

CHAPTER VII

SOME MEDITATIONS ON SUCCESS

IF actors and actresses are like children in that they are readily depressed by disaster, they have the child's compensating gift of being easily uplifted by good fortune. It amazed Sally that any one mortal should have been able to spread such universal happiness as she had done by the simple act of lending her brother Fillmore twenty thousand dollars. If the Millennium had arrived, the members of the Primrose Way Company could not have been on better terms with themselves. The lethargy and dispiritedness, caused by their week of inaction, fell from them like a cloak. The sudden elevation of that creature of the abyss, the assistant stage manager, to the dizzy height of proprietor of the show appealed to their sense of drama. Most of them had played in pieces where much the same thing had happened to the persecuted heroine round about eleven o'clock, and the situation struck them as theatrically sound. Also, now that she had gone, the extent to which Miss Hobson had acted as a blight was universally recognized.

A spirit of optimism reigned, and cheerful rumours became current. The bowler-hatted Teddy had it straight from the lift-boy at his hotel that the ban

on the theatres was to be lifted on Tuesday at the latest; while no less an authority than the cigar-stand girl at the Pontchatrain had informed the man who played the butler that Toledo and Cleveland were opening to-morrow. It was generally felt that the sun was bursting through the clouds and that Fate would soon despair of the hopeless task of trying to keep good men down.

Fillmore was himself again. We all have our particular mode of self-expression in moments of elation. Fillmore's took the shape of buying a new waistcoat and a hundred half-dollar cigars and being very fussy about what he had for lunch. It may have been an optical illusion, but he appeared to Sally to put on at least six pounds in weight on the first day of the new regime. As a serf looking after paper-knives and other properties, he had been—for him—almost slim. As a manager he blossomed out into soft billowy curves, and when he stood on the sidewalk in front of the theatre, gloating over the new posters which bore the legend,

FILLMORE NICHOLAS

PRESENTS

the populace had to make a detour to get round him.

In this era of bubbling joy, it was hard that Sally, the fairy godmother responsible for it all, should not have been completely happy too; and it puzzled her why she was not. But whatever it was that cast the faint shadow refused obstinately to come out from the back of her mind and show itself and be challenged. It was not till she was out driving in a hired car with

Gerald one afternoon on Belle Isle that enlightenment came.

Gerald, since the departure of Miss Hobson, had been at his best. Like Fillmore, he was a man who responded to the sunshine of prosperity. His moodiness had vanished, and all his old charm had returned. And yet . . . it seemed to Sally, as the car slid smoothly through the pleasant woods and fields by the river, that there was something that jarred.

Gerald was cheerful and talkative. He, at any rate, found nothing wrong with life. He held forth spacioisly on the big things he intended to do.

“If this play gets over—and it’s going to—I’ll show ’em!” His jaw was squared, and his eyes glowed as they stared into the inviting future. “One success—that’s all I need—then watch me! I haven’t had a chance yet, but . . .”

His voice rolled on, but Sally had ceased to listen. It was the time of year when the chill of evening follows swiftly on the mellow warmth of afternoon. The sun had gone behind the trees, and a cold wind was blowing up from the river. And quite suddenly, as though it was the wind that had cleared her mind, she understood what it was that had been lurking at the back of her thoughts. For an instant it stood out nakedly without concealment, and the world became a forlorn place. She had realized the fundamental difference between man’s outlook on life and woman’s.

Success! How men worshipped it, and how little of themselves they had to spare for anything else. Ironically, it was the theme of this very play of Gerald’s which she had saved from destruction. Of all the men she knew, how many had any view of life except as a race which they must strain every nerve to

win, regardless of what they missed by the wayside in their haste? Fillmore—Gerald—all of them. There might be a woman in each of their lives, but she came second—an afterthought—a thing for their spare time. Gerald was everything to her. His success would never be more than a side-issue as far as she was concerned. He himself, without any of the trappings of success, was enough for her. But she was not enough for him. A spasm of futile jealousy shook her. She shivered.

“Cold?” said Gerald. “I’ll tell the man to drive back. . . . I don’t see any reason why this play shouldn’t run a year in New York. Everybody says it’s good . . . if it does get over, they’ll all be after me. I . . .”

Sally stared out into a bleak world. The sky was a leaden grey, and the wind from the river blew with a dismal chill.