CHAPTER VII

JILL CATCHES THE 10.10

I

In the lives of each one of us, as we look back and review them in retrospect, there are certain desert wastes from which memory winces like some tired traveller faced with a dreary stretch of road. Even from the security of later happiness we cannot contemplate them without a shudder.

It took one of the most competent firms in the metropolis four days to produce some sort of order in the confusion resulting from Major Selby's financial operations; and during those days Jill existed in a state of being which could be defined as living only in that she breathed and ate and comported herself outwardly like a girl and not a ghost.

Boards announcing that the house was for sale appeared against the railings through which Jane the parlourmaid conducted her daily conversations with the tradesmen. Strangers roamed the rooms eyeing and appraising the furniture. Uncle Chris, on whom disaster had had a quickening and vivifying effect, was everywhere at once, an impressive figure of energy. One may be wronging Uncle Chris, but to the eye of

the casual observer he seemed in these days of trial to be having the time of his life.

Jill varied the monotony of sitting in her room--which was the only place in the house where one might be sure of not encountering a furniture-broker's man with a note-book and pencil--by taking long walks. She avoided as far as possible the small area which had once made up the whole of London for her, but even so she was not always, successful in escaping from old acquaintances. Once, butting through Lennox Gardens on her way to that vast, desolate King's Road which stretches its length out into regions unknown to those whose London is the West End, she happened upon Freddie Rooke, who had been paying a call in his best, and a pair of white spats which would have cut his friend Henry to the quick. It was not an enjoyable meeting. Freddie, keenly alive to the awkwardness of the situation, was scarlet and incoherent; and Jill, who desired nothing less than to talk with one so intimately connected in her mind with all that she had lost, was scarcely more collected. They parted without regret. The only satisfaction that came to Jill from the encounter was the knowledge that Derek was still out of town. He had wired for his things, said Freddie, and had retreated further north. Freddie, it seemed, had been informed of the broken engagement by Lady Underhill in an interview which appeared to have left a lasting impression on his mind. Of Jill's monetary difficulties he had heard nothing.

After this meeting, Jill felt a slight diminution of the oppression

which weighed upon her. She could not have borne to have come unexpectedly upon Derek, and, now that there was no danger of that, she found life a little easier. The days passed somehow, and finally there came the morning, when, accompanied by Uncle Chris--voluble and explanatory about the details of what he called "getting everything settled"--she rode in a taxi to take the train for Southampton. Her last impression of London was of rows upon rows of mean houses, of cats wandering in back-yards among groves of home-washed underclothing, and a smoky greyness which gave way, as the train raced on, to the clearer grey of the suburbs and the good green and brown of the open country.

Then the bustle and confusion of the liner; the calm monotony of the journey, when one came on deck each morning to find the vessel so manifestly in the same spot where it had been the morning before that it was impossible to realize that many hundred miles of ocean had really been placed behind one; and finally the Ambrose Channel lightship and the great bulk of New York rising into the sky like a city of fairyland, heartening yet sinister, at once a welcome and a menace.

"There you are, my dear?" said Uncle Chris indulgently, as though it were a toy he had made for her with his own hands. "New York!"

They were standing on the boat-deck, leaning over the rail. Jill caught her breath. For the first time since disaster had come upon her

she was conscious of a rising of her spirits. It is impossible to behold the huge buildings which fringe the harbour of New York without a sense of expectancy and excitement. There had remained in Jill's mind from childhood memories a vague picture of what she now saw, but it had been feeble and inadequate. The sight of this towering city seemed somehow to blot out everything that had gone before. The feeling of starting afresh was strong upon her.

Uncle Chris, the old traveller, was not emotionally affected. He smoked placidly and talked in a wholly earthy strain of grape-fruit and buckwheat cakes.

It was now, also for the first time, that Uncle Chris touched upon future prospects in a practical manner. On the voyage he had been eloquent but sketchy. With the land of promise within biscuit-throw and the tugs bustling about the great liner's skirts like little dogs about their mistress, he descended to details.

"I shall get a room somewhere," said Uncle Chris, "and start looking about me. I wonder if the old Holland House is still there. I fancy I heard they'd pulled it down. Capital place. I had a steak there in the year.... But I expect they've pulled it down. But I shall find somewhere to go. I'll write and tell you my address directly I've got one."

Jill removed her gaze from the sky-line with a start.

"Write to me?"

"Didn't I tell you about that?" said Uncle Chris cheerily--avoiding her eye, however, for he had realized all along that it might be a little bit awkward breaking the news. "I've arranged that you shall go and stay for the time being down at Brookport--on Long Island, you know--over in that direction--with your Uncle Elmer. Daresay you've forgotten you have an Uncle Elmer, eh?" he went on quickly, as Jill was about to speak. "Your father's brother. Used to be in business, but retired some years ago and goes in for amateur farming. Corn and--and corn," said Uncle Chris. "All that sort of thing. You'll like him. Capital chap! Never met him myself, but always heard," said Uncle Chris, who had never to his recollection heard any comments upon Mr. Elmer Mariner whatever, "that he was a splendid fellow. Directly we decided to sail, I cabled to him, and got an answer saying that he would be delighted to put you up. You'll be quite happy there."

Jill listened to this programme with dismay. New York was calling to her, and Brookport held out no attractions at all. She looked down over the side at the tugs puffing their way through the broken blocks of ice that reminded her of a cocoanut candy familiar to her childhood.

"But I want to be with you," she protested.

"Impossible, my dear, for the present. I shall be very busy, very busy indeed for some weeks, until I have found my feet. Really, you would be in the way. He--er--travels the fastest who travels alone! I must be in a position to go anywhere and do anything at a moment's notice. But always remember, my dear," said Uncle Chris, patting her shoulder affectionately, "that I shall be working for you. I have treated you very badly, but I intend to make up for it. I shall not forget that whatever money I may make will really belong to you." He looked at her benignly, like a monarch of finance who has earmarked a million or two for the benefit of a deserving charity. "You shall have it all, Jill."

He had so much the air of having conferred a substantial benefit upon her that Jill felt obliged to thank him. Uncle Chris had always been able to make people grateful for the phantom gold which he showered upon them. He was as lavish a man with the money he was going to get next week as ever borrowed a five-pound note to see him through till Saturday.

"What are you going to do, Uncle Chris?" asked Jill curiously. Apart from a nebulous idea that he intended to saunter through the city picking dollar-bills off the sidewalk, she had no inkling of his plans.

Uncle Chris toyed with his short moustache. He was not quite equal to a direct answer on the spur of the moment. He had a faith in his star. Something would turn up. Something always had turned up in the old

days, and doubtless, with the march of civilization, opportunities had multiplied. Somewhere behind those tall buildings the Goddess of Luck awaited him, her hands full of gifts, but precisely what those gifts would be he was not in a position to say.

"I shall--ah--how shall I put it--?"

"Look round?" suggested Jill.

"Precisely," said Uncle Chris gratefully. "Look round. I daresay you have noticed that I have gone out of my way during the voyage to make myself agreeable to our fellow-travellers? I had an object. Acquaintances begun on shipboard will often ripen into useful friendships ashore. When I was a young man I never neglected the opportunities which an ocean voyage affords. The offer of a book here, a steamer-rug there, a word of encouragement to a chatty bore in the smoke-room--these are small things, but they may lead to much. One meets influential people on a liner. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but that man with the eye-glasses and the thin nose I was talking to just now is one of the richest men in Milwaukee!"

"But it's not much good having rich friends in Milwaukee when you are in New York!"

"Exactly. There you have put your finger on the very point I have been trying to make. It will probably be necessary for me to travel. And

for that I must be alone. I must be a mobile force. I should dearly like to keep you with me, but you can see for yourself that for the moment you would be an encumbrance. Later on, no doubt, when my affairs are more settled...."

"Oh, I understand. I'm resigned. But, oh dear! it's going to be very dull down at Brookport."

"Nonsense, nonsense! It's a delightful spot."

"Have you been there?"

"No. But of course everybody knows Brookport. Healthy, invigorating.... Sure to be. The very name.... You'll be as happy as the days are long!"

"And how long will the days be!"

"Come, come. You mustn't look on the dark side."

"Is there another?" Jill laughed. "You are an old humbug, Uncle Chris. You know perfectly well what you're condemning me to. I expect Brookport will be like a sort of Southend in winter. Oh, well, I'll be brave. But do hurry and make a fortune, because I want to come to New York."

"My dear," said Uncle Chris solemnly, "if there is a dollar lying loose in this city, rest assured that I shall have it! And, if it's not loose, I will detach it with the greatest possible speed. You have only known me in my decadence, an idle and unprofitable London clubman. I can assure you that lurking beneath the surface, there is a business acumen given to few men...."

"Oh, if you are going to talk poetry," said Jill, "I'll leave you. Anyhow, I ought to be getting below and putting my things together."

II

If Jill's vision of Brookport as a wintry Southend was not entirely fulfilled, neither was Uncle Chris' picture of it as an earthly paradise. At the right time of the year, like most of the summer resorts on the south shore of Long Island, it is not without its attractions; but January is not the month which most people would choose for living in it. It presented itself to Jill on first acquaintance in the aspect of a wind-swept railroad station, dumped down far away from human habitation in the middle of a stretch of flat and ragged country that reminded her a little of parts of Surrey. The station was just a shed on a foundation of planks which lay flush with the rails. From this shed, as the train clanked in, there emerged a tall, shambling man in a weather-beaten overcoat. He had a clean-shaven, wrinkled face, and he looked doubtfully at Jill with

small eyes. Something in his expression reminded Jill of her father, as a bad caricature of a public man will recall the original. She introduced herself.

"If you're Uncle Elmer," she said, "I'm Jill."

The man held out a long hand. He did not smile. He was as bleak as the east wind that swept the platform.

"Glad to meet you again," he said in a melancholy voice. It was news to Jill that they had met before. She wondered where. Her uncle supplied the information. "Last time I saw you, you were a kiddy in short frocks, running round and shouting to beat the band." He looked up and down the platform. "I never heard a child make so much noise!"

"I'm quite quiet now," said Jill encouragingly. The recollection of her infant revelry seemed to her to be distressing her relative.

It appeared, however, that it was not only this that was on his mind.

"If you want to drive home," he said, "we'll have to 'phone to the Durham House for a hack." He brooded a while, Jill remaining silent at his side, loath to break in upon whatever secret sorrow he was wrestling with. "That would be a dollar," he went on. "They're robbers in these parts! A dollar! And it's not over a mile and a half.

Are you fond of walking?"

Jill was a bright girl, and could take a hint.

"I love walking," she said. She might have added that she preferred to do it on a day when the wind was not blowing quite so keenly from the East, but her uncle's obvious excitement at the prospect of cheating the rapacity of the sharks at the Durham House restrained her. Her independent soul had not quite adjusted itself to the prospect of living on the bounty of her fellows, relatives though they were, and she was desirous of imposing as light a burden upon them as possible. "But how about my trunk?"

"The expressman will bring that up. Fifty cents!" said Uncle Elmer in a crushed way. The high cost of entertaining seemed to be afflicting this man deeply.

"Oh, yes," said Jill. She could not see how this particular expenditure was to be avoided. Anxious as she was to make herself pleasant, she declined to consider carrying the trunk to their destination. "Shall we start, then?"

Mr. Mariner led the way out into the ice-covered road. The wind welcomed them like a boisterous dog. For some minutes they proceeded in silence.

"Your aunt will be glad to see you," said Mr. Mariner at last in the voice with which one announces the death of a dear friend.

"It's awfully kind of you to have me to stay with you," said Jill. It is a human tendency to think, when crises occur, in terms of melodrama, and unconsciously she had begun to regard herself somewhat in the light of a heroine driven out into the world from the old home, with no roof to shelter her head. The promptitude with which these good people, who, though relatives, were after all complete strangers, had offered her a resting-place touched her. "I hope I shan't be in the way."

"Major Selby was speaking to me on the telephone just now," said Mr. Mariner, "and he said that you might be thinking of settling down in Brookport. I've some nice little places round here which you might like to look at. Rent or buy. It's cheaper to buy. Brookport's a growing place. It's getting known as a summer resort. There's a bungalow down on the shore I'd like to show you to-morrow. Stands in a nice large plot of ground, and if you bought it for twelve thousand you'd be getting a bargain."

Jill was too astonished to speak. Plainly Uncle Chris had made no mention of the change in her fortunes, and this man looked on her as a girl of wealth. She could only think how typical this was of Uncle Chris. There was a sort of boyish impishness about him. She could see him at the telephone, suave and important. He would have hung up the

receiver with a complacent smirk, thoroughly satisfied that he had done her an excellent turn.

"I put all my money into real estate when I came to live here," went on Mr. Mariner. "I believe in the place. It's growing all the time."

They had come to the outskirts of a straggling village. The lights in the windows gave a welcome suggestion of warmth, for darkness had fallen swiftly during their walk and the chill of the wind had become more biting. There was a smell of salt in the air now, and once or twice Jill had caught the low booming of waves on some distant beach. This was the Atlantic pounding the sandy shore of Fire Island. Brookport itself lay inside, on the lagoon called the Great South Bay.

They passed through the village, bearing to the right, and found themselves in a road bordered by large gardens in which stood big, dark houses. The spectacle of these stimulated Mr. Mariner to something approaching eloquence. He quoted the price paid for each, the price asked, the price offered, the price that had been paid five years ago. The recital carried them on for another mile, in the course of which the houses became smaller and more scattered, and finally, when the country had become bare and desolate again, they turned down a narrow lane and came to a tall, gaunt house standing by itself in a field.

"This is Sandringham," said Mr. Mariner.

"What!" said Jill. "What did you say?"

"Sandringham. Where we live. I got the name from your father. I remember him telling me there was a place called that in England."

"There is." Jill's voice bubbled. "The King lives there."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Mariner. "Well, I bet he doesn't have the trouble with help that we have here. I have to pay our girl fifty dollars a month, and another twenty for the man who looks after the furnace and chops wood. They're all robbers. And if you kick they quit on you!"

III

Jill endured Sandringham for ten days; and, looking back on that period of her life later, she wondered how she did it. The sense of desolation which had gripped her on the station platform increased rather than diminished as she grew accustomed to her surroundings. The east wind died away, and the sun shone fitfully with a suggestion of warmth, but her uncle's bleakness appeared to be a static quality, independent of weather conditions. Her aunt, a faded woman, with a perpetual cold in the head, did nothing to promote cheerfulness. The rest of the household consisted of a gloomy child, "Tibby," aged

eight; a spaniel, probably a few years older, and an intermittent cat, who, when he did put in an appearance, was the life and soul of the party, but whose visits to his home were all too infrequent for Jill.

The picture which Mr. Mariner had formed in his mind of Jill as a wealthy young lady with a taste for house property continued as vivid as ever. It was his practice each morning to conduct her about the neighbourhood, introducing her to the various houses in which he had sunk most of the money he had made in business. Mr. Mariner's life centred around Brookport real estate, and the embarrassed Jill was compelled to inspect sitting-rooms, bathrooms, kitchens, and master's bedrooms till the sound of a key turning in a lock gave her a feeling of nervous exhaustion. Most of her uncle's houses were converted farm-houses, and, as one unfortunate purchaser had remarked, not so darned converted at that. The days she spent at Brookport remained in Jill's memory as a smell of dampness and chill and closeness.

"You want to buy," said Mr. Mariner every time he shut a front-door behind them. "Not rent. Buy. Then, if you don't want to live here, you can always rent in the summer."

It seemed incredible to Jill that the summer would ever come. Winter held Brookport in its grip. For the first time in her life she was tasting real loneliness. She wandered over the snow-patched fields down to the frozen bay, and found the intense stillness, punctuated only by the occasional distant gunshot of some optimist trying for

duck, oppressive rather than restful. She looked on the weird beauty of the ice-bound marshes which glittered red and green and blue in the sun with unseeing eyes; for her isolation was giving her time to think, and thought was a torment.

On the eighth day came a letter from Uncle Chris--a cheerful, even rollicking letter. Things were going well with Uncle Chris, it seemed. As was his habit, he did not enter into details, but he wrote in a spacious way of large things to be, of affairs that were coming out right, of prosperity in sight. As tangible evidence of success, he enclosed a present of twenty dollars for Jill to spend in the Brookport shops.

The letter arrived by the morning mail, and two hours later Mr. Mariner took Jill by one of his usual overland routes to see a house nearer the village than most of those which she had viewed. Mr. Mariner had exhausted the supply of cottages belonging to himself, and this one was the property of an acquaintance. There would be an agent's fee for him in the deal, if it went through, and Mr. Mariner was not a man who despised money in small quantities.

There was a touch of hopefulness in his gloom this morning, like the first intimation of sunshine after a wet day. He had been thinking the thing over, and had come to the conclusion that Jill's unresponsiveness when confronted with the houses she had already seen was due to the fact that she had loftier ideas than he had supposed. Something a little more

magnificent than the twelve thousand dollar places he had shown her was what she desired. This house stood on a hill looking down on the bay, in several acres of ground. It had its private landing-stage and bath-house, its dairy, its sleeping-porches--everything, in fact, that a sensible girl could want. Mr. Mariner could not bring himself to suppose that he would fail again to-day.

"They're asking a hundred and five thousand," he said, "but I know they'd take a hundred thousand. And, if it was a question of cash down, they would go even lower. It's a fine house. You could entertain there. Mrs. Bruggenheim rented it last summer, and wanted to buy, but she wouldn't go above ninety thousand. If you want it, you'd better make up your mind quick. A place like this is apt to be snapped up in a hurry."

Jill could endure it no longer.

"But, you see," she said gently, "all I have in the world is twenty dollars!"

There was a painful pause. Mr. Mariner shot a swift glance at her in the hope of discovering that she had spoken humorously, but was compelled to decide that she had not.

"Twenty dollars!" he exclaimed.

"Twenty dollars," said Jill.

"But your father was a rich man." Mr. Mariner's voice was high and plaintive. "He made a fortune over here before he went to England."

"It's all gone. I got nipped," said Jill, who was finding a certain amount of humour in the situation, "in Amalgamated Dyes."

"Amalgamated Dyes?"

"They're something," explained Jill, "that people get nipped in."

Mr. Mariner digested this.

"You speculated?" he gasped.

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have been allowed to do it," said Mr. Mariner warmly. "Major Selby, your uncle, ought to have known better than to allow you."

"Yes, oughtn't he?" said Jill demurely.

There was another silence, lasting for about a quarter of a mile.

"Well, it's a bad business," said Mr. Mariner.

"Yes," said Jill. "I've felt that myself."

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The result of this conversation was to effect a change in the atmosphere of Sandringham. The alteration in the demeanour of people of parsimonious habit, when they discover that the guest they are entertaining is a pauper and not, as they had supposed, an heiress, is subtle but well marked. In most cases, more well marked than subtle. Nothing was actually said, but there are thoughts that are almost as audible as words. A certain suspense seemed to creep into the air, as happens when a situation has been reached which is too poignant to last. Greek Tragedy affects the reader with the same sense of overhanging doom. Things, we feel, cannot go on as they are.

That night, after dinner, Mrs. Mariner asked Jill to read to her.

"Print tries my eyes so, dear," said Mrs. Mariner.

It was a small thing, but it had the significance of that little cloud that arose out of the sea like a man's hand. Jill appreciated the portent. She was, she perceived, to make herself useful.

"Of course I will," she said cordially. "What would you like me to

read?"

She hated reading aloud. It always made her throat sore, and her eye skipped to the end of each page and took the interest out of it long before the proper time. But she proceeded bravely, for her conscience was troubling her. Her sympathy was divided equally between these unfortunate people who had been saddled with an undesired visitor and herself who had been placed in a position at which every independent nerve in her rebelled. Even as a child she had loathed being under obligations to strangers or those whom she did not love.

"Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Mariner, when Jill's voice had roughened to a weary croak. "You read so well." She wrestled ineffectually with her handkerchief against the cold in the head from which she had always suffered. "It would be nice if you would do it every night, don't you think? You have no idea how tired print makes my eyes."

On the following morning after breakfast, at the hour when she had hitherto gone house-hunting with Mr. Mariner, the child Tibby, of whom up till now she had seen little except at meals, presented himself to her, coated and shod for the open and regarding her with a dull and phlegmatic gaze.

"Ma says will you please take me for a nice walk!"

Jill's heart sank. She loved children, but Tibby was not an

ingratiating child. He was a Mr. Mariner in little. He had the family gloom. It puzzled Jill sometimes why this branch of the family should look on life with so jaundiced an eye. She remembered her father as a cheerful man, alive to the small humours of life.

"All right, Tibby. Where shall we go?"

"Ma says we must keep on the roads and I mustn't slide."

Jill was thoughtful during the walk. Tibby, who was no conversationist, gave her every opportunity for meditation. She perceived that in the space of a few hours she had sunk in the social scale. If there was any difference between her position and that of a paid nurse and companion it lay in the fact that she was not paid. She looked about her at the grim countryside, gave a thought to the chill gloom of the house to which she was about to return, and her heart sank.

Nearing home, Tibby vouched his first independent observation.

"The hired man's quit!"

"Has he?"

"Yep. Quit this morning."

It had begun to snow. They turned and made their way back to the house. The information she had received did not cause Jill any great apprehension. It was hardly likely that her new duties would include the stoking of the furnace. That and cooking appeared to be the only acts about the house which were outside her present sphere of usefulness.

"He killed a rat once in the wood-shed with an axe," said Tibby chattily. "Yessir! Chopped it right in half, and it bled!"

"Look at the pretty snow falling on the trees," said Jill faintly.

At breakfast next morning, Mrs. Mariner having sneezed, made a suggestion.

"Tibby, darling, wouldn't it be nice if you and cousin Jill played a game of pretending you were pioneers in the Far West?"

"What's a pioneer?" enquired Tibby, pausing in the middle of an act of violence on a plate of oatmeal.

"The pioneers were the early settlers in this country, dear. You have read about them in your history book. They endured a great many hardships, for life was very rough for them, with no railroads or anything. I think it would be a nice game to play this morning."

Tibby looked at Jill. There was doubt in his eye. Jill returned his gaze sympathetically. One thought was in both their minds.

"There is a string to this!" said Tibby's eye.

Mrs. Mariner sneezed again.

"You would have lots of fun," she said.

"What'ud we do?" asked Tibby cautiously. He had been had this way before. Only last summer, on his mother's suggestion that he should pretend he was a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island, he had perspired through a whole afternoon cutting the grass in front of the house to make a shipwrecked sailor's simple bed.

"I know," said Jill. "We'll pretend we're pioneers stormbound in their log cabin in the woods, and the wolves are howling outside, and they daren't go out, so they make a lovely big fire and sit in front of it and read."

"And eat candy," suggested Tibby, warming to the idea.

"And eat candy," agreed Jill.

Mrs. Mariner frowned.

"I was going to suggest," she said frostily, "that you shovelled the snow away from the front steps!"

"Splendid!" said Jill. "Oh, but I forgot. I want to go to the village first."

"There will be plenty of time to do it when you get back."

"All right. I'll do it when I get back."

It was a quarter of an hour's walk to the village. Jill stopped at the post-office.

"Could you tell me," she asked, "when the next train is to New York?"

"There's one at ten-ten," said the woman behind the window. "You'll have to hurry."

"I'll hurry!" said Jill.