CHAPTER X

JILL IGNORES AUTHORITY

I

The offices of Messrs. Goble and Cohn were situated, like everything else in New York that appertains to the drama, in the neighbourhood of Times Square. They occupied the fifth floor of the Gotham Theatre on West Forty-second Street. As there was no lift in the building except the small private one used by the two members of the firm, Jill walked up the stairs, and found signs of a thriving business beginning to present themselves as early as the third floor, where half a dozen patient persons of either sex had draped themselves like roosting fowls upon the banisters. There were more on the fourth floor, and the landing of the fifth, which served the firm as a waiting-room, was quite full. It is the custom of New York theatrical managers--the lowest order of intelligence, with the possible exception of the limax maximus or garden slug, known to science--to omit from their calculations the fact that they are likely every day to receive a large number of visitors, whom they will be obliged to keep waiting; and that these people will require somewhere to wait. Such considerations never occur to them. Messrs. Goble and Cohn had provided for those who called to see them one small bench on the landing, conveniently situated at the intersecting point of three

draughts, and had let it go at that.

Nobody, except perhaps the night-watchman, had ever seen this bench empty. At whatever hour of the day you happened to call, you would always find three wistful individuals seated side by side with their eyes on the tiny ante-room where sat the office-boy, the telephone-girl, and Mr. Goble's stenographer. Beyond this was the door marked "Private," through which, as it opened to admit some careless, debonair thousand-dollar-a-week comedian who sauntered in with a jaunty "Hello, Ike!" or some furred and scented female star, the rank and file of the profession were greeted, like Moses on Pisgah, with a fleeting glimpse of the promised land, consisting of a large desk and a section of a very fat man with spectacles and a bald head or a younger man with fair hair and a double chin.

The keynote of the mass meeting on the landing was one of determined, almost aggressive smartness. The men wore bright overcoats with bands round the waist, the women those imitation furs which to the uninitiated eye appear so much more expensive than the real thing. Everybody looked very dashing and very young, except about the eyes. Most of the eyes that glanced at Jill were weary. The women were nearly all blondes, blondness having been decided upon in the theatre as the colour that brings the best results. The men were all so much alike that they seemed to be members of one large family--an illusion which was heightened by the scraps of conversation, studded with "dears," "old mans," and "honeys," which came to Jill's ears. A stern

fight for supremacy was being waged by a score or so of lively and powerful young scents.

For a moment Jill was somewhat daunted by the spectacle, but she recovered almost immediately. The exhilarating and heady influence of New York still wrought within her. The Berserk spirit was upon her, and she remembered the stimulating words of Mr. Brown, of Brown and Widgeon, the best jazz-and-hokum team on the Keith Circuit. "Walk straight in!" had been the burden of his inspiring address. She pushed her way through the crowd until she came to the small ante-room.

In the ante-room were the outposts, the pickets of the enemy. In one corner a girl was hammering energetically and with great speed on a typewriter; a second girl, seated at a switchboard, was having an argument with Central which was already warm and threatened to descend shortly to personalities; on a chair tilted back so that it rested against the wall, a small boy sat eating sweets and reading the comic page of an evening newspaper. All three were enclosed, like zoological specimens, in a cage formed by a high counter terminating in brass bars.

Beyond these watchers on the threshold was the door marked "Private." Through it, as Jill reached the outer defences, filtered the sound of a piano.

Those who have studied the subject have come to the conclusion that

the boorishness of New York theatrical managers' office-boys cannot be the product of mere chance. Somewhere, in some sinister den in the criminal districts of the town, there is a school where small boys are trained for these positions, where their finer instincts are rigorously uprooted and rudeness systematically inculcated by competent professors. Of this school the Cerberus of Messrs. Goble and Cohn had been the star scholar. Quickly seeing his natural gifts, his teachers had given him special attention. When he had graduated, it had been amidst the cordial good wishes of the entire staff. They had taught him all they knew, and they were proud of him. They felt that he would do them credit.

This boy raised a pair of pink-rimmed eyes to Jill, sniffed, bit his thumb-nail, and spoke. He was a snub-nosed boy. His ears and hair were vermilion. His name was Ralph. He had seven hundred and forty-three pimples.

"Woddyerwant?" enquired Ralph, coming within an ace of condensing the question into a word of one syllable.

"I want to see Mr. Goble."

"Zout!" said the Pimple King, and returned to his paper.

There will, no doubt, always be class distinctions. Sparta had her kings and her helots, King Arthur's Round Table its knights and its

scullions, America her Simon Legree and her Uncle Tom. But in no nation and at no period of history has any one ever been so brutally superior to any one else as is the Broadway theatrical office-boy to the caller who wishes to see the manager. Thomas Jefferson held these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Theatrical office-boys do not see eye to eye with Thomas. From their pinnacle they look down on the common herd, the canaille, and despise them. They coldly question their right to live.

Jill turned pink. Mr. Brown, her guide and mentor, foreseeing this situation, had, she remembered, recommended "pushing the office-boy in the face": and for a moment she felt like following his advice. Prudence, or the fact that he was out of reach behind the brass bars, restrained her. Without further delay she made for the door of the inner room. That was her objective, and she did not intend to be diverted from it. Her fingers were on the handle before any of those present divined her intention. Then the stenographer stopped typing and sat with raised fingers, aghast. The girl at the telephone broke off in mid-sentence and stared round over her shoulder. Ralph, the office-boy, outraged, dropped his paper and constituted himself the spokesman of the invaded force.

"Hey!"

Jill stopped and eyed the lad militantly.

"Were you speaking to me?"

"Yes, I was speaking to you!"

"Don't do it again with your mouth full," said Jill, turning to the door.

The belligerent fire in the office-boy's pink-rimmed eyes was suddenly dimmed by a gush of water. It was not remorse that caused him to weep, however. In the heat of the moment he had swallowed a large, jagged sweet, and he was suffering severely.

"You can't go in there!" he managed to articulate, his iron will triumphing over the flesh sufficiently to enable him to speak.

"I am going in there!"

"That's Mr. Goble's private room."

"Well, I want a private talk with Mr. Goble."

Ralph, his eyes still moist, felt that the situation was slipping from his grip. This sort of thing had never happened to him before. "I tell ya he zout!"

Jill looked at him sternly.

"You wretched child!" she said, encouraged by a sharp giggle from the neighbourhood of the switchboard. "Do you know where little boys go who don't speak the truth? I can hear him playing the piano. Now he's singing! And it's no good telling me he's busy. If he was busy, he wouldn't have time to sing. If you're as deceitful as this at your age, what do you expect to be when you grow up? You're an ugly little boy, you've got red ears, and your collar doesn't fit! I shall speak to Mr. Goble about you."

With which words Jill opened the door and walked in.

"Good afternoon," she said brightly.

After the congested and unfurnished discomfort of the landing, the room in which Jill found herself had an air of cosiness and almost of luxury. It was a large room, solidly upholstered. Along the further wall, filling nearly the whole of its space, stood a vast and gleaming desk, covered with a litter of papers which rose at one end of it to a sort of mountain of play-scripts in buff covers. There was a bookshelf to the left. Photographs covered the walls. Near the window was a deep leather lounge; to the right of this stood a small piano, the music-stool of which was occupied by a young man with untidy black hair that needed cutting. On top of the piano, taking the eye

immediately by reason of its bold brightness, was balanced a large cardboard poster. Much of its surface was filled by a picture of a youth in polo costume bending over a blonde goddess in a bathing-suit. What space was left displayed the legend:

ISAAC GOBLE AND JACOB COHN

PRESENT

THE ROSE OF AMERICA

(A Musical Fantasy)

BOOK AND LYRICS BY OTIS PILKINGTON

MUSIC BY ROLAND TREVIS

Turning her eyes from this, Jill became aware that something was going on at the other side of the desk, and she perceived that a second young man, the longest and thinnest she had ever seen, was in the act of rising to his feet, length upon length like an unfolding snake. At the moment of her entry he had been lying back in an office-chair, so that only a merely nominal section of his upper structure was visible. Now he reared his impressive length until his head came within measurable distance of the ceiling. He had a hatchet face and a receding chin, and he gazed at Jill through what she assumed were the

"tortoise-shell cheaters" referred to by her recent acquaintance, Mr. Brown.

"Er...?" said this young man enquiringly in a high, flat voice.

Jill, like many other people, had a brain which was under the alternating control of two diametrically opposite forces. It was like a motor-car steered in turn by two drivers, the one a dashing, reckless fellow with no regard for the speed limits, the other a timid novice. All through the proceedings up to this point the dasher had been in command. He had whisked her along at a break-neck pace, ignoring obstacles and police regulations. Now, having brought her to this situation, he abruptly abandoned the wheel and turned it over to his colleague, the shrinker. Jill, greatly daring a moment ago, now felt an overwhelming shyness.

She gulped, and her heart beat quickly. The thin man towered over her. The black-haired pianist shook his locks at her like Banquo.

"I...." she began.

Then, suddenly, womanly intuition came to her aid. Something seemed to tell her that these men were just as scared as she was. And, at the discovery, the dashing driver resumed his post at the wheel, and she began to deal with the situation with composure.

"I want to see Mr. Goble."

"Mr. Goble is out," said the long young man, plucking nervously at the papers on the desk. Jill had affected him powerfully.

"Out!" She felt she had wronged the pimpled office-boy.

"We are not expecting him back this afternoon. Is there anything I can do?"

He spoke tenderly. This weak-minded young man was thinking that he had never seen anything like Jill before. And it was true that she was looking very pretty, with her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. She touched a chord in the young man which seemed to make the world a flower-scented thing, full of soft music. Often as he had been in love at first sight before in his time, Otis Pilkington could not recall an occasion on which he had been in love at first sight more completely than now. When she smiled at him, it was as if the gates of heaven had opened. He did not reflect how many times, in similar circumstances, these same gates had opened before; and that on one occasion when they had done so it had cost him eight thousand dollars to settle the case out of court. One does not think of these things at such times, for they strike a jarring note. Otis Pilkington was in love. That was all he knew, or cared to know.

"Won't you take a seat, Miss...."

"Mariner," prompted Jill. "Thank you."

"Miss Mariner. May I introduce Mr. Roland Trevis?"

The man at the piano bowed. His black hair heaved upon his skull like seaweed in a ground swell.

"My name is Pilkington. Otis Pilkington."

The uncomfortable silence which always follows introductions was broken by the sound of the telephone-bell on the desk. Otis Pilkington, who had moved out into the room and was nowhere near the desk, stretched forth a preposterous arm and removed the receiver.

"Yes? Oh, will you say, please, that I have a conference at present." Jill was to learn that people in the theatrical business never talked: they always held conferences. "Tell Mrs. Peagrim that I shall be calling later in the afternoon, but cannot be spared just now." He replaced the receiver. "Aunt Olive's secretary," he murmured in a soft aside to Mr. Trevis. "Aunt Olive wanted me to go for a ride." He turned to Jill. "Excuse me. Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Mariner?"

Jill's composure was now completely restored. This interview was turning out so totally different from anything she had expected. The

atmosphere was cosy and social. She felt as if she were back in Ovingdon Square, giving tea to Freddie Rooke and Ronny Devereux and the rest of her friends of the London period. All that was needed to complete the picture was a tea-table in front of her. The business note hardly intruded on the proceedings at all. Still, as business was the object of her visit, she felt that she had better approach it.

"I came for work."

"Work!" cried Mr. Pilkington. He, too, appeared to be regarding the interview as purely of a social nature.

"In the chorus," explained Jill.

Mr. Pilkington seemed shocked. He winced away from the word as though it pained him.

"There is no chorus in 'The Rose of America,'" he said.

"I thought it was a musical comedy."

Mr. Pilkington winced again.

"It is a musical fantasy!" he said. "But there will be no chorus. We shall have," he added, a touch of rebuke in his voice, "the services of twelve refined ladies of the ensemble."

Jill laughed.

"It does sound much better, doesn't it!" she said. "Well, am I refined enough, do you think?"

"I shall be only too happy if you will join us," said Mr. Pilkington promptly.

The long-haired composer looked doubtful. He struck a note up in the treble, then whirled round on his stool.

"If you don't mind my mentioning it, Otie, we have twelve girls already."

"Then we must have thirteen," said Otis Pilkington firmly.

"Unlucky number," argued Mr. Trevis.

"I don't care. We must have Miss Mariner. You can see for yourself that she is exactly the type we need."

He spoke feelingly. Ever since the business of engaging a company had begun, he had been thinking wistfully of the evening when "The Rose of America" had had its opening performance--at his aunt's house at Newport last summer--with an all-star cast of society favourites and

an ensemble recruited entirely from debutantes and matrons of the Younger Set. That was the sort of company he had longed to assemble for the piece's professional career, and until this afternoon he had met with nothing but disappointment. Jill seemed to be the only girl in theatrical New York who came up to the standard he would have liked to demand.

"Thank you very much," said Jill.

There was another pause. The social note crept into the atmosphere again. Jill felt the hostess' desire to keep conversation circulating.

"I hear," she said, "that this piece is a sort of Gilbert and Sullivan opera."

Mr. Pilkington considered the point.

"I confess," he said, "that, in writing the book, I had Gilbert before me as a model. Whether I have in any sense succeeded in...."

"The book," said Mr. Trevis, running his fingers over the piano, "is as good as anything Gilbert ever wrote."

"Oh, come, Rolie!" protested Mr. Pilkington modestly.

"Better," insisted Mr. Trevis. "For one thing, it is up-to-date."

"I do try to strike the modern note," murmured Mr. Pilkington.

"And you have avoided Gilbert's mistake of being too fanciful."

"He was fanciful," admitted Mr. Pilkington. "The music," he added, in a generous spirit of give and take, "has all Sullivan's melody with a newness of rhythm peculiarly its own. You will like the music."

"It sounds," said Jill amiably, "as though the piece is bound to be a tremendous success."

"We hope so," said Mr. Pilkington. "We feel that the time has come when the public is beginning to demand something better than what it has been accustomed to. People are getting tired of the brainless trash and jingly tunes which have been given them by men like Wallace Mason and George Bevan. They want a certain polish.... It was just the same in Gilbert and Sullivan's day. They started writing at a time when the musical stage had reached a terrible depth of inanity. The theatre was given over to burlesques of the most idiotic description. The public was waiting eagerly to welcome something of a higher class. It is just the same to-day. But the managers will not see it. 'The Rose of America' went up and down Broadway for months, knocking at managers' doors."

"It should have walked in without knocking, like me," said Jill. She

got up. "Well, it was very kind of you to see me when I came in so unceremoniously. But I felt it was no good waiting outside on that landing. I'm so glad everything is settled. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Mariner." Mr. Pilkington took her outstretched hand devoutly. "There is a rehearsal called for the ensemble at--when is it, Rolie?"

"Eleven o'clock, day after to-morrow, at Bryant Hall."

"I'll be there," said Jill. "Good-bye, and thank you very much."

The silence which had fallen upon the room as she left it was broken by Mr. Trevis.

"Some pip!" observed Mr. Trevis.

Otis Pilkington awoke from day-dreams with a start.

"What did you say?"

"That girl.... I said she was some pippin!"

"Miss Mariner," said Mr. Pilkington icily, "is a most charming, refined, cultured, and vivacious girl, if you mean that."

"Yes," said Mr. Trevis. "That was what I meant!"

II

Jill walked out into Forty-second Street, looking about her with the eye of a conqueror. Very little change had taken place in the aspect of New York since she had entered the Gotham Theatre, but it seemed a different city to her. An hour ago, she had been a stranger, drifting aimlessly along its rapids. Now she belonged to New York, and New York belonged to her. She had faced it squarely, and forced from it the means of living. She walked on with a new jauntiness in her stride.

The address which Nelly had given her was on the east side of Fifth Avenue. She made her way along Forty-second Street. It seemed the jolliest, alivest street she had ever encountered. The rattle of the Elevated as she crossed Sixth Avenue was music, and she loved the crowds that jostled her with every step she took.

She reached the Fifth Avenue corner just as the policeman out in the middle of the street swung his Stop-and-Go post round to allow the up-town traffic to proceed on its way. A stream of cars which had been dammed up as far as the eye could reach began to flow swiftly past. They moved in a double line, red limousines, blue limousines, mauve limousines, green limousines. She stood waiting for the flood to

cease, and, as she did so, there purred past her the biggest and reddest limousine of all. It was a colossal vehicle with a polar-bear at the steering-wheel and another at his side. And in the interior, very much at his ease, his gaze bent courteously upon a massive lady in a mink coat, sat Uncle Chris.

For a moment he was so near to her that, but for the closed window, she could have touched him. Then the polar-bear at the wheel, noting a gap in the traffic, stepped on the accelerator and slipped neatly through. The car moved swiftly on and disappeared.

Jill drew a deep breath. The Stop-and-Go sign swung round again. She crossed the avenue, and set out once more to find Nelly Bryant. It occurred to her, five minutes later, that a really practical and quick-thinking girl would have noted the number of the limousine.