

CHAPTER III

JILL AND THE UNKNOWN ESCAPE

I

In these days when the authorities who watch over the welfare of the community have taken the trouble to reiterate encouragingly in printed notices that a full house can be emptied in three minutes and that all an audience has to do in an emergency is to walk, not run, to the nearest exit, fire in the theatre has lost a good deal of its old-time terror. Yet it would be paltering with the truth to say that the audience which had assembled to witness the opening performance of the new play at the Leicester was entirely at its ease. The asbestos curtain was already on its way down, which should have been reassuring; but then asbestos curtains never look the part. To the lay eye they seem just the sort of thing that will blaze quickest. Moreover, it had not yet occurred to the man at the switchboard to turn up the house-lights, and the darkness was disconcerting.

Portions of the house were taking the thing better than other portions. Up in the gallery a vast activity was going on. The clatter of feet almost drowned the shouting. A moment before it would have seemed incredible that anything could have made the occupants of the gallery animated, but the instinct of self-preservation had put new

life into them.

The stalls had not yet entirely lost their self-control. Alarm was in the air, but for the moment they hung on the razor-edge between panic and dignity. Panic urged them to do something sudden and energetic; dignity counselled them to wait. They, like the occupants of the gallery, greatly desired to be outside, but it was bad form to rush and jostle. The men were assisting the women in their cloaks, assuring them the while that it was "all right" and that they must not be frightened. But another curl of smoke had crept out just before the asbestos curtain completed its descent, and their words lacked the ring of conviction. The movement towards the exits had not yet become a stampede, but already those with seats nearest the stage had begun to feel that the more fortunate individuals near the doors were infernally slow in removing themselves.

Suddenly, as if by mutual inspiration, the composure of the stalls began to slip. Looking from above, one could have seen a sort of shudder run through the crowd. It was the effect of every member of that crowd starting to move a little more quickly.

A hand grasped Jill's arm. It was a comforting hand, the hand of a man who had not lost his head. A pleasant voice backed up its message of reassurance.

"It's no good getting into that mob. You might get hurt. There's no

danger; the play isn't going on."

Jill was shaken; but she had the fighting spirit and hated to show that she was shaken. Panic was knocking at the door of her soul, but dignity refused to be dislodged.

"All the same," she said, smiling a difficult smile, "it would be nice to get out, wouldn't it?"

"I was just going to suggest something of that very sort," said the man beside her. "The same thought occurred to me. We can stroll out quite comfortably by our own private route. Come along."

Jill looked over her shoulder. Derek and Lady Underhill were merged into the mass of refugees. She could not see them. For an instant a little spasm of pique stung her at the thought that Derek had deserted her. She groped her way after her companion, and presently they came by way of a lower box to the iron pass-door leading to the stage.

As it opened, smoke blew through, and the smell of burning was formidable. Jill recoiled involuntarily.

"It's all right," said her companion. "It smells worse than it really is. And, anyway, this is the quickest way out."

They passed through on to the stage, and found themselves in a world

of noise and confusion compared with which the auditorium which they had left had been a peaceful place. Smoke was everywhere. A stage-hand, carrying a bucket, lurched past them, bellowing. From somewhere out of sight on the other side of the stage there came a sound of chopping. Jill's companion moved quickly to the switchboard, groped, found a handle, and turned it. In the narrow space between the corner of the proscenium and the edge of the asbestos curtain lights flashed up: and simultaneously there came a sudden diminution of the noise from the body of the house. The stalls, snatched from the intimidating spell of the darkness and able to see each other's faces, discovered that they had been behaving indecorously and checked their struggling, a little ashamed of themselves. The relief would be only momentary, but, while it lasted, it postponed panic.

"Go straight across the stage," Jill heard her companion say, "out along the passage and turn to the right, and you'll be at the stage-door. I think, as there seems no one else around to do it, I'd better go out and say a few soothing words to the customers. Otherwise they'll be biting holes in each other."

He squeezed through the narrow opening in front of the curtain.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

Jill remained where she was, leaning with one hand against the switchboard. She made no attempt to follow the directions he had given

her. She was aware of a sense of comradeship, of being with this man in this adventure. If he stayed, she must stay. To go now through the safety of the stage-door would be abominable desertion. She listened, and found that she could hear plainly in spite of the noise. The smoke was worse than ever, and hurt her eyes, so that the figures of the theatre-firemen, hurrying to and fro, seemed like Brocken spectres. She slipped a corner of her cloak across her mouth, and was able to breathe more easily.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I assure you that there is absolutely no danger. I am a stranger to you, so there is no reason why you should take my word, but fortunately I can give you solid proof. If there were any danger, I wouldn't be here. All that has happened is that the warmth of your reception of the play has set a piece of scenery alight...."

A crimson-faced stage-hand, carrying an axe in blackened hands, roared in Jill's ear.

"Op it!" shouted the stage-hand. He cast his axe down with a clatter.

"Can't you see the place is afire?"

"But--but I'm waiting for...." Jill pointed to where her ally was still addressing an audience that seemed reluctant to stop and listen to him.

The stage-hand squinted out round the edge of the curtain.

"If he's a friend of yours, miss, kindly get 'im to cheese it and get a move on. We're clearing out. There's nothing we can do. It's got too much of an 'old. In about another two ticks the roof's going to drop on us."

Jill's friend came squeezing back through the opening.

"Hullo! Still here?" He blinked approvingly at her through the smoke.

"You're a little soldier! Well, Augustus, what's on your mind?"

The simple question seemed to take the stage-hand aback.

"Wot's on my mind? I'll tell you wot's on my blinking mind...."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. I've got it! The place is on fire!"

The stage-hand expectorated disgustedly. Flippancy at such a moment offended his sensibilities.

"We're 'opping it," he said.

"Great minds think alike! We are hopping it, too."

"You'd better! And damn quick!"

"And, as you suggest, damn quick. You think of everything!"

Jill followed him across the stage. Her heart was beating violently.

There was not only smoke now, but heat. Across the stage little scarlet flames were shooting, and something large and hard, unseen through the smoke, fell with a crash. The air was heavy with the smell of burning paint.

"Where's Sir Chester Portwood?" enquired her companion of the stage-hand, who hurried beside them.

"Opped it!" replied the other briefly, and coughed raspily as he swallowed smoke.

"Strange," said the man in Jill's ear, as he pulled her along. "This way. Stick to me. Strange how the drama anticipates life! At the end of Act Two there was a scene where Sir Chester had to creep sombrely out into the night, and now he's gone and done it! Ah!"

They had stumbled through a doorway and were out in a narrow passage, where the air, though tainted, was comparatively fresh. Jill drew a deep breath. Her companion turned to the stage-hand and felt in his pocket.

"Here." A coin changed hands. "Go and get a drink. You need it after

all this."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it. You've saved our lives. Suppose you hadn't come up and told us, and we had never noticed there was a fire!" He turned to Jill. "Here's the stage-door. Shall we creep sombrely out into the night?"

The guardian of the stage-door was standing in the entrance of his little hutch, plainly perplexed. He was a slow thinker and a man whose life was ruled by routine, and the events of the evening had left him uncertain how to act.

"Wot's all this about a fire?" he demanded.

Jill's friend stopped.

"A fire?" He looked at Jill. "Did you hear anything about a fire?"

"They all come bustin' past 'ere yelling there's a fire," persisted the door-man.

"By George! Now I come to think of it, you're perfectly right! There is a fire! If you wait here a little longer you'll get it in the small of the back. Take the advice of an old friend who means you well

and vanish. In the inspired words of the lad we've just parted from, 'op it!"

The stage-door man turned this over in his mind for a space.

"But I'm supposed to stay 'ere till eleven-thirty and lock up!" he said. "That's what I'm supposed to do. Stay 'ere till eleven-thirty and lock up! And it ain't but ten forty-five now."

"I see the difficulty," said Jill's companion thoughtfully.

"Well, Casabianca, I'm afraid I don't see how to help you. It's a matter for your own conscience. I don't want to lure you from the burning deck; on the other hand, if you stick on here you'll most certainly be fired on both sides.... But, tell me. You spoke about locking up something at eleven-thirty. What are you supposed to lock up?"

"Why, the theatre."

"Then that's all right. By eleven-thirty there won't be a theatre. If I were you, I should leave quietly and unostentatiously now. To-morrow, if you wish it, and if they've cooled off sufficiently, you can come and sit on the ruins. Good night!"

II

Outside, the air was cold and crisp. Jill drew her warm cloak closer. Round the corner there was noise and shouting. Fire-engines had arrived. Jill's companion lit a cigarette.

"Do you wish to stop and see the conflagration?" he asked.

Jill shivered. She was more shaken than she had realized.

"I've seen all the conflagration I want."

"Same here. Well, it's been an exciting evening. Started slow, I admit, but warmed up later! What I seem to need at the moment is a restorative stroll along the Embankment. Do you know, Sir Chester Portwood didn't like the title of my play. He said 'Tried by Fire' was too melodramatic. Well, he can't say now it wasn't appropriate."

They made their way towards the river, avoiding the street which was blocked by the crowds and the fire-engines. As they crossed the Strand, the man looked back. A red glow was in the sky.

"A great blaze!" he said. "What you might call--in fact what the papers will call--a holocaust. Quite a treat for the populace."

"Do you think they will be able to put it out?"

"Not a chance. It's got too much of a hold. It's a pity you hadn't that garden-hose of yours with you, isn't it?"

Jill stopped, wide-eyed.

"Garden-hose?"

"Don't you remember the garden-hose? I do! I can feel that clammy feeling of the water trickling down my back now!"

Memory, always a laggard by the wayside that redeems itself by an eleventh-hour rush, raced back to Jill. The Embankment turned to a sun-lit garden, and the January night to a July day. She stared at him. He was looking at her with a whimsical smile. It was a smile which, pleasant to-day, had seemed mocking and hostile on that afternoon years ago. She had always felt then that he was laughing at her, and at the age of twelve she had resented laughter at her expense.

"You surely can't be Wally Mason!" "I was wondering when you would remember." "But the programme called you something else--John something."

"That was a cunning disguise. Wally Mason is the only genuine and official name. And, by Jove! I've just remembered yours. It was

Mariner. By the way,"--he paused for an almost imperceptible instant--"is it still?"