

## CHAPTER XVI

### MR. GOBLE PLAYS WITH FATE

#### I

On the boardwalk at Atlantic City, that much-enduring seashore resort which has been the birthplace of so many musical plays, there stands an all-day and all-night restaurant, under the same management and offering the same hospitality as the one in Columbus Circle at which Jill had taken her first meal on arriving in New York. At least, its hospitality is noisy during the waking and working hours of the day; but there are moments when it has an almost cloistral peace, and the customer, abashed by the cold calm of its snowy marble and the silent gravity of the white-robed attendants, unconsciously lowers his voice and tries to keep his feet from shuffling, like one in a temple. The members of the chorus of "The Rose of America," dropping in by ones and twos at six o'clock in the morning about two weeks after the events recorded in the last chapter, spoke in whispers and gave their orders for breakfast in a subdued undertone.

The dress-rehearsal had just dragged its weary length to a close. It is the custom of the dwellers in Atlantic City, who seem to live entirely by pleasure, to attend a species of vaudeville performances--incorrectly termed a sacred concert--on Sunday nights,

and it had been one o'clock in the morning before the concert scenery could be moved out of the theatre and the first act set of "The Rose of America" moved in. And, as by some unwritten law of the drama no dress-rehearsal can begin without a delay of at least an hour and a half, the curtain had not gone up on Mr. Miller's opening chorus till half-past two. There had been dress-parades, conferences, interminable arguments between the stage-director and a mysterious man in shirt-sleeves about the lights, more dress-parades, further conferences, hitches with regard to the sets, and another outbreak of debate on the subject of blues, ambers, and the management of the "spot," which was worked by a plaintive voice, answering to the name of Charlie, at the back of the family circle. But by six o'clock a complete, if ragged, performance had been given, and the chorus, who had partaken of no nourishment since dinner on the previous night, had limped off round the corner for a bite of breakfast before going to bed.

They were a battered and a draggled company, some with dark circles beneath their eyes, others blooming with the unnatural scarlet of the make-up which they had been too tired to take off. The Duchess, haughty to the last, had fallen asleep with her head on the table. The red-headed Babe was lying back in her chair, staring at the ceiling. The Southern girl blinked like an owl at the morning sunshine out on the boardwalk.

The Cherub, whose triumphant youth had brought her almost fresh

through a sleepless night, contributed the only remark made during the interval of waiting for the meal.

"The fascination of a thtage life! Why girls leave home!" She looked at her reflection in the little mirror of her vanity-bag. "It is a face!" she murmured reflectively. "But I should hate to have to go around with it long!"

A sallow young man, with the alertness peculiar to those who work on the night-shifts of restaurants, dumped a tray down on the table with a clatter. The Duchess woke up. Babe took her eyes off the ceiling. The Southern girl ceased to look at the sunshine. Already, at the mere sight of food, the extraordinary recuperative powers of the theatrical worker had begun to assert themselves. In five minutes these girls would be feeling completely restored and fit for anything.

Conversation broke out with the first sip of coffee, and the calm of the restaurant was shattered. Its day had begun.

"It's a great life if you don't weaken," said the Cherub hungrily attacking her omelette. "And the worth is yet to come! I thuppose all you old dears realithe that this show will have to be rewritten from end to end, and we'll be rehearthing day and night all the time we're on the road."

"Why?" Lois Denham spoke with her mouth full. "What's wrong with it?"

The Duchess took a sip of coffee.

"Don't make me laugh!" she pleaded. "What's wrong with it? What's right with it, one would feel more inclined to ask!"

"One would feel thtill more inclined," said the Cherub, "to athk why one was thuch a chump as to let oneself in for this sort of thing when one hears on all sides that waitresses earn thixty dollars a month."

"The numbers are all right," argued Babe. "I don't mean the melodies, but Johnny has arranged some good business."

"He always does," said the Southern girl. "Some more buckwheat cakes, please. But what about the book?"

"I never listen to the book."

The Cherub laughed.

"You're too good to yourself! I listened to it right along, and take it from me it's sad! Of courthe they'll have it fixed. We can't open in New York like this. My professional reputation wouldn't thtand it! Didn't you thee Wally Mason in front, making notes? They've got him down to do the re-writing."

Jill, who had been listening in a dazed way to the conversation, fighting against the waves of sleep which flooded over her, woke up.

"Was Wally--was Mr. Mason there?"

"Sure. Sitting at the back."

Jill could not have said whether she was glad or sorry. She had not seen Wally since that afternoon when they had lunched together at the Cosmopolis, and the rush of the final weeks of rehearsals had given her little opportunity for thinking of him. At the back of her mind had been the feeling that sooner or later she would have to think of him, but for two weeks she had been too tired and too busy to re-examine him as a factor in her life. There had been times when the thought of him had been like the sunshine on a winter day, warming her with almost an impersonal glow in moments of depression. And then some sharp, poignant memory of Derek would come to blot him out.

She came out of her thoughts to find that the talk had taken another turn.

"And the worth of it is," the Cherub was saying, "we shall rehearse all day and give a show every night and work ourselves to the bone, and then, when they're good and ready, they'll fire one of us!"

"That's right!" agreed the Southern girl.

"They couldn't!" Jill cried.

"You wait!" said the Cherub. "They'll never open in New York with thirteen girls. Ike's much too thuperstitious."

"But they wouldn't do a thing like that after we've all worked so hard!"

There was a general burst of sardonic laughter. Jill's opinion of the chivalry of theatrical managers seemed to be higher than that of her more experienced colleagues.

"They'll do anything," the Cherub assured her.

"You don't know the half of it, dearie," scoffed Lois Denham. "You don't know the half of it!"

"Wait till you've been in as many shows as I have," said Babe, shaking her red locks. "The usual thing is to keep a girl slaving her head off all through the road-tour and then fire her before the New York opening."

"But it's a shame! It isn't fair!"

"If one is expecting to be treated fairly," said the Duchess with a

prolonged yawn, "one should not go into the show-business."

And, having uttered this profoundly true maxim, she fell asleep again.

The slumber of the Duchess was the signal for a general move. Her somnolence was catching. The restorative effects of the meal were beginning to wear off. There was a call for a chorus rehearsal at four o'clock, and it seemed the wise move to go to bed and get some sleep while there was time. The Duchess was roused from her dreams by means of a piece of ice from one of the tumblers; bills were paid; and the company poured out, yawning and chattering, into the sunlight of the empty boardwalk.

Jill detached herself from the group, and made her way to a seat facing the sea. Tiredness had fallen upon her like a leaden weight, crushing all the power out of her limbs, and the thought of walking to the boarding-house where, from motives of economy, she was sharing a room with the Cherub, paralysed her.

It was a perfect morning, clear and cloudless, with the warm freshness of a day that means to be hotter later on. The sea sparkled in the sun. Little waves broke lazily on the grey sand. Jill closed her eyes, for the brightness of sun and water was trying; and her thoughts went back to what the Cherub had said.

If Wally was really going to rewrite the play, they would be thrown

together. She would be obliged to meet him, and she was not sure that she was ready to meet him. Still, he would be somebody to talk to on subjects other than the one eternal topic of the theatre, somebody who belonged to the old life. She had ceased to regard Freddie Rooke in this light; for Freddie, solemn with his new responsibilities as a principal, was the most whole-hearted devotee of "shop" in the company. Freddie nowadays declined to consider any subject for conversation that did not have to do with "The Rose of America" in general and his share in it in particular. Jill had given him up, and he had paired off with Nelly Bryant. The two were inseparable. Jill had taken one or two meals with them, but Freddie's professional monologues, of which Nelly seemed never to weary, were too much for her. As a result she was now very much alone. There were girls in the company whom she liked, but most of them had their own intimate friends, and she was always conscious of not being really wanted. She was lonely, and, after examining the matter as clearly as her tired mind would allow, she found herself curiously soothed by the thought that Wally would be near to mitigate her loneliness.

She opened her eyes, blinking. Sleep had crept upon her with an insidious suddenness, and she had almost fallen over on the seat. She was just bracing herself to get up and begin the long tramp to the boarding-house, when a voice spoke at her side.

"Hullo! Good morning!"



Jill looked up.

"Hullo, Wally!"

"Surprised to see me?"

"No. Milly Trevor said she had seen you at the rehearsal last night."

Wally came round the bench and seated himself at her side. His eyes were tired, and his chin dark and bristly.

"Had breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks. Have you?"

"Not yet. How are you feeling?"

"Rather tired."

"I wonder you're not dead. I've been through a good many dress-rehearsals, but this one was the record. Why they couldn't have had it comfortably in New York and just have run through the piece without scenery last night, I don't know, except that in musical comedy it's etiquette always to do the most inconvenient thing. They know perfectly well that there was no chance of getting the scenery into the theatre till the small hours. You must be worn out. Why

aren't you in bed?"

"I couldn't face the walk. I suppose I ought to be going, though."

She half rose, then sank back again. The glitter of the water hypnotized her. She closed her eyes again. She could hear Wally speaking, then his voice grew suddenly faint and far off, and she ceased to fight the delicious drowsiness.

Jill awoke with a start. She opened her eyes, and shut them again at once. The sun was very strong now. It was one of those prematurely warm days of early Spring which have all the languorous heat of late summer. She opened her eyes once more, and found that she was feeling greatly refreshed. She also discovered that her head was resting on Wally's shoulder.

"Have I been asleep?"

Wally laughed.

"You have been having what you might call a nap." He massaged his left arm vigorously. "You needed it. Do you feel more rested now?"

"Good gracious! Have I been squashing your poor arm all the time? Why didn't you move?"

"I was afraid you would fall over. You just shut your eyes and toppled sideways."

"What's the time?"

Wally looked at his watch.

"Just on ten."

"Ten!" Jill was horrified. "Why, I have been giving you cramp for about three hours! You must have had an awful time!"

"Oh, it was all right. I think I dozed off myself. Except that the birds didn't come and cover us with leaves; it was rather like the 'Babes in the Wood.'"

"But you haven't had any breakfast! Aren't you starving?"

"Well, I'm not saying I wouldn't spear a fried egg with some vim if it happened to float past. But there's plenty of time for that. Lots of doctors say you oughtn't to eat breakfast, and Indian fakirs go without food for days at a time in order to develop their souls. Shall I take you back to wherever you're staying? You ought to get a proper sleep in bed."

"Don't dream of taking me. Go off and have something to eat."

"Oh, that can wait. I'd like to see you safely home."

Jill was conscious of a renewed sense of his comfortingness. There was no doubt about it, Wally was different from any other man she had known. She suddenly felt guilty, as if she were obtaining something valuable under false pretences.

"Wally!"

"Hullo?"

"You--you oughtn't to be so good to me!"

"Nonsense! Where's the harm in lending a hand--or, rather, an arm--to a pal in trouble?"

"You know what I mean. I can't ... that is to say ... it isn't as though ... I mean...."

Wally smiled a tired, friendly smile.

"If you're trying to say what I think you're trying to say, don't! We had all that out two weeks ago. I quite understand the position. You mustn't worry yourself about it." He took her arm, and they crossed the boardwalk. "Are we going in the right direction? You lead the way."

I know exactly how you feel. We're old friends, and nothing more. But, as an old friend, I claim the right to behave like an old friend. If an old friend can't behave like an old friend, how can an old friend behave? And now we'll rule the whole topic out of the conversation. But perhaps you're too tired for conversation?"

"Oh, no."

"Then I will tell you about the sad death of young Mr. Pilkington."

"What!"

"Well, when I say death, I use the word in a loose sense. The human giraffe still breathes, and I imagine, from the speed with which he legged it back to his hotel when we parted, that he still takes nourishment. But really he is dead. His heart is broken. We had a conference after the dress-rehearsal, and our friend Mr. Goble told him in no uncertain words--in the whole course of my experience I have never heard words less uncertain--that his damned rotten high-brow false-alarm of a show--I am quoting Mr. Goble--would have to be rewritten by alien hands. And these are them! On the right, alien right hand. On the left, alien left hand. Yes, I am the instrument selected for the murder of Pilkington's artistic aspirations. I'm going to rewrite the show. In fact, I have already rewritten the first act and most of the second. Goble foresaw this contingency and told me to get busy two weeks ago, and I've been working hard ever since. We

shall start rehearsing the new version to-morrow and open in Baltimore next Monday with practically a different piece. And it's going to be a pippin, believe me, said our hero modestly. A gang of composers has been working in shifts for two weeks, and, by chucking out nearly all of the original music, we shall have a good score. It means a lot of work for you, I'm afraid. All the business of the numbers will have to be re-arranged."

"I like work," said Jill. "But I'm sorry for Mr. Pilkington."

"He's all right. He owns seventy per cent of the show. He may make a fortune. He's certain to make a comfortable sum. That is, if he doesn't sell out his interest in pique--or dudgeon, if you prefer it. From what he said at the close of the proceedings, I fancy he would sell out to anybody who asked him. At least, he said that he washed his hands of the piece. He's going back to New York this afternoon--won't even wait for the opening. Of course, I'm sorry for the poor chap in a way, but he had no right, with the excellent central idea which he got, to turn out such a rotten book. Oh, by the way!"

"Yes?"

"Another tragedy! Unavoidable, but pathetic. Poor old Freddie! He's out!"

"Oh, no!"

"Out!" repeated Wally firmly.

"But didn't you think he was good last night?"

"He was awful! But that isn't why. Goble wanted his part rewritten as a Scotchman, so as to get McAndrew, the fellow who made such a hit last season in 'Hoots, Mon!' That sort of thing is always happening in musical comedy. You have to fit parts to suit whatever good people happen to be available at the moment. My heart bleeds for Freddie, but what can one do? At any rate he isn't so badly off as a fellow was in one of my shows. In the second act he was supposed to have escaped from an asylum, and the management, in a passion for realism, insisted that he should shave his head. The day after he shaved it, they heard that a superior comedian was disengaged and fired him. It's a ruthless business."

"The girls were saying that one of us would be dismissed."

"Oh, I shouldn't think that's likely."

"I hope not."

"So do I. What are we stopping for?"

Jill had halted in front of a shabby-looking house, one of those depressing buildings which spring up overnight at seashore resorts and start to decay the moment the builders have left them.

"I live here."

"Here?" Wally looked at her in consternation. "But...."

Jill smiled.

"We working-girls have got to economize. Besides, it's quite comfortable--fairly comfortable--inside, and it's only for a week."

She yawned. "I believe I'm falling asleep again. I'd better hurry in and go to bed. Good-bye, Wally dear. You've been wonderful. Mind you go and get a good breakfast."

## II

When Jill arrived at the theatre at four o'clock for the chorus rehearsal, the expected blow had not fallen. No steps had apparently been taken to eliminate the thirteenth girl whose presence in the cast preyed on Mr. Goble's superstitious mind. But she found her colleagues still in a condition of pessimistic foreboding. "Wait!" was the gloomy watchword of "The Rose of America" chorus.



The rehearsal passed off without event. It lasted until six o'clock, when Jill, the Cherub, and two or three of the other girls went to snatch a hasty dinner before returning to the theatre to make up. It was not a cheerful meal. Reaction had set in after the over-exertion of the previous night, and it was too early for first-night excitement to take its place. Everybody, even the Cherub, whose spirits seldom failed her, was depressed, and the idea of an overhanging doom had grown. It seemed now to be merely a question of speculating on the victim, and the conversation gave Jill, as the last addition to the company, and so the cause of swelling the ranks of the chorus to the unlucky number, a feeling of guilt. She was glad when it was time to go back to the theatre.

The moment she and her companions entered the dressing-room, it was made clear to them that the doom had fallen. In a chair in the corner, all her pretence and affectation swept away in a flood of tears, sat the unhappy Duchess, the centre of a group of girls anxious to console, but limited in their ideas of consolation to an occasional pat on the back and an offer of a fresh pocket-handkerchief.

"It's tough, honey!" somebody was saying as Jill came in.

Somebody else said it was fierce, and a third girl declared it to be the limit. A fourth girl, well-meaning but less helpful than she would have liked to be, was advising the victim not to worry.

The story of the disaster was brief and easily told. The Duchess, sailing in at the stage-door, had paused at the letterbox to see if Cuthbert, her faithful auto-salesman, had sent her a good-luck telegram. He had, but his good wishes were unfortunately neutralized by the fact that the very next letter in the box was one from the management, crisp and to the point, informing the Duchess that her services would not be required that night or thereafter. It was the subtle meanness of the blow that roused the indignation of "The Rose of America" chorus, the cunning villainy with which it had been timed.

"Poor Mae, if she'd opened to-night, they'd have had to give her two weeks' notice or her salary. But they can fire her without a cent just because she's only been rehearsing and hasn't given a show!"

The Duchess burst into fresh flood of tears.

"Don't you worry, honey!" advised the well-meaning girl who would have been in her element looking in on Job with Bildad the Shuhite and his friends. "Don't you worry!"

"It's tough!" said the girl who had adopted that form of verbal consolation.

"It's fierce!" said the girl who preferred that adjective.

The other girl, with an air of saying something new, repeated her

statement that it was the limit. The Duchess cried forlornly throughout. She had needed this engagement badly. Chorus salaries are not stupendous, but it is possible to save money by means of them during a New York run, especially if you have spent three years in a milliner's shop and can make your own clothes, as the Duchess, in spite of her air of being turned out by Fifth Avenue modistes, could and did. She had been looking forward, now that this absurd piece was to be rewritten by someone who knew his business and had a good chance of success, to putting by just those few dollars that make all the difference when you are embarking on married life. Cuthbert, for all his faithfulness, could not hold up the financial end of the establishment unsupported for at least another eighteen months; and this disaster meant that the wedding would have to be postponed again. So the Duchess, abandoning that aristocratic manner criticized by some of her colleagues as "up-stage" and by others as "Ritz-y," sat in her chair and consumed pocket-handkerchiefs as fast as they were offered to her.

Jill had been the only girl in the room who had spoken no word of consolation. This was not because she was not sorry for the Duchess. She had never been sorrier for any one in her life. The pathos of that swift descent from haughtiness to misery had bitten deep into her sensitive heart. But she revolted at the idea of echoing the banal words of the others. Words were no good, she thought, as she set her little teeth and glared at an absent management--a management just about now presumably distending itself with a luxurious dinner at one

of the big hotels. Deeds were what she demanded. All her life she had been a girl of impulsive action, and she wanted to act impulsively now. She was in much the same Berserk mood as had swept her, raging, to the defence of Bill the parrot on the occasion of his dispute with Henry of London. The fighting spirit which had been drained from her by the all-night rehearsal had come back in full measure.

"What are you going to do?" she cried. "Aren't you going to do something?"

Do? The members of "The Rose of America" ensemble looked doubtfully at one another. Do? It had not occurred to them that there was anything to be done. These things happened, and you regretted them, but as for doing anything, well, what could you do?

Jill's face was white and her eyes were flaming. She dominated the roomful of girls like a little Napoleon. The change in her startled them. Hitherto they had always looked on her as rather an unusually quiet girl. She had always made herself unobtrusively pleasant to them all. They all liked her. But they had never suspected her of possessing this militant quality. Nobody spoke, but there was a general stir. She had flung a new idea broadcast, and it was beginning to take root. Do something? Well, if it came to that, why not?

"We ought all to refuse to go on to-night unless they let her go on!" Jill declared.

The stir became a movement. Enthusiasm is catching, and every girl is at heart a rebel. And the idea was appealing to the imagination.

Refuse to give a show on the opening night! Had a chorus ever done such a thing? They trembled on the verge of making history.

"Strike?" quavered somebody at the back.

"Yes, strike!" cried Jill.

"Hooray! That's the thtuff!" shouted the Cherub, and turned the scale. She was a popular girl, and her adherence to the Cause confirmed the doubters. "Thtrike!"

"Strike! Strike!"

Jill turned to the Duchess, who had been gaping amazedly at the demonstration. She no longer wept, but she seemed in a dream.

"Dress and get ready to go on," Jill commanded. "We'll all dress and get ready to go on. Then I'll go and find Mr. Goble and tell him what we mean to do. And, if he doesn't give in, we'll stay here in this room, and there won't be a performance!"

Mr. Goble, with a Derby hat on the back of his head and an unlighted cigar in the corner of his mouth, was superintending the erection of the first act set when Jill found him. He was standing with his back to the safety-curtain glowering at a blue canvas, supposed to represent one of those picturesque summer skies which you get at the best places on Long Island. Jill, coming down-stage from the staircase that led to the dressing-room, interrupted his line of vision.

"Get out of the light!" bellowed Mr. Goble, always a man of direct speech, adding "Damn you!" for good measure.

"Please move to one side," interpreted the stage-director. "Mr. Goble is looking at the set."

The head carpenter, who completed the little group, said nothing. Stage carpenters always say nothing. Long association with fussy directors has taught them that the only policy to pursue on opening nights is to withdraw into the silence, wrap themselves up in it, and not emerge until the enemy has grown tired and gone off to worry somebody else.

"It don't look right!" said Mr. Goble, cocking his head on one side.

"I see what you mean, Mr. Goble," assented the stage-director obsequiously. "It has perhaps a little too much--er--not quite

enough--yes, I see what you mean!"

"It's too--damn--BLUE!" rasped Mr. Goble, impatient of the vacillating criticism. "That's what's the matter with it."

The head carpenter abandoned the silent policy of a lifetime. He felt impelled to utter. He was a man who, when not at the theatre, spent most of his time in bed, reading all-fiction magazines; but it so happened that once, last summer, he had actually seen the sky; and he considered that this entitled him to speak almost as a specialist on the subject.

"The sky is blue!" he observed huskily. "Yessir! I seen it!"

He passed into the silence again, and, to prevent a further lapse, stopped up his mouth with a piece of chewing-gum.

Mr. Goble regarded the silver-tongued orator wrathfully. He was not accustomed to chatterboxes arguing with him like this. He would probably have said something momentous and crushing, but at this point Jill intervened.

"Mr. Goble."

The manager swung round on her.

"What is it?"

It is sad to think how swiftly affection can change to dislike in this world. Two weeks before, Mr. Goble had looked on Jill with favour. She had seemed good in his eyes. But that refusal of hers to lunch with him, followed by a refusal some days later to take a bit of supper somewhere, had altered his views on feminine charm. If it had been left to him, as most things were about this theatre, to decide which of the thirteen girls should be dismissed, he would undoubtedly have selected Jill. But at this stage in the proceedings there was the unfortunate necessity of making concessions to the temperamental Johnson Miller. Mr. Goble was aware that the dance-director's services would be badly needed in the re-arrangement of the numbers during the coming week or so, and he knew that there were a dozen managers waiting eagerly to welcome him if he threw up his present job, so he had been obliged to approach him in quite a humble spirit and enquire which of his female chorus could be most easily spared. And, as the Duchess had a habit of carrying her haughty languor on to the stage and employing it as a substitute for the chorea which was Mr. Miller's ideal, the dance-director had chosen her. To Mr. Goble's dislike of Jill, therefore, was added now something of the fury of the baffled potentate.

"Jer want?" he demanded.

"Mr. Goble is extremely busy," said the stage-director. "Extremely."



A momentary doubt as to the best way of approaching her subject had troubled Jill on her way downstairs, but, now that she was on the battlefield confronting the enemy, she found herself cool, collected, and full of a cold rage which steeled her nerves without confusing her mind.

"I came to ask you to let Mae D'Arcy go on to-night."

"Who the hell's Mae D'Arcy?" Mr. Goble broke off to bellow at a scene-shifter who was depositing the wall of Mrs. Stuyvesant van Dyke's Long Island residence too far down stage. "Not there, you fool! Higher up!"

"You gave her notice this evening," said Jill.

"Well, what about it?"

"We want you to withdraw it."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The other girls and myself."

Mr. Goble jerked his head so violently that the Derby hat flew off, to be picked up, dusted, and restored by the stage-director.

"Oh, so you don't like it? Well, you know what you can do...."

"Yes," said Jill, "we do. We are going to strike."

"What?"

"If you don't let Mae go on, we shan't go on. There won't be a performance to-night, unless you like to give one without a chorus."

"Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps. But we're quite unanimous."

Mr. Goble, like most theatrical managers, was not good at words over two syllables.

"You're what?"

"We've talked it over, and we've all decided to do what I said."

Mr. Goble's hat shot off again, and gambolled away into the wings, with the stage-director bounding after it like a retriever.

"Whose idea's this?" demanded Mr. Goble. His eyes were a little foggy, for his brain was adjusting itself but slowly to the novel situation.

"Mine."

"Oh, yours! I thought as much!"

"Well," said Jill, "I'll go back and tell them that you will not do what we ask. We will keep our make-up on in case you change your mind."

She turned away.

"Come back!"

Jill proceeded toward the staircase. As she went, a husky voice spoke in her ear.

"Go to it, kid! You're all right!"

The head-carpenter had broken his Trappist vows twice in a single evening, a thing which had not happened to him since the night three years ago, when, sinking wearily into a seat in a dark corner for a bit of a rest, he found that one of his assistants had placed a pot of red paint there.

IV

To Mr. Goble, fermenting and full of strange oaths, entered Johnson Miller. The dance-director was always edgy on first nights, and during the foregoing conversation had been flitting about the stage like a white-haired moth. His deafness had kept him in complete ignorance that there was anything untoward afoot, and he now approached Mr. Goble with his watch in his hand.

"Eight twenty-five," he observed. "Time those girls were on stage."

Mr. Goble, glad of a concrete target for his wrath, cursed him in about two hundred and fifty rich and well-selected words.

"Huh?" said Miller, hand to ear.

Mr. Goble repeated the last hundred and eleven words, the pick of the bunch.

"Can't hear!" said Mr. Miller regretfully. "Got a cold."

The grave danger that Mr. Goble, a thick-necked man, would undergo some sort of a stroke was averted by the presence of mind of the stage-director, who, returning with the hat, presented it like a bouquet to his employer, and then, his hands being now unoccupied, formed them into a funnel and through this flesh-and-blood megaphone endeavoured to impart the bad news.

"The girls say they won't go on!"

Mr. Miller nodded.

"I said it was time they were on."

"They're on strike!"

"It's not," said Mr. Miller austerely, "what they like, it's what they're paid for. They ought to be on stage. We should be ringing up in two minutes."

The stage-director drew another breath, then thought better of it. He had a wife and children, and, if dadma went under with apoplexy, what became of the home, civilization's most sacred product? He relaxed the muscles of his diaphragm, and reached for pencil and paper.

Mr. Miller inspected the message, felt for his spectacle-case, found it, opened it, took out his glasses, replaced the spectacle-case, felt for his handkerchief, polished the glasses, replaced the handkerchief, put the glasses on, and read. A blank look came into his face.

"Why?" he enquired.

The stage-director, with a nod of the head intended to imply that he

must be patient and all would come right in the future, recovered the paper, and scribbled another sentence. Mr. Miller perused it.

"Because Mae D'Arcy has got her notice?" he queried, amazed. "But the girl can't dance a step."

The stage-director, by means of a wave of the hand, a lifting of both eyebrows, and a wrinkling of the nose, replied that the situation, unreasonable as it might appear to the thinking man, was as he had stated and must be faced. What, he enquired--through the medium of a clever drooping of the mouth and a shrug of the shoulders--was to be done about it?

Mr. Miller remained for a moment in meditation.

"I'll go and talk to them," he said.

He flitted off, and the stage-director leaned back against the asbestos curtain. He was exhausted, and his throat was in agony, but nevertheless he was conscious of a feeling of quiet happiness. His life had been lived in the shadow of the constant fear that some day Mr. Goble might dismiss him. Should that disaster occur, he felt there was always a future for him in the movies.

Scarcely had Mr. Miller disappeared on his peace-making errand, when there was a noise like a fowl going through a quickset hedge, and Mr.

Saltzburg, brandishing his baton as if he were conducting an unseen orchestra, plunged through the scenery at the left upper entrance and charged excitedly down the stage. Having taken his musicians twice through the overture, he had for ten minutes been sitting in silence, waiting for the curtain to go up. At last, his emotional nature cracking under the strain of this suspense, he had left his conductor's chair and plunged down under the stage by way of the musician's bolthole to ascertain what was causing the delay.

"What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it?" enquired Mr. Saltzburg. "I wait and wait and wait and wait and wait.... We cannot play the overture again. What is it? What has happened?"

Mr. Goble, that overwrought soul, had betaken himself to the wings where he was striding up and down with his hands behind his back, chewing his cigar. The stage-director braced himself once more to the task of explanation.

"The girls have struck!"

Mr. Saltzburg blinked through his glasses.

"The girls?" he repeated blankly.

"Oh, damn it!" cried the stage-director, his patience at last giving way. "You know what a girl is, don't you?"

"They have what?"

"Struck! Walked out on us! Refused to go on!"

Mr. Saltzburg reeled under the blow.

"But it is impossible! Who is to sing the opening chorus?"

In the presence of one to whom he could relieve his mind without fear of consequences, the stage-director became savagely jocular.

"That's all arranged," he said. "We're going to dress the carpenters in skirts. The audience won't notice anything wrong."

"Should I speak to Mr. Goble?" queried Mr. Saltzburg doubtfully.

"Yes, if you don't value your life," returned the stage-director.

Mr. Saltzburg pondered.

"I will go and speak to the childrun," he said. "I will talk to them. They know me! I will make them be reasonable."

He bustled off in the direction taken by Mr. Miller, his coat-tails flying behind him. The stage-director, with a tired sigh, turned to



face Wally, who had come in through the iron pass-door from the auditorium.

"Hullo!" said Wally cheerfully. "Going strong? How's everybody at home? Fine? So am I! By the way, am I wrong or did I hear something about a theatrical entertainment of some sort here to-night?" He looked about him at the empty stage. In the wings, on the prompt side, could be discerned the flannel-clad forms of the gentlemanly members of the male ensemble, all dressed up for Mrs. Stuyvesant van Dyke's tennis party. One or two of the principals were standing perplexedly in the lower entrance. The O.P. side had been given over by general consent to Mr. Goble for his perambulations. Every now and then he would flash into view through an opening in the scenery. "I understood that to-night was the night for the great revival of comic opera. Where are the comics, and why aren't they opping?"

The stage-director repeated his formula once more.

"The girls have struck!"

"So have the clocks," said Wally. "It's past nine."

"The chorus refuse to go on."

"No, really! Just artistic loathing of the rotten piece, or is there some other reason?"

"They're sore because one of them has been given her notice, and they say they won't give a show unless she's taken back. They've struck. That Mariner girl started it."

"She did!" Wally's interest became keener. "She would!" he said approvingly. "She's a heroine!"

"Little devil! I never liked that girl!"

"Now there," said Wally, "is just the point on which we differ. I have always liked her, and I've known her all my life. So, shipmate, if you have any derogatory remarks to make about Miss Mariner, keep them where they belong--there!" He prodded the other sharply in the stomach. He was smiling pleasantly, but the stage-director, catching his eye, decided that his advice was good and should be followed. It is just as bad for the home if the head of the family gets his neck broken as if he succumbs to apoplexy.

"You surely aren't on their side?" he said.

"Me!" said Wally. "Of course I am. I'm always on the side of the down-trodden and oppressed. If you know of a dirtier trick than firing a girl just before the opening, so that they won't have to pay her two weeks' salary, mention it. Till you do, I'll go on believing that it is the limit. Of course I'm on the girls' side. I'll make them a

speech if they want me to, or head the procession with a banner if they are going to parade down the boardwalk. I'm for 'em, Father Abraham, a hundred thousand strong. And then a few! If you want my considered opinion, our old friend Goble has asked for it and got it. And I'm glad--glad--glad, if you don't mind my quoting Pollyanna for a moment. I hope it chokes him!"

"You'd better not let him hear you talking like that!"

"Au contraire, as we say in the Gay City, I'm going to make a point of letting him hear me talk like that! Adjust the impression that I fear any Goble in shining armour, because I don't. I propose to speak my mind to him. I would beard him in his lair, if he had a beard. Well, I'll clean-shave him in his lair. That will be just as good. But hist! whom have we here? Tell me, do you see the same thing I see?"

Like the vanguard of a defeated army, Mr. Saltzburg was coming dejectedly across the stage.

"Well?" said the stage-director.

"They would not listen to me," said Mr. Saltzburg brokenly. "The more I talked the more they did not listen!" He winced at a painful memory. "Miss Trevor stole my baton, and then they all lined up and sang the 'Star-Spangled Banner'!"

"Not the words?" cried Wally incredulously. "Don't tell me they knew the words!"

"Mr. Miller is still up there, arguing with them. But it will be of no use. What shall we do?" asked Mr. Saltzburg helplessly. "We ought to have rung up half an hour ago. What shall we do-oo-oo?"

"We must go and talk to Goble," said Wally. "Something has got to be settled quick. When I left, the audience was getting so impatient that I thought he was going to walk out on us. He's one of those nasty, determined-looking men. So come along!"

Mr. Goble, intercepted as he was about to turn for another walk up-stage, eyed the deputation sourly and put the same question that the stage-director had put to Mr. Saltzburg.

"Well?"

Wally came briskly to the point.

"You'll have to give in," he said, "or else go and make a speech to the audience, the burden of which will be that they can have their money back by applying at the box-office. These Joans of Arc have got you by the short hairs!"

"I won't give in!"

"Then give out!" said Wally. "Or pay out, if you prefer it. Trot along and tell the audience that the four dollars fifty in the house will be refunded."

Mr. Goble gnawed his cigar.

"I've been in the show business fifteen years...."

"I know. And this sort of thing has never happened to you before. One gets new experiences."

Mr. Goble cocked his cigar at a fierce angle, and glared at Wally. Something told him that Wally's sympathies were not wholly with him.

"They can't do this sort of thing to me!" he growled.

"Well, they are doing it to someone, aren't they," said Wally, "and, if it's not you, who is it?"

"I've a damned good mind to fire them all!"

"A corking idea! I can't see a single thing wrong with it except that it would hang up the production for another five weeks and lose you your bookings and cost you a week's rent of this theatre for nothing and mean having all the dresses made over and lead to all your

principals going off and getting other jobs. These trifling things apart, we may call the suggestion a bright one."

"You talk too damn much!" said Mr. Goble, eyeing him with distaste.

"Well, go on, you say something. Something sensible."

"It is a very serious situation...." began the stage-director.

"Oh, shut up!" said Mr. Goble.

The stage-director subsided into his collar.

"I cannot play the overture again," protested Mr. Saltzburg. "I cannot!"

At this point Mr. Miller appeared. He was glad to see Mr. Goble. He had been looking for him, for he had news to impart.

"The girls," said Mr. Miller, "have struck! They won't go on!"

Mr. Goble, with the despairing gesture of one who realizes the impotence of words, dashed off for his favourite walk up stage. Wally took out his watch.

"Six seconds and a bit," he said approvingly, as the manager returned.

"A very good performance. I should like to time you over the course in running-kit."

The interval for reflection, brief as it had been, had apparently enabled Mr. Goble to come to a decision.

"Go," he said to the stage-director, "and tell 'em that fool of a D'Arcy girl can play. We've got to get that curtain up."

"Yes, Mr. Goble."

The stage-director galloped off.

"Get back to your place," said the manager to Mr. Saltzburg, "and play the overture again."

"Again!"

"Perhaps they didn't hear it the first two times," said Wally.

Mr. Goble watched Mr. Saltzburg out of sight. Then he turned to Wally.

"That damned Mariner girl was at the bottom of this! She started the whole thing! She told me so. Well, I'll settle her! She goes to-morrow!"

"Wait a minute," said Wally. "Wait one minute! Bright as it is, that idea is out!"

"What the devil has it got to do with you?"

"Only this, that if you fire Miss Mariner, I take that neat script which I've prepared and I tear it into a thousand fragments. Or nine hundred. Anyway, I tear it. Miss Mariner opens in New York, or I pack up my work and leave."

Mr. Goble's green eyes glowed.

"Oh, you're stuck on her, are you?" he sneered. "I see!"

"Listen, dear heart," said Wally, gripping the manager's arm, "I can see that you are on the verge of introducing personalities into this very pleasant little chat. Resist the impulse! Why not let your spine stay where it is instead of having it kicked up through your hat? Keep to the main issue. Does Miss Mariner open in New York or does she not?"

There was a tense silence. Mr. Goble permitted himself a swift review of his position. He would have liked to do many things to Wally, beginning with ordering him out of the theatre, but prudence restrained him. He wanted Wally's work. He needed Wally in his business: and, in the theatre, business takes precedence of personal



feelings.

"All right!" he growled reluctantly.

"That's a promise," said Wally. "I'll see that you keep it." He looked over his shoulder. The stage was filled with gaily-coloured dresses. The mutineers had returned to duty. "Well, I'll be getting along. I'm rather sorry we agreed to keep clear of personalities, because I should have liked to say that, if ever they have a skunk-show at Madison Square Garden, you ought to enter--and win the blue ribbon. Still, of course, under our agreement my lips are sealed, and I can't even hint at it. Good-bye. See you later, I suppose?"

Mr. Goble, giving a creditable imitation of a living statue, was plucked from his thoughts by a hand upon his arm. It was Mr. Miller, whose unfortunate ailment had prevented him from keeping abreast of the conversation.

"What did he say?" enquired Mr. Miller, interested. "I didn't hear what he said!"

Mr. Goble made no effort to inform him.