

CHAPTER XIII

THE AMBASSADOR ARRIVES

I

In these days of rapid movement, when existence has become little more than a series of shocks of varying intensity, astonishment is the shortest-lived of all the emotions. There was an instant in which Jill looked at Wally and Wally at Jill with the eye of total amazement, and then, almost simultaneously, each began--the process was subconscious--to regard this meeting not as an isolated and inexplicable event, but as something resulting from a perfectly logical chain of circumstances.

"Hullo!" said Wally.

"Hullo!" said Jill.

It was not a very exalted note on which to pitch the conversation, but it had the merit of giving each of them a little more time to collect themselves.

"This is.... I wasn't expecting you!" said Wally.

"I wasn't expecting you!" said Jill.

There was another pause, in which Wally, apparently examining her last words and turning them over in his mind, found that they did not square with his preconceived theories.

"You weren't expecting me?"

"I certainly was not!"

"But ... but you knew I lived here?"

Jill shook her head. Wally reflected for an instant, and then put his finger, with a happy inspiration, on the very heart of the mystery.

"Then how on earth did you get here?"

He was glad he had asked that. The sense of unreality which had come to him in the first startling moment of seeing her and vanished under the influence of logic had returned as strong as ever. If she did not know he lived in this place, how in the name of everything uncanny had she found her way here? A momentary wonder as to whether all this was not mixed up with telepathy and mental suggestion and all that sort of thing came to him. Certainly he had been thinking of her all the time since their parting at the Savoy Hotel that night three weeks and more back.... No, that was absurd. There must be some sounder reason for

her presence. He waited for her to give it.

Jill for the moment felt physically incapable of giving it. She shrank from the interminable explanation which confronted her as a weary traveller shrinks from a dusty, far-stretching desert. She simply could not go into all that now. So she answered with a question.

"When did you land in New York?"

"This afternoon. We were supposed to dock this morning, but the boat was late." Wally perceived that he was being pushed away from the main point, and jostled his way back to it. "But what are you doing here?"

"It's such a long story."

Her voice was plaintive. Remorse smote Wally. It occurred to him that he had not been sufficiently sympathetic. Not a word had he said on the subject of her change of fortunes. He had just stood and gaped and asked questions. After all, what the devil did it matter how she came to be here? He had anticipated a long and tedious search for her through the labyrinth of New York, and here Fate had brought her to his very door, and all he could do was to ask why, instead of being thankful. He perceived that he was not much of a fellow.

"Never mind," he said. "You can tell me when you feel like it." He looked at her eagerly. Time seemed to have wiped away that little

misunderstanding under the burden of which they had parted. "It's too wonderful finding you like this!" He hesitated. "I heard about--everything," he said awkwardly.

"My--" Jill hesitated too. "My smash?"

"Yes. Freddie Rooke told me. I was terribly sorry."

"Thank you," said Jill.

There was a pause. They were both thinking of that other disaster which had happened. The presence of Derek Underhill seemed to stand like an unseen phantom between them. Finally Wally spoke at random, choosing the first words that came into his head in his desire to break the silence.

"Jolly place, this, isn't it?"

Jill perceived that an opening for those tedious explanations had been granted her.

"Uncle Chris thinks so," she said demurely.

Wally looked puzzled.

"Uncle Chris? Oh, your uncle?"

"Yes."

"But--he has never been here."

"Oh, yes. He's giving a dinner-party here to-night!"

"He's ... what did you say?"

"It's all right. I only began at the end of the story instead of the beginning. I'll tell you the whole thing. And then ... then I suppose you will be terribly angry and make a fuss."

"I'm not much of a lad, as Freddie Rooke would say, for making fusses. And I can't imagine being terribly angry with you."

"Well, I'll risk it. Though, if I wasn't a brave girl, I should leave Uncle Chris to explain for himself and simply run away."

"Anything is better than that. It's a miracle meeting you like this, and I don't want to be deprived of the fruits of it. Tell me anything, but don't go."

"You'll be furious."

"Not with you."

"I should hope not with me. I've done nothing. I am the innocent heroine. But I'm afraid you will be very angry with Uncle Chris."

"If he's your uncle, that passes him. Besides, he once licked the stuffing out of me with a whangee. That forms a bond. Tell me all."

Jill considered. She had promised to begin at the beginning, but it was difficult to know what was the beginning.

"Have you ever heard of Captain Kidd?" she asked at length.

"You're wandering from the point, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. Have you heard of Captain Kidd?"

"The pirate? Of course."

"Well, Uncle Chris is his direct lineal descendant. That really explains the whole thing."

Wally looked at her enquiringly.

"Could you make it a little easier?" he said.

"I can tell you everything in half a dozen words, if you like. But it

will sound awfully abrupt."

"Go ahead."

"Uncle Chris has stolen your apartment."

Wally nodded slowly.

"I see. Stolen my apartment."

"Of course you can't possibly understand. I shall have to tell you the whole thing, after all."

Wally listened with flattering attention as she began the epic of Major Christopher Selby's doings in New York. Whatever his emotions, he certainly was not bored.

"So that's how it all happened," concluded Jill.

For a moment Wally said nothing. He seemed to be digesting what he had heard.

"I see," he said at last. "It's a variant of those advertisements they print in the magazines. 'Why pay rent? Own somebody else's home!'"

"That does rather sum it up," said Jill.

Wally burst into a roar of laughter.

"He's a corker!"

Jill was immensely relieved. For all her courageous bearing, she had not relished the task of breaking the news to Wally. She knew that he had a sense of humour, but a man may have a sense of humour and yet not see anything amusing in having his home stolen in his absence.

"I'm so glad you're not angry."

"Of course not."

"Most men would be."

"Most men are chumps."

"It's so wonderful that it happened to be you. Suppose it had been an utter stranger! What could I have done?"

"It would have been the same thing. You would have won him over in two minutes. Nobody could resist you."

"That's very sweet of you."

"I can't help telling the truth. Washington was just the same."

"Then you don't mind Uncle Chris giving his dinner-party here to-night?"

"He has my blessing."

"You really are an angel," said Jill gratefully. "From what he said, I think he looks on it as rather an important function. He has invited a very rich woman, who has been showing him a lot of hospitality--a Mrs. Peagrim...."

"Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim?"

"Yes? Why, do you know her?"

"Quite well. She goes in a good deal for being Bohemian and knowing people who write and paint and act and so on. That reminds me. I gave Freddie Rooke a letter of introduction to her."

"Freddie Rooke!"

"Yes. He suddenly made up his mind to come over. He came to me for advice about the journey. He sailed a couple of days before I did. I suppose he's somewhere in New York by now, unless he was going on to Florida. He didn't tell me what his plans were."

Jill was conscious of a sudden depression. Much as she liked Freddie, he belonged to a chapter in her life which was closed and which she was trying her hardest to forget. It was impossible to think of Freddie without thinking of Derek, and to think of Derek was like touching an exposed nerve. The news that Freddie was in New York shocked her. New York had already shown itself a city of chance encounters. Could she avoid meeting Freddie?

She knew Freddie so well. There was not a dearer or a better-hearted youth in the world, but he had not that fine sensibility which pilots a man through the awkwardnesses of life. He was a blunderer. Instinct told her that, if she met Freddie, he would talk of Derek, and, if thinking of Derek was touching an exposed nerve, talking of him would be like pressing on that nerve with a heavy hand. She shivered.

Wally was observant.

"There's no need to meet him if you don't want to," he said.

"No," said Jill doubtfully.

"New York's a large place. By the way," he went on, "to return once more to the interesting subject of my lodger, does your uncle sleep here at nights, do you know?"

Jill looked at him gratefully. He was no blunderer. Her desire to avoid Freddie Rooke was, he gave her tacitly to understand, her business, and he did not propose to intrude on it. She liked him for dismissing the subject so easily.

"No, I think he told me he doesn't."

"Well, that's something, isn't it! I call that darned nice of him! I wonder if I could drop back here somewhere about eleven o'clock. Are the festivities likely to be over by then? If I know Mrs. Peagrim, she will insist on going off to one of the hotels to dance directly after dinner. She's a confirmed trotter."

"I don't know how to apologize," began Jill remorsefully.

"Please don't. It's absolutely all right." His eye wandered to the mantelpiece, as it had done once or twice during the conversation. In her hurry Jill had replaced the snapshot with its back to the room, and Wally had the fidgety air of a man whose most cherished possession is maltreated. He got up now and, walking across, turned the photograph round. He stood for a moment, looking at it. Jill had forgotten the snapshot. Curiosity returned to her.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

Wally turned.

"Oh, did you see this?"

"I was looking at it just before you nearly frightened me to death by appearing so unexpectedly."

"Freddie Rooke sold it to me fourteen years ago."

"Fourteen years ago?"

"Next July," added Wally. "I gave him five shillings for it."

"Five shillings! The little brute!" cried Jill indignantly. "It must have been all the money you had in the world!"

"A trifle more, as a matter of fact. All the money I had in the world was three-and-six. But by a merciful dispensation of Providence the curate had called that morning and left a money-box for subscriptions to the village organ-fund.... It's wonderful what you can do with a turn for crime and the small blade of a pocket-knife! I don't think I have ever made money quicker!" He looked at the photograph again. "Not that it seemed quick at the moment. I died at least a dozen agonizing deaths in the few minutes I was operating. Have you ever noticed how slowly time goes when you are coaxing a shilling and a sixpence out of somebody's money-box? Centuries! But I was forgetting. Of course you've had no experience."

"You poor thing!"

"It was worth it."

"And you've had it ever since!"

"I wouldn't part with it for all Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim's millions," said Wally with sudden and startling vehemence, "if she offered me them." He paused. "She hasn't, as a matter of fact."

There was a silence. Jill looked at Wally furtively as he returned to his seat. She was seeing him with new eyes. It was as if this trifling incident had removed some sort of a veil. He had suddenly become more alive. For an instant she had seen right into him, to the hidden deeps of his soul. She felt shy and embarrassed.

"Pat died," she said at length. She felt the necessity of saying something.

"I liked Pat."

"He picked up some poison, poor darling.... How long ago those days seem, don't they?"

"They are always pretty vivid to me. I wonder who has that old house

of yours now."

"I heard the other day," said Jill more easily. The odd sensation of embarrassment was passing. "Some people called ... what was the name?... Debenham, I think."

Silence fell again. It was broken by the front-door bell, like an alarm-clock that shatters a dream.

Wally got up.

"Your uncle," he said.

"You aren't going to open the door?"

"That was the scheme."

"But he'll get such a shock when he sees you."

"He must look on it in the light of rent. I don't see why I shouldn't have a little passing amusement from this business."

He left the room. Jill heard the front door open. She waited breathlessly. Pity for Uncle Chris struggled with the sterner feeling that it served him right.

"Hullo!" she heard Wally say.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo!" replied an exuberant voice. "Wondered if I'd find you in, and all that sort of thing. I say, what a deuce of a way up it is here. Sort of get a chappie into training for going to heaven, what? I mean, what?"

Jill looked about her like a trapped animal. It was absurd, she felt, but every nerve in her body cried out against the prospect of meeting Freddie. His very voice had opened old wounds and set them throbbing.

She listened in the doorway. Out of sight down the passage, Freddie seemed by the sounds to be removing his overcoat. She stole out and darted like a shadow down the corridor that led to Wally's bedroom. The window of the bedroom opened on to the wide roof which Uncle Chris had eulogized. She slipped noiselessly out, closing the window behind her.

II

"I say, Mason, old top," said Freddie, entering the sitting-room, "I hope you don't mind my barging in like this, but the fact is things are a bit thick. I'm dashed worried, and I didn't know another soul I could talk it over with. As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure you were in New York at all, but I remembered hearing you say in London that

you were popping back almost at once, so I looked you up in the telephone book and took a chance. I'm dashed glad you are back. When did you arrive?"

"This afternoon."

"I've been here two or three days. Well, it's a bit of luck catching you. You see, what I want to ask your advice about...."

Wally looked at his watch. He was not surprised to find that Jill had taken to flight. He understood her feelings perfectly, and was anxious to get rid of the inopportune Freddie as soon as possible.

"You'll have to talk quick, I'm afraid," he said. "I've lent this place to a man for the evening, and he's having some people to dinner. What's the trouble?"

"It's about Jill."

"Jill?"

"Jill Mariner, you know. You remember Jill? You haven't forgotten my telling you all that? About her losing her money and coming over to America?"

"No. I remember you telling me that."

Freddie seemed to miss something in his companion's manner, some note of excitement and perturbation.

"Of course," he said, as if endeavouring to explain this to himself, "you hardly knew her, I suppose. Only met once since you were kids and all that sort of thing. But I'm a pal of hers and I'm dashed upset by the whole business, I can tell you. It worries me, I mean to say. Poor girl, you know, landed on her uppers in a strange country. Well, I mean, it worries me. So the first thing I did when I got here was to try to find her. That's why I came over, really, to try to find her. Apart from anything else, you see, poor old Derek is dashed worried about her."

"Need we bring Underhill in?"

"Oh, I know you don't like him and think he behaved rather rummily and so forth, but that's all right now."

"It is, is it?" said Wally drily.

"Oh, absolutely. It's all on again."

"What's all on again?"

"Why, I mean he wants to marry Jill. I came over to find her and tell

her so."

Wally's eyes glowed.

"If you have come over as an ambassador...."

"That's right. Jolly old ambassador. Very word I used myself."

"I say, if you have come over as an ambassador with the idea of reopening negotiations with Jill on behalf of that infernal swine...."

"Old man!" protested Freddie, pained. "Pal of mine, you know."

"If he is, after what's happened, your mental processes are beyond me."

"My what, old son?"

"Your mental processes."

"Oh, ah!" said Freddie, learning for the first time that he had any.

Wally looked at him intently. There was a curious expression on his rough-hewn face.

"I can't understand you, Freddie. If ever there was a fellow who might

have been expected to take the only possible view of Underhill's behaviour in this business, I should have said it was you. You're a public-school man. You've mixed all the time with decent people. You wouldn't do anything that wasn't straight yourself to save your life. Yet it seems to have made absolutely no difference in your opinion of this man Underhill that he behaved like an utter cad to a girl who was one of your best friends. You seem to worship him just as much as ever. And you have travelled three thousand miles to bring a message from him to Jill--Good God! Jill!--to the effect, as far as I can understand it, that he has thought it over and come to the conclusion that after all she may possibly be good enough for him!"

Freddie recovered the eye-glass which the raising of his eyebrows had caused to fall, and polished it in a crushed sort of way. Rummy, he reflected, how chappies stayed the same all their lives as they were when they were kids. Nasty, tough sort of chap Wally Mason had been as a boy, and here he was, apparently, not altered a bit. At least the only improvement he could detect was that, whereas in the old days Wally, when in an ugly mood like this, would undoubtedly have kicked him, he now seemed content with mere words. All the same, he was being dashed unpleasant. And he was all wrong about poor Derek. This last fact he endeavoured to make clear.

"You don't understand," he said. "You don't realize. You've never met Lady Underhill, have you?"

"What has she got to do with it?"

"Everything, old bean, everything. If it hadn't been for her, there wouldn't have been any trouble of any description, sort, or order. But she barged in and savaged poor old Derek till she absolutely made him break off the engagement."

"If you call him 'poor old Derek' again, Freddie," said Wally viciously, "I'll drop you out of the window and throw your hat after you! If he's such a gelatine-backed worm that his mother can...."

"You don't know her, old thing! She's the original hellhound!"

"I don't care what...."

"Must be seen to be believed," mumbled Freddie.

"I don't care what she's like! Any man who could...."

"Once seen, never forgotten!"

"Damn you! Don't interrupt every time I try to get a word in!"

"Sorry, old man! Shan't occur again!"

Wally moved to the window, and stood looking out. He had had much more

to say on the subject of Derek Underhill, but Freddie's interruptions had put it out of his head, and he felt irritated and baffled.

"Well, all I can say is," he remarked savagely, "that, if you have come over here as an ambassador to try and effect a reconciliation between Jill and Underhill, I hope to God you'll never find her."

Freddie emitted a weak cough, like a very far-off asthmatic old sheep. He was finding Wally more overpowering every moment. He had rather forgotten the dear old days of his childhood, but this conversation was beginning to refresh his memory: and he was realizing more vividly with every moment that passed how very Wallyish Wally was--how extraordinarily like the Wally who had dominated his growing intellect when they were both in Eton suits. Freddie in those days had been all for peace, and he was all for peace now. He made his next observation diffidently.

"I have found her!"

Wally spun round.

"What!"

"When I say that, I don't absolutely mean I've seen her. I mean I know where she is. That's what I came round to see you about. Felt I must talk it over, you know. The situation seems to me dashed rotten and

not a little thick. The fact is, old man, she's gone on the stage. In the chorus, you know. And, I mean to say, well, if you follow what I'm driving at, what, what?"

"In the chorus?"

"In the chorus!"

"How do you know?"

Freddie groped for his eyeglass, which had fallen again. He regarded it a trifle sternly. He was fond of the little chap, but it was always doing that sort of thing. The whole trouble was that, if you wanted to keep it in its place, you simply couldn't register any sort of emotion with the good old features: and, when you were chatting with a fellow like Wally Mason, you had to be registering something all the time.

"Well, that was a bit of luck, as a matter of fact. When I first got here, you know, it seemed to me the only thing to do was to round up a merry old detective and put the matter in his hands, like they do in stories. You know. Ring at the bell. 'And this, if I mistake not, Watson, is my client now.' And then in breezes client and spills the plot. I found a sleuth in the classified telephone directory, and toddled round. Rummy chaps, detectives! Ever met any? I always thought they were lean, hatchet-faced Johnnies with inscrutable smiles. This one looked just like my old Uncle Ted, the one who died of apoplexy.

Jovial, puffy-faced bird, who kept bobbing up behind a fat cigar. Have you ever noticed what whacking big cigars these fellows over here smoke? Rummy country, America. You ought to have seen the way this blighter could shift his cigar right across his face with moving his jaw-muscles. Like a flash! Most remarkable thing you ever saw, I give you my honest word! He...."

"Couldn't you keep your Impressions of America for the book you're going to write, and come to the point?" said Wally rudely.

"Sorry, old chap," said Freddie meekly. "Glad you reminded me. Well... Oh, yes. We had got as far as the jovial old human bloodhound, hadn't we? Well, I put the matter before this chappie. Told him I wanted to find a girl, showed him a photograph, and so forth. I say," said Freddie, wandering off once more into speculation, "why is it that coves like that always talk of a girl as 'the little lady'? This chap kept saying 'We'll find the little lady for you!' Oh, well, that's rather off the rails, isn't it? It just floated across my mind and I thought I'd mention it. Well, this blighter presumably nosed about and made enquiries for a couple of days, but didn't effect anything that you might call substantial. I'm not blaming him, mind you. I shouldn't care to have a job like that myself. I mean to say, when you come to think of what a frightful number of girls there are in this place, to have to ... well, as I say, he did his best but didn't click; and then this evening, just before I came here, I met a girl I had known in England--she was in a show over there--a girl

called Nelly Bryant...."

"Nelly Bryant? I know her."

"Yes? Fancy that! She was in a thing called 'Follow the Girl' in London. Did you see it by any chance? Topping show! There was one scene where the...."

"Get on! Get on! I wrote it."

"You wrote it?" Freddie beamed simple-hearted admiration. "My dear old chap, I congratulate you! One of the ripest and most all-wool musical comedies I've ever seen. I went twenty-four times. Rummy I don't remember spotting that you wrote it. I suppose one never looks at the names on the programme. Yes, I went twenty-four times The first time I went was with a couple of chappies from...."

"Listen, Freddie!" said Wally feverishly. "On some other occasion I should dearly love to hear the story of your life, but just now...."

"Absolutely, old man. You're perfectly right. Well, to cut a long story short, Nelly Bryant told me that she and Jill were rehearsing with a piece called 'The Rose of America.'"

"'The Rose of America!'"

"I think that was the name of it."

"That's Ike Goble's show. He called me up on the phone about it half an hour ago. I promised to go and see a rehearsal of it to-morrow or the day after. And Jill's in that?"

"Yes. How about it? I mean, I don't know much about this sort of thing, but do you think it's the sort of thing Jill ought to be doing?"

Wally was moving restlessly about the room. Freddie's news had disquieted him. Mr. Goble had a reputation.

"I know a lot about it," he replied, "and it certainly isn't." He scowled at the carpet. "Oh, damn everybody!"

Freddie paused to allow him to proceed, if such should be his wish, but Wally had apparently said his say. Freddie went on to point out an aspect of the matter which was troubling him greatly.

"I'm sure poor old Derek wouldn't like her being in the chorus!"

Wally started so violently that for a moment Freddie was uneasy.

"I mean Underhill," he corrected himself hastily.

"Freddie," said Wally, "you're an awfully good chap, but I wish you would exit rapidly now! Thanks for coming and telling me, very good of you. This way out!"

"But, old man...!"

"Now what?"

"I thought we were going to discuss this binge and decide what to do and all that sort of thing."

"Some other time. I want to think about it."

"Oh, you will think about it?"

"Yes, I'll think about it."

"Topping! You see, you're a brainy sort of fellow, and you'll probably hit something."

"I probably shall, if you don't go."

"Eh? Oh, ah, yes!" Freddie struggled into his coat. More than ever did the adult Wally remind him of the dangerous stripling of years gone by. "Well, cheerio!"

"Same to you!"

"You'll let me know if you scare up some devilish fruity wheeze, won't you? I'm at the Biltmore."

"Very good place to be. Go there now."

"Right ho! Well, toodle-oo!"

"The elevator is at the foot of the stairs," said Wally. "You press the bell and up it comes. You hop in and down you go! It's a great invention! Good night!"

"Oh, I say. One moment...."

"Good night!" said Wally.

He closed the door, and ran down the passage.

"Jill!" he called. He opened the bedroom window and stepped out.

"Jill!"

There was no reply.

"Jill!" called Wally once again, but again there was no answer.

Wally walked to the parapet, and looked over. Below him the vastness of the city stretched itself in a great triangle, its apex the harbour, its sides the dull silver of the East and Hudson Rivers. Directly before him, crowned with its white lantern, the Metropolitan Tower reared its graceful height to the stars. And all around, in the windows of the tall buildings that looked from this bastion on which he stood almost squat, a million lights stared up at him, the unsleeping eyes of New York. It was a scene of which Wally, always sensitive to beauty, never tired: but to-night it had lost its appeal. A pleasant breeze from the Jersey shore greeted him with a quickening whisper of springtime and romance, but it did not lift the heaviness of his heart. He felt depressed and apprehensive.