CHAPTER XIV

MR. GOBLE MAKES THE BIG NOISE

I

Spring, whose coming the breeze had heralded to Wally as he smoked upon the roof, floated graciously upon New York two mornings later. The city awoke to a day of blue and gold and to a sense of hard times over and good times to come. In his apartment on Park Avenue, Mr Isaac Goble, sniffing the gentle air from the window of his breakfast-room, returned to his meal and his Morning Telegraph with a resolve to walk to the theatre for rehearsal: a resolve which had also come to Jill and Nelly Bryant, eating stewed prunes in their boarding-house in the Forties. On the summit of his sky-scraper, Wally Mason, performing Swedish exercises to the delectation of various clerks and stenographers in the upper windows of neighbouring buildings, felt young and vigorous and optimistic, and went in to his shower-bath thinking of Jill. And it was of Jill, too, that young Pilkington thought, as he propped his long form up against the pillows and sipped his morning cup of tea. For the first time in several days a certain moodiness which had affected Otis Pilkington left him, and he dreamed happy day-dreams.

The gaiety of Otis was not, however, entirely or even primarily due to

the improvement in the weather. It had its source in a conversation which had taken place between himself and Jill's Uncle Chris on the previous night. Exactly how it had come about, Mr. Pilkington was not entirely clear, but, somehow, before he was fully aware of what he was saying, he had begun to pour into Major Selby's sympathetic ears the story of his romance. Encouraged by the other's kindly receptiveness, he had told him all--his love for Jill, his hopes that some day it might be returned, the difficulties complicating the situation owing to the known prejudices of Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim concerning girls who formed the personnel of musical comedy ensembles. To all these outpourings Major Selby had listened with keen attention, and finally had made one of those luminous suggestions, so simple yet so shrewd, which emanate only from your man of the world. It was Jill's girlish ambition, it seemed from Major Selby's statement, to become a force in the motion-picture world. The movies were her objective.

What, he broke off to ask, did Pilkington think of the idea?

Pilkington thought the idea splendid. Miss Mariner, with her charm and looks, would be wonderful in the movies.

There was, said Uncle Chris, a future for the girl in the movies.

Mr. Pilkington agreed cordially. A great future indeed.

"Observe," proceeded Uncle Chris, gathering speed and expanding his

chest as he spread his legs before the fire, "how it would simplify the whole matter if Jill were to become a motion-picture artist and win fame and wealth in her profession. You go to your excellent aunt and announce that you are engaged to be married to Jill Mariner. There is a momentary pause. 'Not the Jill Mariner?' falters Mrs. Peagrim. 'Yes, the famous Miss Mariner!' you reply. Well, I ask you, my boy, can you see her making any objection? Such a thing would be absurd. No, I can see no flaw in the project whatsoever." Here Uncle Chris, as he had pictured Mrs. Peagrim doing, paused for a moment. "Of course, there would be the preliminaries."

"The preliminaries?"

Uncle Chris' voice became a melodious coo. He beamed upon Mr. Pilkington.

"Well, think for yourself, my boy! These things cannot be done without money. I do not propose to allow my niece to waste her time and her energy in the rank and file of the profession, waiting years for a chance that might never come. There is plenty of room at the top, and that, in the motion-picture profession, is the place to start. If Jill is to become a motion-picture artist, a special company must be formed to promote her. She must be made a feature, a star, from the beginning. Whether," said Uncle Chris, smoothing the crease of his trousers, "you would wish to take shares in the company yourself...."

"Oo...!"

"... is a matter," proceeded Uncle Chris, ignoring the interruption, "for you yourself to decide. Possibly you have other claims on your purse. Possibly this musical play of yours has taken all the cash you are prepared to lock up. Possibly you may consider the venture too speculative. Possibly ... there are a hundred reasons why you may not wish to join us. But I know a dozen men--I can go down Wall Street to-morrow and pick out twenty men--who will be glad to advance the necessary capital. I can assure you that I personally shall not hesitate to risk--if one can call it risking--any loose cash which I may have lying idle at my banker's."

He rattled the loose cash which he had lying idle in his trouser-pocket--fifteen cents in all--and stopped to flick a piece of fluff off his coat-sleeve. Mr. Pilkington was thus enabled to insert a word.

"How much would you want?" he enquired.

"That," said Uncle Chris meditatively, "is a little hard to say. I should have to look into the matter more closely in order to give you the exact figures. But let us say for the sake of argument that you put up--what shall we say?--a hundred thousand? fifty thousand? ... no, we will be conservative. Perhaps you had better not begin with more than ten thousand. You can always buy more shares later. I don't

suppose I shall begin with more than ten thousand myself."

"I could manage ten thousand all right."

"Excellent. We make progress, we make progress. Very well, then. I go to my Wall Street friends and tell them about the scheme, and say 'Here is ten thousand dollars! What is your contribution?' It puts the affair on a business-like basis, you understand. Then we really get to work. But use your own judgment, my boy, you know. Use your own judgment. I would not think of persuading you to take such a step, if you felt at all doubtful. Think it over. Sleep on it. And, whatever you decide to do, on no account say a word about it to Jill. It would be cruel to raise her hopes until we are certain that we are in a position to enable her to realize them. And, of course, not a word to Mrs. Peagrim."

"Of course."

"Very well, then, my boy," said Uncle Chris affably. "I will leave you to turn the whole thing over in your mind. Act entirely as you think best. How is your insomnia, by the way? Did you try Nervino? Capital! There's nothing like it. It did wonders for me! Good night, good night!"

Otis Pilkington had been turning the thing over in his mind, with an interval for sleep, ever since. And the more he thought of it, the

better the scheme appeared to him. He winced a little at the thought of the ten thousand dollars, for he came of prudent stock and had been brought up in habits of parsimony, but, after all, he reflected, the money would be merely a loan. Once the company found its feet, it would be returned to him a hundred-fold. And there was no doubt that this would put a completely different aspect on his wooing of Jill, as far as Aunt Olive was concerned. Why, a cousin of his--young Brewster Philmore--had married a movie-star only two years ago, and nobody had made the slightest objection. Brewster was to be seen with his bride frequently beneath Mrs. Peagrim's roof. Against the higher strata of Bohemia Mrs. Peagrim had no prejudice at all. Quite the reverse, in fact. She liked the society of those whose names were often in the papers and much in the public mouth. It seemed to Otis Pilkington, in short, that Love had found a way. He sipped his tea with relish, and when the Japanese valet brought in the toast all burned on one side, chided him with a gentle sweetness which, one may hope, touched the latter's Oriental heart and inspired him with a desire to serve his best of employers more efficiently.

At half-past ten, Otis Pilkington removed his dressing-gown and began to put on his clothes to visit the theatre. There was a rehearsal-call for the whole company at eleven. As he dressed, his mood was as sunny as the day itself.

And the day, by half-past ten, was as sunny as ever Spring day had been in a country where Spring comes early and does its best from the

very start. The blue sky beamed down on a happy city. To and fro the citizenry bustled, aglow with the perfection of the weather. Everywhere was gaiety and good cheer, except on the stage of the Gotham Theatre, where an early rehearsal, preliminary to the main event, had been called by Johnson Miller in order to iron some of the kinks out of the "My Heart and I" number, which, with the assistance of the male chorus, the leading lady was to render in Act One.

On the stage of the Gotham gloom reigned--literally, because the stage was wide and deep and was illumined only by a single electric light; and figuratively, because things were going even worse than usual with the "My Heart and I" number, and Johnson Miller, always of an emotional and easily stirred temperament, had been goaded by the incompetence of his male chorus to a state of frenzy. At about the moment when Otis Pilkington shed his flowered dressing-gown and reached for his trousers (the heather-mixture with the red twill), Johnson Miller was pacing the gangway between the orchestra pit and the first row of the orchestra chairs, waving one hand and clutching his white locks with the other, his voice raised the while in agonized protest.

"Gentlemen, you silly idiots," complained Mr. Miller loudly, "you've had three weeks to get these movements into your thick heads, and you haven't done a damn thing right! You're all over the place! You don't seem able to turn without tumbling over each other like a lot of Keystone Kops! What's the matter with you? You're not doing the

movements I showed you; you're doing some you have invented yourselves, and they are rotten! I've no doubt you think you can arrange a number better than I can, but Mr. Goble engaged me to be the director, so kindly do exactly as I tell you. Don't try to use your own intelligence, because you haven't any. I'm not blaming you for it. It wasn't your fault that your nurses dropped you on your heads when you were babies. But it handicaps you when you try to think."

Of the seven gentlemanly members of the male ensemble present, six looked wounded by this tirade. They had the air of good men wrongfully accused. They appeared to be silently calling on Heaven to see justice done between Mr. Miller and themselves. The seventh, a long-legged young man in faultlessly fitting tweeds of English cut, seemed, on the other hand, not so much hurt as embarrassed. It was this youth who now stepped down to the darkened footlights and spoke in a remorseful and conscience-stricken manner.

"I say!"

Mr. Miller, that martyr to deafness, did not hear the pathetic bleat. He had swung off at right angles and was marching in an overwrought way up the central aisle leading to the back of the house, his india-rubber form moving in convulsive jerks. Only when he had turned and retraced his steps did he perceive the speaker and prepare to take his share in the conversation.

"What?" he shouted. "Can't hear you!"

"I say, you know, it's my fault, really."

"What?"

"I mean to say, you know...."

"What? Speak up, can't you?"

Mr. Saltzburg, who had been seated at the piano, absently playing a melody from his unproduced musical comedy, awoke to the fact that the services of an interpreter were needed. He obligingly left the music-stool and crept, crab-like, along the ledge of the stage-box. He placed his arm about Mr. Miller's shoulders and his lips to Mr. Miller's left ear, and drew a deep breath.

"He says it is his fault!"

Mr. Miller nodded adhesion to this admirable sentiment.

"I know they're not worth their salt!" he replied.

Mr. Saltzburg patiently took in a fresh stock of breath.

"This young man says it is his fault that the movement went wrong!"

"Tell him I only signed on this morning, laddie," urged the tweed-clad young man.

"He only joined the company this morning!"

This puzzled Mr. Miller.

"How do you mean, warning?" he asked.

Mr. Saltzburg, purple in the face, made a last effort.

"This young man is new," he bellowed carefully, keeping to words of one syllable. "He does not yet know the steps. He says this is his first day here, so he does not yet know the steps. When he has been here some more time he will know the steps. But now he does not know the steps."

"What he means," explained the young man in tweeds helpfully, "is that I don't know the steps."

"He does not know the steps!" roared Mr. Saltzburg.

"I know he doesn't know the steps," said Mr. Miller. "Why doesn't he know the steps? He's had long enough to learn them."

"He is new!"

"Hugh?"

"New!"

"Oh, new?"

"Yes, new!"

"Why the devil is he new?" cried Mr. Miller, awaking suddenly to the truth and filled with a sense of outrage. "Why didn't he join with the rest of the company? How can I put on chorus numbers if I am saddled every day with new people to teach? Who engaged him?"

"Who engaged you?" enquired Mr. Saltzburg of the culprit.

"Mr. Pilkington."

"Mr. Pilkington," shouted Mr. Saltzburg.

"When?"

"When?"

"Last night."

"Last night."

Mr. Miller waved his hands in a gesture of divine despair, spun round, darted up the aisle, turned, and bounded back.

"What can I do?" he wailed. "My hands are tied! I am hampered! I am handicapped! We open in two weeks and every day I find somebody new in the company to upset everything I have done. I shall go to Mr. Goble and ask to be released from my contract. I shall.... Come along, come along, come along now!" he broke off suddenly. "Why are we wasting time? The whole number once more. The whole number once more from the beginning!"

The young man tottered back to his gentlemanly colleagues, running a finger in an agitated manner round the inside of his collar. He was not used to this sort of thing. In a large experience of amateur theatricals he had never encountered anything like it. In the breathing-space afforded by the singing of the first verse and refrain by the lady who played the heroine of "The Rose of America," he found time to make an enquiry of the artist on his right.

"I say! Is he always like this?"

"Who? Johnny?"

"The sportsman with the hair that turned white in a single night. The barker on the sky-line. Does he often get the wind up like this?"

His colleague smiled tolerantly.

"Why, that's nothing!" he replied. "Wait till you see him really cut loose! That was just a gentle whisper!"

"My God!" said the newcomer, staring into a bleak future.

The leading lady came to the end of her refrain, and the gentlemen of the ensemble, who had been hanging about up-stage, began to curvet nimbly down towards her in a double line; the new arrival, with an eye on his nearest neighbour, endeavouring to curvet as nimbly as the others. A clapping of hands from the dark auditorium indicated--inappropriately--that he had failed to do so. Mr. Miller could be perceived--dimly--with all his fingers entwined in his hair.

"Clear the stage!" yelled Mr. Miller. "Not you!" he shouted, as the latest addition to the company began to drift off with the others. "You stay!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I shall have to teach you the steps by yourself, or we shall get nowhere. Go up-stage. Start the music again, Mr. Saltzburg.

Now, when the refrain begins, come down. Gracefully! Gracefully!"

The young man, pink but determined, began to come down gracefully. And it was while he was thus occupied that Jill and Nelly Bryant, entering the wings which were beginning to fill up as eleven o'clock approached, saw him.

"Whoever is that?" said Nelly.

"New man," replied one of the chorus gentlemen. "Came this morning."

Nelly turned to Jill.

"He looks just like Mr. Rooke!" she exclaimed.

"He is Mr. Rooke!" said Jill.

"He can't be!"

"He is!"

"But what is he doing here?"

Jill bit her lip.

"That's just what I'm going to ask him myself," she said.

II

The opportunity for a private conversation with Freddie did not occur immediately. For ten minutes he remained alone on the stage, absorbing abusive tuition from Mr. Miller: and at the end of that period a further ten minutes was occupied with the rehearsing of the number with the leading lady and the rest of the male chorus. When, finally, a roar from the back of the auditorium announced the arrival of Mr. Goble and at the same time indicated Mr. Goble's desire that the stage should be cleared and the rehearsal proper begin, a wan smile of recognition and a faint "What ho!" was all that Freddie was able to bestow upon Jill, before, with the rest of the ensemble, they had to go out and group themselves for the opening chorus. It was only when this had been run through four times and the stage left vacant for two of the principals to play a scene that Jill was able to draw the Last of the Rookes aside in a dark corner and put him to the question.

"Freddie, what are you doing here?"

Freddie mopped his streaming brow. Johnson Miller's idea of an opening chorus was always strenuous. On the present occasion, the ensemble were supposed to be guests at a Long Island house-party, and Mr. Miller's conception of the gathering suggested that he supposed house-party guests on Long Island to consist exclusively of victims of

St. Vitus' dance. Freddie was feeling limp, battered, and exhausted: and, from what he had gathered, the worst was yet to come.

"Eh?" he said feebly.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, ah, yes! I see what you mean! I suppose you're surprised to find me in New York, what?"

"I'm not surprised to find you in New York. I knew you had come over. But I am surprised to find you on the stage, being bullied by Mr. Miller."

"I say," said Freddie in an awed voice. "He's a bit of a nut, that lad, what? He reminds me of the troops of Midian in the hymn. The chappies who prowled and prowled around. I'll bet he's worn a groove in the carpet. Like a jolly old tiger at the Zoo at feeding time. Wouldn't be surprised at any moment to look down and find him biting a piece out of my leg!"

Jill seized his arm and shook it.

"Don't ramble, Freddie! Tell me how you got here."

"Oh, that was pretty simple. I had a letter of introduction to this

chappie Pilkington who's running this show, and, we having got tolerably pally in the last few days, I went to him and asked him to let me join the merry throng. I said I didn't want any money, and the little bit of work I would do wouldn't make any difference, so he said 'Right ho!' or words to that effect, and here I am."

"But why? You can't be doing this for fun, surely?"

"Fun!" A pained expression came into Freddie's face. "My idea of fun isn't anything in which jolly old Miller, the bird with the snowy hair, is permitted to mix. Something tells me that that lad is going to make it his life-work picking on me. No, I didn't do this for fun. I had a talk with Wally Mason the night before last, and he seemed to think that being in the chorus wasn't the sort of thing you ought to be doing, so I thought it over and decided that I ought to join the troupe too. Then I could always be on the spot, don't you know, if there was any trouble. I mean to say, I'm not much of a chap and all that sort of thing, but still I might come in handy one of these times. Keep a fatherly eye on you, don't you know, and what not!"

Jill was touched. "You're a dear, Freddie!"

"I thought, don't you know, it would make poor old Derek a bit easier in his mind."

Jill froze.

"I don't want to talk about Derek, Freddie, please."

"Oh, I know what you must be feeling. Pretty sick, I'll bet, what? But if you could see him now...."

"I don't want to talk about him!"

"He's pretty cut up, you know. Regrets bitterly and all that sort of thing. He wants you to come back again."

"I see! He sent you to fetch me?"

"That was more or less the idea."

"It's a shame that you had all the trouble. You can get messenger-boys to go anywhere and do anything nowadays. Derek ought to have thought of that."

Freddie looked at her doubtfully.

"You're spoofing, aren't you? I mean to say, you wouldn't have liked that!"

"I shouldn't have disliked it any more than his sending you."

"Oh, but I wanted to pop over. Keen to see America and so forth."

Jill looked past him at the gloomy stage. Her face was set, and her eyes sombre.

"Can't you understand, Freddie? You've known me a long time. I should have thought that you would have found out by now that I have a certain amount of pride. If Derek wanted me back, there was only one thing for him to do--come over and find me himself."

"Rummy! That's what Mason said, when I told him. You two don't realize how dashed busy Derek is these days."

"Busy!"

Something in her face seemed to tell Freddie that he was not saying the right thing, but he stumbled on.

"You've no notion how busy he is. I mean to say, elections coming on and so forth. He daren't stir from the metrop."

"Of course I couldn't expect him to do anything that might interfere with his career, could I?"

"Absolutely not. I knew you would see it!" said Freddie, charmed at her reasonableness. All rot, what you read about women being

unreasonable. "Then I take it it's all right, eh?"

"All right?"

"I mean you will toddle home with me at the earliest opp. and make poor old Derek happy?"

Jill laughed discordantly.

"Poor old Derek!" she echoed. "He has been badly treated, hasn't he?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," said Freddie doubtfully. "You see, coming down to it, the thing was more or less his fault, what?"

"More or less!"

"I mean to say...."

"More or less!"

Freddie glanced at her anxiously. He was not at all sure now that he liked the way she was looking or the tone in which she spoke. He was not a keenly observant young man, but there did begin at this point to seep through to his brain-centres a suspicion that all was not well.

"Let me pull myself together!" said Freddie warily to his immortal

soul. "I believe I'm getting the raspberry!" And there was silence for a space.

The complexity of life began to weigh upon Freddie. Life was like one of those shots at squash which seem so simple till you go to knock the cover off the ball, when the ball sort of edges away from you and you miss it. Life, Freddie began to perceive, was apt to have a nasty back-spin on it. He had never had any doubt when he had started, that the only difficult part of this expedition to America would be the finding of Jill. Once found, he had presumed that she would be delighted to hear his good news and would joyfully accompany him home on the next boat. It appeared now, however, that he had been too sanguine. Optimist as he was, he had to admit that, as far as could be ascertained with the naked eye, the jolly old binge might be said to have sprung a leak.

He proceeded to approach the matter from another angle.

"I say!"

"Yes?"

"You do love old Derek, don't you? I mean to say, you know what I mean, love him and all that sort of rot?"

"I don't know!"

"You don't know! Oh, I say, come now! You must know! Pull up your socks, old thing.... I mean, pull yourself together! You either love a chappie or you don't."

Jill smiled painfully.

"How nice it would be if everything were as simple and straightforward as that. Haven't you ever heard that the dividing line between love and hate is just a thread? Poets have said so a great number of times."

"Oh, poets!" said Freddie, dismissing the genus with a wave of the hand. He had been compelled to read Shakespeare and all that sort of thing at school, but it had left him cold, and since growing to man's estate he had rather handed the race of bards the mitten. He liked Doss Chiderdoss' stuff in the Sporting Times, but beyond that he was not much of a lad for poets.

"Can't you understand a girl in my position not being able to make up her mind whether she loves a man or despises him?"

Freddie shook his head.

"No," he said. "It sounds dashed silly to me!"

"Then what's the good of talking?" cried Jill. "It only hurts."

"But--won't you come back to England?"

"No."

"Oh, I say! Be a sport! Take a stab at it!"

Jill laughed again--another of those grating laughs which afflicted Freddie with a sense of foreboding and failure. Something had undoubtedly gone wrong with the works. He began to fear that at some point in the conversation--just where he could not say--he had been less diplomatic than he might have been.

"You speak as if you were inviting me to a garden-party! No, I won't take a stab at it. You've a lot to learn about women, Freddie!"

"Women are rum!" conceded that perplexed ambassador.

Jill began to move away.

"Don't go!" urged Freddie.

"Why not? What's the use of talking any more? Have you ever broken an arm or a leg, Freddie?"

"Yes," said Freddie, mystified. "As a matter of fact, my last year at Oxford, playing soccer for the college in a friendly game, some blighter barged into me and I came down on my wrist. But...."

"It hurt?"

"Like the deuce!"

"And then it began to get better, I suppose. Well, used you to hit it, and twist it, and prod it, or did you leave it alone to try and heal? I won't talk any more about Derek! I simply won't! I'm all smashed up inside, and I don't know if I'm ever going to get well again, but at least I'm going to give myself a chance. I'm working as hard as ever I can and I'm forcing myself not to think of him. I'm in a sling, Freddie, like your wrist, and I don't want to be prodded. I hope we shall see a lot of each other while you're over here--you always were the greatest dear in the world--but you mustn't mention Derek again, and you mustn't ask me to go home. If you avoid those subjects, we'll be as happy as possible. And now I'm going to leave you to talk to poor Nelly. She has been hovering round for the last ten minutes, waiting for a chance to speak to you. She worships you, you know!"

Freddie started violently.

"Oh, I say! What rot!"

Jill had gone, and he was still gaping after her, when Nelly Bryant moved towards him--shyly, like a worshipper approaching a shrine.

"Hello, Mr. Rooke!" said Nelly.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo!" said Freddie.

Nelly fixed her large eyes on his face. A fleeting impression passed through Freddie's mind that she was looking unusually pretty this morning: nor was the impression unjustified. Nelly was wearing for the first time a Spring suit which was the outcome of hours of painful selection among the wares of a dozen different stores, and the knowledge that the suit was just right seemed to glow from her like an inner light. She felt happy, and her happiness had lent an unwonted colour to her face and a soft brightness to her eyes.

"How nice it is, your being here!"

Freddie waited for the inevitable question, the question with which Jill had opened their conversation; but it did not come. He was surprised, but relieved. He hated long explanations, and he was very doubtful whether loyalty to Jill could allow him to give them to Nelly. His reason for being where he was had to do so intimately with Jill's most private affairs. A wave of gratitude to Nelly swept through him when he realized that she was either incurious or else too delicate-minded to show inquisitiveness.

As a matter of fact, it was delicacy that kept Nelly silent. Seeing Freddie here at the theatre, she had, as is not uncommon with fallible mortals, put two and two together and made the answer four when it was not four at all. She had been deceived by circumstantial evidence. Jill, whom she had left in England wealthy and secure, she had met again in New York penniless as the result of some Stock Exchange cataclysm in which, she remembered with the vagueness with which one recalls once-heard pieces of information, Freddie Rooke had been involved. True, she seemed to recollect hearing that Freddie's losses had been comparatively slight, but his presence in the chorus of "The Rose of America" seemed to her proof that after all they must have been devastating. She could think of no other reason except loss of money which could have placed Freddie in the position in which she now found him, so she accepted it; and, with the delicacy which was innate in her and which a hard life had never blunted, decided, directly she saw him, to make no allusion to the disaster.

Such was Nelly's view of the matter, and sympathy gave to her manner a kind of maternal gentleness which acted on Freddie, raw from his late encounter with Mr. Johnson Miller and disturbed by Jill's attitude in the matter of poor old Derek, like a healing balm. His emotions were too chaotic for analysis, but one thing stood out clear from the welter--the fact that he was glad to be with Nelly as he had never been glad to be with a girl before, and found her soothing as he had never supposed a girl could be soothing.

They talked desultorily of unimportant things, and every minute found Freddie more convinced that Nelly was not as other girls. He felt that he must see more of her.

"I say," he said. "When this binge is over ... when the rehearsal finishes, you know, how about a bite to eat?"

"I should love it. I generally go to the Automat."

"The how-much? Never heard of it."

"In Times Square. It's cheap, you know."

"I was thinking of the Cosmopolis."

"But that's so expensive."

"Oh, I don't know. Much the same as any of the other places, isn't it?"

Nelly's manner became more motherly than ever. She bent forward and touched his arm affectionately.

"You haven't to keep up any front with me," she said gently. "I don't care whether you're rich or poor or what. I mean, of course I'm

awfully sorry you've lost your money, but it makes it all the easier for us to be real pals, don't you think so?"

"Lost my money?"

"Well, I know you wouldn't be here if you hadn't. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but, when you talked of the Cosmopolis, I just had to. You lost your money in the same thing Jill Mariner lost hers, didn't you? I was sure you had, the moment I saw you here. Who cares? Money isn't everything!"

Astonishment kept Freddie silent for an instant: after that he refrained from explanations of his own free will. He accepted the situation and rejoiced in it. Like many other wealthy and modest young men, he had always had a sneaking suspicion at the back of his mind that any girl who was decently civil to him was so from mixed motives--or, more likely, motives that were not even mixed. Well, dash it, here was a girl who seemed to like him although under the impression that he was broke to the wide. It was an intoxicating experience. It made him feel a better chap. It fortified his self-respect.

"You know," he said, stammering a little, for he found a sudden difficulty in controlling his voice. "You're a dashed good sort!"

"I'm awfully glad you think so."

There was a silence--as far, at least, as he and she were concerned. In the outer world, beyond the piece of scenery under whose shelter they stood, stirring things, loud and exciting things, seemed to be happening. Some sort of an argument appeared to be in progress. The rasping voice of Mr. Goble was making itself heard from the unseen auditorium. These things they sensed vaguely, but they were too occupied with each other to ascertain details.

"What was the name of that place again?" asked Freddie. "The what-ho-something?"

"The Automat?"

"That's the little chap! We'll go there, shall we?"

"The food's quite good. You go and help yourself out of slot-machines, you know."

"My favourite indoor sport!" said Freddie with enthusiasm. "Hullo! What's up? It sounds as if there were dirty work at the cross-roads!"

The voice of the assistant stage-manager was calling, sharply excited, agitation in every syllable.

"All the gentlemen of the chorus on the stage, please! Mr. Goble wants

all the chorus-gentlemen on the stage!"

"Well, cheerio for the present," said Freddie. "I suppose I'd better look into this."

He made his way on to the stage.

III

There is an insidious something about the atmosphere of a rehearsal of a musical play which saps the finer feelings of those connected with it. Softened by the gentle beauty of the Spring weather, Mr. Goble had come to the Gotham Theatre that morning in an excellent temper, firmly intending to remain in an excellent temper all day. Five minutes of "The Rose of America" had sent him back to the normal; and at ten minutes past eleven he was chewing his cigar and glowering at the stage with all the sweetness gone from his soul. When Wally Mason arrived at a quarter past eleven and dropped into the seat beside him, the manager received him with a grunt and even omitted to offer him a cigar. And when a New York theatrical manager does that, it is a certain sign that his mood is of the worst.

One may find excuses for Mr. Goble. "The Rose of America" would have tested the equanimity of a far more amiable man: and on Mr. Goble what Otis Pilkington had called its delicate whimsicality jarred

profoundly. He had been brought up in the lower-browed school of musical comedy, where you shelved the plot after the opening number and filled in the rest of the evening by bringing on the girls in a variety of exotic costumes, with some good vaudeville specialists to get the laughs. Mr. Goble's idea of a musical piece was something embracing trained seals, acrobats, and two or three teams of skilled buck-and-wing dancers, with nothing on the stage, from a tree to a lamp-shade, which could not suddenly turn into a chorus-girl. The austere legitimateness of "The Rose of America" gave him a pain in the neck. He loathed plot, and "The Rose of America" was all plot.

Why, then, had the earthy Mr. Goble consented to associate himself with the production of this intellectual play? Because he was subject, like all other New York managers, to intermittent spasms of the idea that the time is ripe for a revival of comic opera. Sometimes, lunching in his favourite corner in the Cosmopolis grill-room, he would lean across the table and beg some other manager to take it from him that the time was ripe for a revival of comic opera--or, more cautiously, that pretty soon the time was going to be ripe for a revival of comic opera. And the other manager would nod his head and thoughtfully stroke his three chins and admit that, sure as God made little apples, the time was darned soon going to be ripe for a revival of comic opera. And then they would stuff themselves with rich food and light big cigars and brood meditatively.

With most managers these spasms, which may be compared to twinges of

conscience, pass as quickly as they come, and they go back to coining money with rowdy musical comedies, quite contented. But Otis Pilkington, happening along with the script of "The Rose of America" and the cash to back it, had caught Mr. Goble in the full grip of an attack, and all the arrangements had been made before the latter emerged from the influence. He now regretted his rash act.

"Say, listen," he said to Wally, his gaze on the stage, his words proceeding from the corner of his mouth, "you've got to stick around with this show after it opens on the road. We'll talk terms later. But we've got to get it right, don't care what it costs. See?"

"You think it will need fixing?"

Mr. Goble scowled at the unconscious artists, who were now going through a particularly arid stretch of dialogue.

"Fixing! It's all wrong! It don't add up right! You'll have to rewrite it from end to end."

"Well, I've got some idea about it. I saw it played by amateurs last summer, you know. I could make a quick job of it, if you want me to. But will the author stand for it?"

Mr. Goble allowed a belligerent eye to stray from the stage, and twisted it round in Wally's direction.

"Say, listen! He'll stand for anything I say. I'm the little guy that gives orders round here. I'm the big noise!"

As if in support of this statement he suddenly emitted a terrific bellow. The effect was magical. The refined and painstaking artists on the stage stopped as if they had been shot. The assistant stage-director bent sedulously over the footlights, which had now been turned up, shading his eyes with the prompt script.

"Take that over again!" shouted Mr. Goble. "Yes, that speech about life being like a water-melon. It don't sound to me as though it meant anything." He cocked his cigar at an angle, and listened fiercely. He clapped his hands. The action stopped again. "Cut it!" said Mr. Goble tersely.

"Cut the speech, Mr. Goble?" queried the obsequious assistant stage-director.

"Yes. Cut it. It don't mean nothing!"

Down the aisle, springing from a seat at the back, shimmered Mr. Pilkington, wounded to the quick.

"Mr. Goble! Mr. Goble!"

"Well?"

"That is the best epigram in the play."

"The best what?"

"Epigram. The best epigram in the play."

Mr. Goble knocked the ash off his cigar. "The public don't want epigrams. The public don't like epigrams. I've been in the show business fifteen years, and I'm telling you! Epigrams give them a pain under the vest. All right, get on."

Mr. Pilkington fluttered agitatedly. This was his first experience of Mr. Goble in the capacity of stage-director. It was the latter's custom to leave the early rehearsals of the pieces with which he was connected to a subordinate producer, who did what Mr. Goble called the breaking-in. This accomplished, he would appear in person, undo most of the other's work, make cuts, tell the actors how to read their lines, and generally enjoy himself. Producing plays was Mr. Goble's hobby. He imagined himself to have a genius in that direction, and it was useless to try to induce him to alter any decision to which he might have come. He regarded those who did not agree with him with the lofty contempt of an Eastern despot.

Of this Mr. Pilkington was not yet aware.

"But, Mr. Goble ...!"

The potentate swung irritably round on him.

"What is it? What is it? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"That epigram...."

"It's out!"

"But ...!"

"It's out!"

"Surely," protested Mr. Pilkington almost tearfully, "I have a voice...."

"Sure you have a voice," retorted Mr. Goble, "and you can use it any old place you want, except in my theatre. Have all the voice you like! Go round the corner and talk to yourself! Sing in your bath! But don't come using it here, because I'm the little guy that does all the talking in this theatre! That fellow makes me tired," he added complainingly to Wally, as Mr. Pilkington withdrew like a foiled python. "He don't know nothing about the show business, and he keeps butting in and making fool suggestions. He ought to be darned glad

he's getting his first play produced and not trying to teach me how to direct it." He clapped his hands imperiously. The assistant stage-manager bent over the footlights. "What was that that guy said? Lord Finchley's last speech. Take it again."

The gentleman who was playing the part of Lord Finchley, an English character actor who specialized in London "nuts," raised his eyebrows, annoyed. Like Mr. Pilkington, he had never before come into contact with Mr. Goble as stage-director, and, accustomed to the suaver methods of his native land, he was finding the experience trying. He had not yet recovered from the agony of having that water-melon line cut out of his part. It was the only good line, he considered, that he had. Any line that is cut out of an actor's part is always the only good line he has.

"The speech about Omar Khayyám?" he enquired with suppressed irritation.

"I thought that was the way you said it. All wrong! It's Omar of Khayyám."

"I think you will find that Omar Khayyám is the--ah--generally accepted version of the poet's name," said the portrayer of Lord Finchley adding beneath his breath. "You silly ass!"

"You say Omar of Khayyám," bellowed Mr. Goble. "Who's running this

show, anyway?"

"Just as you please."

Mr. Goble turned to Wally.

"These actors...." he began, when Mr. Pilkington appeared again at his elbow.

"Mr. Goble! Mr. Goble!"

"What is it now?"

"Omar Khayyám was a Persian poet. His name was Khayyám."

"That wasn't the way I heard it," said Mr. Goble doggedly. "Did you?" he enquired of Wally. "I thought he was born at Khayyám."

"You're probably quite right," said Wally, "but, if so, everybody else has been wrong for a good many years. It's usually supposed that the gentleman's name was Omar Khayyám. Khayyám, Omar J. Born A.D. 1050, educated privately and at Bagdad University. Represented Persia in the Olympic Games of 1072, winning the sitting high-jump and the egg-and-spoon race. The Khayyáms were quite a well-known family in Bagdad, and there was a lot of talk when Omar, who was Mrs. Khayyam's pet son, took to drink and writing poetry. They had had it all fixed

for him to go into his father's date business."

Mr. Goble was impressed. He had a respect for Wally's opinion, for Wally had written "Follow the Girl" and look what a knock-out that had been. He stopped the rehearsal again.

"Go back to that Khayyám speech!" he said interrupting Lord Finchley in mid-sentence.

The actor whispered a hearty English oath beneath his breath. He had been up late last night, and, in spite of the fair weather, he was feeling a trifle on edge.

"' In the words of Omar of Khayyám'...."

Mr. Goble clapped his hands.

"Cut that 'of,'" he said. "The show's too long, anyway."

And, having handled a delicate matter in masterly fashion, he leaned back in his chair and chewed the end off another cigar.

For some minutes after this the rehearsal proceeded smoothly. If Mr. Goble did not enjoy the play, at least he made no criticisms except to Wally. To him he enlarged from time to time on the pain which "The Rose of America" caused him.

"How I ever came to put on junk like this beats me," confessed Mr. Goble frankly.

"You probably saw that there was a good idea at the back of it," suggested Wally. "There is, you know. Properly handled, it's an idea that could be made into a success."

"What would you do with it?"

"Oh, a lot of things," said Wally warily. In his younger and callower days he had sometimes been rash enough to scatter views on the reconstruction of plays broadcast, to find them gratefully absorbed and acted upon and treated as a friendly gift. His affection for Mr. Goble was not so overpowering as to cause him to give him ideas for nothing now.

"Any time you want me to fix it for you, I'll come along. About one and a half per cent of the gross would meet the case, I think."

Mr. Goble faced him, registering the utmost astonishment and horror.

"One and a half per cent for fixing a show like this? Why, darn it, there's hardly anything to do to it! It's--it's in!"

"You called it junk just now."

"Well, all I meant was that it wasn't the sort of thing I cared for myself. The public will eat it. Take it from me, the time is just about ripe for a revival of comic opera."

"This one will want all the reviving you can give it. Better use a pulmotor."

"But that long boob, that Pilkington ... he would never stand for my handing you one and a half per cent."

"I thought you were the little guy who arranged things round here."

"But he's got money in the show."

"Well, if he wants to get any out, he'd better call in somebody to rewrite it. You don't have to engage me if you don't want to. But I know I could make a good job of it. There's just one little twist the thing needs and you would have quite a different piece."

"What's that?" enquired Mr. Goble casually.

"Oh, just a little ... what shall I say? ... a little touch of what-d'you-call-it and a bit of thingummy. You know the sort of thing! That's all it wants."

Mr. Goble gnawed his cigar, baffled.

"You think so, eh?" he said at length.

"And perhaps a suspicion of je-ne-sais-quoi," added Wally.

Mr. Goble worried his cigar, and essayed a new form of attack.

"You've done a lot of work for me," he said. "Good work!"

"Glad you liked it," said Wally.

"You're a good kid. I like having you around. I was half thinking of giving you a show to do this Fall. Corking book. French farce. Ran two years in Paris. But what's the good, if you want the earth?"

"Always useful, the earth. Good thing to have."

"See here, if you'll fix up this show for half of one per cent, I'll give you the other to do."

"You shouldn't slur your words so. For a moment I thought you said 'half of one per cent. One and a half of course you really said.

"If you won't take half, you don't get the other."

"All right," said Wally. "There are lots of other managers in New York. Haven't you seen them popping about? Rich, enterprising men, and all of them love me like a son."

"Make it one per cent," said Mr. Goble, "and I'll see if I can fix it with Pilkington."

"One and a half."

"Oh, damn it, one and a half, then," said Mr. Goble morosely. "What's the good of splitting straws?"

"Forgotten Sports of the Past--Splitting the Straw. All right. If you drop me a line to that effect, legibly signed with your name, I'll wear it next my heart. I shall have to go now. I have a date. Good-bye. Glad everything's settled and everybody's happy."

For some moments after Wally had left, Mr. Goble sat hunched up in his orchestra-chair, smoking sullenly, his mood less sunny than ever. Living in a little world of sycophants, he was galled by the off-hand way in which Wally always treated him. There was something in the latter's manner which seemed to him sometimes almost contemptuous. He regretted the necessity of having to employ him. There was, of course, no real necessity why he should have employed Wally. New York was full of librettists who would have done the work equally well for half the money, but, like most managers, Mr. Goble had the mental processes of

a sheep. "Follow the Girl" was the last outstanding musical success in New York theatrical history: Wally had written it, therefore nobody but Wally was capable of re-writing "The Rose of America." The thing had for Mr. Goble the inevitability of Fate. Except for deciding mentally that Wally had swelled head, there was nothing to be done.

Having decided that Wally had swelled head, and not feeling much better, Mr. Goble concentrated his attention on the stage. A good deal of action had taken place there during the recently concluded business talk, and the unfortunate Lord Finchley was back again, playing another of his scenes. Mr. Goble glared at Lord Finchley. He did not like him, and he did not like the way he was speaking his lines.

The part of Lord Finchley was a non-singing rôle. It was a type part. Otis Pilkington had gone to the straight stage to find an artist, and had secured the not uncelebrated Wentworth Hill, who had come over from London to play in an English comedy which had just closed. The newspapers had called the play thin, but had thought that Wentworth Hill was an excellent comedian. Mr. Hill thought so, too, and it was consequently a shock to his already disordered nerves when a bellow from the auditorium stopped him in the middle of one of his speeches and a rasping voice informed him that he was doing it all wrong.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Hill, quietly but dangerously, stepping to the footlights.

"All wrong!" repeated Mr. Goble.

"Really?" Wentworth Hill, who a few years earlier had spent several terms at Oxford University before being sent down for aggravated disorderliness, had brought little away with him from that seat of learning except the Oxford manner. This he now employed upon Mr. Goble with an icy severity which put the last touch to the manager's fermenting state of mind. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me just how you think that part should be played?"

Mr. Goble marched down the aisle.

"Speak out to the audience," he said, stationing himself by the orchestra pit. "You're turning your head away all the darned time."

"I may be wrong," said Mr. Hill, "but I have played a certain amount, don't you know, in pretty good companies, and I was always under the impression that one should address one's remarks to the person one was speaking to, not deliver a recitation to the gallery. I was taught that that was the legitimate method."

The word touched off all the dynamite in Mr. Goble. Of all things in the theatre he detested most the "legitimate method." His idea of producing was to instruct the cast to come down to the footlights and hand it to 'em. These people who looked up-stage and talked to the

audience through the backs of their necks revolted him.

"Legitimate! That's a hell of a thing to be! Where do you get that legitimate stuff? You aren't playing Ibsen!"

"Nor am I playing a knockabout vaudeville sketch."

"Don't talk back at me!"

"Kindly don't shout at me! Your voice is unpleasant enough without your raising it."

Open defiance was a thing which Mr. Goble had never encountered before, and for a moment it deprived him of breath. He recovered it, however, almost immediately.

"You're fired!"

"On the contrary," said Mr. Hill, "I'm resigning." He drew a green-covered script from his pocket and handed it with an air to the pallid assistant stage-director. Then, more gracefully than ever Freddie Rooke had managed to move down-stage under the tuition of Johnson Miller, he moved up-stage to the exit. "I trust that you will be able to find someone who will play the part according to your ideas!"

"I'll find," bellowed Mr. Goble at his vanishing back, "a chorus-man who'll play it a damned sight better than you!" He waved to the assistant stage-director. "Send the chorus-men on the stage!"

"All the gentlemen of the chorus on the stage, please!" shrilled the assistant stage-director, bounding into the wings like a retriever. "Mr. Goble wants all the chorus-gentlemen on the stage!"

There was a moment, when the seven male members of "The Rose of America" ensemble lined up self-consciously before his gleaming eyes, when Mr. Goble repented of his brave words. An uncomfortable feeling passed across his mind that Fate had called his bluff and that he would not be able to make good. All chorus-men are exactly alike, and they are like nothing else on earth. Even Mr. Goble, anxious as he was to overlook their deficiencies, could not persuade himself that in their ranks stood even an adequate Lord Finchley.

And then, just as a cold reaction from his fervid mood was about to set in, he perceived that Providence had been good to him. There, at the extreme end of the line, stood a young man who, as far as appearance went, was the ideal Lord Finchley--as far as appearance went, a far better Lord Finchley than the late Mr. Hill. He beckoned imperiously.

"You at the end!"

"Me?" said the young man.

"Yes, you. What's your name?"

"Rooke. Frederick Rooke, don't you know."

"You're English, aren't you?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, absolutely!"

"Ever played a part before?"

"Part? Oh, I see what you mean. Well, in amateur theatricals, you know, and all that sort of rot."

His words were music to Mr. Goble's ears. He felt that his Napoleonic action had justified itself by success. His fury left him. If he had been capable of beaming, one would have said that he beamed at Freddie.

"Well, you play the part of Lord Finchley from now on. Come to my office this afternoon for your contract. Clear the stage. We've wasted enough time."

Five minutes later, in the wings, Freddie, receiving congratulations from Nelly Bryant, asserted himself.

"Not the Automat to-day, I think, what? Now that I'm a jolly old star and all that sort of thing, it can't be done. Directly this is over we'll roll round to the Cosmopolis. A slight celebration is indicated, what? Right ho! Rally round, dear heart, rally round!"