

CHAPTER VIII

THE DRY-SALTERS WING DEREK

I

Doctors, laying down the law in their usual confident way, tell us that the vitality of the human body is at its lowest at two o'clock in the morning: and that it is then, as a consequence, that the mind is least able to contemplate the present with equanimity, the future with fortitude, and the past without regret. Every thinking man, however, knows that this is not so. The true zero hour, desolate, gloom-ridden, and spectre-haunted, occurs immediately before dinner while we are waiting for that cocktail. It is then that, stripped for a brief moment of our armour of complacency and self-esteem, we see ourselves as we are--frightful chumps in a world where nothing goes right; a grey world in which, hoping to click, we merely get the raspberry; where, animated by the best intentions, we nevertheless succeed in perpetrating the scaliest bloomers and landing our loved ones neck-deep in the gumbo.

So reflected Freddie Rooke, that priceless old bean, sitting disconsolately in an arm-chair at the Drones Club about two weeks after Jill's departure from England, waiting for his friend Algy Martyn to trickle in and give him dinner.

Surveying Freddie, as he droops on his spine in the yielding leather, one is conscious of one's limitations as a writer. Gloom like his calls for the pen of a master. Zola could have tackled it nicely. Gorky might have made a stab at it. Dostoevsky would have handled it with relish. But for oneself the thing is too vast. One cannot wangle it. It intimidates. It would have been bad enough in any case, for Algy Martyn was late as usual and it always gave Freddie the pip to have to wait for dinner: but what made it worse was the fact that the Drones was not one of Freddie's clubs and so, until the blighter Algy arrived, it was impossible for him to get his cocktail. There he sat, surrounded by happy, laughing young men, each grasping a glass of the good old mixture-as-before, absolutely unable to connect. Some of them, casual acquaintances, had nodded to him, waved, and gone on lowering the juice,--a spectacle which made Freddie feel much as the wounded soldier would have felt if Sir Philip Sidney, instead of offering him the cup of water, had placed it to his own lips and drained it with a careless "Cheerio!" No wonder Freddie experienced the sort of abysmal soul-sadness which afflicts one of Tolstoi's Russian peasants when, after putting in a heavy day's work strangling his father, beating his wife, and dropping the baby into the city reservoir, he turns to the cupboard, only to find the vodka-bottle empty.

Freddie gave himself up to despondency: and, as always in these days when he was mournful, he thought of Jill. Jill's sad case was a

continual source of mental anguish to him. From the first he had blamed himself for the breaking-off of her engagement with Derek. If he had not sent the message to Derek from the police-station, the latter would never have known about their arrest, and all would have been well. And now, a few days ago, had come the news of her financial disaster, with its attendant complications.

It had descended on Freddie like a thunderbolt through the medium of Ronny Devereux.

"I say," Ronny had said, "have you heard the latest? Your pal, Underhill, has broken off his engagement with Jill Mariner."

"I know; rather rotten, what!"

"Rotten? I should say so! It isn't done. I mean to say, chap can't chuck a girl just because she's lost her money. Simply isn't on the board, old man!"

"Lost her money? What do you mean?"

Ronny was surprised. Hadn't Freddie heard? Yes, absolute fact. He had it from the best authority. Didn't know how it had happened and all that, but Jill Mariner had gone completely bust; Underhill had given her the miss-in-baulk; and the poor girl had legged it, no one knew where. Oh, Freddie had met her and she had told him she was going to

America? Well, then, legged it to America. But the point was that the swine Underhill had handed her the mitten just because she was broke, and that was what Ronny thought so bally rotten. Broker a girl is, Ronny meant to say, more a fellow should stick to her.

"But--" Freddie rushed to his hero's defence. "But it wasn't that at all. Something quite different. I mean, Derek didn't even know Jill had lost her money. He broke the engagement because...." Freddie stopped short. He didn't want everybody to know of that rotten arrest business, as they infallibly would if he confided in Ronny Devereux. Sort of thing he would never hear the last of. "He broke it off because of something quite different."

"Oh, yes!" said Ronny sceptically.

"But he did, really!"

Ronny shook his head.

"Don't you believe it, old son. Don't you believe it. Stands to reason it must have been because the poor girl was broke. You wouldn't have done it and I wouldn't have done it, but Underhill did, and that's all there is to it. I mean, a tick's a tick, and there's nothing more to say. Well, I know he's been a pal of yours, Freddie, but, next time I meet him, by Jove, I'll cut him dead. Only I don't know him to speak to, dash it!" concluded Ronny regretfully.

Ronny's news had upset Freddie. Derek had returned to the Albany a couple of days ago, moody and silent. They had lunched together at the Bachelors, and Freddie had been pained at the attitude of his fellow-clubmen. Usually, when he lunched at the Bachelors, his table became a sort of social centre. Cheery birds would roll up to pass the time of day, and festive old eggs would toddle over to have coffee and so forth, and all that sort of thing. Jolly! On this occasion nobody had rolled, and all the eggs present had taken their coffee elsewhere. There was an uncomfortable chill in the atmosphere of which Freddie had been acutely conscious, though Derek had not appeared to notice it. The thing had only come home to Derek yesterday at the Albany, when the painful episode of Wally Mason had occurred. It was this way....

"Hullo, Freddie, old top! Sorry to have kept you waiting."

Freddie looked up from his broken meditations, to find that his host had arrived.

"Hullo!"

"A quick bracer," said Algy Martyn, "and then the jolly old food-stuffs. It's pretty late, I see. Didn't notice how time was slipping."

Over the soup, Freddie was still a prey to gloom. For once the healing gin-and-vermouth had failed to do its noble work. He sipped sombrely, so sombrely as to cause comment from his host.

"Pipped?" enquired Algy solicitously.

"Pretty pipped," admitted Freddie.

"Backed a loser?"

"No."

"Something wrong with the old tum?"

"No.... Worried."

"Worried?"

"About Derek."

"Derek? Who's...? Oh, you mean Underhill?"

"Yes."

Algy Martyn chased an elusive piece of carrot about his soup plate, watching it interestedly as it slid coyly from the spoon.

"Oh?" he said, with sudden coolness. "What about him?"

Freddie was too absorbed in his subject to notice the change in his friend's tone.

"A dashed unpleasant thing," he said, "happened yesterday morning at my place. I was just thinking about going out to lunch, when the door-bell rang and Barker said a chappie of the name of Mason would like to see me. I didn't remember any Mason, but Barker said the chappie said he knew me when I was a kid. So he loosed him into the room, and it turned out to be a fellow I used to know years ago down in Worcestershire. I didn't know him from Adam at first, but gradually the old bean got to work, and I placed him. Wally Mason his name was. Rummily enough, he had spoken to me at the Leicester that night when the fire was, but not being able to place him, I had given him the miss somewhat. You know how it is. Cove you've never been introduced to says something to you in a theatre, and you murmur something and sheer off. What?"

"Absolutely," agreed Algy Martyn. He thoroughly approved of Freddie's code of etiquette. Sheer off. Only thing to do.

"Well, anyhow, now that he had turned up again and told me who he was, I began to remember. We had been kids together, don't you know. (What's this? Salmon? Oh, right ho.) So I buzzed about and did the

jovial host, you know; gave him a drink and a toofer, and all that sort of thing; and talked about the dear old days and what not. And so forth, if you follow me. Then he brought the conversation round to Jill. Of course he knew Jill at the same time when he knew me, down in Worcestershire, you see. We were all pretty pally in those days, if you see what I mean. Well, this man Mason, it seems, had heard somewhere about Jill losing her money, and he wanted to know if it was true. I said absolutely. Hadn't heard any details, but Ronny had told me, and Ronny had had it from some one who had stable information and all that sort of thing. 'Dashed shame, isn't it?' I said. 'She's gone to America, you know.' 'I didn't know,' he said. 'I understood she was going to be married quite soon.' Well, of course, I told him that that was off. He didn't say anything for a bit, then he said 'Off?' I said 'Off.' 'Did she break it off?' asked the chappie. 'Well, no,' I said. 'As a matter of fact Derek broke it off.' He said 'Oh!' (What? Oh yes, a bit of pheasant will be fine.) Where was I? Oh, yes. He said 'Oh!' Now, before this, I ought to tell you, this chappie Mason had asked me to come out and have a bit of lunch. I had told him I was lunching with Derek, and he said 'Right ho,' or words to that effect, 'Bring him along.' Derek had been out for a stroll, you see, and we were waiting for him to come in. Well, just at this point or juncture, if you know what I mean, in he came, and I said 'Oh, what ho!' and introduced Wally Mason. 'Oh, do you know Underhill?' I said, or something like that. You know the sort of thing. And then...."

Freddie broke off and drained his glass. The recollection of that

painful moment had made him feverish. Social difficulties always did.

"Then what?" enquired Algy Martyn.

"Well, it was pretty rotten. Derek held out his hand, as a chappie naturally would, being introduced to a strange chappie, and Wally Mason, giving it an absolute miss, went on talking to me just as if we were alone, you know. Look here. Here was I, where this knife is. Derek over here--this fork--with his hand out. Mason here--this bit of bread. Mason looks at his watch, and says 'I'm sorry, Freddie, but I find I've an engagement for lunch. So long!' and biffed out, without apparently knowing that Derek was on the earth. I mean...." Freddie reached for his glass. "What I mean is, it was dashed embarrassing. I mean, cutting a fellow dead in my rooms. I don't know when I've felt so rotten!"

Algy Martyn delivered judgment with great firmness.

"Chappie was perfectly right!"

"No, but I mean...."

"Absolutely correct-o," insisted Algy sternly. "Underhill can't dash about all over the place giving the girl he's engaged to the mitten because she's broke, and expect no notice to be taken of it. If you want to know what I think, old man, your pal Underhill--I can't

imagine what the deuce you see in him, but, school together and so forth, makes a difference, I suppose--I say, if you want to know what I think, Freddie, the blighter Underhill would be well advised either to leg it after Jill and get her to marry him or else lie low for a goodish while till people have forgotten the thing. I mean to say, fellows like Ronny and I and Dick Wimpole and Archie Studd and the rest of our lot--well, we all knew Jill and thought she was a topper and had danced with her here and there and seen her about and all that, and naturally we feel pretty strongly about the whole dashed business. Underhill isn't in our particular set, but we all know most of the people he knows, and we talk about this business, and the thing gets about, and there you are! My sister, who was a great pal of Jill's, swears that all the girls she knows mean to cut Underhill. I tell you, Freddie, London's going to get pretty hot for him if he doesn't do something dashed quick and with great rapidity!"

"But you haven't got the story right, old thing!"

"How not?"

"Well, I mean you think and Ronny thinks and all the rest of you think that Derek broke off the engagement because of the money. It wasn't that at all."

"What was it, then?"

"Well.... Well, look here, it makes me seem a fearful ass and all that, but I'd better tell you. Jill and I were going down one of those streets near Victoria and a blighter was trying to slay a parrot...."

"Parrot-shooting's pretty good in those parts, they tell me," interjected Algy satirically.

"Don't interrupt, old man. This parrot had got out of one of the houses, and a fellow was jabbing at it with a stick, and Jill--you know what she's like; impulsive, I mean, and all that--Jill got hold of the stick and biffed him with some vim, and a policeman rolled up and the fellow made a fuss and the policeman took Jill and me off to chokey. Well, like an ass, I sent round to Derek to bail us out, and that's how he heard of the thing. Apparently he didn't think a lot of it, and the result was that he broke off the engagement."

Algy Martyn had listened to this recital with growing amazement.

"He broke it off because of that?"

"Yes."

"What absolute rot!" said Algy Martyn. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"I say, old man!"

"I don't believe a word of it," repeated Algy firmly.

"And nobody else will either. It's dashed good of you, Freddie, to cook up a yarn like that to try and make things look better for the blighter, but it won't work. Such a damn silly story, too!" said Algy with some indignation.

"But it's true!"

"What's the use, Freddie, between old pals?" said Algy protestingly.

"You know perfectly well that Underhill's a worm of the most pronounced order, and that, when he found out that Jill hadn't any money, he chucked her."

"But why should Derek care whether Jill was well off or not? He's got enough money of his own."

"Nobody," said Algy judicially, "has got enough money of his own. Underhill thought he was marrying a girl with a sizable chunk of the ready, and, when the fuse blew out, he decided it wasn't good enough. For Heaven's sake don't let's talk any more about the blighter. It gives me a pain to think of him."

II

Freddie returned to the Albany in a state of gloom and uneasiness. Algy's remarks, coming on top of the Wally Mason episode, had shaken him. The London in which he and Derek moved and had their being is nothing but a village, and it was evident that village gossip was hostile to Derek. People were talking about him. Local opinion had decided that he had behaved badly. Already one man had cut him. Freddie blanched at a sudden vision of streetfuls of men, long Piccadillys of men, all cutting him, one after the other. Something had got to be done.

The subject was not an easy one to broach to his somewhat forbidding friend, as he discovered when the latter arrived about half an hour later. Derek had been attending the semi-annual banquet of the Worshipful Dry-Salters Company down in the City, understudying one of the speakers, a leading member of Parliament, who had been unable to appear; and he was still in the grip of that feeling of degraded repletion which City dinners induce.

Yet, unfavourably disposed as, judging by his silence and the occasional moody grunts he uttered, he appeared to be to a discussion of his private affairs, it seemed to Freddie impossible that the night should be allowed to pass without some word spoken on the subject. He thought of Ronny and what Ronny had said, of Algy and what Algy had said, of Wally Mason and how Wally had behaved in this very room; and he nerved himself to the task.

"Derek, old top."

A grunt.

"I say, Derek, old bean."

Derek roused himself, and looked gloomily across the room to where he stood, warming his legs at the blaze.

"Well?"

Freddie found a difficulty in selecting words. A ticklish business, this. One that might well have disconcerted a diplomat. Freddie was no diplomat, and the fact enabled him to find a way in the present crisis. Equipped by nature with an amiable tactlessness and a happy gift of blundering, he charged straight at the main point, and landed on it like a circus elephant alighting on a bottle.

"I say, you know, about Jill!"

He stooped to rub the backs of his legs, on which the fire was playing with a little too fierce a glow, and missed his companion's start and the sudden thickening of his bushy eyebrows.

"Well?" said Derek again.

Freddie nerved himself to proceed. A thought flashed across his mind that Derek was looking exactly like Lady Underhill. It was the first time he had seen the family resemblance quite so marked.

"Ronny Devereux was saying...." faltered Freddie.

"Damn Ronny Devereux!"

"Oh, absolutely! But...."

"Ronny Devereux! Who the devil is Ronny Devereux?"

"Why, old man, you've heard me speak of him, haven't you? Pal of mine. He came down to the station with Algy and me to meet your mater that morning."

"Oh, that fellow? And he has been saying something about...?"

"It isn't only Ronny, you know," Freddie hastened to interject. "Algy Martyn's talking about it, too. And lots of other fellows. And Algy's sister and a lot of peoples They're all saying...."

"What are they saying?"

Freddie bent down and chafed the back of his legs. He simply couldn't look at Derek while he had that Lady Underhill expression on the old

map. Rummy he had never noticed before how extraordinarily like his mother he was. Freddie was conscious of a faint sense of grievance. He could not have put it into words, but what he felt was that a fellow had no right to go about looking like Lady Underhill.

"What are they saying?" repeated Derek grimly.

"Well...." Freddie hesitated. "That it's a bit tough.... On Jill, you know."

"They think I behaved badly?"

"Well.... Oh, well, you know!"

Derek smiled a ghastly smile. This was not wholly due to mental disturbance. The dull heaviness which was the legacy of the Dry-Salters' dinner had begun to change to something more actively unpleasant. A sub-motive of sharp pain had begun to run through it, flashing in and out like lightning through a thunder-cloud. He felt sullen and vicious.

"I wonder," he said with savage politeness, "if, when you chat with your friends, you would mind choosing some other topic than my private affairs."

"Sorry, old man. But they started it, you know."

"And, if you feel you've got to discuss me, kindly keep it to yourself. Don't come and tell me what your damned friends said to each other and to you and what you said to them, because it bores me. I'm not interested. I don't value their opinions as much as you seem to." Derek paused, to battle in silence with the imperious agony within him. "It was good of you to put me up here," he went on, "but I think I won't trespass on your hospitality any longer. Perhaps you'll ask Barker to pack my things to-morrow." Derek moved, as majestically as an ex-guest of the Worshipful Company of Dry-Salters may, in the direction of the door. "I shall go to the Savoy."

"Oh, I say, old man! No need to do that."

"Good night."

"But, I say...."

"And you can tell your friend Devereux that, if he doesn't stop poking his nose into my private business, I'll pull it off."

"Well," said Freddie doubtfully, "of course I don't suppose you know, but.... Ronny's a pretty hefty bird. He boxed for Cambridge in the light-weights the last year he was up, you know. He...."

Derek slammed the door. Freddie was alone. He stood rubbing his legs

for some minutes, a rueful expression on his usually cheerful face. Freddie hated rows. He liked everything to jog along smoothly. What a rotten place the world was these days! Just one thing after another. First, poor old Jill takes the knock and disappears. He would miss her badly. What a good sort! What a pal! And now--gone. Biffed off. Next, Derek. Together, more or less, ever since Winchester, and now--bing!...

Freddie heaved a sigh, and reached out for the Sporting Times, his never-failing comfort in times of depression. He lit another cigar and curled up in one of the arm-chairs. He was feeling tired. He had been playing squash all the afternoon, a game at which he was exceedingly expert and to which he was much addicted.

Time passed. The paper slipped to the floor. A cold cigar followed it. From the depths of the chair came a faint snore....

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A hand on his shoulder brought Freddie with a jerk from troubled dreams. Derek was standing beside him. A bent, tousled Derek, apparently in pain.

"Freddie!"

"Hullo!"

A spasm twisted Derek's face.

"Have you got any pepsin?"

Derek uttered a groan. What a mocker of our petty human dignity is this dyspepsia, bringing low the haughtiest of us, less than love itself a respecter of persons. This was a different Derek from the man who had stalked stiffly from the room two hours before. His pride had been humbled upon the rack.

"Pepsin?"

"Yes. I've got the most damned attack of indigestion."

The mists of sleep rolled away from Freddie. He was awake again, and became immediately helpful. These were the occasions when the Last of the Rookes was a good man to have at your side. It was Freddie who suggested that Derek should recline in the arm-chair which he had vacated; Freddie who nipped round the corner to the all-night chemist's and returned with a magic bottle guaranteed to relieve an ostrich after a surfeit of tenpenny nails; Freddie who mixed and administered the dose.

His ministrations were rewarded. Presently the agony seemed to pass. Derek recovered.

One would say that Derek became himself again, but that the mood of gentle remorse which came upon him as he lay in the arm-chair was one so foreign to his nature. Freddie had never seen him so subdued. He was like a convalescent child. Between them, the all-night chemist and the Dry. Salters seemed to have wrought a sort of miracle. These temporary softenings of personality frequently follow City dinners. The time to catch your Dry-Salter in angelic mood is the day after the semi-annual banquet. Go to him then and he will give you his watch and chain.

"Freddie," said Derek.

They were sitting over the dying fire. The clock on the mantelpiece, beside which Jill's photograph had stood pointed to ten minutes past two. Derek spoke in a low, soft voice. Perhaps the doctors are right after all, and two o'clock is the hour at which our self-esteem deserts us, leaving in its place regret for past sins, good resolutions for future behaviour.

"What do Martyn and the others say about ... you know?"

Freddie hesitated. Pity to start all that again.

"Oh, I know," went on Derek. "They say I behaved like a cad."

"Oh, well...."

"They are quite right. I did."

"Oh, I shouldn't say that, you know. Faults on both sides and all that sort of rot."

"I did!" Derek stared into the fire. Scattered all over London at that moment, probably a hundred Worshipful Dry-Salters were equally sleepless and subdued, looking wide-eyed into black pasts. "Is it true she has gone to America, Freddie?"

"She told me she was going."

"What a fool I've been!"

The clock ticked on through the silence. The fire sputtered faintly, then gave a little wheeze, like a very old man. Derek rested his chin on his hands, gazing into the ashes.

"I wish to God I could go over there and find her."

"Why don't you?"

"How can I? There may be an election coming on at any moment. I can't stir."

Freddie leaped from his seat. The suddenness of the action sent a red-hot corkscrew of pain through Derek's head.

"What the devil's the matter?" he demanded irritably. Even the gentle mood which comes with convalescence after a City dinner is not guaranteed to endure against this sort of thing.

"I've got an idea, old bean!"

"Well, there's no need to dance, is there?"

"I've nothing to keep me here, you know. What's the matter with my popping over to America and finding Jill?" Freddie tramped the floor, aglow. Each beat of his foot jarred Derek, but he made no complaint.

"Could you?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course I could. I was saying only the other day that I had half a mind to buzz over. It's a wheeze! I'll get on the next boat and charge over in the capacity of a jolly old ambassador. Have her back in no time. Leave it to me, old thing! This is where I come out strong!"