

CHAPTER V

PETE

IN the meantime, Pete, happy that there were no jangling bells to take him away, drank in every word. He was never happier than when he was near his idol, Oliver Silver. Had the latter only known it, his tiny room at home was full of photographs of the old actor in his various ancient rôles—of Cassius, of Polonius in “Hamlet,” with Irving in “The Bells,” with Modjeska in “Mary Stuart,” in “The Lady of Lyons,” in “Frou-Frou,” and a host of others. Pete had begged these pictures, from time to time, of Oliver; and they formed a dado around Pete’s box of a place, much to the wonder and amazement of his mother.

“Sure, an’ what in God’s name do you see in them photographs?” she had cried, as he brought home one after another through the previous months. “An old feller like that, all rigged up—what good does it do anybody to have the likes of these?” And she shook her head, and

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almost thought her boy was losing what wits he had.

“He used to be a great boy,” Pete contended loyally.

“Used to be? Used to be!” his mother answered in derision. “Sure an’ them’s the words of a failure, my boy. Never copy an old geezer”—there were the dreadful words again! —“like that, me lad. If he was so good, why couldn’t he keep goin’ in the-ayter, eh? Tell me that, now, will yez? Tell me that!” And she felt that he could never answer. But he did.

“Say, ma, there’s some folks that’s too good for the public.”

“Good Lord! Too good! An’ you belave that nonsense, do yez? Is the Pope too good for the people? The better he is, the more power to him. Don’t you go an’ be fooled by old men like this one, bad cess to him. Aim high, me lad, aim high. I don’t want yez to be an elevator boy all yer life. Just up and down, up and down, all day and all night.”

And Mrs. O’Reilly would go on with her ironing, or whatever work it was she was engaged in at the time.

Pete knew, through long experience, that there was no use arguing with his mother. He

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longed to tell her of his secret ambition to be an actor; but he did not dare. She would have laughed him out of the house. Big business, like contracting, was what she conceived as success. Or maybe her boy would be a politician, and get into Tammany Hall. That was the highest dream she had for him. Her fancy could go no further.

Pete, standing in the elevator, gazed at his idol. How wonderful it must be to have played so many royal rôles, and listened to the cheering audiences, all over the world. To him, Silver was a very old man—almost ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. He wondered how it felt to be so ancient—not to have sprightly legs any more; not to be able to skip about, as he had just done with little Lillie—it must be a bore. What did old men do when they sat for such long hours in their rooms? And they got sort of cranky and curious. *He* would never let himself get like that. He'd be young for ever, and always gay; ready for all the good times that might come along. Terrible thing to grow old and white-haired.

“Going up, Mr. Silver?” he said now. He loved it when he was alone in the car with the actor, and could drink in his image in the mirrors. He sensed his great distinction; he got an

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emanation from the tall form, the massive head—an emanation of glory and wonder.

“No, Peter,” answered Silver. “I think I’ll just wander about this morning. I want to take a walk later. Have to keep fit, you know.”

The dullness of the morning hours was Pete’s excuse for loitering and talking. He wished *he* could take a walk out on the Avenue with this splendid old man. Cooped up here—it sometimes grew monotonous. Nice to be able to go for a stroll whenever the mood was on. Those people didn’t know what luck they were in. Think of having no regular hours to keep! Think of the luxury of being able to sleep as late as one pleased, in a world of no alarm clocks or summoning mothers’ voices! Gee! wouldn’t it be fine to be a great gentleman, or an actor at leisure. He did not know of Oliver’s dislike of idleness. To have all the time in the universe, and not to be able to fill it in—that was far worse than drudgery.

The fifteenth floor wanted Pete at that instant. He clicked back the signal, and closed the door once again. Duty! What an appalling thing it was! Yet he supposed every great man, some time in his youth, had to obey other people’s orders. Yet he found it hard to imagine Old Silver ever doing what a stage director told him

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to do. He thought of him as something apart, something sacred, and different. He could enter that mysterious region that lies behind a stage-door, make himself into somebody else, and then live romance for a few brief hours, night after night. He had done it. And just think, he, Pete, could talk to him, as he might talk to the drummer in 402, or little Lillie in 817, or any of the ladies scattered all over the Splendide like so many birds of plumage.