

CHAPTER XIX

A YOUNG man with Valentino sideburns and wavy black hair stood before her. His eyes were as blue as his shirt. His teeth were crooked, and his smile was crooked. So much Molly saw in the light of the corridor. But there was something about his smile that made her like him.

"I heard you singing, honey," he said. "And I thought maybe you knew the kid next door."

His voice was soft, almost caressing. He had called her "honey!" What sort of man was this? She switched on the light and stared at him, and smiled as he stepped back. He appeared so overwhelmed.

"Oh!" he said, and it seemed as if he could say no more. She invited him in, motioned him toward the chair.

"Please don't think that I—that I——"

"Don't apologize," said Molly. "You're quite welcome. I haven't talked to anyone for weeks unless it was to say 'How much is that?' and 'I'll take it, then.'"

"Thanks!" he said, giving her a shy little grin.

"I am Eileen Drew."

"Eileen Drew!" He said the name softly, as though he enjoyed the sound of it.

"Miss Drew, I'm a newspaper man. I came up to see the little girl next door, but—— Did you know her?"

He seemed to be selecting his words for her especial benefit. She wondered why. She had liked it better when he said "the kid next door."

"I've seen her," she said. "But I never talked to her. I heard her crying one night, and went to her door, and knocked. But she wouldn't let me in."

"She hated women," he said simply, lighting a cigarette.

"You mean she's dead?"

"Dead. Acid. No failure this time."

Molly sat on the bed facing him, studying him, her legs doubled under her. Was it possible the girl next door was Monica Lane?

"She wrote me a note—but I didn't get it until a little while ago. And I got here—too late."

Perhaps the sympathy he saw in Molly's face warmed him back to his natural speech.

"They tell me that when she first came from the tall uncut she was as green as they make 'em—as sweet a kid as ever went wrong on Broadway. But she'd been in and out of jail when I first saw her. She was hard! Yet there was something nice about her, 'N-N-Nat,' she used to call me."

He flipped the half-smoked cigarette through the window, lit another.

"Why did she kill herself?"

"Boy trouble!"

She had heard the phrase before, had read it in one of the Broadway columns. It had sounded funny then. Boy trouble!

"She came from a tank town in Iowa, and many a joy-johnny was breathless for her. And she was green! I've just come from her room. I saw her lying on the bed, with a man's picture in her hand—and I heard a girl in the next room singing a requiem."

"Was it—was it Monica Lane?"

"Yes. You did know her, then?"

"I had read about her. I knew she lived here. That's all."

"She used to peddle cigarettes in Big Joe Carozzo's place, and gyp the drunks out of their change."

He smiled, and another cigarette went shooting out of the window, tracing a bright path in the night.

"She fell in love with Geoffrey Platt—the only man in the world, I guess, who never tried to double-cross her. What a story it is! Monica Lane, soiled, hard, bitter, poor, going soft for the most eligible bachelor in New York! Killing herself because she could never have him—lying there with his picture in her hand, and you singing 'Just a Memory!'"

"And all I can write is something like this: 'Monica Lane, former cigarette girl in a Times

Square night club, was found dead in bed last night in her home at umpty-ump-ump West Fifty-seventh Street. A previous attempt at suicide, made less than a month ago, failed because a friend struck a bottle of poison from her hand. It is said the young woman was despondent.”

“Yes,” said Molly, looking at the picture of Platt which the reporter held out to her. “It is enough. Let her rest. And this man is a gentleman—too much a gentleman to be linked with any scandal.”

“I can’t bring you into the story, either. And her note—the spelling, the crazy things she says—I think her yen for Platt must have unbalanced her a trifle.”

“Are all reporters as considerate as you?”

“When a story touches their friends—well, most of them are, I guess.”

“But not all?”

“Some of them would write scandal about their own grandmothers. But—tell me something about yourself, Miss Drew. You sing well. Where do you hide yourself?”

“You mean—am I a professional singer? No, I’m not. But I want to be. I came to New York simply to sing in the Corsairs’ Club.”

“And I want to write another *Abie’s Irish Rose*. Miss Drew, I know dozens of girls who want to be cabaret singers. And they all want to sing for Big Joe Carozzo. But—a girl like you!”

"Is my voice so bad?" she asked, pretending dismay.

"Your voice is exquisite. Your face is exquisite. You could sing anywhere, any time. I could get you a chance to sing in two musical comedies. I might even get you a hearing from Gatti-Casazza. It isn't that."

"I'm almost twenty-one, and——"

"And you can take care of yourself? Hundreds of girls have said that. Monica Lane was one of them. They didn't know what they were talking about. I tell you most girls have to buy success on Broadway. They buy it with their beauty, and pay for it with their tears."

"He's going to put that in a book," she thought.

"They're little white lambs going into the woods to sing to the wolves?" she asked.

"Good!" he said. "Great line! Only a lamb has some chance of getting away with it. When a girl gets full of giggle-water in one of these——"

"Are you Irving Henschell?" she asked.

"Because I talk as he writes?" He laughed with her. "No. I'm Nat Retticker."

"Oh! You write those stories of chorus girls and bootleggers and night-club entertainers. I like your column—and Henschell's, too. His slang is delicious. 'Making whoopee,' and 'this couple is altar-bound, and that couple was sealed or welded, and that couple had it abrogated,' and 'moom pictures' and—"

and 'tall millinery' and 'giggle-water' and 'boy trouble!'"

"Would you like to meet him?"

"Of course I would!"

"Good! I'll call around for you to-morrow night. We work at night. All Broadway reporters have to. We take in the shows and the speakeasies and the clubs. We're all washed up about seven or eight o'clock in the morning."

"What time will you come, Mr. Retticker?"

"Early. We'll have dinner, see a girl show, and then take in the white-rock watering places. You'll see speakeasies and dives. You'll see drunken kids of sixteen and seventeen, drunken women of sixty, you'll see naked women. You'll see things I wouldn't even talk about to you. And you'll be so sick of Broadway that you'll want to go home."

"But if I want to stay?"

"You won't when you see how rotten the life is, how phony. Broadway's a fake, Eileen Drew. And you—you're real. You don't belong."

He reached for his hat, took Platt's picture from her.

"I must 'phone in my yarn," he said. "Sorry if I upset you. But—don't feel too bad about Monica. She got only what she wanted." His hand went mechanically to his pocket. She heard paper rustling under his hand. The note.

"Did she mention Platt?" she asked.

"No. It's just a crazy little letter. She said she knew who had killed Spots Larkin. And she wanted to tell me before it was too late. Well, if she did know, it's too late now."

"Too late!" she echoed. Dear God, was it indeed—too late?

Without warning he took her hand, held it palm upward, put a shy, hot kiss upon it, and ran.

And Molly stood there long—staring at a door that was closed.

CHAPTER XX

THEY had a steak sandwich in a Seventh Avenue delicatessen, after the show, an enormous steak lying on two pieces of toast and flanked with French fried potatoes, lettuce, sliced tomatoes, and a piece of raw onion. Molly looked at it in some astonishment.

Was this the fare of Broadway girls? Why, it was enough to feed two hungry farmers in threshing time.

“And they call this a sandwich?” she asked.

“On the level! The wind won’t blow that away. I was with a girl the other night, and she was eating potato chips with her steak. The waiter opened a window, and the draft blew her potato chips across the room. She held her steak on the plate with both hands, and hollered, ‘For God’s sake, shut that winder.’”

“New Yorkers eat too much,” Molly observed. “They eat all the time. They have breakfast places, lunch places, afternoon tea places, dinner places, after-theatre supper places, and sandwich shops for in between times. New Yorkers buy gum or chocolate before they go anywhere on the subway, and buy more when they get there. They buy candy in the

theatres, sandwiches on the ferries, coffee, wedges of pie—on the ferries going to work, on the ferries going home to dinner. How can they stand it?"

Nat was cynical to-night, she noted, and gay, and though his eyes made constant love to her he was careful that his hands did not so much as touch her hands. He talked of everything, his job, his expense account that let him buy all the meals and all the drinks he wanted, his friends—who were of all kinds—his column, his experiences in the clubs. Apparently he had forgotten Monica Lane, and the secret she would keep forever!

He pointed out people in the delicatessen. "That gal goes home on the subway every night, and her father waits for her at the home station. Some night her train will be late, or it won't run, or something. The chap with her is married. The girl with the chink is taking hop, they say. She won't last long. The baby in blue was married last week to a movie director—not the johnny who's feeding her now."

Molly wanted to go to the Corsairs' as soon she could, but Nat insisted on showing her other places first.

First they visited an ornate barroom, made to look like a street in some tropic land. It was crowded. It was alive with noise. Molly felt stifled, lost. Men and women stood up against the bar, talked and sang, laughed and drank, stared at her. Three bartenders in white aprons worked feverishly. Men garbed as

Mexicans went through the crowd playing guitars and singing. Molly could hear them only when they were close by. Someone was playing a piano somewhere in the room. Molly couldn't see it. The bar was covered with bottles and glasses. In front of the mirror were piles and piles of bottles, mounds and mounds of glasses.

Nat tried to elbow her up to the bar. There wasn't room. There wasn't a vacant seat at the tables. There wasn't a comfortable spot to stand in between bar and tables. The place reeked with smoke.

Molly saw a young girl with her arms around a man. She felt a great disgust. A young man was looking soulfully into an old woman's face—a woman with thin bare shoulders. Young girls with old men, young men with old women! They made her think of a paragraph she had read in one of the papers:

The New York girls are so nice. They go out often, but always with their daddies. And their daddies buy them everything. Nice daddies!

Men came up to greet Nat, men in evening clothes, one with a green sweater and corduroy trousers. He introduced none of them, and Molly was grateful. She resented their staring, their unaffected interest in her. She saw that Nat kept looking obliquely at her, watching her reactions.

"Let's go!" she said. "I need fresh air!"

They went somewhere in a taxi, went upstairs in

an elevator. Nat explained that this club owned the whole building—seven floors. As soon as one floor was padlocked by the prohibition agents, he said, the club opened again on the floor above.

They went many places thereafter, so many places that Molly couldn't remember them all. There were queer places tucked away in dark corners, secret and furtive places, brightly lighted and noisy places. All she recalled of them later were glimpses, incidents—a beefy girl singing and shaking her shoulders, a thin girl doing a dance called the Black Bottom, a man with a lean sad face and a battered stovepipe hat who was introduced to her as "the funniest guy in New York, and never got a break," women screaming with laughter, and with gin, a man pinching a woman's bare arm, half-naked girls dancing prettily, drunken couples dancing obscenely.

"And now," Nat said, as they left one of those places, "I'll take you to a dive that will make you blush! It's strong medicine—but it's good for what ails you."

"Lead on," she said. "I feel as if I've been swimming for hours in seas of drunken women. I feel intoxicated myself—though I've had nothing but ginger ale. I can stand 'most anything now."

It was a room with ghastly yellow walls from which electric fixtures stuck out like bones. A couch ran around three walls, behind little tables where a few dozen men and women sat. A waiter in bell-boy's

uniform escorted them to a table, brought them glasses. A girl sang to them, an ugly little girl, Molly thought. A coloured girl played the piano, and smoked a cigarette. Back of her, apeline darkies wrenched blue music out of brasses.

"Is this all?" Molly asked.

"No. Wait. You'll be blushing before you know it." He smiled tolerantly, waved to a man across the room. "That's Chet Qug," he said, "that long lanky hoodlum with the pretty girl in pink."

"Qug?"

"Qug. And his right name, too, I guess. He's the toughest guy in New York. He used to go around town swearing no dame was on the level. He'd see some pal with a girl, and he'd say, 'Is that your best speed? Why don't you pick one that's on the up-and-up?' He'd burn a guy up, see? He thought it was funny. And now he's fallen hard for a girl himself. I mean that for the first time in his life he's in love with a girl. And he's learned she's what he thought all other women were. He was telling me about her the other night—and he cried about it, wept salt tears all over me. The toughest guy in New York, and he weeps—and wants to murder someone! He goes out with a new girl every night—but he still loves the one he knows is wrong. What a laugh, eh? But nobody laughs at Qug."

Qug came to the table as Nat finished talking of him. "Lo, feller," he cried. "Glad to see you in good

company for once. But why take a girl like her into a pig pen like this?"

"Medicine, Chet, bitter medicine. Miss Drew, Mr. Qug."

The "toughest guy in New York" shook hands with Molly, gave her a smile out of his hard blue eyes and his wide pale mouth, and warned her.

"Beat it out of here, girlie," he said gently. "You ain't doing yourself no good, being seen here."

As he spoke a number of barelegged girls rushed into the centre of the room and began, not to dance, but to make sinuous motions with their bodies, to writhe and shake and twist themselves. Here was pornography, here was horror, here was passion standing naked and leering at her. The waiters joined the girls. "Get hot!" they cried. The music laughed and gurgled obscenely. "Get hot!" it echoed. Men and women applauded, cheered, thrust dollar bills into outstretched hands, cried "Get hot!"

Molly's face was burning.

"Take me out of here, please," she said.

"Good kid," said Qug. He shoved the waiters out of her way, sent one of them reeling half across the room, cleared a passage for her.

"Thank you," Molly said, and he shook hands with her again. "I'm going to shoot my broad home," he said. "She's got a lot of home work to do. And I'll catch you later at Carozzo's dump. Don't forget. Carozzo's."

"We've got to stop in at The Orchid a moment," Nat said. "See you at Carozzo's. And—thanks for the straight-arm stuff."

"The pleasure's all mine. Take care of that girl."

The hostess at The Orchid, an effervescent woman of middle age, greeted Nat with a kiss, and looked at Molly. "You beautiful, beautiful dream," she cried. "Oh, Nat, where did you get her?"

She sat at their table for some little time, telling Nat the news she had to tell while Molly's eyes made little trips around the room. She saw a waiter holding a bottle of ammonia to the nose of a drunken man; she saw a fight that was stopped after a few blows; saw a woman sobbing over her unconscious escort; noticed a woman sitting at a table not far away. The woman had distinction despite the lines of dissipation in her face. She wore diamonds.

"That's Rose White," the hostess said. "A few years ago she was the most beautiful thing in New York. She was just what her name is, a white rose. There's a story for you, Nat. When she gets tipsy enough she'll begin to sing. Her voice is still sweet, but not what it was once."

"What happened to her?" Molly asked.

"Half a million dollars," Nat said.

He rose. "It's nearly daylight," he announced. "We'll be just in time for the show at Carozzo's."

In the taxi he asked her: "Do you still want to be a cabaret singer?"

“Yes. Don’t ask me why. And please, please help me.”

He seized her hand, held it tight.

“Oh, Eileen, you are so beautiful and innocent and sweet—and I want to keep you with me always. I love you! But please—please go home, dear, and never, never, never come back!”

He said he loved her, and she knew he meant it. She felt a little compassion for him. He did so want to “save her!”

“I like you, Nat,” she said. “You mustn’t make love to me, though, and you mustn’t try to keep me from—from my work.”

She gripped his arm when the taxi slid into the curb, gripped it tight, and didn’t know it.

“This is Carozzo’s,” a voice cried within her. “This is the tent of Holofernes! I am here. Will I be like Rose White? Will I kill myself like Monica Lane? What does it matter?”

“Oh, Nat,” she said aloud, “I’m—I’m half afraid!”

CHAPTER XXI

BROADWAY, sleeping like an honest street, stirred uneasily with the dawn. Seventh Avenue, lying cross-wise in its Times Square bed, woke from its dreams of fair women, rubbed its eyes, and yawned.

But in the Corsairs' Club, sixty stories above, lights burned feverishly. Music caroused. Men and women laughed and shouted, danced and drank and loved.

Strange wild drums beat in Molly's veins as she entered the long narrow room with Retticker and passed through a lane of eyes to a table under a black flag that wore the skull and bones. She was really here at last! But where was Carozzo? Where was Mora? Where was Marcia? She looked for them but could not see them. She looked at the door that led into Carozzo's den. Behind that door there had been murder. Behind that door her father had been framed.

An old man with a satyr's face was jigging in the centre of the floor, and people were laughing at him, and encouraging him to wilder endeavours. A woman with plump white shoulders staggered up from a nearby table, and brought him a glass full of liquor. He

gulped it down, still jiggling, and fell on his face. The glass broke. The woman sat down and laughed. Grinning waiters escorted both to their tables. Molly gave the affair scant attention.

"That wasn't part of the programme," Nat explained, "but it might well have been. There are lots of impromptu acts here. You see most of Carozzo's patrons are rich, rich enough to give stupid parties in their homes, and to be bored with them. They like this dive because they can be natural here. They can get up and sing or jig or beat the drums, or make fools of themselves in any other way. There's another old boy—I don't see him around to-night—who likes to bend over backward until he can drink from a glass of whisky that is standing on the floor.

"The old fossil you saw jiggling is a banker. After midnight he's got more dollars than sense, and he hands out hundred-dollar bills for tips. But try to get a loan from him during banking hours!"

Men began to come to the table, Irving Henschell, the Broadway columnist with the newest Broadway slang; Chet Qug, whom Molly had already met; Fran McLean from Hollywood, who said he had mistaken Molly for a moving-picture star he knew; Geoffrey Cameron Platt III, who had just returned from Paris; and others whom she forgot five minutes later.

"You'll see Platt here every night," Nat commented when he had the opportunity. "He went

abroad suddenly after the Larkin murder, got back a few weeks ago."

Molly was stung with curiosity.

"He was here when the murder was discovered?" she asked. And to cover her excitement she added, "How fascinating!"

"Yes. He was here with Anson Keen, the deputy district attorney, that night. He and Keen went into that room"—he waved a hand in the general direction of the door—"and kept everybody out until Captain O'Malley and the medical examiner arrived. He gave us all the dope he could. And—a queer thing—he insisted that Anthony Sommers was absolutely innocent. When we went to find him later in the day we learned he was gone."

Here was a clew, Molly thought. She must cultivate Mr. Platt and find out why he went, and why he said her father was not guilty.

The lights went out suddenly, and within a few seconds a spotlight revealed a filmy white figure on the balcony.

"Marcia," Nat said. "They call her Snake Eyes."

In the darkness below the balcony a man began to sing in a rich tenor voice. In the spotlight the filmy figure began to dance, slowly, gracefully; began to unwind from its misty drapes; began to take a woman's shape.

For a moment the woman stood in the glare of the light, black hair running like paint down her white

body. The singer's voice died slowly, softly, and the spotlight went out. At once all the other lights burst out of the darkness and there was noise again.

"Beautiful!" said Molly, answering the question she saw in the reporter's eyes. "But the effect on all these people——"

"Is the effect intended. Carozzo is too subtle to allow any rough stuff in this jernt—such as you saw at some of the other clubs to-night. But he gets there just the same. He puts a kick even in beauty."

Molly saw Carozzo and knew he was coming to greet her. She recognized him at once, and fought to conceal the revulsion she felt.

"Nat!" Carozzo said cordially. He clasped both Nat's hands in his. "I have only just learned from Henschell that you were here. Introduce me, please, to your beautiful friend."

He bowed low to Molly and held her hand. And if the pulse beat fast in her throat, and little white marks appeared at either side of her nose, her eyes betrayed nothing.

"Eileen Drew! Eileen Drew!" he said. He looked at her a long time, a queer yellow light in his black eyes, his fat fingers playing with his cruel moustache points.

She smiled and bowed. He pulled up a chair, sat beside her, leaned close to her. "And Henschell tells me that you sing."

"I studied in Chicago for some time," she said, as though it didn't matter.

"Will you sing for us?" His voice was persuasive, tender.

She was half dismayed. She had not expected the opportunity to come so suddenly, felt unprepared for it. But—why not? If she were to sing here every night, as she intended to, she might as well begin now.

"Yes," she said. "What song would you like?"

"Anything. But from you—not this 'vo-de-o-do!'"

"They like the old-fashioned stuff," Nat said. "They may come here and drink all night, men with other men's wives, but they like songs about young love, and home and mother—though they haven't seen poor Ma in years and years, you know—moonlight and roses in a garden—and the little boy who wants to go to heaven because his mama's there."

"I will sing you a song I learned from my grandmother," Molly said. "I don't believe the orchestra ever heard it. But that doesn't matter, does it?"

While Carozzo was making the announcement to his guests, Molly looked at Nat. She saw he was both jealous and displeased. She watched him lighting a cigarette, his hand trembling so that the flame singed his eyelashes. She noticed that he did not look at her.

"Ladies and suckers!" Carozzo began. They

laughed and cheered him. They began to clap before he had finished, and Molly stood up quickly, her hands going to her heart.

The guests—those who could still see—saw a slender girl, in black taffeta, a girl with great gray eyes and yellow hair, standing straight, smiling, a bit nervous perhaps, waiting for silence.

Molly saw dissipated men and women, tables covered with bottles and china and silverware and ash trays, pirate flags on the walls, a pair of cutlasses crossed, an old-fashioned pistol hanging on a black cord, yawning musicians, girls in scanty costumes standing by the dressing-room door, waiters slithering through the tables, a young girl sleeping on an old man's shoulder, one arm around his neck, a woman lying face and arms on a wet table, a woman staring through a lorgnette and wisps of gray hair, a man trying to sit steadily in his chair. She saw friendly faces, too, a man drinking a toast to her, a girl smiling at her. She sang:

*"I know a place where the sun is like gold
And the cherry blooms burst with snow;
And down underneath is the loveliest nook,
Where the four-leaf clovers grow."*

She saw an old man trying to bite through a thick sandwich; saw a woman pouring a drink from a hammered-silver flask, and spilling most of the liquid; saw a waiter enter from the kitchen door, a

huge tray of food and silver held above his shoulder with the palm of his hand.

*“One leaf is for hope, and one is for faith,
And one is for love, you know.
And God put another one on for luck—
If you search you will find where they grow.”*

A man was rolling some dice at a far table, two women watching the spotted cubes spin. The hat-check girl was reading a newspaper, one of those little ones full of pictures. One of those girls at the dressing-room door was sneering. Marcia. The song went on:

*“But you must have hope, and you must have faith,
And love, and be strong, and so—”*

She could feel that Carozzo was watching her, though she couldn't see him. The thought made her uneasy. The woman who had fallen across the table was struggling to get up. Her escort was laughing at her. A girl was having fun at the same table, feeding a man with a spoon.

*“If you work, if you watch, you will find the place
Where the four-leaf clovers grow.”*

As she turned to sit down she saw Carozzo wiping his forehead. She smiled at him. He rose quickly, took her hands, patted them.

"It was wonderful!" he said. "Most wonderful. Hear how they applaud!"

Indeed, men were clapping, beating the glasses with knives and forks and spoons, crying "More! More!" The woman with the lorgnette was screaming for "Dearie, My Dearie!" Snatches of talk came to her: "so natural"—"not much expression but it makes you feel . . ."—"perfectly beautiful girl"—"some baby"—"make her sing 'The Man I Love.'" She could see a girl dabbing at her eyes with a bit of lace.

"Wait!" Carozzo said. "I will make another little announcement."

He got up quickly and waved his hands for silence.

"Dearie!" a woman screamed. "Man I Love," a man shouted. "Moonlight Bay," someone else called. Other voices yelled, "More! We want more!"

"You made a hit, Eileen," Nat said.

But Molly stared at the handkerchief Carozzo had let fall when he arose, stared at the little stitches, at the monogram. She had put those stitches there, she had made that monogram. The handkerchief was one of those she had sent her father on his last birthday.

"Miss Drew is just visiting in New York," she heard Carozzo saying. "But I hope to have her stay with us for a long time. I hope to give you the pleasure of having her sing to you every night. And now, if you are quiet, I will ask her to sing 'Dearie.'"

“Yeah, give this little girl a nice big hand,” said Retticker, pouring himself another brandy. He laughed without mirth. “And buy forget-me-nots for little Monica Lane!”

Molly shivered, saw Carozzo’s fat hand beckoning her, and rose to sing again.