

tiously in his pocket to see if he had money enough for the fare.

XII.

Mother Fritzi proved to be a broad, jolly, red-faced woman with a German accent and a mammoth coiffure of molasses-colored hair. Bob learned subsequently that she was an ex-trapeze performer, having been one of "The Three Nagles, World-Renowned Gymnasts," and that she was now conducting a theatrical boarding house for the benefit of her friends as well as herself.

Rollicking sounds of gaiety issued from an old-fashioned, imitation-stone house before which they alighted; and when they entered (both girls had latchkeys to the front door), they came upon a scene of strange animation. A mixed quartet was delivering a Swiss yodel to the accompaniment of three flutes, not a whit disturbed by the syncopated banging on a piano in the adjoining room, while half a dozen more men and women, obviously of the stage, were laughing, talking, smoking, and almost drowning the clashing chords of music.

The entrance of the new arrivals brought no pause, but Mother Fritzi bustled forward importantly, her round face beaming, and greeted the girls effusively, extending a dimpled hand to each. Then she turned her welcoming smile on Bob.

"And who's the rosy-cheeked boy?" she asked.

Bob was introduced, and Mother Fritzi, squeezing his fingers in her cushiony palm, said that he reminded her of "The Old Homestead," which rather puzzled him.

Other introductions followed. The spirit of good-fellowship fairly permeated the air. Everybody was disposed to clap everybody else on the back, figuratively if not literally, in hearty congratulation on the excellence of their various "stunts." Bob liked them all—except a flashily dressed ventriloquist, known familiarly as "Dicky" Duval, who thus patronizingly greeted Bob:

"Salutation, Uncle Si! How's every little thing down on the farm?"

His distaste for the ventriloquist waxed still more pronounced when Mother Fritzi told him, "Dicky's doing big time now at the Castle, and has a mash on Dolores."

This remark of Mother Fritzi incited a feeling within him that felt more like anger than jealousy.

The yodlers ceased warbling, the flutists joined the syncopated pianist, a long-faced youth brought a snare drum from the hall, and presently there crashed upon the air the ear-splitting strains of the latest "lame duck" rag. Chairs and table were shoved back, the rug was rolled up, and two-thirds of the assemblage swung into the dance.

Bob sat near the front windows beside Mother Fritzi, who bobbed contentedly back and forth in her rocking-chair, her round face aglow, her eyes beaming fondly upon "her children"—they were all children to her. Bob, tho, was steeped in a black melancholy. The sight of Dolores whirling past in the arms of the ventriloquist sent no ray of brightness thru his gloom.

Then a question which had lain very near his heart for a long while—a question which had been unusually insistent and troublesome since yesterday—rose in his mind, and he decided to put it to the plump, well-meaning woman who sat beside him. He approached it in a roundabout fashion:

"Mrs. Nagle—" he began.

"Call me Mother," she interrupted, patting his hand, which rested on the arm of his chair next hers. "Everybody does."

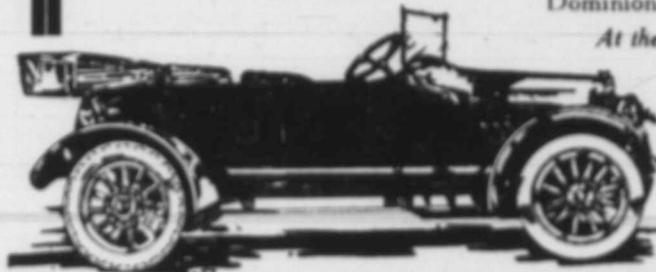
He started afresh, with a slight show of embarrassment:

"M-mother—you know a lot about stage folks and their ways, and I want to ask you something. Do married women on the stage use their husband's names, or—"

"Almost always their maiden names, my child. My first husband's name was Lowenbach, and when we was playing small time houses in comedy acro-

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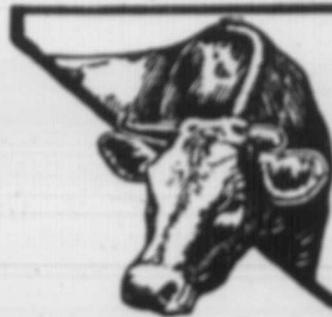
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