

CHAPTER XVII

THE COST OF A ROW

I

Otis Pilkington had left Atlantic City two hours after the conference which had followed the dress-rehearsal, firmly resolved never to go near "The Rose of America" again. He had been wounded in his finest feelings. There had been a moment, when Mr. Goble had given him the choice between having the piece rewritten and cancelling the production altogether, when he had inclined to the heroic course. But for one thing Mr. Pilkington would have defied the manager, refused to allow his script to be touched, and removed the play from his hands. That one thing was the fact that, up to the day of the dress-rehearsal, the expenses of the production had amounted to the appalling sum of thirty-two thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine dollars, sixty-eight cents, all of which had to come out of Mr. Pilkington's pocket. The figures, presented to him in a neatly typewritten column stretching over two long sheets of paper, had stunned him. He had had no notion that musical plays cost so much. The costumes alone had come to ten thousand six hundred and sixty-three dollars and fifty cents, and somehow that odd fifty cents annoyed Otis Pilkington as much as anything on the list. A dark suspicion that Mr. Goble, who had seen to all the executive end of the business, had a secret arrangement with the costumer whereby he received a private rebate, deepened his gloom. Why, for ten

thousand six hundred and sixty-three dollars and fifty cents you could dress the whole female population of New York State and have a bit left over for Connecticut. So thought Mr. Pilkington, as he read the bad news in the train. He only ceased to brood upon the high cost of costuming when in the next line but one there smote his eye an item of four hundred and ninety-eight dollars for "Clothing." Clothing! Weren't costumes clothing? Why should he have to pay twice over for the same thing? Mr. Pilkington was just raging over this, when something lower down in the column caught his eye. It was the words:--

Clothing 187.45

At this Otis Pilkington uttered a stifled cry, so sharp and so anguished that an old lady in the next seat, who was drinking a glass of milk, dropped it and had to refund the railway company thirty-five cents for breakages. For the remainder of the journey she sat with one eye warily on Mr. Pilkington, waiting for his next move.

This adventure quieted Otis Pilkington down, if it did not soothe him. He returned blushing to a perusal of his bill of costs, nearly every line of which contained some item that infuriated and dismayed him. "Shoes" (\$213.50) he could understand, but what on earth was "Academy. Rehl. \$105.50"? What was "Cuts ... \$15"? And what in the name of everything infernal was this item for "Frames," in which mysterious luxury he had apparently indulged to the extent of ninety-four dollars and fifty cents? "Props" occurred on the list no fewer than seventeen

times. Whatever his future, at whatever poor-house he might spend his declining years, he was supplied with enough props to last his lifetime.

Otis Pilkington stared blankly at the scenery that flitted past the train windows. (Scenery! There had been two charges for scenery! "Friedmann, Samuel ... Scenery ... \$3711" and "Unitt and Wickes ... Scenery ... \$2120"). He was suffering the torments of the ruined gamester at the roulette-table. Thirty-two thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine dollars, sixty-eight cents! And he was out of pocket ten thousand in addition from the cheque he had handed over two days ago to Uncle Chris as his share of the investment of starting Jill in the motion-pictures. It was terrible! It deprived one of the power of thought.

The power of thought, however, returned to Mr. Pilkington almost immediately, for, remembering suddenly that Roland Trevis had assured him that no musical production, except one of those elaborate girl-shows with a chorus of ninety, could possibly cost more than fifteen thousand dollars at an outside figure, he began to think about Roland Trevis, and continued to think about him until the train pulled into the Pennsylvania Station.

For a week or more the stricken financier confined himself mostly to his rooms, where he sat smoking cigarettes, gazing at Japanese prints, and trying not to think about "props" and "rehl." Then, gradually, the

almost maternal yearning to see his brain-child once more, which can never be wholly crushed out of a young dramatist, returned to him--faintly at first, then getting stronger by degrees till it could no longer be resisted. Otis Pilkington, having instructed his Japanese valet to pack a few simple necessaries in a suit-case, took a cab to the Grand Central Station and caught an afternoon train for Rochester, where his recollection of the route planned for the tour told him "The Rose of America" would now be playing.

Looking into his club on the way, to cash a cheque, the first person he encountered was Freddie Rooke.

"Good gracious!" said Otis Pilkington. "What are you doing here?"

Freddie looked up dully from his reading. The abrupt stoppage of his professional career--his life-work, one might almost say--had left Freddie at a very loose end; and so hollow did the world seem to him at the moment, so uniformly futile all its so-called allurements, that, to pass the time, he had just been trying to read the National Geographic Magazine.

"Hullo!" he said. "Well, might as well be here as anywhere, what?" he replied to the other's question.

"But why aren't you playing?"

"They sacked me! They've changed my part to a bally Scotchman! Well, I mean to say, I couldn't play a bally Scotchman!"

Mr. Pilkington groaned in spirit. Of all the characters in his musical fantasy on which he prided himself, that of Lord Finchley was his pet. And he had been burked, murdered, blotted out, in order to make room for a bally Scotchman.

"The character's called 'The McWhustle of McWhustle' now!" said Freddie sombrely.

The McWhustle of McWhustle! Mr. Pilkington almost abandoned his trip to Rochester on receiving this devastating piece of information.

"He comes on in Act One in kilts!"

"In kilts! At Mrs. Stuyvesant van Dyke's garden-party! On Long Island!"

"It isn't Mrs. Stuyvesant van Dyke any longer, either," said Freddie.

"She's been changed to the wife of a pickle manufacturer."

"A pickle manufacturer!"

"Yes. They said it ought to be a comedy part."

If agony had not caused Mr. Pilkington to clutch for support at the back of a chair, he would undoubtedly have wrung his hands.

"But it was a comedy part!" he wailed. "It was full of the subtlest, most delicate satire on Society. They were delighted with it at Newport! Oh, this is too much! I shall make a strong protest! I shall insist on these parts being kept as I wrote them! I shall.... I must be going at once, or I shall miss my train." He paused at the door. "How was business in Baltimore?"

"Rotten!" said Freddie, and returned to his National Geographic Magazine.

Otis Pilkington tottered into his cab. He was shattered by what he had heard. They had massacred his beautiful play and, doing so had not even made a success of it by their own sordid commercial lights. Business at Baltimore had been rotten! That meant more expense, further columns of figures with "frames" and "rehl." in front of them! He staggered into the station.

"Hey!" cried the taxi-driver.

Otis Pilkington turned.

"Sixty-five cents, mister, if you please! Forgetting I'm not your private shovoor, wasn't you?"

Mr. Pilkington gave him a dollar. Money--money! Life was just one long round of paying out and paying out.

II

The day which Mr. Pilkington had selected for his visit to the provinces was a Tuesday. "The Rose of America" had opened at Rochester on the previous night, after a week at Atlantic City in its original form and a week at Baltimore in what might be called its second incarnation. Business had been bad in Atlantic City and no better in Baltimore, and a meagre first-night house at Rochester had given the piece a cold reception, which had put the finishing touches to the depression of the company in spite of the fact that the Rochester critics, like those of Baltimore, had written kindly of the play. One of the maxims of the theatre is that "out-of-town notices don't count," and the company had refused to be cheered by them.

It is to be doubted, however, if even crowded houses would have aroused much response from the principals and chorus of "The Rose of America." For two weeks without a break they had been working under forced draught, and they were weary in body and spirit. The new principals had had to learn parts in exactly half the time usually given for that purpose, and the chorus, after spending five weeks assimilating one set of steps and groupings, had been compelled to

forget them and rehearse an entirely new set. From the morning after the first performance at Atlantic City, they had not left the theatre except for sketchy half-hour meals.

Jill, standing listlessly in the wings while the scene-shifters arranged the Second Act set, was aware of Wally approaching from the direction of the pass-door.

"Miss Mariner, I believe?" said Wally. "I suppose you know you look perfectly wonderful in that dress? All Rochester's talking about it, and there is some idea of running excursion trains from Troy and Utica. A great stir it has made!"

Jill smiled. Wally was like a tonic to her during these days of overwork. He seemed to be entirely unaffected by the general depression, a fact which he attributed himself to the happy accident of being in a position to sit back and watch the others toil. But in reality Jill knew that he was working as hard as any one. He was working all the time, changing scenes, adding lines, tinkering with lyrics, smoothing over principals whose nerves had become strained by the incessant rehearsing, keeping within bounds Mr. Goble's passion for being the big noise about the theatre. His cheerfulness was due to the spirit that was in him, and Jill appreciated it. She had come to feel very close to Wally since the driving rush of making over "The Rose of America" had begun.

"They seemed quite calm to-night," she said. "I believe half of them were asleep."

"They're always like that in Rochester. They cloak their deeper feelings. They wear the mask. But you can tell from the glassy look in their eyes that they are really seething inwardly. But what I came round about was--(a)--to give you this letter...."

Jill took the letter, and glanced at the writing. It was from Uncle Chris. She placed it on the axe over the fire-buckets for perusal later.

"The man at the box-office gave it to me," said Wally, "when I looked in there to find out how much money there was in the house to-night. The sum was so small that he had to whisper it."

"I'm afraid the piece isn't a success."

"Nonsense! Of course it is! We're doing fine. That brings me to section (b) of my discourse. I met poor old Pilkington in the lobby, and he said exactly what you have just said, only at greater length."

"Is Mr. Pilkington here?"

"He appears to have run down on the afternoon train to have a look at the show. He is catching the next train back to New York! Whenever I

meet him, he always seems to be dashing off to catch the next train back to New York! Poor chap! Have you ever done a murder? If you haven't, don't! I know exactly what it feels like, and it feels rotten! After two minutes' conversation with Pilkington, I could sympathize with Macbeth when he chatted with Banquo. He said I had killed his play. He nearly wept, and he drew such a moving picture of a poor helpless musical fantasy being lured into a dark alley by thugs and there slaughtered that he almost had me in tears too. I felt like a beetle-browed brute with a dripping knife and hands imbrued with innocent gore."

"Poor Mr. Pilkington!"

"Once more you say exactly what he said, only more crisply. I comforted him as well as I could, told him all was for the best and so on, and he flung the box-office receipts in my face and said that the piece was as bad a failure commercially as it was artistically. I couldn't say anything to that, seeing what a house we've got to-night, except to bid him look out to the horizon where the sun will shortly shine. In other words, I told him that business was about to buck up and that later on he would be going about the place with a sprained wrist from clipping coupons. But he refused to be cheered, cursed me some more for ruining his piece, and ended by begging me to buy his share of it cheap."

"You aren't going to?"

"No, I am not--but simply and solely for the reason that, after that fiasco in London, I raised my right hand--thus--and swore an oath that never, as long as I lived, would I again put up a cent for a production, were it the most obvious cinch on earth. I'm gun-shy. But if he does happen to get hold of any one with a sporting disposition and a few thousands to invest, that person will make a fortune. This piece is going to be a gold-mine."

Jill looked at him in surprise. With anybody else but Wally she would have attributed this confidence to author's vanity. But with Wally, she felt, the fact that the piece, as played now, was almost entirely his own work did not count. He viewed it dispassionately, and she could not understand why, in the face of half-empty houses, he should have such faith in it.

"But what makes you think so? We've been doing awfully badly so far."

Wally nodded.

"And we shall do awfully badly in Syracuse the last half of this week. And why? For one thing, because the show isn't a show at all at present. Why should people flock to pay for seats for what are practically dress-rehearsals of an unknown play? Half the principals have had to get up in their parts in two weeks, and they haven't had time to get anything out of them. They are groping for their lines all

the time. The girls can't let themselves go in the numbers, because they are wondering if they are going to remember the steps. The show hasn't had time to click together yet. It's just ragged. Take a look at it in another two weeks! I know! I don't say musical comedy is a very lofty form of art, but still there's a certain amount of science about it. If you go in for it long enough, you learn the tricks, and take it from me that, if you have a good cast and some catchy numbers it's almost impossible not to have a success. We've got an excellent cast now, and the numbers are fine. I tell you--as I tried to tell Pilkington, only he wouldn't listen--that this show is all right. There's a fortune in it for somebody. But I suppose Pilkington is now sitting in the smoking-car of an east-bound train, trying to get the porter to accept his share in the piece instead of a tip!"

If Otis Pilkington was not actually doing that, he was doing something like it. Sunk in gloom, he bumped up and down on an uncomfortable seat, wondering why he had ever taken the trouble to make the trip to Rochester. He had found exactly what he had expected to find, a mangled caricature of his brain-child playing to a house half empty and wholly indifferent. The only redeeming feature, he thought vindictively, as he remembered what Roland Trevis had said about the cost of musical productions, was the fact that the new numbers were undoubtedly better than those which his collaborator had originally supplied.

And "The Rose of America," after a disheartening Wednesday matinee and

a not much better reception on the Wednesday night, packed its baggage and moved to Syracuse, where it failed just as badly. Then for another two weeks it wandered on from one small town to another, up and down New York State and through the doldrums of Connecticut, tacking to and fro like a storm-battered ship, till finally the astute and discerning citizens of Hartford welcomed it with such a reception that hardened principals stared at each other in a wild surmise, wondering if these things could really be: and a weary chorus forgot its weariness and gave encore after encore with a snap and vim which even Mr. Johnson Miller was obliged to own approximated to something like it. Nothing to touch the work of his choruses of the old days, of course, but nevertheless fair, quite fair.

The spirits of the company revived. Optimism reigned. Principals smiled happily and said they had believed in the thing all along. The ladies and gentlemen of the ensemble chattered contentedly of a year's run in New York. And the citizens of Hartford fought for seats, and, if they could not get seats, stood up at the back.

Of these things Otis Pilkington was not aware. He had sold his interest in the piece two weeks ago for ten thousand dollars to a lawyer acting for some client unknown, and was glad to feel that he had saved something out of the wreck.