

CHAPTER IV

THE CHILD IN THE CORRIDOR

AS Oliver went out of the cashier's cage, he caught sight of a little golden-haired girl who was tripping across the corridor. A bell-boy—the one with the nice face and clear blue eyes—jumped behind a pillar as she came toward him, pretending that he was playing hide-and-seek with her. The child laughed, and made believe she could not find him.

Oliver thought: "She thinks those pillars are trees, and that she's in the Park, and that this bell-boy is her playmate. Sad!"

He had observed her often—little Lillie, they called her. She was always alone. His old heart went out to her.

He sat down and watched the quiet game the two were playing. Luckily the elevator bell did not ring for some time, so that the boy, Pete, was privileged to indulge in his favourite indoor sport.

Lillie's movements were like those of a gay

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young gazelle. But what a life, Oliver thought, for a child. He knew something of her history. She could not have been more than seven years of age. Her mother was an actress, who was busy at rehearsals just now. Therefore the child was left alone at the Splendide all day, in the charge of one of the women employees—evidently she could not afford a special nurse of her own for her. The old ladies in the hotel took a vivid interest in Lillie, and made quite a pet of her.

“What lovely golden curls you have!” they would say. They told her stories, to which she listened avidly. So easily could she have been spoiled; but she was not. She had wonderful poise for a child of her age. She went to school, of course; but this happened to be a Saturday morning, and she was free to romp with Pete, and to laugh her way through the lane of posts and artificial palms that were the only gardens she knew, poor child.

Pete had crouched down behind one of the tubs from whose depths rose a particularly tall palm, and Lillie was unable to see him. She stood twirling on the rug, looking this way and that, intent on but one thing—the discovery of the mysteriously departed lad—when the bell rang.

Still no Pete. The corridor was practically

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deserted at this time. It was one of the slack hours. The bell rang again, while Lillie stood there, looking anxiously about her.

Robert Erdleigh, hearing the sound of the bell, came out from his cage. The desk clerk, idly standing behind his counter, also observed the proceedings. Now he leaned far over the desk, and whispered loudly to Lillie, "He's over there! Catch him!" and he pointed to the palm tub behind which Pete was crouched.

But Lillie did not move. She wanted to discover her playmate herself, without the aid of these august personages, of whom she was inordinately fond, but who had no business, she thought, to join in their romp.

Again the bell; and while Lillie's back was turned, Pete tumbled from his hiding-place and like a young panther slipped into the cage of the lift, softly closed the door behind him, smiled, and whisked unseen to the upper regions. It was done with the exactitude of a movie rehearsal. There was not a hitch. It was Pete's dramatic instinct telling him just what to do. For the lad, who loved and adored old 'Oliver Silver, longed himself to be on the stage; and every day of his life he portrayed some part. This morning he was the romping Jackie Coogan—for the movies, too, held him in thrall."

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Oliver watched with interest. He wondered what Lillie would do, when she crept over at last to the palm—for he was certain she would do this.

Sure enough, *her* instinct led her there—and perhaps the stage whisper of the desk clerk. Slowly, softly, cat-like, she crept over the soft rug, a shining little figure, one finger on her lip, ready to cry out, “I found you!”

But when she arrived at the spot, and while the three men watched her with smiles, there was no bell-boy. Confused, crushed, humiliated, she stole back to her former position in the centre of the corridor. Her calculations weighed her down. . . Where was he? Where could he have flown?

Then it seemed to flash through her pretty head that he had taken the elevator. She saw the closed door, and she must have remembered the summoning bells. Ah! that was it—he had cunningly eluded her. It wasn't fair—it wasn't cricket; but she'd show him.

So she crept to the lift door. She could see the indicator, revealing the floor upon which the elevator was at that moment, and her quick mind worked madly. “3,” she must have read. Then “2.” In another moment he would be

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down, and she would jump at him, crying out, and thus win the game.

“ 1,” said the signal. And the door was pushed backward. Lillie crouched to leap, ready for her supreme fun.

She did so—and fell right into the arms of the Middle West drummer, who stepped forth with his sample cases in his hands, his derby hat on the back of his head, his gay spats spread apart.

“ Booh ! ” cried Lillie. And then fell back, ashamed and humiliated.

Pete’s red head, in its funny little cap, peeped at her ; but all that she saw was the huge drummer—a total stranger. No old friend of the Splendide—just the surprised face of some one she had never known before.

Bob Erdleigh laughed outright. The desk clerk, Simmons, laughed too ; but Oliver Silver did not. He rose from his chair and went to little Lillie.

He grasped her round the waist, tossed her into the air, and then perched her fairy-like form on his shoulder.

“ Don’t be afraid, Lillie ! It’s only your old friend, Oliver Silver ! ”

The child was delighted. It was a diverting way to put her back in her triumphant place. It would prove to this gross and gauch stranger

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that she was an inhabitant of this house—no mere interloper, like him. With the swift understanding of a child, and a child's ability to readjust itself immediately, she was happy again.

“Oh, Papa Silver”—that was her name for him—“I'm so glad to see you!” she shrilled from her high perch. And she patted his white hair, which felt like a bird's nest to her tiny hand. Then she looked down at the amazed drummer; and the latter, to make good too, smiled and addressed the old man:

“Why, if it isn't Oliver Silver, the famous actor,” he said.

He knew that would cause Silver to be his eternal friend. He remembered what the desk clerk had told him—a little flattery. It would work wonders.

Silver was delighted. A drummer—an obvious drummer—knew his name, knew his art; perhaps had seen him tread the boards. He hoped, in a flash, that he had seen him in one of his greatest rôles—not in one of those farce comedies, cheap and tawdry, when he had been forced to eke out a season.

“The same,” said Oliver pontifically; and, with little Lillie still perched on his broad shoulder, he advanced to the travelling salesman, as he now thought of him, and shook him by the

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hand. "Thank you for recognizing me, sir." And he bowed in his most lordly way.

It was good to be remembered.

"I saw you as Cassius, Mr. Silver. You were superb," the drummer went on. He was taking chances. He knew it. But fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Before the other had a chance to reply, he thought it better to continue:

"Some kid, that. Great little girl. Hello, baby." And he held his hand up to her.

"I'm no baby!" Lillie, affronted, replied. "Am I, Papa Silver? I'm a grown-up lady."

The drummer laughed, and winked, and grabbed up his cases, with Pete's assistance.

"I'll say you are," he said. "Hope I'll see you all again. I've got to get out and hustle for the coin. A busy day ahead of me. What you doing now, Mr. Silver? I wanted to take in a show to-night."

Silver drew himself up to his full height, after placing Lillie gently on the floor.

"Show?" he inquired. "I've seldom been in a 'show,' my good man," he told him. "Shakespeare is hardly a 'show,' except in these degenerate days of Hamlet in mufti."

"Sorry," said the drummer. "I'm just a low-brow, you know. Leave word with Annie what

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you're in. I must make my get-away. So long, everybody!"

And he hurried out.

A show, indeed, thought Oliver! So this is how they thought of him, in their heart of hearts. But if he had only known it, the drummer had alluded to him, only the day before, as "that old geezer."