

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE FLOOR CLERK

“**P**OOOR Miss Pinchbeck,” they always called her—they didn’t know that she was married. No one knew very much about her when it came to that.

She was floor clerk on the eighteenth floor. One thought of her as “nice.” The word seemed to fit around her like a glove. She had kindly eyes, and was always cheerful and gentle and helpful to her “patients,” as she called the visitors to her desk on the eighteenth floor.

Old 931 missed her sorely when she was moved up from his floor. She had become an institution with him, and he used to like to pause and chat with her before he took the lift for his daily walk. There was something gracious and Old-World about her, and she always cheered him up so when she was at her place mornings and evenings, making little records of the comings and goings of transients.



## *The Floor Clerk*

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and visitors. There were generally pretty flowers on her desk, too, from grateful "patients," and one lady from California sent her each year some dainty little flowering cactus plants, in which Miss Pinchbeck took great delight. When perishable flowers wilted and finally had to be reluctantly thrown away, these stolid plants endured, she would say. She called them her green friends, stanch and true. A kindly old Roman Catholic priest from Canada, who always stopped at the Splendide on his rare trips to New York, had noticed her love of flowers, too, and jokingly counselled her, when she one day complained of sleeplessness, always to do as an old lady had once told him she did—to read herself to sleep with an "Imitation of Christ"—and a seed catalogue! That was the same humorous old fellow who once asked her, when she complained of having been insulted by a commercial traveller, if she would like him to lay one of the curses on the rascal which he had found in an old Latin book in Sorrento. "Yes," she said, "boils and blains, please." But she had one great trouble of her own—a secret trouble—for very few knew anything of it. She had a crippled foot.

But not always had she been thus afflicted, and she was not ashamed of her misfortune.



## *The Actor in Room 931*

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That old priest had discovered it one day when she was hurrying to her mysterious home, and she told him humbly and falteringly her little story. Then it was that he christened the deformed foot her Victoria Cross—and they both laughed a bit, through tears. For the War had done this cruel thing to her—the War, which is responsible for so much misery in the world.

She was a nurse in 1916, at a children's hospital near Verdun—a hospital which had been erected very quietly and unostentatiously by a great British author who loved children with a desperate passion. He had conceived the idea through that great love of his. He had himself seen the havoc wrought among the little ones around Verdun and his heart was touched. It was a wonderful little hospital, with the noise from the great guns booming all day long, and all night, too, in the distance. "The bees," some of the little ones called them—great bees with stings. Only, thank God, they were too far off to matter.

Miss Pinchbeck was a splendid, hard-working, cheery little nurse there for many weary months. Then one day "the bees" came too near, and a dreadful raid of aeroplanes took place over the little hospital where the Red Cross



## *The Floor Clerk*

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flag waved so unavailingly. The nurses carried the children to a cave they had dug and enlarged from time to time in the hill-side in case of just such an emergency.

But there was one little girl they could not move. All the nurses and doctors had looked upon her case as the saddest in the hospital. It was impossible to shift her. There she lay day after day, so uncomplainingly, just gazing at the sky. And finally the sky was filled with horror.

Sally Pinchbeck offered to stay with her, and of course was permitted to do so. And in the long empty shed these two remained, with shells and bombs crashing around them—for hours, it seemed. For an eternity.

Suddenly there came a lull, and all you could have heard, if you had been privileged to listen, was Sally telling funny stories and making silly little jokes and singing. "Of such is the music of heaven," said that old priest.

Suddenly a great and mighty crash, as if the earth had split asunder. And when the nurses crept back to the shed they found the poor little crushed child had gone. Sally was lying, apparently dead, too, and at her side a picture of the mad hatters' tea-party, and in one hand a copy of a tattered "Alice in Won-



derland," and the dead child's arm around her neck as if to comfort her.

Sally Pinchbeck was found to be only wounded, but they were bad wounds in the knee. Later on she was forced to undergo many operations. But when she emerged from the last one, it was with the knowledge that all the rest of her life she would have to carry about with her a clumsy, crippled foot. No more activities, no more running about on those willing feet of service. And once on a time she had been a good tennis-player; and if she had one fault, it was her human feminine pride in her little feet!

But even with her crippled-foot she had known the glamour of romance! Yes—a war romance. It happened after she came to America to make her way, there being so little for her in England. In New York she met a young lieutenant, who had been shell-shocked in the War: and one may say that it was Sally Pinchbeck's suppressed motherhood which caused her to fall in love with this lad. Those children she had cared for were robust and strong compared with this poor fellow; but she was determined that he should be made whole. And so, unselfishly, she gave her youth and charm to him—told him they would pull through together and make the days sing with their joy.



## *The Floor Clerk*

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At first he seemed to rally splendidly. He got work again in his old office, and though his salary was not sufficient for them to have a servant, Sally did not complain. She did all the work. She fetched and carried. Once a nurse, always a nurse, one might have said, seeing her toddling about, preparing special dishes for her sometimes quite impossible husband. He was peevish and cross one minute and sweet and tender the next. A paradox. Like living with a grown-up child. And then there came a fatal day when he could work no more. His eyes began to fail him. Not entirely did his sight go; but the sunlight, for him, seemed to be behind a mist, and he could not do the tasks assigned to him.

“Then *I* will do something—for I must,” said Sally Pinchbeck—as if she had never done anything in her crowded life!

Service again. The service of a good and noble woman who would not let life defeat her.

She hid her sorrow. She answered an advertisement put in the papers by Barrow. A floor clerk! Just what she could do. A lady's job. And her poor deformed foot would be concealed by the desk at which she would sit!



There would be soft carpets on which to walk, and the work would not be too exacting. The wages she received would keep them both in comparative comfort. The problem was, how could she leave Sam all day alone? That was solved through the good offices of a neighbour in the simple rooming-house where they dwelt. An old Irishwoman there, whose son worked down-town in a hotel, said she would be delighted to look after him while she was absent. She would read to him and see to it that he was taken for his daily walk. It did look as if this woman were an angel sent from heaven. And Sam liked her, and she liked Sam. He never fussed with her. And thus it was that Sally went out into the world of workers—one of that vast band sprinkled like salt over the banquet of cities. There are thousands like her with their tragic little stories.

One night, as Sally went out through the staff door of the Splendide, the little cigar-girl—Mary it was then—saved her from slipping on the icy pavement outside; and she of the frozen toe and she of the bad foot fraternized, or sororized, or whatever it is you wish to call it when two women find a common bond. And then it was that Peter came along



## *The Floor Clerk*

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and asked her which way she was going. He'd be only too glad to see her to the subway.

She told him her address. "Why, that's mine, too!" shouted Peter. Strange coincidences. And then it was she learned for the first time that it was his old mother who was looking after her Sam all day. In all that maze of houses, to think that she had moved to the one where Peter lived, and to think that they worked under the same roof by day! It was wonderful, and they laughed and cried by turns all the way up-town.

It was Peter thereafter who got flowers for her from various rooms. It was Peter who fetched and carried for her and delighted her with his imitations, in off moments, of leading actors. He learned to strut like Old 931; he captured his every mannerism, his every nuance of voice. And it was noted that too often during the day the lift would pause at the eighteenth floor. Erdleigh, doing some fine detective work, learned why, and called Peter to task for his inordinate delays.

One morning, Barrow said to Sally: "You're an asset." And she, remembering that Peter had just left her (he'd almost been caught), thought he was calling her an ass, and tears came into her sad eyes. Then he repeated the



## *The Actor in Room 931*

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word he had first said, and her tears turned to hysterical laughter, and she kept giggling in an unseemly way all that afternoon at her desk. It would be something to tell Sam that night when she got home—something to cheer him out of the lethargy in which he had lately sunk.

And having taken care of all those children during the War, and taking care of Sam now, you can see why she looked upon the guests on her floor as her "patients." It was because her heart was still in her old work. Ah! she could never get away from it. But she had her memories. She had nursed a certain gay young prince, too, some four years ago when he had been thrown, hunting; and many were the jolly little jokes she could have told that he played upon her, so full of fun was he all the time. And she once showed Mary a little gold bangle she always wore up under her sleeve, with a miniature nurse's head on it in enamel, hanging by a tiny chain. And every Christmas a beautiful card would arrive at the Splendide, and it had the name of a very famous house upon it. But Sally, like another famous woman of ancient times, mostly hid all these things in her heart. Sam was what she thought of most. Always Sam. Would



## *The Floor Clerk*

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he never get well and strong again? Thinking of him, she even forgot her clumsy foot, dragging it along as she did on her weary way home.