

CHAPTER VI

LITTLE MARY

OLD 931, as some of the clerks and most of the bell-boys had a way of thinking of him, was actually having luncheon one day not long after at his own hotel. This was a luxury that he seldom allowed himself, and he was just enjoying his demi tasse and wondering why the French didn't follow the example of Americans and call their café noir by the same name, when his meditations were broken into by a lovely voice saying, "Cigarettes or cigars, sir!"

He looked up. And in this room, amid the dowagers and young people—the whole assortment of those who daily lunched here—he saw a Madonna-like face. It lighted up the entire place, even as those daffodils had lighted a corner of his room upstairs. Was she new here? Strange that he had never noticed her before. But then, he so seldom was here at this hour; and perhaps she appeared and plied her trade only at this time.

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From her shoulders there fell cords that were attached to her tray; and upon this was an assortment of the wares she carried about, from table to table. She gave a note of piquancy to the dining-room. He loved beauty—ah! how many wonderful faces he had seen in his time! The women of his profession had always seemed to him the loveliest in the world; for they made a business of keeping themselves eternally young—they had to; for good looks were their stock-in-trade. And they remained young in heart—the best youth of all.

And now here was one more beautiful face to gladden him. Those velvet eyes, that raven hair, that skin which looked like smooth marble—how could a girl keep such beauty in this foul wilderness of Manhattan! It was the old miracle of the lily that floats on the water of a dank pond.

He drank in her beauty for a moment, speechless. She saw his embarrassment; but she did not connect it with her loveliness. She was too modest, too unassuming for that. She observed him closely, the while her hands, like two white doves, fluttered over the cigarettes. Those hands! They were exquisite.

He bought a cigar, just to prolong the pleasure of this unexpected moment. Her golden voice said "Thank you, sir," as she handed him his

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change ; and then she glided through the aisle of tables, and was lost to view behind a great column.

Next day, long before noontime, he met her in the lobby of the hotel. He did not recognize her at first, without her Spanish-gipsy costume and her little basket of wares.

She came up to him quite frankly and naturally, and said :

“ You don’t remember me, sir—do you ? But it would be remarkable if you did—for I was only a little child in your company fifteen years ago. Mary Monteith was my mother—do you remember now ? ” And her eyes sparkled.

His old grandfatherly heart was touched. He could scarcely speak for a moment. Then he burst out, looking sharply into her face again :

“ Of course, of course ! I remember your dear mother well. God bless my soul, and was it fifteen years ago ! As long as that. And you were the little Mary I used to dandle on my knee ! Well, well, my child, I’m glad to see you again, so grown-up, so . . . so lovely ! ” Again he drank in her beauty. By George ! but she *was* wonderful. “ But ”—he paused, hoping he could put it delicately and not wound her—“ how does it come that you are here now, doing this—this curious work ? It must be

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tiring, and tiresome, carrying that tray about. Poor child ! ”

She did not answer at once. She looked down, studying the rose-pattern of the rug.

“ Come, ” said Silver kindly. “ I hope I have not hurt you. Suppose we go to the mezzanine floor—it’s very cosy and quiet there—and talk over the old days, and the why and wherefore of all this. You won’t be on duty for an hour yet, will you, my child ? ”

She followed him. It was only a little way ; and Silver knew that at this hour the place he had in mind would be practically deserted. And it was such a good spot for confidences.

The girl was not embarrassed. She sensed in Old Silver a true friend—how often she had heard her poor mother speak of him, long after she was unable longer to remain on the stage.

“ She died ”—little Mary’s voice was low—“ six months ago. It was terrible to me. But she was brave to the end. We never had much, you know. ” She paused. “ I worked at Macy’s for a bit after—after mother was buried ; and then one of the floor clerks here, who seemed to like me, spoke to the people at the cigar stand, and I came here yesterday—only yesterday, think of that !—and I met you. They told me you were stopping here, Mr. Silver. You see, you’re

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quite famous—oh, very famous, and it was so easy to pick you out of all the crowd. I hope you didn't mind my speaking to you? I just couldn't help it," she raced on.

"Of course not, little Mary," said Old 931. "Anyone would be glad to have you even notice him. Well, well! and to think you're dear Mary Monteith's daughter! A strange world—a strange city. Anything can happen here. Strange indeed." And he seemed to drift off in a dream.

"They're kind to me here," little Mary continued after a silence of some minutes. She did not feel that she should interrupt the old man's thoughts. And the old man seemed to have so many thoughts and memories. "It's trying work, as you said; but it's better than the basement of a department store, with all that foul air to breathe, and saucy people to wait upon. The other girl who works with me is very kind and helpful and patient—I didn't know just how to go about this, you see."

Silver was thinking hard. He remembered her coming to her mother's dressing-room, and visiting the other members of the company between the acts—such a sweet little child she was. And he would hold her on his knee, and pet her, and give her a stick of candy when her

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mother wasn't looking, and make a tremendous fuss over her. Funny that she should be here now, sitting beside him in this hotel—and she a part of the machinery of it, and he one of the guests—no, just one of the numbers that the desk clerk tacked up on that board behind him! He let her rattle on. He liked the sound of her voice.

“I never went on the stage—not as a real actress, you know. Mother seemed to dislike the idea of my doing so; and I don't think I ever had a real call to that kind of work. I suppose,” she added quaintly, “that people do get ‘calls’ to other kinds of things beside the Church, don't they?”

Old 931 smiled. “And what are your ambitions, your hopes now?” he asked, looking pityingly at the bright, Madonna-like face.

“Why,” she replied promptly and frankly, “just a living at present. That's all I think of—all I dare to think of. I don't care to look ahead. It makes me—sort of dizzy, and—afraid.” Unconsciously she stretched out her hands—those loveliest of hands. The gesture revealed her secret fears. To think that a child like this had to face life, here, in this way! He must speak to Barrow about her.

At that moment they heard a clock strike eleven.

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“ My ! ” little Mary cried. “ I must be going—I have no business here—what if the manager should find me ! ”

“ Oh, that would be all right—no harm shall come to you. The owner of the Splendide is one of my best friends—*the* best. But don't let me detain you.”

“ It will be so nice to see you once in a while,” Mary said. “ It will make the days brighter, just to know you are here. Good-bye. You have been so kind to me.”

And she hurried away, with no further words.

He looked at her vanishing form. Another girl in this vast city, striving to earn a living, hoping for the best. He wondered about her life, and what it really was. So many men could speak to her if they had a mind to do so. She would learn too much of life in a great city, perhaps. Coarse drummers would flirt with her. Men were such beasts, as well he knew. He felt that he must keep an eye on her, for Mary Monteith's sake.

Curious place, New York. Very curious. Everybody, no matter how humble, had a story to tell. Everybody had a problem to face. And youth—it was at once a blessing and a curse.