

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST NIGHT AT THE LEICESTER

I

The front-door closed softly behind the theatre-party. Dinner was over, and Barker had just been assisting the expedition out of the place. Sensitive to atmosphere, he had found his share in the dinner a little trying. It had been a strained meal, and what he liked was a clatter of conversation and everybody having a good time and enjoying themselves.

"Ellen!" called Barker, as he proceeded down the passage to the empty dining-room. "Ellen!"

Mrs. Barker appeared out of the kitchen, wiping her hands. Her work for the evening, like her husband's, was over. Presently what is technically called a "useful girl" would come in to wash up the dishes, leaving the evening free for social intercourse. Mrs. Barker had done well by her patrons that night, and now she wanted a quiet chat with Barker over a glass of Freddie Rooke's port.

"Have they gone, Horace?" she asked, following him into the dining-room.

Barker selected a cigar from Freddie's humidor, crackled it against his ear, smelt it, clipped off the end, and lit it. He took the decanter and filled his wife's glass, then mixed himself a whisky-and-soda.

"Happy days!" said Barker. "Yes, they've gone!"

"I didn't see her ladyship."

"You didn't miss much! A nasty, dangerous specimen, she is! 'Always merry and bright,' I don't think. I wish you'd have had my job of waiting on 'em, Ellen, and me been the one to stay in the kitchen safe out of it all. That's all I say! It's no treat to me to 'and the dishes when the atmosphere's what you might call electric. I didn't envy them that vol-au-vent of yours, Ellen, good as it smelt. Better a dinner of 'erbs where love is than a stalled ox and 'atred therewith," said Barker, helping himself to a walnut.

"Did they have words?"

Barker shook his head impatiently.

"That sort don't have words, Ellen. They just sit and goggle."

"How did her ladyship seem to hit it off with Miss Mariner, Horace?"

Barker uttered a dry laugh.

"Ever seen a couple of strange dogs watching each other sort of wary? That was them! Not that Miss Mariner wasn't all that was pleasant and nice-spoken. She's all right, Miss Mariner is. She's a little queen. It wasn't her fault the dinner you'd took so much trouble over was more like an evening in the Morgue than a Christian dinner-party. She tried to help things along best she could. But what with Sir Derek chewing his lip 'alf the time and his mother acting about as matey as a pennorth of ice-cream, she didn't have a chance. As for the guv'nor--well, I wish you could have seen him, that's all. You know, Ellen, sometimes I'm not altogether easy in my mind about the guv'nor's mental balance. He knows how to buy cigars, and you tell me his port is good--I never touch it myself--but sometimes he seems to me to go right off his onion. Just sat there, he did, all through dinner, looking as if he expected the good food to rise up and bite him in the face, and jumping nervous when I spoke to him. It's not my fault," said Barker, aggrieved. "I can't give gentlemen warning before I ask 'em if they'll have sherry or hock. I can't ring a bell or toot a horn to show 'em I'm coming. It's my place to bend over and whisper in their ear, and they've no right to leap about in their seats and make me spill good wine. (You'll see the spot close by where you're sitting, Ellen. Jogged my wrist, he did!) I'd like to know why people in the spear of life which these people are in can't behave themselves rational, same as we do. When we were walking out and I

took you to have tea with my mother, it was one of the pleasantest meals I ever ate. Talk about 'armony! It was a love-feast!"

"Your ma and I took to each other right from the start, Horace," said Mrs. Barker softly. "That's the difference."

"Well, any woman with any sense would take to Miss Mariner. If I told you how near I came to spilling the sauce-boat accidentally over that old fossil's head, you'd be surprised, Ellen. She just sat there brooding like an old eagle. If you ask my opinion, Miss Mariner's a long sight too good for her precious son!"

"Oh, but Horace! Sir Derek's a baronet!"

"What of it? Kind 'earts are more than coronets and simple faith than Norman blood, aren't they?"

"You're talking Socialism, Horace."

"No, I'm not. I'm talking sense. I don't know who Miss Mariner's parents may have been--I never enquired--but anyone can see she's a lady born and bred. But do you suppose the path of true love is going to run smooth, for all that? Not it! She's got a 'ard time ahead of her, that poor girl!"

"Horace!" Mrs. Barker's gentle heart was wrung. The situation hinted

at by her husband was no new one--indeed, it formed the basis of at least fifty per cent of the stories in the True Heart Novelette Series, of which she was a determined reader--but it had never failed to touch her. "Do you think her ladyship means to come between them and wreck their romance?"

"I think she means to have a jolly good try."

"But Sir Derek has his own money, hasn't he? I mean it's not like when Sir Courtenay Travers fell in love with the milkmaid and was dependent on his mother, the Countess, for everything. Sir Derek can afford to do what he pleases, can't he?"

Barker shook his head tolerantly. The excellence of the cigar and the soothing qualities of the whisky-and-soda had worked upon him, and he was feeling less ruffled.

"You don't understand these things," he said. "Women like her ladyship can talk a man into anything and out of anything. I wouldn't care, only you can see the poor girl is mad over the feller. What she finds attractive in him, I can't say, but that's her own affair."

"He's very handsome, Horace, with those flashing eyes and that stern mouth," argued Mrs. Barker.

Barker sniffed.

"Have it your own way," he said. "It's no treat to me to see his eyes flash, and if he'd put that stern mouth of his to some better use than advising the gov'nor to lock up the cigars and trouser the key, I'd be better pleased. If there's one thing I can't stand," said Barker, "it's not to be trusted!" He lifted his cigar and looked at it censoriously. "I thought so! Burning all down one side. They will do that if you light 'em careless. Oh, well," he continued, rising and going to the humidor, "there's plenty more where that came from. Out of evil cometh good," said Barker philosophically. "If the gov'nor hadn't been in such a overwrought state to-night, he'd have remembered not to leave the key in the keyhole. Help yourself to another glass of port, Ellen, and let's enjoy ourselves!"

II

When one considers how full of his own troubles, how weighed down with the problems of his own existence the average playgoer generally is when enters a theatre, it is remarkable that dramatists ever find it possible to divert and entertain whole audiences for a space of several hours. As regards at least three of those who had assembled to witness its opening performance, the author of "Tried by Fire," at the Leicester Theatre, undoubtedly had his work cut out for him.

It has perhaps been sufficiently indicated by the remarks of Barker,

the valet, that the little dinner at Freddie Rooke's had not been an unqualified success. Searching the records for an adequately gloomy parallel to the taxi-cab journey to the theatre which followed it, one can only think of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. And yet even that was probably not conducted in dead silence.

The only member of the party who was even remotely happy was, curiously enough, Freddie Rooke. Originally Freddie had obtained three tickets for "Tried by Fire." The unexpected arrival of Lady Underhill had obliged him to buy a fourth, separated by several rows from the other three. This, as he had told Derek at breakfast, was the seat he proposed to occupy himself.

It consoles the philosopher in this hard world to reflect that, even if man is born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward, it is still possible for small things to make him happy. The thought of being several rows away from Lady Underhill had restored Freddie's equanimity like a tonic. It thrilled him like the strains of some grand, sweet anthem all the way to the theatre. If Freddie Rooke had been asked at that moment to define happiness in a few words, he would have replied that it consisted in being several rows away from Lady Underhill.

The theatre was nearly full when Freddie's party arrived. The Leicester Theatre had been rented for the season by the newest theatrical knight, Sir Chester Portwood, who had a large following;

and, whatever might be the fate of the play in the final issue, it would do at least one night's business. The stalls were ablaze with jewellery and crackling with starched shirt-fronts; and expensive scents pervaded the air, putting up a stiff battle with the plebeian peppermint that emanated from the pit. The boxes were filled, and up in the gallery grim-faced patrons of the drama, who had paid their shillings at the door and intended to get a shilling's worth of entertainment in return, sat and waited stolidly for the curtain to rise.

The lights shot up beyond the curtain. The house-lights dimmed. Conversation ceased. The curtain rose. Jill wriggled herself comfortably into her seat, and slipped her hand into Derek's. She felt a glow of happiness as it closed over hers. All, she told herself, was right with the world.

All, that is to say, except the drama which was unfolding on the stage. It was one of those plays which start wrong and never recover. By the end of the first ten minutes there had spread through the theatre that uneasy feeling which comes over the audience at an opening performance when it realizes that it is going to be bored. A sort of lethargy had gripped the stalls. The dress-circle was coughing. Up in the gallery there was grim silence.

Sir Chester Portwood was an actor-manager who had made his reputation in light comedy of the tea-cup school. His numerous admirers attended

a first night at his theatre in a mood of comfortable anticipation, assured of something pleasant and frothy with a good deal of bright dialogue and not too much plot. To-night he seemed to have fallen a victim to that spirit of ambition which intermittently attacks actor-managers of his class, expressing itself in an attempt to prove that, having established themselves securely as light comedians, they can, like the lady reciter, turn right around and be serious. The one thing which the London public felt that it was safe from in a Portwood play was heaviness, and "Tried by Fire" was grievously heavy. It was a poetic drama, and the audience, though loath to do anybody an injustice, was beginning to suspect that it was written in blank verse.

The acting did nothing to dispel the growing uneasiness. Sir Chester himself, apparently oppressed by the weightiness of the occasion and the responsibility of offering an unfamiliar brand of goods to his public, had dropped his customary debonair method of delivering lines and was mouthing his speeches. It was good gargling, but bad elocution. And, for some reason best known to himself, he had entrusted the rôle of the heroine to a doll-like damsel with a lisp, of whom the audience disapproved sternly from her initial entrance.

It was about half-way through the first act that Jill, whose attention had begun to wander, heard a soft groan at her side. The seats which Freddie Rooke had bought were at the extreme end of the seventh row. There was only one other seat in the row, and, as Derek had placed his

mother on his left and was sitting between her and Jill, the latter had this seat on her right. It had been empty at the rise of the curtain, but in the past few minutes a man had slipped silently into it. The darkness prevented Jill from seeing his face, but it was plain that he was suffering, and her sympathy went out to him. His opinion of the play so obviously coincided with her own.

Presently the first act ended, and the lights went up. There was a spatter of insincere applause from the stalls, echoed in the dress-circle. It grew fainter in the upper circle, and did not reach the gallery at all.

"Well?" said Jill to Derek. "What do you think of it?"

"Too awful for words," said Derek sternly.

He leaned forward to join the conversation which had started between Lady Underhill and some friends she had discovered in the seats in front; and Jill, turning, became aware that the man on her right was looking at her intently. He was a big man with rough, wiry hair and a humorous mouth. His age appeared to be somewhere in the middle twenties. Jill, in the brief moment in which their eyes met, decided that he was ugly, but with an ugliness that was rather attractive. He reminded her of one of those large, loose, shaggy dogs that break things in drawing-rooms but make admirable companions for the open road. She had a feeling that he would look better in tweeds in a field

than in evening dress in a theatre. He had nice eyes. She could not distinguish their colour, but they were frank and friendly.

All this Jill noted with her customary quickness, and then she looked away. For an instant she had had an odd feeling that somewhere she had met this man or somebody very like him before, but the impression vanished. She also had the impression that he was still looking at her, but she gazed demurely in front of her and did not attempt to verify the suspicion.

Between them, as they sat side by side, there inserted itself suddenly the pinkly remorseful face of Freddie Rooke. Freddie, having skirmished warily in the aisle until it was clear that Lady Underhill's attention was engaged elsewhere, had occupied a seat in the row behind which had been left vacant temporarily by an owner who liked refreshment between the acts. Freddie was feeling deeply ashamed of himself. He felt that he had perpetrated a bloomer of no slight magnitude.

"I'm awfully sorry about this," he said penitently. "I mean, roping you in to listen to this frightful tosh! When I think I might have got seats just as well for any one of half a dozen topping musical comedies, I feel like kicking myself with some vim. But, honestly, how was I to know? I never dreamed we were going to be let in for anything of this sort. Portwood's plays are usually so dashed bright and snappy and all that. Can't think what he was doing, putting on a thing like

this. Why, it's blue round the edges!"

The man on Jill's right laughed sharply.

"Perhaps," he said, "the chump who wrote the piece got away from the asylum long enough to put up the money to produce it."

If there is one thing that startles the well-bred Londoner and throws him off his balance, it is to be addressed unexpectedly by a stranger. Freddie's sense of decency was revolted. A voice from the tomb could hardly have shaken him more. All the traditions to which he had been brought up had gone to solidify his belief that this was one of the things which didn't happen. Absolutely it wasn't done. During an earthquake or a shipwreck and possibly on the Day of Judgment, yes. But only then. At other times, unless they wanted a match or the time or something, chappies did not speak to fellows to whom they had not been introduced. He was far too amiable to snub the man, but to go on with this degrading scene was out of the question. There was nothing for it but flight.

"Oh, ah, yes," he mumbled. "Well," he added to Jill, "I suppose I may as well be toddling back. See you later and so forth."

And with a faint "Good-bye-ee!" Freddie removed himself, thoroughly unnerved.

Jill looked out of the corner of her eye at Derek. He was still occupied with the people in front. She turned to the man on her right. She was not the slave to etiquette that Freddie was. She was much too interested in life to refrain from speaking to strangers.

"You shocked him!" she said dimpling.

"Yes. It broke Freddie all up, didn't it!"

It was Jill's turn to be startled. She looked at him in astonishment.

"Freddie?"

"That was Freddie Rooke, wasn't it? Surely I wasn't mistaken?"

"But--do you know him? He didn't seem to know you."

"These are life's tragedies He has forgotten me. My boyhood friend!"

"Oh, you were at school with him?"

"No. Freddie went to Winchester, if I remember. I was at Haileybury. Our acquaintance was confined to the holidays. My people lived near his people in Worcestershire."

"Worcestershire!" Jill leaned forward excitedly. "But I used to live

near Freddie in Worcestershire myself when I was small. I knew him there when he was a boy. We must have met!"

"We met all right."

Jill wrinkled her forehead. That odd familiar look was in his eyes again. But memory failed to respond. She shook her head.

"I don't remember you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind. Perhaps the recollection would have been painful."

"How do you mean, painful?"

"Well, looking back, I can see that I must have been a very unpleasant child. I have always thought it greatly to the credit of my parents that they let me grow up. It would have been so easy to have dropped something heavy on me out of a window. They must have been tempted a hundred times, but they refrained. Yes, I was a great pest around the home. My only redeeming point was the way I worshipped you!"

"What!"

"Oh, yes. You probably didn't notice it at the time, for I had a curious way of expressing my adoration. But you remain the brightest memory of a chequered youth."

Jill searched his face with grave eyes, then shook her head again.

"Nothing stirs?" asked the man sympathetically.

"It's too maddening! Why does one forget things?" She reflected. "You aren't Bobby Morrison?"

"I am not. What is more, I never was!"

Jill dived into the past once more and emerged with another possibility.

"Or--Charlie--Charlie what was it?--Charlie Field?"

"You wound me! Have you forgotten that Charlie Field wore velvet Lord Fauntleroy suits and long golden curls? My past is not smirched with anything like that."

"Would I remember your name if you told me?"

"I don't know. I've forgotten yours. Your surname, that is. Of course, I remember that your Christian name was Jill. It has always seemed to me the prettiest monosyllable in the language." He looked at her thoughtfully. "It's odd how little you've altered in looks. Freddie's just the same, too, only larger. And he didn't wear an eye-glass in

those days, though I can see he was bound to later on. And yet I've changed so much that you can't place me. It shows what a wearing life I must have led. I feel like Rip van Winkle. Old and withered. But that may be just the result of watching this play."

"It is pretty terrible, isn't it?"

"Worse than that. Looking at it dispassionately, I find it the extreme, ragged, outermost edge of the limit. Freddie had the correct description of it. He's a great critic."

"I really do think it's the worst thing I have ever seen."

"I don't know what plays you have seen, but I feel you're right."

"Perhaps the second act's better," said Jill optimistically.

"It's worse. I know that sounds like boasting, but it's true. I feel like getting up and making a public apology."

"But ... Oh!"

Jill turned scarlet. A monstrous suspicion had swept over her.

"The only trouble is," went on her companion, "that the audience would undoubtedly lynch me. And, though it seems improbable just at the

present moment, it may be that life holds some happiness for me that's worth waiting for. Anyway, I'd rather not be torn limb from limb. A messy finish! I can just see them rending me asunder in a spasm of perfectly justifiable fury. 'She loves me!' Off comes a leg. 'She loves me not!' Off comes an arm. No, I think on the whole I'll lie low. Besides, why should I care? Let 'em suffer. It's their own fault. They would come!"

Jill had been trying to interrupt the harangue. She was greatly concerned.

"Did you write the play?"

The man nodded.

"You are quite right to speak in that horrified tone. But between ourselves and on the understanding that you don't get up and denounce me, I did."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"Not half so sorry as I am, believe me!"

"I mean, I wouldn't have said...."

"Never mind. You didn't tell me anything I didn't know." The lights

began to go down. He rose. "Well, they're off again. Perhaps you will excuse me? I don't feel quite equal to assisting any longer at the wake. If you want something to occupy your mind during the next act, try to remember my name."

He slid from his seat and disappeared. Jill clutched at Derek.

"Oh, Derek, it's too awful. I've just been talking to the man who wrote this play, and I told him it was the worst thing I had ever seen!"

"Did you?" Derek snorted. "Well, it's about time somebody told him!" A thought seemed to strike him. "Why, who is he? I didn't know you knew him."

"I don't. I don't even know his name."

"His name, according to the programme, is John Grant. Never heard of him before. Jill, I wish you would not talk to people you don't know," said Derek with a note of annoyance in his voice. "You can never tell who they are."

"But...."

"Especially with my mother here. You must be more careful."

The curtain rose. Jill saw the stage mistily. From childhood up, she had never been able to cure herself of an unfortunate sensitiveness when sharply spoken to by those she loved. A rebuking world she could face with a stout heart, but there had always been just one or two people whose lightest word of censure could crush her. Her father had always had that effect upon her, and now Derek had taken his place.

But if there had only been time to explain.... Derek could not object to her chatting with a friend of her childhood, even if she had completely forgotten him and did not remember his name even now. John Grant? Memory failed to produce any juvenile John Grant for her inspection.

Puzzling over this problem, Jill missed much of the beginning of the second act. Hers was a detachment which the rest of the audience would gladly have shared. For the poetic drama, after a bad start, was now plunging into worse depths of dullness. The coughing had become almost continuous. The stalls, supported by the presence of large droves of Sir Chester's personal friends, were struggling gallantly to maintain a semblance of interest, but the pit and gallery had plainly given up hope. The critic of a weekly paper of small circulation, who had been shoved up in the upper circle, grimly jotted down the phrase "apathetically received" on his programme. He had come to the theatre that night in an aggrieved mood, for managers usually put him in the dress-circle. He got out his pencil again. Another phrase had occurred to him, admirable for the opening of his article. "At the Leicester

Theatre," he wrote, "where Sir Chester Portwood presented 'Tried by Fire,' dullness reigned supreme...."

But you never know. Call no evening dull till it is over. However uninteresting its early stages may have been that night was to be as animated and exciting as any audience could desire--a night to be looked back to and talked about, for just as the critic of London Gossip wrote those damning words on his programme, guiding his pencil uncertainly in the dark, a curious yet familiar odour stole over the house.

The stalls got it first, and sniffed. It rose to the dress-circle, and the dress-circle sniffed. Floating up, it smote the silent gallery. And, suddenly, coming to life with a single-minded abruptness, the gallery ceased to be silent.

"Fire!"

Sir Chester Portwood, ploughing his way through a long speech, stopped and looked apprehensively over his shoulder. The girl with the lisp, who had been listening in a perfunctory manner to the long speech, screamed loudly. The voice of an unseen stage-hand called thunderously to an invisible "Bill" to commere quick. And from the scenery on the prompt side there curled lazily across the stage a black wisp of smoke.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

"Just," said a voice at Jill's elbow, "what the play needed!" The mysterious author was back in his seat again.