

CHAPTER III

ERDLEIGH, THE CASHIER

THE Splendide did what is known in hotel parlance as a "refined" business. No one rougher than that harmless drummer ever got beyond its portals. It was big, but not too big. It was a homely place, and ladies of independent means, with powdery hair and chubby hands, could be seen in its public sitting-rooms, knowing one another, arranging for a rubber of bridge, or talking over the latest play or novel. They were permanent guests, who called this place their home, since they knew no other. The servants remained, as a rule—an amazing thing to happen in a city like New York. Barrow made them his friends. There was a sense of establishment and well-being, to be found only too infrequently in that vast honeycomb which is Manhattan.

Silver, now that he was idle, stayed a great deal in his room; but he liked, too, to roam about the hotel, chatting with anyone who hap-

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pened to take his fancy. Employees in such a place have their leisure hours, too. There is a time of day when, as in the subway, there is a tremendous rush ; but there will be long expanses of time when things move slowly.

On the morning after he had dined with Barrow, the old actor, having read his newspaper—he always followed the theatrical columns with the deepest interest, though he deprecated the appearance of so many new names—went down in the lift to see what was going on in the lobby. The papering in his room had been finished, and he had to confess that it did look smart and bright, and was a great improvement. It was a pink and blue design they had given him—country scenes, with chickens and pigs—yes, and a garden. Had Barrow done it on purpose, to remind him of their Devonshire dream? And there were some flowers on his table—a beautiful bunch of daffodils which were like a yellow lamp in the darkest corner. Barrow was certainly a poet ; and strange as it may seem, there are many men in business who are poets at heart. That was why the Splendide attracted the clientele it did, and why a curious nameless happiness pervaded the place.

Some of the clerks lived at the hotel, way up on the top floor ; others went to mysterious

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homes in the Bronx or in Brooklyn—or maybe just around the corner. One never knew.

Robert Erdleigh was one who had long attracted Silver's attention. Erdleigh was the cashier, and a more human, presentable fellow it would have been hard to find.

"Good morning, young man," Old Silver addressed him, on this particular Spring day. "Won't you change a ten-dollar bill for me? It's seldom I have one, you know, and you might think I'd wish to keep it as long as possible."

Erdleigh smiled. He was used to the actor's quaint ways and speech.

"If anyone can keep money in this darned town," he said, "I'd like to know who it is." He had pulled out his cash drawer, and it gave a hearty little ring as it emerged. "What you don't spend, the crooks get away with. Why, there are hold-ups every hour, Mr. Silver." He was started on his favourite subject. If Silver read the theatrical news, Erdleigh's delight was the crime columns. Fraud, vice, and even murder held a grim satisfaction for him. Bandits with guns—he loved to read about them; and he was thrilled when any were captured and sent off to jail. Almost, he felt that he had captured them himself. He knew where the

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dives in New York were located, and every speak-easy down the line.

Yet he was a quiet young man, with the polished manners of a true gentleman. Everybody liked him. He could chat of terrible goings-on in Fifth Avenue—for he read the society columns, too; and he knew of strange coloured ladies' flats, where blackmail was part of the day's business; and he knew the names of all the celebrated forgers of history, and how long their sentences were in the Federal prisons.

As he handed out the change to-day, he said:

"Did you read about that hold-up in Central Park last night, Mr. Silver? My! what a remarkable crime—the lady's earrings grabbed from her ears, and her opera cloak literally torn from her shoulders! They had their nerve with them, I'll tell the world," he added, falling unconsciously into the vernacular of the day. Usually careful of his speech, he wanted to withdraw the phrase, even as the desk clerk had wanted to withdraw that wink; but it was too late.

"Do you suppose they'll catch the ruffians?" the actor wanted to know.

"Oh, they got away—but one of them dropped his gun—you know that lonely road near the

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Mall? I hope that will be a clue. Wish I were on their trail."

"Why don't you become a detective? Wouldn't it pay better than this job, and wouldn't it be more exciting?"

Erdleigh sighed. "I suppose, just as you dream of a perfect part to play, I dream of the perfect mystery to solve. On my last vacation, I made a round of all the city prisons—yes, and Sing Sing, too—so that I could talk to prisoners and crooks. Some of them are the cleverest people you'd want to know. That's why they're crooks, I suppose. My wife thought it was a funny way to spend my off-time; but it's in my blood—this curiosity about criminals. Look here, I can show you how forgery is accomplished. Just stand over here—come on back of my desk, won't you, sir? It'll only take a minute, and I'm not busy just now."

Fascinated, Oliver Silver did as Erdleigh asked. The cashier's face positively changed expression, the moment he was deep in his explanation.

"You see, it's this way," he hurried on breathlessly. "This signature—the curly one—oh, that's the easiest kind to imitate. But take a plain, fearless handwriting, like this one"—he had pulled out a sample from among the dozens

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he had concealed in his desk—"and it's devilish hard to duplicate it. It looks easier, but it's really much more difficult."

He was moving his pen slowly over a virgin piece of paper, one eye on the signature he had drawn forth.

"Do you see, sir? That 'y' is mighty strange, but I can get it. Look!" Triumphantly, he held up the copy he had made. Then he shuffled them both, and asked the actor to tell him which was the original and which the copy.

Silver was amazed. "Why, you're like 'Jim the Penman!'" he exclaimed. "Quite a genius. For the life of me, I cannot tell which is which. I'd be almost fearful of such a gift, Bob." He always called the cashier that.

"I've made a study of the subject—just as anyone would study anything that appealed to them—languages, say, or dancing. It's fascinating. Now, you write your name down here, Mr. Silver, and I'll bet I can duplicate it."

He shoved a piece of paper under the actor's hand and dipped a pen into the ink-well.

"Write naturally, now; don't try to be different."

Oliver's hand went slowly over the paper—how long it was since he had put that name on

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a cheque! The thought came to him as he was inscribing it there, and he wondered if the other had read his secret thought.

"There!" he exclaimed in a moment. "Now show me how clever you are, Bob."

The other immediately copied the signature on another sheet. It did not take him long. He shuffled the bits once more; and Silver was unable to say which was his own writing.

"Marvellous!" he told him. "Simply marvellous, Bob. But this sort of thing is like spiritualism—don't get involved too deeply. It's dangerous."

Erdleigh laughed outright. "If I were inclined to be a crook, do you think I'd be giving myself away like this, sir? Oh, no! It simply fascinates me; that's all. Don't be afraid."

And he laid the two samples among the treasured signatures in his desk drawer.

The old actor walked out of the little cage where the cashier lived most of his life.

"I hope I never see your name in the papers as one of those rascals who impose on good citizens," he said, with a smile. "Most interesting—most interesting, Bob. You've missed your calling. If you don't go in for crime, you should go in for detecting it."

"This is the last place where there's apt to

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be any great excitement," answered Erdleigh. "Quiet as the grave, most of the time. But then," he added, receipting a bill for a lady who had just come up, "you never can tell, can you, Mr. Silver?"