

CHAPTER XII

UNCLE CHRIS BORROWS A FLAT

I

Uncle Chris walked breezily into the room, flicking a jaunty glove. He stopped short on seeing that Mr. Pilkington was not alone.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I understood...." He peered at Jill uncertainly. Mr. Pilkington affected a dim, artistic lighting-system in his studio, and people who entered from the great outdoors generally had to take time to accustom their eyes to it. "If you're engaged...."

"Er--allow me.... Miss Mariner.... Major Selby."

"Hullo, Uncle Chris!" said Jill.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated that startled gentleman adventurer, and collapsed on to a settee as if his legs had been mown from under him.

"I've been looking for you all over New York," said Jill.

Mr. Pilkington found himself unequal to the intellectual pressure of the conversation.

"Uncle Chris?" he said with a note of feeble enquiry in his voice.

"Major Selby is my uncle."

"Are you sure?" said Mr. Pilkington. "I mean...."

Not being able to ascertain, after a moment's self-examination, what he did mean, he relapsed into silence.

"Whatever are you doing here?" asked Uncle Chris.

"I've been having tea with Mr. Pilkington."

"But ... but why Mr. Pilkington?"

"Well, he invited me."

"But how do you know him?"

"We met at the theatre."

"Theatre?"

Otis Pilkington recovered his power of speech.

"Miss Mariner is rehearsing with a little play in which I am interested," he explained.

Uncle Chris half rose from the settee. He blinked twice in rapid succession. Jill had never seen him so shaken from his customary poise.

"Don't tell me you have gone on the stage, Jill!"

"I have. I'm in the chorus...."

"Ensemble," corrected Mr. Pilkington softly.

"I'm in the ensemble of a piece called 'The Rose of America.' We've been rehearsing for ever so long."

Uncle Chris digested this information in silence for a moment. He pulled at his short moustache.

"Why, of course!" he said at length. Jill, who knew him so well, could tell by the restored ring of cheeriness in his tone that he was himself again. He had dealt with this situation in his mind and was prepared to cope with it. The surmise was confirmed the next instant when he rose and stationed himself in front of the fire. Mr.

Pilkington detested steam-heat and had scoured the city till he had found a studio apartment with an open fireplace. Uncle Chris spread his legs and expanded his chest. "Of course," he said. "I remember now that you told me in your letter that you were thinking of going on the stage. My niece," explained Uncle Chris to the attentive Mr.

Pilkington, "came over from England on a later boat. I was not expecting her for some weeks. Hence my surprise at meeting her here. Of course. You told me that you intended to go on the stage, and I strongly recommended you to begin at the bottom of the ladder and learn the ground-work thoroughly before you attempted higher flights."

"Oh, that was it?" said Mr. Pilkington. He had been wondering.

"There is no finer training," resumed Uncle Chris, completely at his ease once more, "than the chorus. How many of the best-known actresses in America began in that way! Dozens. Dozens. If I were giving advice to any young girl with theatrical aspirations, I should say 'Begin in the chorus!' On the other hand," he proceeded, turning to Mr. Pilkington, "I think it would be just as well if you would not mention the fact of my niece being in that position to Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim. She might not understand."

"Exactly," assented Mr. Pilkington.

"The term 'chorus'...."

"I dislike it intensely myself."

"It suggests...."

"Precisely."

Uncle Chris inflated his chest again, well satisfied.

"Capital!" he said. "Well, I only dropped in to remind you, my boy, that you and your aunt are dining with me to-night. I was afraid a busy man like you might forget."

"I was looking forward to it," said Mr. Pilkington, charmed at the description.

"You remember the address? Nine East Forty-first Street. I have moved, you remember."

"So that was why I couldn't find you at the other place," said Jill.

"The man at the door said he had never heard of you."

"Stupid idiot!" said Uncle Chris testily. "These New York hall-porters are recruited entirely from homes for the feeble-minded. I suppose he was a new man. Well, Pilkington, my boy, I shall expect you at seven o'clock. Good-bye till then. Come, Jill."

"Good-bye, Mr. Pilkington," said Jill.

"Good-bye for the present, Miss Mariner," said Mr. Pilkington, bending down to take her hand. The tortoise-shell spectacles shot a last soft beam at her.

As the front door closed behind them, Uncle Chris heaved a sigh of relief.

"Whew! I think I handled that little contretemps with diplomacy! A certain amount of diplomacy, I think!"

"If you mean," said Jill severely, "that you told some disgraceful fibs...."

"Fibs, my dear--or shall we say, artistic mouldings of the unshapely clay of truth--are the ... how shall I put it?... Well, anyway, they come in dashed handy. It would never have done for Mrs. Peagrim to have found out that you were in the chorus. If she discovered that my niece was in the chorus, she would infallibly suspect me of being an adventurer. And while," said Uncle Chris meditatively, "of course I am, it is nice to have one's little secrets. The good lady has had a rooted distaste for girls in that perfectly honourable but maligned profession ever since our long young friend back there was sued for breach of promise by a member of a touring company in his second year at college. We all have our prejudices. That is hers. However, I

think, we may rely on our friend to say nothing about the matter....
But why did you do it? My dear child, whatever induced you to take
such a step?"

Jill laughed.

"That's practically what Mr. Miller said to me when we were rehearsing
one of the dances this afternoon, only he put it differently." She
linked her arm in his. "What else could I do? I was alone in New York
with the remains of that twenty dollars you sent me and no more in
sight."

"But why didn't you stay down at Brookport with your Uncle Elmer?"

"Have you ever seen my Uncle Elmer?"

"No. Curiously enough, I never have."

"If you had, you wouldn't ask. Brookport! Ugh! I left when they tried
to get me to understudy the hired man, who had resigned."

"What!"

"Yes, they got tired of supporting me in the state to which I was
accustomed--I don't blame them!--so they began to find ways of making
me useful about the home. I didn't mind reading to Aunt Julia, and I

could just stand taking Tibby for walks. But, when it came to shoveling snow, I softly and silently vanished away."

"But I can't understand all this. I suggested to your uncle--diplomatically--that you had large private means."

"I know you did. And he spent all his time showing me over houses and telling me I could have them for a hundred thousand dollars cash down." Jill bubbled. "You should have seen his face when I told him that twenty dollars was all I had in the world!"

"You didn't tell him that!"

"I did."

Uncle Chris shook his head, like an indulgent father disappointed in a favourite child.

"You're a dear girl, Jill, but really you do seem totally lacking in ... how shall I put it?--finesse. Your mother was just the same. A sweet woman, but with no diplomacy, no notion of handling a situation. I remember her as a child giving me away hopelessly on one occasion after we had been at the jam-cupboard. She did not mean any harm, but she was constitutionally incapable of a tactful negative at the right time." Uncle Chris brooded for a moment on the past. "Oh, well, it's a very fine trait, no doubt, though inconvenient. I don't

blame you for leaving Brookport if you weren't happy there. But I wish you had consulted me before going on the stage."

"Shall I strike this man?" asked Jill of the world at large. "How could I consult you? My darling, precious uncle, don't you realize that you had vanished into thin air, leaving me penniless? I had to do something. And, now that we are on the subject, perhaps you will explain your movements. Why did you write to me from that place on Fifty-seventh Street if you weren't there?"

Uncle Chris cleared his throat.

"In a sense ... when I wrote ... I was there."

"I suppose that means something, but it's beyond me. I'm not nearly as intelligent as you think, Uncle Chris, so you'll have to explain."

"Well, it was this way, my dear. I was in a peculiar position you must remember. I had made a number of wealthy friends on the boat and it is possible that--unwittingly--I gave them the impression that I was as comfortably off as themselves. At any rate, that is the impression they gathered, and it hardly seemed expedient to correct it. For it is a deplorable trait in the character of the majority of rich people that they only--er--expand--they only show the best and most companionable side of themselves to those whom they imagine to be as wealthy as they are. Well, of course, while one was on the boat, the fact that I was sailing under

what a purist might have termed false colours did not matter. The problem was how to keep up the--er--innocent deception after we had reached New York. A woman like Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim--a ghastly creature, my dear, all front teeth and exuberance, but richer than the Sub-Treasury--looks askance at a man, however agreeable, if he endeavours to cement a friendship begun on board ship from a cheap boarding-house on Amsterdam Avenue. It was imperative that I should find something in the nature of what I might call a suitable base of operations. Fortune played into my hands. One of the first men I met in New York was an old soldier-servant of mine, to whom I had been able to do some kindnesses in the old days. In fact--it shows how bread cast upon the waters returns to us after many days--it was with the assistance of a small loan from me that he was enabled to emigrate to America. Well, I met this man, and, after a short conversation, he revealed the fact that he was the hall-porter at that apartment-house which you visited, the one on Fifty-Seventh Street. At this time of the year, I knew, many wealthy people go south, to Florida and the Carolinas, and it occurred to me that there might be a vacant apartment in his building. There was. I took it."

"But how on earth could you afford to pay for an apartment in a place like that?"

Uncle Chris coughed.

"I didn't say I paid for it. I said I took it. That is, as one might say, the point of my story. My old friend, grateful for favours

received and wishing to do me a good turn, consented to become my accomplice in another--er--innocent deception. I gave my friends the address and telephone number of the apartment-house, living the while myself in surroundings of a somewhat humbler and less expensive character. I called every morning for letters. If anybody rang me up on the telephone, the admirable man answered in the capacity of my servant, took a message, and relayed it on to me at my boarding-house. If anybody called, he merely said that I was out. There wasn't a flaw in the whole scheme, my dear, and its chief merit was its beautiful simplicity."

"Then what made you give it up? Conscience?"

"Conscience never made me give up anything," said Uncle Chris firmly. "No, there were a hundred chances to one against anything going wrong, and it was the hundredth that happened. When you have been in New York longer, you will realize that one peculiarity of the place is that the working-classes are in a constant state of flux. On Monday you meet a plumber. Ah! you say, a plumber! Capital! On the following Thursday you meet him again, and he is a car-conductor. Next week he will be squirting soda in a drug-store. It's the fault of these dashed magazines, with their advertisements of correspondence courses--Are You Earning All You Should?--Write To Us and Learn Chicken-Farming By Mail.... It puts wrong ideas into the fellows' heads. It unsettles them. It was so in this case. Everything was going swimmingly, when my man suddenly conceived the idea that destiny had

intended him for a chauffeur-gardener, and he threw up his position!"

"Leaving you homeless!"

"As you say, homeless--temporarily. But, fortunately--I have been amazingly lucky all through; it really does seem as if you cannot keep a good man down--fortunately my friend had a friend who was janitor at a place on East Forty-first Street, and by a miracle of luck the only apartment in the building was empty. It is an office-building, but, like some of these places, it has one small bachelor's apartment on the top floor."

"And you are the small bachelor?"

"Precisely. My friend explained matters to his friend--a few financial details were satisfactorily arranged--and here I am, perfectly happy with the cosiest little place in the world, rent free. I am even better off than I was before, as a matter of fact, for my new ally's wife is an excellent cook, and I have been enabled to give one or two very pleasant dinners at my new home. It lends verisimilitude to the thing if you can entertain a little. If you are never in when people call, they begin to wonder. I am giving dinner to your friend Pilkington and Mrs. Peagrim there to-night. Homey, delightful, and infinitely cheaper than a restaurant."

"And what will you do when the real owner of the place walks in in the

middle of dinner?"

"Out of the question. The janitor informs me that he left for England some weeks ago, intending to make a stay of several months."

"Well, you certainly think of everything."

"Whatever success I may have achieved," replied Uncle Chris, with the dignity of a Captain of Industry confiding in an interviewer, "I attribute to always thinking of everything."

Jill gurgled with laughter. There was that about her uncle which always acted on her moral sense like an opiate, lulling it to sleep and preventing it from rising up and becoming critical. If he had stolen a watch and chain, he would somehow have succeeded in convincing her that he had acted for the best under the dictates of a benevolent altruism.

"What success have you achieved?" she asked, interested. "When you left me, you were on your way to find a fortune. Did you find it?"

"I have not actually placed my hands on it yet," admitted Uncle Chris. "But it is hovering in the air all round me. I can hear the beating of the wings of the dollar-bills as they flutter to and fro, almost within reach. Sooner or later I shall grab them. I never forget, my dear, that I have a task before me--to restore to you the money of

which I deprived you. Some day--be sure--I shall do it. Some day you will receive a letter from me, containing a large sum--five thousand--ten thousand--twenty thousand--whatever it may be, with the simple words 'First Instalment.'" He repeated the phrase, as if it pleased him. "First Instalment!"

Jill hugged his arm. She was in the mood in which she used to listen to him ages ago telling her fairy stories.

"Go on!" she cried. "Go on! It's wonderful! Once upon a time Uncle Chris was walking along Fifth Avenue, when he happened to meet a poor old woman gathering sticks for firewood. She looked so old and tired that he was sorry for her, so he gave her ten cents which he had borrowed from the janitor, and suddenly she turned into a beautiful girl and said 'I am a fairy! In return for your kindness I grant you three wishes!' And Uncle Chris thought for a moment, and said, 'I want twenty thousand dollars to send to Jill!' And the fairy said, 'It shall be attended to. And the next article?'"

"It is all very well to joke," protested Uncle Chris, pained by this flippancy, "but let me tell you that I shall not require magic assistance to become a rich man. Do you realize that at houses like Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim's I am meeting men all the time who have only to say one little word to make me a millionaire? They are fat, grey men with fishy eyes and large waistcoats, and they sit smoking cigars and brooding on what they are going to do to the market next day. If I

were a mind-reader I could have made a dozen fortunes by now. I sat opposite that old pirate, Bruce Bishop, for over an hour the very day before he and his gang sent Consolidated Pea-Nuts down twenty points! If I had known what was in the wind, I doubt if I could have restrained myself from choking his intentions out of the fellow. Well, what I am trying to point out is that one of these days one of these old oysters will have a fleeting moment of human pity and disgorge some tip on which I can act. It is that reflection that keeps me so constantly at Mrs. Peagrim's house." Uncle Chris shivered slightly. "A fearsome woman, my dear! Weighs a hundred and eighty pounds and as skittish as a young lamb in springtime! She makes me dance with her!" Uncle Chris' lips quivered in a spasm of pain, and he was silent for a moment. "Thank Heaven I was once a footballer!" he said reverently.

"But what do you live on?" asked Jill. "I know you are going to be a millionaire next Tuesday week, but how are you getting along in the meantime?"

Uncle Chris coughed.

"Well, as regards actual living expenses, I have managed by a shrewd business stroke to acquire a small but sufficient income. I live in a boarding-house--true--but I contrive to keep the wolf away from its door--which, by the by, badly needs a lick of paint. Have you ever heard of Nervino?"

"I don't think so. It sounds like a patent medicine."

"It is a patent medicine." Uncle Chris stopped and looked anxiously at her. "Jill, you're looking pale, my dear."

"Am I? We had rather a tiring rehearsal."

"Are you sure," said Uncle Chris seriously, "that it is only that? Are you sure that your vitality has not become generally lowered by the fierce rush of Metropolitan life? Are you aware of the things that can happen to you if you allow the red corpuscles of your blood to become devitalised? I had a friend...."

"Stop! You're scaring me to death!"

Uncle Chris gave his moustache a satisfied twirl.

"Just what I meant to do, my dear. And, when I had scared you sufficiently--you wouldn't wait for the story of my consumptive friend. Pity! It's one of my best!--I should have mentioned that I had been having much the same trouble myself until lately, but the other day I happened to try Nervino, the great specific.... I was giving you an illustration of myself in action, my dear. I went to these Nervino people--happened to see one of their posters and got the idea in a flash--I went to them and said, 'Here am I, a presentable man of persuasive manners and a large acquaintance among the leaders of New

York Society. What would it be worth to you to have me hint from time to time at dinner parties and so forth that Nervino is the rich man's panacea?' I put the thing lucidly to them. I said, 'No doubt you have a thousand agents in the city, but have you one who does not look like an agent and won't talk like an agent? Have you one who is inside the houses of the wealthy, at their very dinner-tables, instead of being on the front step, trying to hold the door open with his foot? That is the point you have to consider.' They saw the idea at once. We arranged terms--not as generous as I could wish, perhaps, but quite ample. I receive a tolerably satisfactory salary each week, and in return I spread the good word about Nervino in the gilded palaces of the rich. Those are the people to go for, Jill. They have been so busy wrenching money away from the widow and the orphan that they haven't had time to look after their health. You catch one of them after dinner, just as he is wondering if he was really wise in taking two helpings of the lobster Newburg, and he is clay in your hands. I draw my chair up to his and become sympathetic and say that I had precisely the same trouble myself until recently, and mention a dear old friend of mine who died of indigestion, and gradually lead the conversation round to Nervino. I don't force it on them. I don't even ask them, to try it. I merely point to myself, rosy with health, and say that I owe everything to it, and the thing is done. They thank me profusely and scribble the name down on their shirt-cuffs. And there you are! I don't suppose," said Uncle Chris philosophically, "that the stuff can do them any actual harm."

They had come to the corner of Forty-first Street. Uncle Chris felt in his pocket and produced a key.

"If you want to go and take a look at my little nest, you can let yourself in. It's on the twenty-second floor. Don't fail to go out on the roof and look at the view. It's worth seeing. It will give you some idea of the size of the city. A wonderful, amazing city, my dear, full of people who need Nervino. I shall go on and drop in at the club for half an hour. They have given me a fortnight's card at the Avenue. Capital place. Here's the key."

Jill turned down Forty-first Street, and came to a mammoth structure of steel and stone which dwarfed the modest brown houses beside it into nothingness. It was curious to think of a private flat nestling on the summit of this mountain. She went in, and the lift shot her giddily upwards to the twenty-second floor. She found herself facing a short flight of stone steps, ending in a door. She mounted the steps, tried the key, and, turning it, entered a hall-way. Proceeding down the passage, she reached a sitting-room.

It was a small room, but furnished with a solid comfort which soothed her. For the first time since she had arrived in New York, she had the sense of being miles away from the noise and bustle of the city. There was a complete and restful silence. She was alone in a nest of books and deep chairs, on which a large grandfather-clock looked down with that wide-faced benevolence peculiar to its kind. So peaceful was

this eyrie, perched high up above the clamour and rattle of civilization, that every nerve in her body seemed to relax in a delicious content. It was like being in Peter Pan's house in the tree-tops.

II

Jill possessed in an unusual degree that instinct for exploration which is implanted in most of us. She was frankly inquisitive, and could never be two minutes in a strange room without making a tour of it and examining its books, pictures, and photographs. Almost at once she began to prowl.

The mantelpiece was her first objective. She always made for other people's mantelpieces, for there, more than anywhere else, is the character of a proprietor revealed. This mantelpiece was sprinkled with photographs, large, small, framed and unframed. In the centre of it, standing all alone and looking curiously out of place among its large neighbours, was a little snapshot.

It was dark by the mantelpiece. Jill took the photograph to the window, where the fading light could fall on it. Why, she could not have said, but the thing interested her. There was mystery about it. It seemed in itself so insignificant to have the place of honour.

The snapshot had evidently been taken by an amateur, but it was one of those lucky successes which happen at rare intervals to amateur photographers to encourage them to proceed with their hobby. It showed a small girl in a white dress cut short above slim, black legs, standing in the porch of an old house, one hand swinging a sun-bonnet, the other patting an Irish terrier which had planted its front paws against her waist and was looking up into her face with that grave melancholy characteristic of Irish terriers. The sunlight was evidently strong, for the child's face was puckered in a twisted though engaging grin. Jill's first thought was "What a jolly kid!" And then, with a leaping of the heart that seemed to send something big and choking into her throat, she saw that it was a photograph of herself.

With a swooping bound memory raced back over the years. She could feel the hot sun on her face, hear the anxious voice of Freddie Rooke--then fourteen and for the first time the owner of a camera--imploring her to stand just like that because he wouldn't be half a minute only some rotten thing had stuck or something. Then the sharp click, the doubtful assurance of Freddie that he thought it was all right if he hadn't forgotten to shift the film (in which case she might expect to appear in combination with a cow which he had snapped on his way to the house), and the relieved disappearance of Pat, the terrier, who didn't understand photography. How many years ago had that been? She could not remember. But Freddie had grown to long-legged manhood, she to an age of discretion and full-length frocks, Pat had died, the old

house was inhabited by strangers ... and here was the silent record of that sun-lit afternoon, three thousand miles away from the English garden in which it had come into existence.

The shadows deepened. The top of the great building swayed gently, causing the pendulum of the grandfather-clock to knock against the sides of its wooden case. Jill started. The noise, coming after the dead silence, frightened her till she realized what it was. She had a nervous feeling of not being alone. It was as if the shadows held goblins that peered out at the intruder. She darted to the mantelpiece and replaced the photograph. She felt like some heroine of a fairy-story meddling with the contents of the giant's castle. Soon there would come the sound of a great footstep thud--thud....

Thud.

Jill's heart gave another leap. She was perfectly sure she had heard a sound. It had been just like the banging of a door. She braced herself, listening, every muscle tense. And then, cleaving the stillness, came a voice from down the passage--

"Just see them Pullman porters,
Dolled up with scented waters
Bought with their dimes and quarters!
See, here they come! Here they come!"

For an instant Jill could not have said whether she was relieved or more frightened than ever. True, that numbing sense of the uncanny had ceased to grip her, for Reason told her that spectres do not sing rag-time songs. On the other hand, owners of apartments do, and she would almost as readily have faced a spectre as the owner of this apartment. Dizzily, she wondered how in the world she was to explain her presence. Suppose he turned out to be some awful-choleric person who would listen to no explanations.

"Oh, see those starched-up collars!
Hark how their captain hollers
'Keep time! Keep time!'
It's worth a thousand dollars
To see those tip-collectors...."

Very near now. Almost at the door.

"Those upper-berth inspectors,
Those Pullman porters on parade!"

A dim, shapeless figure in the black of the doorway. The scrabbling of fingers on the wall.

"Where are you, dammit?" said the voice, apparently addressing the electric-light switch.

Jill shrank back, desperate fingers pressing deep into the back of an arm-chair. Light flashed from the wall at her side. And there, in the doorway, stood Wally Mason in his shirt-sleeves.