

CHAPTER IX

JILL IN SEARCH OF AN UNCLE

I

New York welcomed Jill, as she came out of the Pennsylvania Station in Seventh Avenue, with a whirl of powdered snow that touched her cheek like a kiss, the cold, bracing kiss one would expect from this vivid city. She stood at the station entrance, a tiny figure beside the huge pillars, looking round her with eager eyes. A wind was whipping down the avenue. The sky was a clear, brilliant tint of the brightest blue. Energy was in the air, and hopefulness. She wondered if Mr. Elmer Mariner ever came to New York. It was hard to see how even his gloom would contrive to remain unaffected by the exhilaration of the place.

She took Uncle Chris' letter from her bag. He had written from an address on East Fifty-seventh Street. There would be just time to catch him before he went out to lunch. She hailed a taxi-cab which was coming out of the station.

It was a slow ride, halted repeatedly by congestion of the traffic, but a short one for Jill. She was surprised at herself, a Londoner of long standing, for feeling so provincial and being so impressed. But London was far away. It belonged to a life that seemed years ago and

a world from which she had parted for ever. Moreover, this was undeniably a stupendous city through which her taxi-cab was carrying her. At Times Square the stream of the traffic plunged into a whirlpool, swinging out of Broadway to meet the rapids which poured in from east, west, and north. On Fifth Avenue all the motor-cars in the world were gathered together. On the pavements, pedestrians, muffled against the nipping chill of the crisp air, hurried to and fro. And, above, that sapphire sky spread a rich velvet curtain which made the tops of the buildings stand out like the white minarets of some eastern city of romance.

The cab drew up in front of a stone apartment house; and Jill, getting out, passed under an awning through a sort of mediæval courtyard, gay with potted shrubs, to an inner door. She was impressed. Evidently the tales one heard of fortunes accumulated overnight in this magic city were true, and one of them must have fallen to the lot of Uncle Chris. For nobody to whom money was a concern could possibly afford to live in a place like this. If Croesus and the Count of Monte Cristo had applied for lodging there, the authorities would probably have looked on them a little doubtfully at first and hinted at the desirability of a month's rent in advance.

In a glass case behind the inner door, reading a newspaper and chewing gum, sat a dignified old man in the rich uniform of a general in the Guatemalan army. He was a brilliant spectacle. He wore no jewellery, but this, no doubt, was due to a private distaste for display. As

there was no one else of humbler rank at hand from whom Jill could solicit an introduction and the privilege of an audience, she took the bold step of addressing him directly.

"I want to see Major Selby, please."

The Guatemalan general arrested for a moment the rhythmic action of his jaws, lowered his paper and looked at her with raised eyebrows. At first Jill thought that he was registering haughty contempt, then she saw what she had taken for scorn was surprise.

"Major Selby?"

"Major Selby."

"No Major Selby living here."

"Major Christopher Selby."

"Not here," said the associate of ambassadors and the pampered pet of Guatemala's proudest beauties. "Never heard of him in my life!"

II

Jill had read works of fiction in which at certain crises everything

had "seemed to swim" in front of the heroine's eyes, but never till this moment had she experienced that remarkable sensation herself. The Saviour of Guatemala did not actually swim, perhaps, but he certainly flickered. She had to blink to restore his prismatic outlines to their proper sharpness. Already the bustle and noise of New York had begun to induce in her that dizzy condition of unreality which one feels in dreams, and this extraordinary statement added the finishing touch.

Perhaps the fact that she had said "please" to him when she opened the conversation touched the heart of the hero of a thousand revolutions. Dignified and beautiful as he was to the eye of the stranger, it is unpleasant to have to record that he lived in a world which rather neglected the minor courtesies of speech. People did not often say "please" to him. "Here!" "Hi!" and "Gosh darn you!" yes; but seldom "please." He seemed to approve of Jill, for he shifted his chewing-gum to a position which facilitated speech, and began to be helpful.

"What was the name again?"

"Selby."

"Howja spell it?"

"S-e-l-b-y."

"S-e-l-b-y. Oh, Selby?"

"Yes, Selby."

"What was the first name?"

"Christopher."

"Christopher?"

"Yes, Christopher."

"Christopher Selby? No one of that name living here."

"But there must be."

The veteran shook his head with an indulgent smile.

"You want Mr. Sipperley," he said tolerantly. In Guatemala these mistakes are always happening. "Mr. George Sipperley. He's on the fourth floor. What name shall I say?"

He had almost reached the telephone when Jill stopped him. This is an age of just-as-good substitutes, but she refused to accept any unknown Sipperley as a satisfactory alternative for Uncle Chris.

"I don't want Mr. Sipperley. I want Major Selby."

"Howja spell it once more?"

"S-e-l-b-y."

"S-e-l-b-y. No one of that name living here. Mr. Sipperley--" he spoke in a wheedling voice, as if determined, in spite of herself, to make Jill see what was in her best interests--"Mr. Sipperley's on the fourth floor. Gentleman in the real estate business," he added insinuatingly. "He's got blond hair and a Boston bull-dog."

"He may be all you say, and he may have a dozen bull-dogs...."

"Only one. Jack his name is."

"... But he isn't the right man. It's absurd. Major Selby wrote to me from this address. This is Eighteen East Fifty-seventh Street?"

"This is Eighteen East Fifty-seventh Street," conceded the other cautiously.

"I've got his letter here." She opened her bag, and gave an exclamation of dismay. "It's gone!"

"Mr. Sipperley used to have a friend staying with him last Fall. A Mr. Robertson. Dark-complexioned man with a moustache."

"I took it out to look at the address, and I was sure I put it back. I must have dropped it."

"There's a Mr. Rainsby on the seventh floor. He's a broker down on Wall Street. Short man with an impediment in his speech."

Jill snapped the clasp of her bag.

"Never mind," she said. "I must have made a mistake. I was quite sure that this was the address, but it evidently isn't. Thank you so much. I'm so sorry to have bothered you."

She walked away, leaving the Terror of Paraguay and all points west speechless: for people who said "Thank you so much" to him were even rarer than those who said "please." He followed her with an affectionate eye till she was out of sight, then, restoring his chewing-gum to circulation, returned to the perusal of his paper. A momentary suggestion presented itself to his mind that what Jill had really wanted was Mr. Willoughby on the eighth floor, but it was too late to say so now; and soon, becoming absorbed in the narrative of a spirited householder in Kansas who had run amuck with a hatchet and slain six, he dismissed the matter from his mind.

Jill walked back to Fifth Avenue, crossed it, and made her way thoughtfully along the breezy street which, flanked on one side by the Park and on the other by the green-roofed Plaza Hotel and the apartment houses of the wealthy, ends in the humbler and more democratic spaces of Columbus Circle. She perceived that she was in that position, familiar to melodrama, of being alone in a great city. The reflection brought with it a certain discomfort. The bag that dangled from her wrist contained all the money she had in the world, the very broken remains of the twenty dollars which Uncle Chris had sent her at Brookport. She had nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep, and no immediately obvious means of adding to her capital. It was a situation which she had not foreseen when she set out to walk to Brookport station.

She pondered over the mystery of Uncle Chris' disappearance, and found no solution. The thing was inexplicable. She was as sure of the address he had given in his letter as she was of anything in the world. Yet at that address nothing had been heard of him. His name was not even known. These were deeper waters than Jill was able to fathom.

She walked on aimlessly. Presently she came to Columbus Circle, and, crossing Broadway at the point where that street breaks out into an eruption of automobile shops, found herself, suddenly hungry, opposite a restaurant whose entire front was a sheet of plate glass. On the other side of this glass, at marble-topped tables, apparently careless

of their total lack of privacy, sat the impecunious, lunching, their every mouthful a spectacle for the passer-by. It reminded Jill of looking at fishes in an aquarium. In the centre of the window, gazing out in a distraught manner over piles of apples and grape-fruit, a white-robed ministrant at a stove juggled ceaselessly with buckwheat cakes. He struck the final note in the candidness of the establishment, a priest whose ritual contained no mysteries.

Spectators with sufficient time on their hands to permit them to stand and watch were enabled to witness a New York midday meal in every stage of its career, from its protoplasmic beginnings as a stream of yellowish-white liquid poured on top of the stove to its ultimate Nirvana in the interior of the luncher in the form of an appetising cake. It was a spectacle which no hungry girl could resist. Jill went in, and, as she made her way among the tables, a voice spoke her name.

"Miss Mariner!"

Jill jumped, and thought for a moment that the thing must have been an hallucination. It was impossible that anybody in the place should have called her name. Except for Uncle Chris, wherever he might be, she knew no one in New York. Then the voice spoke again, competing valiantly with a clatter of crockery so uproarious as to be more like something solid than a mere sound.

"I couldn't believe it was you!"

A girl in blue had risen from the nearest table, and was staring at her in astonishment. Jill recognized her instantly. Those big, pathetic eyes, like a lost child's, were unmistakable. It was the parrot girl, the girl whom she and Freddie Rooke had found in the drawing-room at Ovingdon Square that afternoon when the foundations of the world had given way and chaos had begun.

"Good gracious!" cried Jill. "I thought you were in London!"

That feeling of emptiness and panic, the result of her interview with the Guatemalan general at the apartment house, vanished magically. She sat down at this unexpected friend's table with a light heart.

"Whatever are you doing in New York?" asked the girl. "I never knew you meant to come over."

"It was a little sudden. Still, here I am. And I'm starving. What are those things you're eating?"

"Buckwheat cakes."

"Oh, yes. I remember Uncle Chris talking about them on the boat. I'll have some."

"But when did you come over?"

"I landed about ten days ago. I've been down at a place called Brookport on Long Island. How funny running into you like this!"

"I was surprised that you remembered me."

"I've forgotten your name," admitted Jill frankly. "But that's nothing. I always forget names."

"My name's Nelly Bryant."

"Of course. And you're on the stage, aren't you?"

"Yes. I've just got work with Goble and Cohn.... Hullo, Phil!"

A young man with a lithe figure and smooth black hair brushed straight back from his forehead had paused at the table on his way to the cashier's desk.

"Hello, Nelly."

"I didn't know you lunched here."

"Don't often. Been rehearsing with Joe up at the Century Roof, and had a quarter of an hour to get a bite. Can I sit down?"

"Sure. This is my friend, Miss Mariner."

The young man shook hands with Jill, flashing an approving glance at her out of his dark, restless eyes.

"Pleased to meet you."

"This is Phil Brown," said Nelly. "He plays the straight for Joe Widgeon. They're the best jazz-and-hokum team on the Keith Circuit."

"Oh, hush!" said Mr. Brown modestly. "You always were a great little booster, Nelly."

"Well, you know you are! Weren't you held over at the Palace last time? Well, then!"

"That's true," admitted the young man. "Maybe we didn't gool 'em, eh? Stop me on the street and ask me! Only eighteen bows second house Saturday!"

Jill was listening, fascinated.

"I can't understand a word," she said. "It's like another language."

"You're from the other side, aren't you?" asked Mr. Brown.

"She only landed a week ago," said Nelly.

"I thought so from the accent," said Mr. Brown. "So our talk sort of goes over the top, does it? Well, you'll learn American soon, if you stick around."

"I've learned some already," said Jill. The relief of meeting Nelly had made her feel very happy. She liked this smooth-haired young man. "A man on the train this morning said to me, 'Would you care for the morning paper, sister?' I said, 'No, thanks, brother, I want to look out of the window and think!'"

"You meet a lot of fresh guys on trains," commented Mr. Brown austerely. "You want to give 'em the cold-storage eye." He turned to Nelly. "Did you go down to Ike, as I told you?"

"Yes."

"Did you cop?"

"Yes. I never felt so happy in my life. I'd waited over an hour on that landing of theirs, and then Johnny Miller came along, and I yelled in his ear that I was after work, and he told me it would be all right. He's awfully good to girls who've worked in shows for him before. If it hadn't been for him I might have been waiting there still."

"Who," enquired Jill, anxious to be abreast of the conversation, "is Ike?"

"Mr. Goble. Where I've just got work. Goble and Cohn, you know."

"I never heard of them!"

The young man extended his hand.

"Put it there!" he said. "They never heard of me! At least, the fellow I saw when I went down to the office hadn't! Can you beat it!"

"Oh, did you go down there, too?" asked Nelly.

"Sure. Joe wanted to get in another show on Broadway. He'd sort of got tired of vodevil. Say, I don't want to scare you, Nelly, but, if you ask me, that show they're putting out down there is a citron! I don't think Ike's got a cent of his own money in it. My belief is that he's running it for a lot of amateurs. Why, say, listen! Joe and I blow in there to see if there's anything for us, and there's a tall guy in tortoise-shell cheaters sitting in Ike's office. Said he was the author and was engaging the principals. We told him who we were, and it didn't make any hit with him at all. He said he had never heard of us. And, when we explained, he said no, there wasn't going to be any of our sort of work in the show. Said he was making an effort to give the public something rather better than the usual sort of thing. No

specialities required. He said it was an effort to restore the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition. Say, who are these Gilbert and Sullivan guys, anyway? They get written up in the papers all the time and I never met any one who'd run across them. If you want my opinion, that show down there is a comic opera!"

"For heaven's sake!" Nelly had the musical comedy performer's horror of the older-established form of entertainment. "Why, comic opera died in the year one!"

"Well, these guys are going to dig it up. That's the way it looks to me." He lowered his voice. "Say, I saw Clarice last night," he said in a confidential undertone. "It's all right."

"It is?"

"We've made it up. It was like this...."

His conversation took an intimate turn. He expounded for Nelly's benefit the inner history, with all its ramifications, of a recent unfortunate rift between himself and "the best little girl in Flatbush"--what he had said, what she had said, what her sister had said, and how it all came right in the end. Jill might have felt a little excluded, but for the fact that a sudden and exciting idea had come to her. She sat back, thinking.... After all, what else was she to do? She must do something....

She bent forward and interrupted Mr. Brown in his description of a brisk passage of arms between himself and the best little girl's sister, who seemed to be an unpleasant sort of person in every way.

"Mr. Brown."

"Hello?"

"Do you think there would be any chance for me if I asked for work at Goble and Cohn's?"

"You're joking!" cried Nelly.

"I'm not at all."

"But what do you want with work?"

"I've got to find some. And right away, too."

"I don't understand."

Jill hesitated. She disliked discussing her private affairs, but there was obviously no way of avoiding it. Nelly was round-eyed and mystified, and Mr. Brown had manifestly no intention whatever of withdrawing tactfully. He wanted to hear all.

"I've lost my money," said Jill.

"Lost your money! Do you mean...?"

"I've lost it all. Every penny I had in the world."

"Tough!" interpolated Mr. Brown judicially. "I was broke once way out in a tank-town in Oklahoma. The manager skipped with our salaries. Last we saw of him he was doing the trip to Canada in nothing flat."

"But how?" gasped Nelly.

"It happened about the time we met in London. Do you remember Freddie Rooke, who was at our house that afternoon?"

A dreamy look came into Nelly's eyes. There had not been an hour since their parting when she had not thought of that immaculate sportsman. It would have amazed Freddie, could he have known, but to Nelly Bryant he was the one perfect man in an imperfect world.

"Do I!" she sighed ecstatically.

Mr. Brown shot a keen glance at her.

"Aha!" he cried facetiously. "Who is he, Nelly? Who is this blue-eyed

boy?"

"If you want to know," said Nelly, defiance in her tone, "he's the fellow who gave me fifty pounds, with no strings tied to it--get that!--when I was broke in London! If it hadn't been for him, I'd be there still."

"Did he?" cried Jill. "Freddie!"

"Yes. Oh, Gee!" Nelly sighed once more. "I suppose I'll never see him again in this world."

"Introduce me to him, if you do," said Mr. Brown. "He sounds just the sort of little pal I'd like to have!"

"You remember hearing Freddie say something about losing money in a slump on the Stock Exchange," proceeded Jill. "Well, that was how I lost mine. It's a long story, and it's not worth talking about, but that's how things stand, and I've got to find work of some sort, and it looks to me as if I should have a better chance of finding it on the stage than anywhere else."

"I'm terribly sorry."

"Oh, it's all right. How much would these people Goble and Cohn give me if I got an engagement?"

"Only forty a week."

"Forty dollars a week! It's wealth! Where are they?"

"Over at the Gotham Theatre in Forty-second Street."

"I'll go there at once."

"But you'll hate it. You don't realize what it's like. You wait hours and hours and nobody sees you."

"Why shouldn't I walk straight in and say that I've come for work?"

Nelly's big eyes grew bigger.

"But you couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"Why, you couldn't!"

"I don't see why."

Mr. Brown intervened with decision.

"You're dead right," he said to Jill approvingly. "If you ask me, that's the only sensible thing to do. Where's the sense of hanging around and getting stalled? Managers are human guys, some of 'em. Probably, if you were to try it, they'd appreciate a bit of gall. It would show 'em you'd got pep. You go down there and try walking straight in. They can't eat you. It makes me sick when I see all those poor devils hanging about outside these offices, waiting to get noticed and nobody ever paying any attention to them. You push the office-boy in the face if he tries to stop you, and go in and make 'em take notice. And, whatever you do, don't leave your name and address! That's the old, moth-eaten gag they're sure to try to pull on you. Tell 'em there's nothing doing. Say you're out for a quick decision! Stand 'em on their heads!"

Jill got up, fired by this eloquence. She called for her check.

"Good-bye," she said. "I'm going to do exactly as you say. Where can I find you afterwards?" she said to Nelly.

"You aren't really going?"

"I am!"

Nelly scribbled on a piece of paper.

"Here's my address. I'll be in all evening."

"I'll come and see you. Good-bye, Mr. Brown. And thank you."

"You're welcome!" said Mr. Brown.

Nelly watched Jill depart with wide eyes.

"Why did you tell her to do that?" she said.

"Why not?" said Mr. Brown. "I started something, didn't I? Well, I guess I'll have to be leaving, too. Got to get back to rehearsal. Say, I like that friend of yours, Nelly. There's no yellow streak about her! I wish her luck!"