

CHAPTER XVIII

A NIGHT OF NIGHTS

THE rehearsals of "She Stoops," as they called it, actor-fashion abbreviating the title, were in full swing. Strutting the boards once more—what fun it was going to be! Jack and Queenie with him again, as in the old days in London; and Miss Clavendish at her brilliant best, and Peter his dresser!

Yes, for the boy had urged him to take him on, so that he might get a real peep behind the scenes, and smell the grease-paint, and watch the scene-shifters, and hobnob with the other dressers, and make himself generally useful. He could keep his job as day elevator-boy, except on matinée days, and it was Barrow who arranged for some one else to take his place^a on those afternoons. A dream realized at last in young Peter's life. The extra money quite consoled his Irish mother, and there were added photographs of Old Silver hung on the walls at home—Old Silver in his wig

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and amazing costume. And to be so near his idol every evening—what a thrill Peter got out of it all!

The night of the opening came. Excitement behind the scenes. Every one nervous, high-strung, taut. That faint feeling, as if the earth were falling in, and the sky above. Lord! to have it over.

They had rehearsed all day, up till four o'clock in the afternoon. No try-out out of town; a cold opening in the metropolis. It could be done with a classic, but never with a musical comedy. An ordeal to be faced and got through with somehow. The actor becomes a master in the art of auto-suggestion. He has to be one. He must hypnotize himself into a state of indifference. He couldn't go on otherwise. The worst of it is, no matter how many years he remains before the public, that fit of nerves never leaves him. Rather, it grows. It is as if he had not played before an audience ever. Experience does not rob him of fear; it is an ever-present ghost which haunts the theatre. The only consolation lies in the fact that the actor who does not suffer from it is certainly not an artist. The greater the tension, the greater the effort made, and therefore the finer performance given.

The Actor in Room 931

Old Silver suffered much on that memorable evening in New York. He could eat no dinner, he could not lie down and rest. So long absent from the boards, he was like a beginner starting all over again. He was heartened by the messages which floated into his dressing-room, which Peter swiftly opened for him—glowing words on yellow bits of paper, from Susie Martin, Charles, Dollie, and every one of the clerks and servants at the Splendide. And finally a cable from Lord and Lady Cliveden. Ah! they had heard of this opening, 'way over there in their English garden, and they had not forgotten the old man, the dear friend. What a world of wonder it was!

“Peter,” said Silver, as they left the hotel for the theatre on that memorable first evening, “you must carry this box for me.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the boy, glad to do anything for his master.

“And you must not speak of it,” continued the actor.

“No, sir,” answered Peter, wondering what the package might contain.

“I can trust you, Peter?”

“Absolutely, sir. You know that.”

“When we get to the theatre I'll tell you what to do,” went on Old 931. “This is to

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be our secret. Not a single person in the cast must know of it. Understand?"

"Of course, sir. Anything you say goes with me."

And then it was that Silver whispered some mysterious words in the lad's ear.

Peter's lips expanded into a broad grin.

"Great, sir! Golly, what an idea!" And he all but danced out to the elevator—to be taken down by the Captain—Peter, who had taken so many people down. He felt like an engineer who suddenly finds himself riding in the parlour-car of the train he has so long kept on the track.

"Good luck, Oliver Silver!" said the Captain as the actor got out on the ground floor.

And those heartening words followed him like a golden thread as he walked proudly through the corridor to the door where Charles had once stood. Now another hailed his taxi, and he and Peter stepped into it.

A night of triumph for them all. A packed house. All the important critics out in front. The bustle, the excitement, the whispers that precede the lifting of the curtain. The hush that follows. The deafening applause with each actor's entrance. The bows. The smiles.

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The first nervous utterance of the old magical lines. The laughter. The waving of programmes at the end of each act. The orchestra playing. The faces peering from boxes and stalls. The gallery gods in a clamour. The standees watching the celebrities pass out between the acts. Gorgeous ladies and well-groomed men. Speeches. Curtain-calls. And, finally, the last scene, played with gusto, and the dropping of the curtain over it all. The members of the company embracing one another, congratulating one another. Moments of hysteria. For success was in the air.

Old Silver crying with joy in the wings. Queenie and Jack hugging him to their hearts, and he in turn hugging them. Miss Clavendish doing the same. Barrow behind the scenes, wringing his hand. Flowers in every dressing-room. The manager, all smiles, praising them unstintedly. The far-off sound of carriage-calls. Peter in a delirium of delight. Peter removing a mysterious box from the wings, where, all through the performance, it had remained unnoticed.

A supper back at the Splendide for the whole company, with Barrow acting as host. Champagne glasses lifted. Toasts said with fervour. A night of nights.

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Yes! Goldsmith, slumbering far away in the Temple, must have heard, and turned in his sleep and smiled. For "She Stoops" had conquered again!