Jill the Reckless

By

P. G. Wodehouse

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

* * * * *

JILL THE RECKLESS

CHAPTER I

THE FAMILY CURSE

I

Freddie Rooke gazed coldly at the breakfast-table. Through a gleaming eye-glass he inspected the revolting object which Barker, his faithful man, had placed on a plate before him.

"Barker!" His voice had a ring of pain.

"Sir?"

"What's this?"

"Poached egg, sir."

Freddie averted his eyes with a silent shudder.

"It looks just like an old aunt of mine," he said. "Remove it!"

He got up, and, wrapping his dressing-gown about his long legs, took up a stand in front of the fireplace. From this position he surveyed the room, his shoulders against the mantelpiece, his calves pressing the club fender. It was a cheerful oasis in a chill and foggy world, a typical London bachelor's breakfast-room. The walls were a restful grey, and the table, set for two, a comfortable arrangement in white and silver.

"Eggs, Barker," said Freddie solemnly, "are the acid test!"

"Yes, sir?"

"If, on the morning after, you can tackle a poached egg, you are all right. If not, not. And don't let anybody tell you otherwise."

"No, sir."

Freddie pressed the palm of his hand to his brow, and sighed.

"It would seem, then, that I must have revelled a trifle whole-heartedly last night. I was possibly a little blotto. Not whiffled, perhaps, but indisputably blotto. Did I make much noise coming in?"

"No, sir. You were very quiet."

"Ah! A dashed bad sign!"

Freddie moved to the table, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"The cream jug is to your right, sir," said the helpful Barker.

"Let it remain there. Café noir for me this morning. As noir as it can jolly well stick!" Freddie retired to the fireplace and sipped delicately. "As far as I can remember, it was Ronny Devereux' birthday or something...."

"Mr. Martyn's, I think you said, sir."

"That's right. Algy Martyn's birthday, and Ronny and I were the guests. It all comes back to me. I wanted Derek to roll along and join the festivities--he's never met Ronny--but he gave it a miss. Quite right! A chap in his position has responsibilities. Member of Parliament and all that. Besides," said Freddie earnestly, driving home the point with a wave of his spoon, "he's engaged to be married. You must remember that, Barker!"

"I will endeavour to, sir."

"Sometimes," said Freddie dreamily, "I wish I were engaged to be married. Sometimes I wish I had some sweet girl to watch over me and.... No, I don't, by Jove. It would give me the utter pip! Is Sir Derek up yet, Barker?"

"Getting up, sir."

"See that everything is all right, will you? I mean as regards the food-stuffs and what not. I want him to make a good breakfast. He's got to meet his mother this morning at Charing Cross. She's legging it back from the Riviera."

"Indeed, sir?"

Freddie shook his head.

"You wouldn't speak in that light, careless tone if you knew her! Well, you'll see her to-night. She's coming here to dinner."

"Yes, sir."

"Miss Mariner will be here, too. A foursome. Tell Mrs. Barker to pull up her socks and give us something pretty ripe. Soup, fish, all that sort of thing. She knows. And let's have a stoup of malvoisie from the oldest bin. This is a special occasion!"

"Her ladyship will be meeting Miss Mariner for the first time, sir?"

"You've put your finger on it! Absolutely the first time on this or any stage! We must all rally round and make the thing a success."

"I am sure Mrs. Barker will strain every nerve, sir." Barker moved to the door, carrying the rejected egg, and stepped aside to allow a tall, well-built man of about thirty to enter. "Good morning, Sir Derek."

"Morning, Barker."

Barker slid softly from the room. Derek Underhill sat down at the table. He was a strikingly handsome man, with a strong, forceful face, dark, lean and cleanly shaven. He was one of those men whom a stranger would instinctively pick out of a crowd as worthy of note. His only defect was that his heavy eyebrows gave him at times an expression which was a little forbidding. Women, however, had never been repelled by it. He was very popular with women, not quite so popular with men--always excepting Freddie Rooke, who worshipped him. They had been at school together, though Freddie was the younger by several years.

"Finished, Freddie?" asked Derek.

Freddie smiled wanly.

"We are not breakfasting this morning," he replied. "The spirit was willing, but the jolly old flesh would have none of it. To be perfectly frank, the Last of the Rookes has a bit of a head."

"Ass!" said Derek.

"A bit of sympathy," said Freddie, pained, "would not be out of place. We are far from well. Some person unknown has put a threshing-machine inside the old bean and substituted a piece of brown paper for our tongue. Things look dark and yellow and wobbly!"

"You shouldn't have overdone it last night."

"It was Algy Martyn's birthday," pleaded Freddie.

"If I were an ass like Algy Martyn," said Derek, "I wouldn't go about advertising the fact that I'd been born. I'd hush it up!"

He helped himself to a plentiful portion of kedgeree, Freddie watching him with repulsion mingled with envy. When he began to eat the spectacle became too poignant for the sufferer, and he wandered to the window.

"What a beast of a day!"

It was an appalling day. January, that grim month, was treating London

with its usual severity. Early in the morning a bank of fog had rolled up off the river, and was deepening from pearly white to a lurid brown. It pressed on the window-pane like a blanket, leaving dark, damp rivulets on the glass.

"Awful!" said Derek,

"Your mater's train will be late."

"Yes. Damned nuisance. It's bad enough meeting trains in any case, without having to hang about a draughty station for an hour."

"And it's sure, I should imagine," went on Freddie, pursuing his train of thought, "to make the dear old thing pretty tolerably ratty, if she has one of those slow journeys." He pottered back to the fireplace, and rubbed his shoulders reflectively against the mantelpiece. "I take it that you wrote to her about Jill?"

"Of course. That's why she's coming over, I suppose. By the way, you got those seats for that theatre to-night?"

"Yes. Three together and one somewhere on the outskirts. If it's all the same to you, old thing, I'll have the one on the outskirts."

Derek, who had finished his kedgeree and was now making himself a blot on Freddie's horizon with toast and marmalade, laughed.

"What a rabbit you are, Freddie! Why on earth are you so afraid of mother?"

Freddie looked at him as a timid young squire might have gazed upon St. George when the latter set out to do battle with the dragon. He was of the amiable type which makes heroes of its friends. In the old days when he had fagged for him at Winchester he had thought Derek the most wonderful person in the world, and this view he still retained. Indeed, subsequent events had strengthened it. Derek had done the most amazing things since leaving school. He had had a brilliant career at Oxford, and now, in the House of Commons, was already looked upon by the leaders of his party as one to be watched and encouraged. He played polo superlatively well, and was a fine shot. But of all his gifts and qualities the one that extorted Freddie's admiration in its intensest form was his lion-like courage as exemplified by his behaviour in the present crisis. There he sat, placidly eating toast and marmalade, while the boat-train containing Lady Underhill already sped on its way from Dover to London. It was like Drake playing bowls with the Spanish Armada in sight.

"I wish I had your nerve!" he said awed. "What I should be feeling, if I were in your place and had to meet your mater after telling her that I was engaged to marry a girl she had never seen, I don't know. I'd rather face a wounded tiger!"

"Idiot!" said Derek placidly.

"Not," pursued Freddie, "that I mean to say anything in the least derogatory and so forth to your jolly old mater, if you understand me, but the fact remains she scares me pallid. Always has, ever since the first time I went to stay at your place when I was a kid. I can still remember catching her eye the morning I happened by pure chance to bung an apple through her bedroom window, meaning to let a cat on the sill below have it in the short ribs. She was at least thirty feet away, but, by Jove, it stopped me like a bullet!"

"Push the bell, old man, will you? I want some more toast."

Freddie did as he was requested, with growing admiration.

"The condemned man made an excellent breakfast," he murmured. "More toast, Barker," he added, as that admirable servitor opened the door. "Gallant! That's what I call it. Gallant!"

Derek tilted his chair back.

"Mother is sure to like Jill when she sees her," he said.

"When she sees her! Ah! But the trouble is, young feller-me-lad, that she hasn't seen her! That's the weak spot in your case, old companion. A month ago she didn't know of Jill's existence. Now, you

know and I know that Jill is one of the best and brightest. As far as we are concerned, everything in the good old garden is lovely. Why, dash it, Jill and I were children together. Sported side by side on the green, and what not. I remember Jill, when she was twelve, turning the garden hose on me and knocking about seventy-five per cent off the market value of my best Sunday suit. That sort of thing forms a bond, you know, and I've always felt that she was a corker. But your mater's got to discover it for herself. It's a dashed pity, by Jove, that Jill hasn't a father or a mother or something of that species to rally round just now. They would form a gang. There's nothing like a gang! But she's only got that old uncle of hers. A rummy bird. Met him?"

"Several times. I like him."

"Oh, he's a genial old buck all right. A very bonhomous lad. But you hear some pretty queer stories about him if you get among people who knew him in the old days. Even now I'm not so dashed sure I should care to play cards with him. Young Threepwood was telling me only the other day that the old boy took thirty quid off him at picquet as clean as a whistle. And Jimmy Monroe, who's on the Stock Exchange, says he's frightfully busy these times buying margins or whatever it is chappies do down in the City. Margins. That's the word. Jimmy made me buy some myself on a thing called Amalgamated Dyes. I don't understand the procedure exactly, but Jimmy says it's a sound egg and will do me a bit of good. What was I talking about? Oh, yes, old

Selby. There's no doubt he's quite a sportsman. But till you've got Jill well established, you know, I shouldn't enlarge on him too much with the mater."

"On the contrary," said Derek, "I shall mention him at the first opportunity. He knew my father out in India."

"Did he, by Jove! Oh, well, that makes a difference."

Barker entered with the toast, and Derek resumed his breakfast.

"It may be a little bit awkward," he said, "at first, meeting mother. But everything will be all right after five minutes."

"Absolutely! But, oh, boy! that first five minutes!" Freddie gazed portentously through his eye-glass. Then he seemed to be undergoing some internal struggle, for he gulped once or twice. "That first five minutes!" he said, and paused again. A moment's silent self-communion, and he went on with a rush. "I say, listen. Shall I come along, too?"

"Come along?"

"To the station. With you."

"What on earth for?"

"To see you through the opening stages. Break the ice, and all that sort of thing. Nothing like collecting a gang, you know. Moments when a feller needs a friend and so forth. Say the word, and I'll buzz along and lend my moral support."

Derek's heavy eyebrows closed together in an offended frown, and seemed to darken his whole face. This unsolicited offer of assistance hurt his dignity. He showed a touch of the petulance which came now and then when he was annoyed, to suggest that he might not possess so strong a character as his exterior indicated.

"It's very kind of you," he began stiffly.

Freddie nodded. He was acutely conscious of this himself.

"Some fellows," he observed, "would say 'Not at all!' I suppose. But not the Last of the Rookes! For, honestly, old man, between ourselves, I don't mind admitting that this is the bravest deed of the year, and I'm dashed if I would do it for anyone else."

"It's very good of you, Freddie...."

"That's all right. I'm a Boy Scout, and this is my act of kindness for to-day."

Derek got up from the table.

"Of course you mustn't come," he said. "We can't form a sort of debating society to discuss Jill on the platform at Charing Cross."

"Oh, I would just hang around in the offing, shoving in an occasional tactful word."

"Nonsense!"

"The wheeze would simply be to...."

"It's impossible."

"Oh, very well," said Freddie, damped. "Just as you say, of course. But there's nothing like a gang, old son, nothing like a gang!"

II

Derek Underhill threw down the stump of his cigar, and grunted irritably. Inside Charing Cross Station business was proceeding as usual. Porters wheeling baggage-trucks moved to and fro like Juggernauts. Belated trains clanked in, glad to get home, while others, less fortunate, crept reluctantly out through the blackness and disappeared into an inferno of detonating fog-signals. For outside the fog still held. The air was cold and raw and tasted coppery. In

the street traffic moved at a funeral pace, to the accompaniment of hoarse cries and occasional crashes. Once the sun had worked its way through the murk and had hung in the sky like a great red orange, but now all was darkness and discomfort again, blended with that odd suggestion of mystery and romance which is a London fog's only redeeming quality.

The fog and the waiting had had their effect upon Derek. The resolute front he had exhibited to Freddie at the breakfast-table had melted since his arrival at the station, and he was feeling nervous at the prospect of the meeting that lay before him. Calm as he had appeared to the eye of Freddie and bravely as he had spoken, Derek, in the recesses of his heart, was afraid of his mother. There are men--and Derek Underhill was one of them--who never wholly emerge from the nursery. They may put away childish things and rise in the world to affluence and success, but the hand that rocked their cradle still rules their lives.

Derek turned to begin one more walk along the platform, and stopped in mid-stride, raging. Beaming over the collar of a plaid greatcoat, all helpfulness and devotion, Freddie Rooke was advancing towards him, the friend that sticketh closer than a brother. Like some loving dog, who, ordered home sneaks softly on through alleys and by-ways, peeping round corners and crouching behind lamp-posts, the faithful Freddie had followed him after all. And with him, to add the last touch to Derek's discomfiture, were those two inseparable allies of his, Ronny

Devereux and Algy Martyn.

"Well, old thing," said Freddie, patting Derek encouragingly on the shoulder, "here we are after all! I know you told me not to roll round and so forth, but I knew you didn't mean it. I thought it over after you had left, and decided it would be a rotten trick not to cluster about you in your hour of need. I hope you don't mind Ronny and Algy breezing along too. The fact is, I was in the deuce of a funk--your jolly old mater always rather paralyses my nerve-centres, you know--so I roped them in. Met 'em in Piccadilly, groping about for the club, and conscripted 'em both, they very decently consenting. We all toddled off and had a pick-me-up at that chemist chappie's at the top of the Hay-market, and now we're feeling full of beans and buck, ready for anything. I've explained the whole thing to them, and they're with you to the death! Collect a gang, dear boy, collect a gang! That's the motto. There's nothing like it!"

"Nothing!" said Ronny.

"Absolutely nothing!" said Algy.

"We'll just see you through the opening stages," said Freddie, "and then leg it. We'll keep the conversation general you know."

"Stop it getting into painful channels," said Ronny.

"Steer it clear," said Algy, "of the touchy topic."

"That's the wheeze," said Freddie. "We'll ... Oh, golly! There's the train coming in now!" His voice quavered, for not even the comforting presence of his two allies could altogether sustain him in this ordeal. But he pulled himself together with a manful effort. "Stick it, old beans!" he said doughtily. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party!"

"We're here!" said Ronny Devereux.

"On the spot!" said Algy Martyn.

III

The boat-train slid into the station. Bells rang, engines blew off steam, porters shouted, baggage-trucks rattled over the platform. The train began to give up its contents, now in ones and twos, now in a steady stream. Most of the travellers seemed limp and exhausted, and were pale with the pallor that comes of a choppy Channel crossing. Almost the only exception to the general condition of collapse was the eagle-faced lady in the brown ulster, who had taken up her stand in the middle of the platform and was haranguing a subdued little maid in a voice that cut the gloomy air like a steel knife. Like the other travellers, she was pale, but she bore up resolutely. No one could

have told from Lady Underhill's demeanour that the solid platform seemed to heave beneath her feet like a deck.

Derek approached, acutely conscious of Freddie, Ronny, and Algy, who were skirmishing about his flank.

"Well, mother! So there you are at last!"

"Well, Derek!"

Derek kissed his mother. Freddie, Ronny, and Algy shuffled closer, like leopards. Freddie, with the expression of one who leads a forlorn hope, moved his Adam's apple briskly up and down several times, and spoke.

"How do you do, Lady Underhill?"

"How do you do, Mr. Rooke?"

Lady Underhill bowed stiffly and without pleasure. She was not fond of the Last of the Rookes. She supposed the Almighty had had some wise purpose in creating Freddie, but it had always been inscrutable to her.

"Like you," mumbled Freddie, "to meet my friends. Lady Underhill. Mr. Devereux."

"Charmed," said Ronny affably.

"Mr. Martyn."

"Delighted," said Algy with old-world courtesy.

Lady Underhill regarded this mob-scene with an eye of ice.

"How do you do?" she said. "Have you come to meet somebody?"

"I--er--we--er--why--er--" This woman always made Freddie feel as if he were being disembowelled by some clumsy amateur. He wished that he had defied the dictates of his better nature and remained in his snug rooms at the Albany, allowing Derek to go through this business by himself. "I--er--we--er--came to meet you, don't you know!"

"Indeed! That was very kind of you!"

"Oh, not at all."

"Thought we'd welcome you back to the old homestead," said Ronny beaming.

"What could be sweeter?" said Algy. He produced a cigar-case, and extracted a formidable torpedo-shaped Havana. He was feeling

delightfully at his ease, and couldn't understand why Freddie had made such a fuss about meeting this nice old lady. "Don't mind if I smoke, do you? Air's a bit raw to-day. Gets into the lungs."

Derek chafed impotently. These unsought allies were making a difficult situation a thousand times worse. A more acute observer than young Mr. Martyn, he noted the tight lines about his mother's mouth and knew them for the danger-signal they were. Endeavouring to distract her with light conversation, he selected a subject which was a little unfortunate.

"What sort of crossing did you have, mother?"

Lady Underhill winced. A current of air had sent the perfume of Algy's cigar playing about her nostrils. She closed her eyes, and her face turned a shade paler. Freddie, observing this, felt quite sorry for the poor old thing. She was a pest and a pot of poison, of course, but all the same, he reflected charitably, it was a shame that she should look so green about the gills. He came to the conclusion that she must be hungry. The thing to do was to take her mind off it till she could be conducted to a restaurant and dumped down in front of a bowl of soup.

"Bit choppy, I suppose, what?" he bellowed, in a voice that ran up and down Lady Underhill's nervous system like an electric needle. "I was afraid you were going to have a pretty rough time of it when I read

the forecast in the paper. The good old boat wobbled a bit, eh?"

Lady Underhill uttered a faint moan. Freddie noticed that she was looking deucedly chippy, even chippier than a moment ago.

"It's an extraordinary thing about that Channel crossing," said Algy Martyn meditatively, as he puffed a refreshing cloud. "I've known fellows who could travel quite happily everywhere else in the world--round the Horn in sailing-ships and all that sort of thing--yield up their immortal soul crossing the Channel! Absolutely yield up their immortal soul! Don't know why. Rummy, but there it is!"

"I'm like that myself," assented Ronny Devereux. "That dashed trip from Calais gets me every time. Bowls me right over. I go aboard, stoked to the eyebrows with sea-sick remedies, swearing that this time I'll fool 'em, but down I go ten minutes after we've started and the next thing I know is somebody saying, 'Well, well! So this is Dover!'"

"It's exactly the same with me," said Freddie, delighted with the smooth, easy way the conversation was flowing. "Whether it's the hot, greasy smell of the engines...."

"It's not the engines," contended Ronny Devereux. "Stands to reason it can't be. I rather like the smell of engines. This station is reeking with the smell of engine-grease, and I can drink it in and enjoy it." He sniffed, luxuriantly. "It's something else."

"Ronny's right," said Algy cordially. "It isn't the engines. It's the way the boat heaves up and down and up and down and up and down...." He shifted his cigar to his left hand in order to give with his right a spirited illustration of a Channel steamer going up and down and up and down and up and down. Lady Underhill, who had opened her eyes, had an excellent view of the performance, and closed her eyes again quickly.

"Be quiet!" she snapped.

"I was only saying...."

"Be quiet!"

"Oh, rather!"

Lady Underhill wrestled with herself. She was a woman of great will-power and accustomed to triumph over the weaknesses of the flesh. After a while her eyes opened. She had forced herself, against the evidence of her senses, to recognize that this was a platform on which she stood and not a deck.

There was a pause. Algy, damped, was temporarily out of action, and his friends had for the moment nothing to remark.

"I'm afraid you had a trying journey, mother," said Derek. "The train was very late."

"Now, train-sickness," said Algy, coming to the surface again, "is a thing lots of people suffer from. Never could understand it myself."

"I've never had a touch of train-sickness," said Ronny.

"Oh, I have," said Freddie. "I've often felt rotten on a train. I get floating spots in front of my eyes and a sort of heaving sensation, and everything kind of goes black...."

"Mr. Rooke!"

"Eh?"

"I should be greatly obliged if you would keep those confidences for the ear of your medical adviser."

"Freddie," intervened Derek hastily, "my mother's rather tired. Do you think you could be going ahead and getting a taxi?"

"My dear old chap, of course! Get you one in a second. Come along, Algy. Pick up the old waukeesis, Ronny."

And Freddie, accompanied by his henchmen, ambled off, well pleased

with himself. He had, he felt, helped to break the ice for Derek and had seen him safely through those awkward opening stages. Now he could totter off with a light heart and get a bite of lunch.

Lady Underhill's eyes glittered. They were small, keen, black eyes, unlike Derek's, which were large and brown. In their other features the two were obviously mother and son. Each had the same long upper lip, the same thin, firm mouth, the prominent chin which was a family characteristic of the Underhills, and the jutting Underhill nose. Most of the Underhills came into the world looking as though they meant to drive their way through life like a wedge.

"A little more," she said tensely, "and I should have struck those unspeakable young men with my umbrella. One of the things I have never been able to understand, Derek, is why you should have selected that imbecile Rooke as your closest friend."

Derek smiled tolerantly.

"It was more a case of him selecting me. But Freddie is quite a good fellow really. He's a man you've got to know."

"I have not got to know him, and I thank heaven for it!"

"He's a very good-natured fellow. It was decent of him to put me up at the Albany while our house was let. By the way, he has some seats for

the first night of a new piece this evening. He suggested that we might all dine at the Albany and go on to the theatre." He hesitated a moment. "Jill will be there," he said, and felt easier now that her name had at last come into the talk. "She's longing to meet you."

"Then why didn't she meet me?"

"Here, do you mean? At the station? Well, I--I wanted you to see her for the first time in pleasanter surroundings."

"Oh!" said Lady Underhill shortly.

It is a disturbing thought that we suffer in this world just as much by being prudent and taking precautions as we do by being rash and impulsive and acting as the spirit moves us. If Jill had been permitted by her wary fiancé to come with him to the station to meet his mother it is certain that much trouble would have been avoided. True, Lady Underhill would probably have been rude to her in the opening stages of the interview, but she would not have been alarmed and suspicious; or, rather, the vague suspicion which she had been feeling would not have solidified, as it did now into definite certainty of the worst. All that Derek had effected by his careful diplomacy had been to convince his mother that he considered his bride-elect something to be broken gently to her.

She stopped and faced him.

"Who is she?" she demanded. "Who is this girl?"

Derek flushed.

"I thought I made everything clear in my letter."

"You made nothing clear at all."

"By your leave!" chanted a porter behind them, and a baggage-truck clove them apart.

"We can't talk in a crowded station," said Derek irritably. "Let me get you to the taxi and take you to the hotel.... What do you want to know about Jill?"

"Everything. Where does she come from? Who are her people? I don't know any Mariners."

"I haven't cross-examined her," said Derek stiffly. "But I do know that her parents are dead. Her father was an American."

"American!"

"Americans frequently have daughters, I believe."

"There is nothing to be gained by losing your temper," said Lady Underhill with steely calm.

"There is nothing to be gained, as far as I can see, by all this talk," retorted Derek. He wondered vexedly why his mother always had this power of making him lose control of himself. He hated to lose control of himself. It upset him, and blurred that vision which he liked to have of himself as a calm, important man superior to ordinary weaknesses. "Jill and I are engaged, and there is an end to it."

"Don't be a fool," said Lady Underhill, and was driven away by another baggage-truck. "You know perfectly well," she resumed, returning to the attack, "that your marriage is a matter of the greatest concern to me and to the whole of the family."

"Listen, mother!" Derek's long wait on the draughty platform had generated an irritability which overcame the deep-seated awe of his mother which was the result of years of defeat in battles of the will. "Let me tell you in a few words all that I know of Jill, and then we'll drop the subject. In the first place, she is a lady. Secondly, she has plenty of money...."

"The Underhills do not need to marry for money."

"I am not marrying for money!"

"Well, go on."

"I have already described to you in my letter--very inadequately, but I did my best--what she looks like. Her sweetness, her lovableness, all the subtle things about her which go to make her what she is, you will have to judge for yourself."

"I intend to!"

"Well, that's all, then. She lives with her uncle, a Major Selby...."

"Major Selby? What regiment?"

"I didn't ask him," snapped the goaded Derek. "And, in the name of heaven, what does it matter? If you are worrying about Major Selby's social standing, I may as well tell you that he used to know father."

"What! When? Where?"

"Years ago. In India, when father was at Simla."

"Selby? Selby? Not Christopher Selby?"

"Oh, you remember him?"

"I certainly remember him! Not that he and I ever met, but your father

often spoke of him."

Derek was relieved. It was abominable that this sort of thing should matter, but one had to face facts, and, as far as his mother was concerned, it did. The fact that Jill's uncle had known his dead father would make all the difference to Lady Underhill.

"Christopher Selby!" said Lady Underhill reflectively. "Yes! I have often heard your father speak of him. He was the man who gave your father an I.O.U. to pay a card debt, and redeemed it with a cheque which was returned by the bank!"

"What!"

"Didn't you hear what I said? I will repeat it, if you wish."

"There must have been some mistake."

"Only the one your father made when he trusted the man."

"It must have been some other fellow."

"Of course!" said Lady Underhill satirically. "No doubt your father knew hundreds of Christopher Selbys!"

Derek bit his lip.

"Well, after all," he said doggedly, "whether it's true or not...."

"I see no reason why your father should not have spoken the truth."

"All right. We'll say it is true, then. But what does it matter? I am marrying Jill, not her uncle."

"Nevertheless, it would be pleasanter if her only living relative were not a swindler!... Tell me, where and how did you meet this girl?"

"I should be glad if you would not refer to her as 'this girl.' The name, if you have forgotten it, is Mariner."

"Well, where did you meet Miss Mariner?"

"At Prince's. Just after you left for Mentone. Freddie Rooke introduced me."

"Oh, your intellectual friend Mr. Rooke knows her?"

"They were children together. Her people lived next to the Rookes in Worcestershire."

"I thought you said she was an American."

"I said her father was. He settled in England. Jill hasn't been in America since she was eight or nine."

"The fact," said Lady Underhill, "that the girl is a friend of Mr. Rooke is no great recommendation."

Derek kicked angrily at a box of matches which someone had thrown down on the platform.

"I wonder if you could possibly get it into your head, mother, that I want to marry Jill, not engage her as an under-housemaid. I don't consider that she requires recommendations, as you call them. However, don't you think the most sensible thing is for you to wait till you meet her at dinner to-night, and then you can form your own opinion? I'm beginning to get a little bored by this futile discussion."

"As you seem quite unable to talk on the subject of this girl without becoming rude," said Lady Underhill, "I agree with you. Let us hope that my first impression will be a favourable one. Experience has taught me that first impressions are everything."

"I'm glad you think so," said Derek, "for I fell in love with Jill the very first moment I saw her!"

IV

Barker stepped back and surveyed with modest pride the dinner-table to which he had been putting the finishing touches. It was an artistic job and a credit to him.

"That's that!" said Barker, satisfied.

He went to the window and looked out. The fog which had lasted well into the evening, had vanished now, and the clear night was bright with stars. A distant murmur of traffic came from the direction of Piccadilly.

As he stood there, the front-door bell rang, and continued to ring in little spurts of sound. If character can be deduced from bell-ringing, as nowadays it apparently can be from every other form of human activity, one might have hazarded the guess that whoever was on the other side of the door was determined, impetuous, and energetic.

"Barker!"

Freddie Rooke pushed a tousled head, which had yet to be brushed into the smooth sleekness that made a delight to the public eye, out of a room down the passage.

"Sir?"

"Somebody ringing."

"I heard, sir. I was about to answer the bell."

"If it's Lady Underhill, tell her I'll be in in a minute."

"I fancy it is Miss Mariner, sir. I think I recognize her touch."

He made his way down the passage to the front-door, and opened it. A girl was standing outside. She wore a long grey fur coat, and a filmy hood covered her hair. As Barker opened the door, she scampered in like a grey kitten.

"Brrh! It's cold!" she exclaimed. "Hullo, Barker!"

"Good evening, miss."

"Am I the last or the first or what?"

Barker moved to help her with her cloak.

"Sir Derek and her ladyship have not yet arrived, miss. Sir Derek went to bring her ladyship from the Savoy Hotel. Mr. Rooke is dressing in his bedroom and will be ready very shortly."

The girl had slipped out of the fur coat, and Barker cast a swift glance of approval at her. He had the valet's unerring eye for a thoroughbred, and Jill Mariner was manifestly that. It showed in her walk, in every move of her small, active body, in the way she looked at you, in the way she talked to you, in the little tilt of her resolute chin. Her hair was pale gold, and had the brightness of colouring of a child's. Her face glowed, and her grey eyes sparkled. She looked very much alive.

It was this liveliness of hers that was her chief charm. Her eyes were good and her mouth, with its small, even teeth, attractive, but she would have laughed if anybody had called her beautiful. She sometimes doubted if she Were even pretty. Yet few men had met her and remained entirely undisturbed. She had a magnetism. One hapless youth, who had laid his heart at her feet and had been commanded to pick it up again, had endeavoured subsequently to explain her attraction (to a bosom friend over a mournful bottle of the best in the club smoking-room) in these words: "I don't know what it is about her, old man, but she somehow makes a feller feel she's so damned interested in a chap, if you know what I mean." And though not generally credited in his circle with any great acuteness, there is no doubt that the speaker had achieved something approaching a true analysis of Jill's fascination for his sex. She was interested in everything Life presented to her notice, from a Coronation to a stray cat. She was vivid. She had sympathy. She listened to you as though you really mattered. It takes a man of tough fibre to resist these qualities. Women, on the other

hand, especially of the Lady Underhill type, can resist them without an effort.

"Go and stir him up," said Jill, alluding to the absent Mr. Rooke. "Tell him to come and talk to me. Where's the nearest fire? I want to get right over it and huddle."

"The fire's burning nicely in the sitting-room, miss."

Jill hurried into the sitting-room, and increased her hold on Barker's esteem by exclaiming rapturously at the sight that greeted her. Barker had expended time and trouble over the sitting-room. There was no dust, no untidiness. The pictures all hung straight; the cushions were smooth and unrumpled; and a fire of exactly the right dimensions burned cheerfully in the grate, flickering cosily on the small piano by the couch, on the deep leather arm-chairs which Freddie had brought with him from Oxford, that home of comfortable chairs, and on the photographs that studded the walls. In the centre of the mantelpiece, the place of honour, was the photograph of herself which she had given Derek a week ago.

"You're simply wonderful, Barker! I don't see how you manage to make a room so cosy!" Jill sat down on the club fender that guarded the fireplace, and held her hands over the blaze. "I can't understand why men ever marry. Fancy having to give up all this!"

"I am gratified that you appreciate it, miss. I did my best to make it comfortable for you. I fancy I hear Mr. Rooke coming now."

"I hope the others won't be long. I'm starving. Has Mrs. Barker got something very good for dinner?"

"She has strained every nerve, miss."

"Then I'm sure it's worth waiting for. Hullo, Freddie."

Freddie Rooke, resplendent in evening dress, bustled in, patting his tie with solicitous fingers. It had been right when he had looked in the glass in his bedroom, but you never know about ties. Sometimes they stay right, sometimes they wriggle up sideways. Life is full of these anxieties.

"I shouldn't touch it," said Jill. "It looks beautiful, and, if I may say so in confidence, is having a most disturbing effect on my emotional nature. I'm not at all sure I shall be able to resist it right through the evening. It isn't fair of you to try to alienate the affections of an engaged young person like this."

Freddie squinted down, and became calmer.

"Hullo, Jill, old thing. Nobody here yet?"

"Well, I'm here--the petite figure seated on the fender. But perhaps I don't count."

"Oh, I didn't mean that, you know."

"I should hope not, when I've bought a special new dress just to fascinate you. A creation I mean. When they cost as much as this one did, you have to call them names. What do you think of it?"

Freddie seated himself on another section of the fender, and regarded her with the eye of an expert. A snappy dresser, as the technical term is, himself, he appreciated snap in the outer covering of the other sex.

"Topping!" he said spaciously. "No other word for it. All wool and a yard wide. Precisely as mother makes it. You look like a thingummy."

"How splendid. All my life I've wanted to look like a thingummy, but somehow I've never been able to manage it."

"A wood-nymph!" exclaimed Freddie, in a burst of unwonted imagery. He looked at her with honest admiration. "Dash it, Jill, you know, there's something about you! You're--what's the word?--you've got such small bones."

"Ugh! I suppose it's a compliment, but how horrible it sounds! It

makes me feel like a skeleton."

"I mean to say, you're--you're dainty!"

"That's much better."

"You look as if you weighed about an ounce and a half. You look like a bit of thistledown! You're a little fairy princess, dash it!"

"Freddie! This is eloquence!" Jill raised her left hand, and twiddled a ringed finger ostentatiously. "Er--you do realize that I'm bespoke, don't you, and that my heart, alas, is another's? Because you sound as if you were going to propose."

Freddie produced a snowy handkerchief, and polished his eye-glass. Solemnity descended on him like a cloud. He looked at Jill with an earnest, paternal gaze.

"That reminds me," he said. "I wanted to have a bit of a talk with you about that--being engaged and all that sort of thing. I'm glad I got you alone before the Curse arrived."

"Curse? Do you mean Derek's mother? That sounds cheerful and encouraging."

"Well, she is, you know," said Freddie earnestly. "She's a bird! It

would be idle to deny it. She always puts the fear of God into me. I never know what to say to her."

"Why don't you try asking her riddles?"

"It's no joking matter," persisted Freddie, his amiable face overcast. "Wait till you meet her! You should have seen her at the station this morning. You don't know what you're up against!"

"You make my flesh creep, Freddie. What am I up against?"

Freddie poked the fire scientifically, and assisted it with coal.

"It's this way," he said. "Of course, dear old Derek's the finest chap in the world."

"I know that," said Jill softly. She patted Freddie's hand with a little gesture of gratitude. Freddie's devotion to Derek was a thing that always touched her. She looked thoughtfully into the fire, and her eyes seemed to glow in sympathy with the glowing coals. "There's nobody like him!"

"But," continued Freddie, "he always has been frightfully under his mother's thumb, you know."

Jill was conscious of a little flicker of irritation.

"Don't be absurd, Freddie. How could a man like Derek be under anybody's thumb?"

"Well, you know what I mean!"

"I don't in the least know what you mean."

"I mean, it would be rather rotten if his mother set him against you."

Jill clenched her teeth. The quick temper which always lurked so very little beneath the surface of her cheerfulness was stirred. She felt suddenly chilled and miserable. She tried to tell herself that Freddie was just an amiable blunderer who spoke without sense or reason, but it was no use. She could not rid herself of a feeling of foreboding and discomfort. It had been the one jarring note in the sweet melody of her love-story, this apprehension of Derek's regarding his mother. The Derek she loved was a strong man, with a strong man's contempt for other people's criticism; and there had been something ignoble and fussy in his attitude regarding Lady Underhill. She had tried to feel that the flaw in her idol did not exist. And here was Freddie Rooke, a man who admired Derek with all his hero-worshipping nature, pointing it out independently. She was annoyed, and she expended her annoyance, as women will do, upon the innocent bystander.

"Do you remember the time I turned the hose on you, Freddie," she

said, rising from the fender, "years ago, when we were children, when you and that awful Mason boy--what was his name? Wally Mason--teased me?" She looked at the unhappy Freddie with a hostile eye. It was his blundering words that had spoiled everything. "I've forgotten what it was all about, but I know that you and Wally infuriated me and I turned the garden hose on you and soaked you both to the skin. Well, all I want to point out is that, if you go on talking nonsense about Derek and his mother and me, I shall ask Barker to bring me a jug of water, and I shall empty it over you! Set him against me! You talk as if love were a thing any third party could come along and turn off with a tap! Do you suppose that, when two people love each other as Derek and I do, that it can possibly matter in the least what anybody else thinks or says, even if it is his mother? I haven't got a mother, but suppose Uncle Chris came and warned me against Derek...."

Her anger suddenly left her as quickly as it had come. That was always the way with Jill. One moment she would be raging; the next, something would tickle her sense of humour and restore her instantly to cheerfulness. And the thought of dear, lazy old Uncle Chris taking the trouble to warn anybody against anything except the wrong brand of wine or an inferior make of cigar conjured up a picture before which wrath melted away. She chuckled, and Freddie, who had been wilting on the fender, perked up.

"You're an extraordinary girl, Jill. One never knows when you're going to get the wind up."

"Isn't it enough to make me get the wind up, as you call it, when you say absurd things like that?"

"I meant well, old girl!"

"That's the trouble with you. You always do mean well. You go about the world meaning well till people fly to put themselves under police protection. Besides, what on earth could Lady Underhill find to object to in me? I've plenty of money, and I'm one of the most charming and attractive of Society belles. You needn't take my word for that, and I don't suppose you've noticed it, but that's what Mr. Gossip in the Morning Mirror called me when he was writing about my getting engaged to Derek. My maid showed me the clipping. There was quite a long paragraph, with a picture of me that looked like a Zulu chieftainess taken in a coal-cellar during a bad fog. Well, after that, what could anyone say against me? I'm a perfect prize! I expect Lady Underhill screamed with joy when she heard the news and went singing all over her Riviera villa."

"Yes," said Freddie dubiously. "Yes, yes, oh, quite so, rather!"

Jill looked at him sternly.

"Freddie, you're concealing something from me! You don't think I'm a charming and attractive Society belle! Tell me why not and I'll show

you where you are wrong. Is it my face you object to, or my manners, or my figure? There was a young bride of Antigua, who said to her mate, 'What a pig you are!' Said he, 'Oh, my queen, is it manners you mean, or do you allude to my fig-u-ar?' Isn't my figuar all right, Freddie?"

"Oh, I think you're topping."

"But for some reason you're afraid that Derek's mother won't think so. Why won't Lady Underhill agree with Mr. Gossip?"

Freddie hesitated.

"Speak up!"

"Well, it's like this. Remember, I've known the old devil...."

"Freddie Rooke! Where do you pick up such expressions? Not from me!"

"Well, that's how I always think of her! I say I've known her ever since I used to go and stop at their place when I was at school, and I know exactly the sort of things that put her back up. She's a what-d'you-call-it. I mean to say, one of the old school, don't you know. And you're so dashed impulsive, old girl. You know you are! You are always saying things that come into your head."

"You can't say a thing unless it comes into your head."

"You know what I mean," Freddie went on earnestly, not to be diverted from his theme. "You say rummy things and you do rummy things. What I mean to say is, you're impulsive."

"What have I ever done that the sternest critic could call rummy?"

"Well, I've seen you with my own eyes stop in the middle of Bond Street and help a lot of fellows shove along a cart that had got stuck. Mind you, I'm not blaming you for it...."

"I should hope not. The poor old horse was trying all he knew to get going, and he couldn't quite make it. Naturally, I helped."

"Oh, I know. Very decent and all that, but I doubt if Lady Underhill would have thought a lot of it. And you're so dashed chummy with the lower orders."

"Don't be a snob, Freddie."

"I'm not a snob," protested Freddie, wounded. "When I'm alone with Barker--for instance--I'm as chatty as dammit. But I don't ask waiters in public restaurants how their lumbago is."

"Have you ever had lumbago?"

"No."

"Well, it's a very painful thing, and waiters get it just as badly as dukes. Worse, I should think, because they're always bending and stooping and carrying things. Naturally one feels sorry for them."

"But how do you ever find out that a waiter has got lumbago?"

"I ask him, of course."

"Well, for goodness' sake," said Freddie, "if you feel the impulse to do that sort of thing to-night, try and restrain it. I mean to say, if you're curious to know anything about Barker's chilblains, for instance, don't enquire after them while he's handing Lady Underhill the potatoes! She wouldn't like it."

Jill uttered an exclamation.

"I knew there was something! Being so cold and wanting to rush in and crouch over a fire put it clean out of my head. He must be thinking me a perfect beast!" She ran to the door. "Barker! Barker!"

Barker appeared from nowhere.

"Yes, miss?"

"I'm so sorry I forgot to ask before. How are your chilblains?"

"A good deal better miss, thank you."

"Did you try the stuff I recommended?"

"Yes, miss. It did them a world of good."

"Splendid!"

Jill went back into the sitting-room.

"It's all right," she said reassuringly. "They're better."

She wandered restlessly about the room, looking at the photographs, then sat down at the piano and touched the keys. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half-hour. "I wish to goodness they would arrive," she said.

"They'll be here pretty soon, I expect."

"It's rather awful," said Jill, "to think of Lady Underhill racing all the way from Mentone to Paris and from Paris to Calais and from Calais to Dover and from Dover to London simply to inspect me. You can't wonder I'm nervous, Freddie."

The eye-glass dropped from Freddie's eye.

"Are you nervous?" he asked, astonished.

"Of course I'm nervous. Wouldn't you be in my place?"

"Well, I should never have thought it."

"Why do you suppose I've been talking such a lot? Why do you imagine I snapped your poor, innocent head off just now! I'm terrified inside, terrified!"

"You don't look it, by Jove!"

"No, I'm trying to be a little warrior. That's what Uncle Chris always used to call me. It started the day when he took me to have a tooth out, when I was ten. 'Be a little warrior, Jill!' he kept saying. 'Be a little warrior!' And I was." She looked at the clock. "But I shan't be if they don't get here soon. The suspense is awful." She strummed the keys. "Suppose she doesn't like me, Freddie! You see how you've scared me."

"I didn't say she wouldn't. I only said you'd got to watch out a bit."

"Something tells me she won't. My nerve is oozing out of me." Jill

shook her head impatiently. "It's all so vulgar! I thought this sort of thing only happened in the comic papers and in music-hall songs. Why, it's just like that song somebody used to sing." She laughed. "Do you remember? I don't know how the verse went, but ...

John took me round to see his mother,
his mother,
his mother!
And when he'd introduced us to each other,
She sized up everything that I had on.
She put me through a cross-examination:
I fairly boiled with aggravation:
Then she shook her head,
Looked at me and said:
'Poor John! Poor John!'

Chorus, Freddie! Let's cheer ourselves up! We need it!"

John took me round to see his mother...!

"His m-o-o-other!" croaked Freddie. Curiously enough, this ballad was one of Freddie's favourites. He had rendered it with a good deal of success on three separate occasions at village entertainments down in Worcestershire, and he rather flattered himself that he could get about as much out of it as the next man. He proceeded to abet Jill heartily with gruff sounds which he was under the impression

constituted what is known in musical circles as "singing seconds."

"His mo-o-other!" he growled with frightful scorn.

"And when he'd introduced us to each other...."

"O-o-o-other!"

"She sized up everything that I had on!"

"Pom-pom-pom!"

"She put me through a cross-examination...."

Jill had thrown her head back, and was singing jubilantly at the top of her voice. The appositeness of the song had cheered her up. It seemed somehow to make her forebodings rather ridiculous, to reduce them to absurdity, to turn into farce the gathering tragedy which had been weighing upon her nerves.

Then she shook her head,
Looked at me and said:
'Poor John!'....

"Jill," said a voice at the door. "I want you to meet my mother!"

"Poo-oo-oor John!" bleated the hapless Freddie, unable to check himself.

"Dinner," said Barker the valet, appearing at the door and breaking a silence that seemed to fill the room like a tangible presence, "is served!"