

CHAPTER II

TWO OLD CRONIES

THAT night, up in Barrow's sumptuous sitting-room, the two old men sat down to dine. It was good for the proprietor to get away from the strain of business—running a huge hotel was no easy matter. He liked to relax. The sum of joy, to him, was a dinner like this with an old friend.

He was a widower, like Silver. They had been boys together in England; and when Oliver first appeared on the London stage—he could not remember the time when he had not longed to become a Thespian—it was Richard who, with his young bride, had occupied stalls on the opening night, and applauded loudest of all the multitude. It wasn't much of a part that Oliver had, and people around wondered why his entrance should have brought forth an ovation from B 2 and 4.

"As though it were yesterday I remember it," Barrow was saying, as they raised their glasses

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to drink each other's health. "And here we are, still good friends—let me see, is it forty-seven years?"

"Forty-eight," corrected Oliver. And he smiled. "A long, long time, Richard, to have stood together. I don't have to tell you how grateful I am for all you've done for me." He liked sentiment, but not sentimentality. "To you, sir—the best crony a man ever had."

They drank solemnly.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" Barrow said.

"Incomparable," answered Silver. The word rolled on his tongue.

The chicken casserole was incomparable, too; and the artichokes, perfection. A storm had come up. They could hear the rain beating on the windows, but the drawn curtains muffled the sound. It was good to be here, thus. Just the two of them, with warm memories, and a feast fit for Lucullus.

"I've never given up the dream of that little place down in Devonshire," Barrow was saying, later. "We'll have it yet," he smiled across the table. "A year or two more at the grindstone, and then . . . gentlemen farmers, that's what we'll be, Oliver."

"We?" the old actor repeated.

"Of course. That is, unless you get snapped

The Actor in Room 931

up by one of these disgustingly rich American widows, my boy. Watch your step, as they say."

"Ye gods!" Oliver cried out. "What's a widow, when there are snug little Devonshire farms, and soft downs, and gardens full of hollyhocks! England—in June! Oh, Richard, let's not even talk of it. I'll get weepy. And choky. And you know how awful I am when I get like that."

But they went right on.

"A night in London now and then, doing the theatres, and you in your old corner at the Garrick," Barrow was saying. "Piccadilly Circus, in the rain, with the lights sparkling through the mist—Lord! but it will be good for both of us. Then back to the country, with the chickens and pigs—we *must* have a pig or two—and a little car to chug us round about. But best of all, our garden . . ."

"And the fun of seeing the shoots we've planted coming to full flower," the actor interrupted.

"And the sunsets over the hedge, and the sea roaring at our feet, and . . ."

"And the smell of honeysuckle—why, we're like two old women, dreaming of something that can never be!"

"But it *can* be—it *must* be," Barrow told him.

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And after their coffee and cigars they brought out the chessboard, and sat silently until midnight at that most magical of games. When each had gone to bed, it was to dream of rolling hills and patchwork fields, just like a chessboard; and over these green fields there somehow passed a king and queen, monstrous in size, and a horse; and some noisy rooks pounced down and mysteriously gobbled them up. Yet neither of them had taken too much of that rare old claret.