

CHAPTER VIII

A CALL ON THE TELEPHONE

LIFE ran along at the Splendide. When business was brisk, Barrow rejoiced—for was he not nearer to the consummation of his dream of retiring? The “steadies” stayed on; and there was an increasing stream of transients at the desk, a flow of bright yellow telegrams asking for reservations. These things are dear to the hotel proprietor’s heart.

With the coming of June, there was a slight exodus to the mountains or the seashore; but many old-timers kept their suites all the year round, and sub-let to visitors in the summer season—but only to those who could supply the highest references. Barrow did not tolerate every one and everybody beneath his hostelry roof. He knew that it paid to do an exclusive business.

Old Silver watched the ever-changing pageant. Some of the new faces interested him; but he preferred, after all, the harmony of the one big

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family with which he had become so familiar ; and in this family he included all the clerks and bell-boys and chambermaids and waiters, who seemed to have the good Barrow's interests very much at heart.

The pale young man came and went. One day he would be sitting in his usual place, the next he would not be there ; and he began to notice another stranger who likewise crossed the stage of the corridor now and then—another figure in the drama that was perpetually going on. He was obviously not a gentleman. He wore rather louder clothes than were seemly, and always smoked an enormous cigar which never seemed to go out, or to grow smaller. It was like a muffler which an aunt embroiders—it never seems to be finished, but remains in a state of semi-completion.

One morning, Silver noticed that the young man was in the corridor—he came to think of him now as the pale young man ; and he saw him go to the cigar stand and become engaged in a deep conversation with little Mary. She leaned down, under his direction, and picked out a certain pile of cigar boxes ; but the pale young man did not evince an interest in any save the third from the top. He fumbled and stammered, and Silver, approaching under the

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pretext of buying a newspaper, watched him covertly. He did not like him; he'd never liked him; and he was suspicious of him now. He wanted to shout, "What's the matter with the top box, sir? Why don't you select your cigars from that, and make it all the easier for poor little Mary?" Surely there could be no necessity of this particularity of selections!

"Please, miss," he heard the pale young man saying, "will you give me a cigar out of that second box, and I—I think I'll just take this one intact. It's for a friend, you see, and I don't want to open it."

He had sniffed of it, and Old Silver thought of him as a terrier sniffing at anything he might find anywhere. What a curious young man! Somehow he did not fit in with the picture at the Splendide.

"Those are ten dollars, sir," Mary was saying next; but the pale young man did not wince at the price. He did not look like a ten-dollar buyer. But he was. He whisked out a green-back—two, in fact; and Silver noted that one was a ten-dollar bill, the other a one. Little Mary swiftly gave him seventy-five cents change; whereupon he said, "Oh, keep it, and buy yourself some chewing-gum!"

Silver could have struck him for that! If

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this foolish young fellow, this wisp of pale effrontery, had only known what a great dancer little Mary had been!

But she was a good sport. "Thank you, sir," he heard her saying to the brute. And he went away with the box tucked under his arm and a lighted cigar between his lips.

When Silver turned, he saw the other mysterious man, who was not quite a gentleman, disappearing behind a pillar—that very pillar where little Lillie had played with Pete so many weeks ago.

Should he speak to Mary now about these queer goings-on? He decided that he had better not do so. And thus it was that he slipped away for his walk up the avenue. Nothing like a constitutional to keep one young.

That evening he dined with Barrow; and Barrow brought out some rare old champagne this time.

"It'll buck us up, as they say in America," his old friend said. "Let's drink to Devonshire, and the farm."

The dream—it was always with Barrow.

"Things are splendid at the Splendide," he laughed. "Not so long now, old boy, before we'll get back where we belong. Happy over it?"

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“It’s too wonderful,” answered the actor.

They played chess again, while the soft June wind blew in at the window. But between moves each thought of the farm so far away, and that lovely chequer-board country, where there was peace, and beauty, and no pale young man to intrude his grotesque self between one and the blue sky.

Silver had gone to bed and had dropped off into a pleasant dream, when his telephone jangled sharply. Strange that it should clamour at this unseemly hour.

Before he could answer it, it rang again—rapidly, insistently, as if the instrument itself was aware of the importance of the message it should convey.

“Hello! hello!” Silver’s voice called out over the wire.

“Oh!” was the answer he received—a feeble, very distinct “Oh!”

“Yes, yes,” Silver replied. “What is it? Who’s there?”

A pause, as if some one were taking a breath before going on. Then:

“It’s little Mary.”

Was he dreaming?

“Mary? . . . My child, what is it? Are you still in the hotel?”

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"No, I'm—arrested. I need you. Come quickly. Forgive me, but you are the only true friend I have in the world, and I'm in serious trouble." He heard her sob. He caught the sharp catch in her tiny voice—a voice now so full of suffering. What did this mean?

He discovered where she was—not so many blocks away. He had passed that station-house many a time. He could get there within a few minutes in a taxi.

"Don't speak of this—to anyone," he heard her go on. "Just—come. I know I can count upon you."

"Indeed you can, my child," he answered over the wire. "I'll slip into my clothes at once."

His head was ringing, as if the summoning bell still jangled there, as he made his way quietly out of the Splendide. Little Mary—Mary Monteith's child—in trouble, and at a police station! What a city of surprises, New York was! And an hour ago he had been so happy.