

CHAPTER IX

CIGARS, AND THE PALE YOUNG MAN

WHY are we always afraid of anyone in uniform? Even a ship's officer is a terrifying individual to the simple layman. A conductor frightens children, and a fireman typifies danger. But a policeman—he sends shivers down the spines of the best of us.

Even Old Silver was nervous as he entered the dim portals of the police station. Never before had he crossed this grim threshold, or one like it. Here was indeed another world, in which he wished to have no part. To think that little Mary had entered this place, under tragic circumstances! His old heart beat fast.

“What yez want?” he heard a gruff voice saying; and he was conscious of a hand—an unfriendly hand—on his shoulder.

He turned, and a hard-faced, enormous man in a shabby blue uniform confronted him.

“Why, I have a young friend here—apprehended. There must be some mistake,” he managed to get out.

“There’s pretty few mistakes made here—when they gets here, they gen’ally deserves it.” And there was coarse laughter from this creature. He took advantage of his proximity to the door to get rid of some dreadful material in his mouth. Silver shivered. Little Mary among such beasts! It was terrible.

“But this is really a mistake,” Silver said. “I’m the girl’s godfather,” he lied blandly. “I must see her. Won’t you see what can be done?”

“Come on up to the desk and tell the sergeant,” answered the brute. And he led the way through the dim corridor.

Silver saw a big desk set upon a platform. It looked ominous. An elderly man with bowed shoulders was bending over some papers, which the ledge of the desk concealed from view. He too was in uniform, of course. His pen scratched across a page—some one’s destiny was being sealed, Silver thought swiftly. Destinies were always being sealed here.

He waited. The sergeant did not look up. Finally the man who had ushered him in stepped forward, loth to disturb the august personage literally and figuratively “higher up.”

At his approach, the sergeant slowly moved and peered over his glasses.

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“What is it now, Crimmins?” he asked sharply.

Silver noted his expression. It was stern, but it was not cruel; and at this he inwardly rejoiced. This was the wisp of comfort to which he clung in that instant.

“This ole gen’man says he’s got a god-daughter here,” Crimmins replied.

The sergeant transferred his gaze to the newcomer, half in shadow.

“That’s interesting,” he said, taking in the distinguished form of the actor. Then he removed his glasses and searched the other’s countenance. He scratched his head with the end of the pen for a moment, and seemed to be in deep meditation. “Can I believe my eyes?” he finally uttered. “Haven’t I seen you on the stage? Aren’t you—Oliver Silver?”

The old actor was so amazed in turn that he could not speak. This was a propitious beginning. Crimmins became all deference at once; he almost scraped the ground.

“Thank you, sir; I am. I hope I gave a good performance when you saw me.” And he smiled a wan smile.

“You certainly did. I’m mighty fond of the theatre,” he went on in genial tones. “I

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go often—when I am not on duty here. It's two years since I saw you in a revival of 'The Rivals.' My! but you were excellent. I recognized you at once, even without your wig."

Much as Silver liked all this, his mind thought only of little Mary in her extremity. Somewhere in that dim adjoining room, behind bars, she was confined, and here was the sergeant, who must have shut her up, talking in a leisurely manner, as though her troubles were nothing, nothing!

"Sir, I love your compliments; but can we not speak of these things later?" he dared to say. "A child—a mere child—has found herself in trouble. Oh, it must all be a hideous error, but I've come over here to see what I can do for her."

The sergeant understood.

"It isn't often that I get a chance to talk of the theatre, and I am so used to prisoners that I forgot your errand for the moment. You must mean that girl they brought in a little while ago. Let me see, her name was——" And he began searching the records.

"Mary Monteith," answered Silver, and then wondered if he had done right to utter the name; for little Mary might have given another in such a place.

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"That's it!" the sergeant said. "Here it is—'Mary Monteith, aged nineteen. Charge, conspiracy in smuggling.' That's bad, Mr. Silver. How well do you know this girl?"

"Conspiracy in smuggling!" The words rang in Old Silver's brain. He was nonplussed. He could not comprehend. He swayed as he stood there. The dim room became dimmer. He felt a hundred years old, suddenly. A thousand thoughts surged through his head.

"I know her well—very well indeed, sir," Oliver answered the sergeant. "There can be no truth in this charge, if you will pardon my saying so. Would it be possible for me to see little Mary, as we always call her? and then things can be explained."

The sergeant paused, one hand at his brow. "It's irregular. You're not a lawyer. But—yes, I think I can let you through. Maybe you'd allow me to go with you. The girl was so pretty, so delicate, that I was touched by her case. Still, one has to learn to harden one's heart in police stations. There are so many fakes, you know. Come this way."

He had stepped down from the platform while he was speaking, and now led the way to the rear room.

Oliver's heart was pounding. Even as bell-

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boys led guests to numbered rooms, so he was being led to a numbered cell. And as the door was flung wide and he saw the long tiers of bolted caves, wherein human beings were shoved like beans in packages, he wondered how he was going to be able to stand the shock of seeing little Mary thus ticketed and placed.

"She's in 29," he heard the voice of Crimmins saying as they trudged down the dimly lighted street of iron and stone.

It was a pale, desperate face that peered from behind those awful bars when footfalls were heard in the corridor. She had known that Old 931 would come to little 29—and here he was!

"Oh," he heard her gasp. "I'm so—relieved. The good sergeant let me telephone—I don't know what I've done! They came and got me. I'm innocent, I swear it—but they say I must be held here in this miserable place until morning. Oh, make them set me free!"

Silver was touched, as who would not have been, at the plight of this child. He turned to the sergeant.

"May we talk with her? Couldn't she be allowed out in the other room, away from these vicious surroundings, sir? I don't see how I can stand it, here, and I fear she will break

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under the strain. I'd like to get her story, and then send for my friend Barrow if she can be bailed out."

The sergeant knew, of course, that the old actor would claim no unfair advantage, and he had no wish to seem unduly cruel. But the law was the law, and though again it would be irregular to make the concessions asked, a glance at little Mary told him that he should do so.

"Crimmins, unlock this cell," he now said; and Mary walked forth and followed them into the place from which they had come. She thought she was being freed and clutched Oliver's hand in a spasm of joy.

"Careful, my child," the old actor warned her. "You're not out yet. Tell us your story from the beginning, as clearly as you can."

And they placed her in a chair beside the sergeant's big desk, and there she poured out her soul to them.

"That strange man who had been pacing the Splendide for days—no, not the pale young man, but the one with the moustache—he was a detective. And it was he who arrested me, only a little while ago. I didn't know why. I didn't know what it was all about, and it

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was so horrible when he placed his hand on me and told me to 'come along.'" She buried her face in her hands—those wonderful hands—and sobbed. Silver gently touched her shoulder.

"Come, come, little Mary, this will never do. You must brace up, and tell us everything. It's late, you know, and if I'm to get Barrow."

She straightened up at once. It was comforting to have him here, beside her, like an iron prop in her extremity. She felt as if the combination in a safe had been started, and after a few turns the doors would open miraculously.

"Let's have McAllister in here," suggested the sergeant.

"Who's McAllister?" Silver wanted to know.

"The detective."

"Oh!"

Crimmins fetched him. The old actor recognized him immediately and bowed stiffly.

"I had to take her and bring her here, much as I hated to do so," McAllister began in a matter-of-fact way. "It's all in the day's job. That crook got away, blast his soul; but we'll get him yet."

"Who?" inquired Silver. He was confused, and wanted to get matters straight.

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"The pale young man," little Mary put in.
"It's he they should have, not little me!"

"H'm, I begin to see light," Silver said.
"It's something to do with that young man, is it, and his purchase of cigars and his constant watching? Now tell me all. I'm sure everything can be adjusted so that this child may come back to the hotel to-night."

McAllister seemed to enjoy the limelight. He crossed his legs, put the inevitable cigar between his lips, and settled back with his chair against the wall.

"Lemme do the talking," he said.

Every one seemed perfectly willing that he should proceed—in fact, there was no way of stopping him.

"I was put on this case a long time ago," he began in leisurely fashion. "I like smuggling cases—they've got lots of romance to them. Oh, I don't mean love and them fancy things," he amended. "I mean adventure—get me?" And he surveyed the group.

"They're hiding things in every kind of container these days," McAllister went on. "Cigar boxes is a pretty good place for jewels, so some of the smuggling gang thinks. Well, we'd got a line on some pearls that might be concealed in a certain shipment of 'cigars'."

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from England, and I was one o' those detailed on the case. I'd been around to several of the big hotels, but everything was quiet. I can't go into how we traced this bunch of cigar boxes—that would be givin' away some of the secrets of the Bureau. We have ways of findin' things out, though, as you can imagine. Well, to make a long story short, I'd been watchin' that pale young guy that used to hang around little Mary's stand, and I noticed that he was talkin' with her pretty often, an' actin' suspicious. I found out from the desk clerk that he wasn't a guest o' the house, so that put me wise to the fact that he might belong to the gang we're after. I confess I suspected little Mary here. I do yet, if you want to know the truth."

"Oh!" gasped the child. "How could you?"

"Well, we've had more innocent-looking dames than you dragged into cases, and found they was guilty, after all," McAllister said. "It's a funny world," he added, with great originality, as he took a puff on his cigar. "Anyhow, I made up my mind that pale young guy was the one we was after. I watched him close—nothin' he did escaped me." At least it could be said of McAllister that he was not

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lacking in self-esteem. But what happened later in the evening must have robbed him of some of it. For he went on to tell how he noted that the pale young fellow seemed to be watching day after day for a certain box of cigars to be left at the top of the pile. Of course, no one could swear to this: it was simply McAllister's intuition that told him what the game was. Well, the present night came, with full suspicion aroused, and he followed the young man, after he had made his purchase. Not too closely did he pursue him. He wanted to give him a chance to be well out of the hotel before he placed his hand upon his shoulder. But the fellow was far too quick for him. He became lost in a maze of traffic, and it was not until ten or fifteen minutes later that he spied him again on Madison Avenue. The detective cannoned up against him rather violently, and the box of cigars fell on the sidewalk. The detective picked up the box and put it swiftly in his capacious overcoat pocket; but when he turned to arrest the pale young man he had disappeared. A humiliating moment this must have been to McAllister! He had meant to brush up against the fellow, pretend to apologize, and then seize the box and the possessor of it at once. Instead, he found

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his prey gone, though the box was his, and two stalwart officers in uniform placing their hands on *his* shoulder! But quickly he displayed his badge, and they laughed at the error they had made. Even officers make mistakes once in a while, McAllister told them all, trying to chuckle.

At the police station he opened the box, and there, sure enough, he made his startling discovery. It was an innocent enough looking package. The cigars were placed, as usual; but the detective slit one of them open very carefully, and beneath the first layer of tobacco-leaf two pearls were concealed—for all the world like tiny peas in a neat pod. And another cigar held a like number of gems. If only he had caught the pale young man!

But his mind went back to Mary. She had certainly been in collusion with the youth who had escaped the clutches of the law. Some one must be apprehended, and it might as well be the girl. That was the way his mind worked. He admitted it. He rather exulted in it.

“I hated to get her,” he looked about the little group and said. “But it just had to be done.”

Little Mary was sobbing again. Old Silver whispered to her, “There’s not the slightest

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evidence against you, my child. Be brave now. Why, I'll rush back to the hotel, waken Barrow, get his lawyer, and be back in a jiffy to bail you out. It's absurd—the whole pesky business."

"Merely a matter of formality," the sergeant said to Silver. "I hoped some one of standing would come, to get this child bailed out. It isn't nice to think of her locked up back there. And I hope, sir, that I shall soon have the pleasure of seeing you on the stage again," he added, as Old Silver was putting on his hat and gathering up his stick.

"It seems to me there's too much drama in this wretched world," the old actor laughed back at the sergeant, as he marched grandly to the door and made what he believed was a most thrilling exit.

He wakened Barrow. He told him, rapidly, the whole tragic story. The proprietor, still sleepy, and listening to him while he dressed hurriedly, went to the cashier's safe and got out the requisite sum, which Silver had asked the sergeant to name.

But when they got back to the station-house an amazing thing happened.

Little Mary was gone. An elderly gentleman had come and bailed her out three or

four minutes after Silver had left for the Splendide. Not a trace of her. The sergeant and Crimpins, and even McAllister, thought the stranger who had come along was Barrow—that Old Silver was worn out and unable to return. They hadn't the slightest hesitation in accepting the man's money and allowing little Mary to leave.

Luckily, Oliver knew Mary's address—a humble lodging down on East Third Street. Late though it was, he hastened thence in Barrow's car. They rang the bell, aroused the landlady, a shabby, forlorn old creature, who was furious, as well she might be, at being called from her bed at such an unseemly hour.

No Mary! Not a trace of her.

Who was the mysterious man who had gone on the child's bail? The sergeant had told him that he gave a distinguished name and an address on Fifth Avenue. An old friend of her family, who had happened in at the Splendide, he said, right after Mary's predicament, and learned from the night clerk of her arrest. He often went there to see her and to talk with her, he told the sergeant hurriedly. He had not lost much time in words, however, and he had taken the girl away in a big limousine.

Strange. No one could make it out. Finally

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in despair, the two old cronies, Silver and Barrow, went disconsolately back to the hotel and to bed. But not to sleep. Each lay in the darkness, wondering about the fate of the little cigarette-girl. And Silver remembered his remark to the sergeant that there was too much drama in real life nowadays. He tossed till the white dawn crept into his room, and the earliest milk-wagons could be heard rolling down the streets, and the vast city began to stir once more to life and energy.