

CHAPTER XVIII

JILL RECEIVES NOTICE

I

The violins soared to one last high note; the bassoon uttered a final moan; the pensive person at the end of the orchestra-pit just under Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim's box, whose duty it was to slam the drum at stated intervals, gave that much-enduring instrument a concluding wallop; and, laying aside his weapons, allowed his thoughts to stray in the direction of cooling drinks. Mr. Saltzburg lowered the baton which he had stretched quivering towards the roof and sat down and mopped his forehead. The curtain fell on the first act of "The Rose of America," and simultaneously tremendous applause broke out from all over the Gotham Theatre, which was crammed from floor to roof with that heterogeneous collection of humanity which makes up the audience of a New York opening performance. The applause continued like the breaking of waves on a stony beach. The curtain rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell again. An usher, stealing down the central aisle, gave to Mr. Saltzburg an enormous bouquet of American Beauty roses, which he handed to the prima donna, who took it with a brilliant smile and a bow, nicely combining humility with joyful surprise. The applause, which had begun to slacken, gathered strength

again. It was a superb bouquet, nearly as big as Mr. Saltzburg himself. It had cost the prima donna close on a hundred dollars that morning at Thorley's, but it was worth every cent of the money.

The house-lights went up. The audience began to move up the aisles to stretch its legs and discuss the piece during the intermission. There was a general babble of conversation. Here, a composer who had not got an interpolated number in the show was explaining to another composer who had not got an interpolated number in the show the exact source from which a third composer who had got an interpolated number in the show had stolen the number which he had got interpolated. There, two musical comedy artists who were temporarily resting were agreeing that the prima donna was a dear thing but that, contrary as it was to their life-long policy to knock anybody, they must say that she was beginning to show the passage of years a trifle and ought to be warned by some friend that her career as an ingénue was a thing of the past. Dramatic critics, slinking in twos and threes into dark corners, were telling each other that "The Rose of America" was just another of those things but it had apparently got over. The general public was of the opinion that it was a knock-out.

"Otie, darling," said Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagram, leaning her ample shoulder on Uncle Chris' perfectly fitting sleeve and speaking across him to young Mr. Pilkington, "I do congratulate you, dear. It's perfectly delightful! I don't know when I have enjoyed a musical piece so much. Don't you think it's perfectly darling, Major Selby?"

"Capital!" agreed that suave man of the world, who had been bored as near extinction as makes no matter. "Congratulate you, my boy!"

"You clever, clever thing!" said Mrs. Peagrim, skittishly striking her nephew on the knee with her fan. "I'm proud to be your aunt! Aren't you proud to know him, Mr. Rooke?"

The fourth occupant of the box awoke with a start from the species of stupor into which he had been plunged by the spectacle of the McWhustle of McWhustle in action. There had been other dark moments in Freddie's life. Once, back in London, Parker had sent him out into the heart of the West End without his spats and he had not discovered their absence till he was half-way up Bond Street. On another occasion, having taken on a stranger at squash for a quid a game, he had discovered too late that the latter was an ex-public-school champion. He had felt gloomy when he had learned of the breaking-off of the engagement between Jill Mariner and Derek Underhill, and sad when it had been brought to his notice that London was giving Derek the cold shoulder in consequence. But never in his whole career had he experienced such gloom and such sadness as had come to him that evening while watching this unspeakable person in kilts murder that part that should have been his. And the audience, confound them, had roared with laughter at every damn silly thing the fellow had said!

"Eh?" he replied. "Oh, yes, rather, absolutely!"

"We're all proud of you, Otie darling," proceeded Mrs. Peagrim.

"The piece is a wonderful success. You will make a fortune out of it. And just think, Major Selby, I tried my best to argue the poor, dear boy out of putting it on! I thought it was so rash to risk his money in a theatrical venture. But then," said Mrs. Peagrim in extenuation, "I had only seen the piece when it was done at my house at Newport, and of course it really was rather dreadful nonsense then! I might have known that you would change it a great deal before you put it on in New York. As I always say, plays are not written, they are rewritten! Why, you have improved this piece a hundred per cent, Otie! I wouldn't know it was the same play!"

She slapped him smartly once more with her fan, ignorant of the gashes she was inflicting. Poor Mr. Pilkington was suffering twin torments, the torture of remorse and the agonized jealousy of the unsuccessful artist. It would have been bad enough to have to sit and watch a large audience rocking in its seats at the slap-stick comedy which Wally Mason had substituted for his delicate social satire: but, had this been all, at least he could have consoled himself with the sordid reflection that he, as owner of the piece, was going to make a lot of money out of it. Now, even this material balm was denied him. He had sold out, and he was feeling like the man who parts for a song with shares in an apparently goldless gold mine, only to read in the papers next morning that a new reef has been located. Into each life some rain must fall. Quite a shower was falling now into young Mr.

Pilkington's.

"Of course," went on Mrs. Peagrim, "when the play was done at my house, it was acted by amateurs. And you know what amateurs are! The cast to-night is perfectly splendid. I do think that Scotchman is the most killing creature! Don't you think he is wonderful, Mr. Rooke?"

We may say what we will against the upper strata of Society, but it cannot be denied that breeding tells. Only by falling back for support on the traditions of his class and the solid support of a gentle up-bringing was the Last of the Rookes able to crush down the words that leaped to his lips and to substitute for them a politely conventional agreement. If Mr. Pilkington was feeling like a too impulsive seller of gold mines, Freddie's emotions were akin to those of the Spartan boy with the fox under his vest. Nothing but Winchester and Magdalen could have produced the smile which, though twisted and confined entirely to his lips, flashed on to his face and off again at his hostess' question.

"Oh, rather! Priceless!"

"Wasn't that part an Englishman before?" asked Mrs. Peagrim. "I thought so. Well, it was a stroke of genius changing it. This Scotchman is too funny for words. And such an artist!"

Freddie rose shakily. One can stand just so much.

"Think," he mumbled, "I'll be pushing along and smoking a cigarette."

He groped his way to the door.

"I'll come with you, Freddie my boy," said Uncle Chris, who felt an imperative need of five minutes' respite from Mrs. Peagrim. "Let's get out into the air for a moment. Uncommonly warm it is here."

Freddie assented. Air was what he felt he wanted most.

Left alone in the box with her nephew, Mrs. Peagrim continued for some moments in the same vein, innocently twisting the knife in the open wound. It struck her from time to time that darling Otie was perhaps a shade unresponsive, but she put this down to the nervous strain inseparable from a first night of a young author's first play.

"Why," she concluded, "you will make thousands and thousands of dollars out of this piece. I am sure it is going to be another 'Merry Widow.'"

"You can't tell from a first night audience," said Mr. Pilkington sombrely, giving out a piece of theatrical wisdom he had picked up at rehearsals.

"Oh, but you can. It's so easy to distinguish polite applause from the

real thing. No doubt many of the people down here have friends in the company or other reasons for seeming to enjoy the play, but look how the circle and the gallery were enjoying it! You can't tell me that that was not genuine. They love it. How hard," she proceeded commiseratingly, "you must have worked, poor boy, during the tour on the road to improve the piece so much! I never liked to say so before but even you must agree with me now that that original version of yours, which was done down at Newport, was the most terrible nonsense! And how hard the company must have worked too! Otie," cried Mrs. Peagrim, aglow with the magic of a brilliant idea, "I will tell you what you must really do. You must give a supper and dance to the whole company on the stage to-morrow night after the performance."

"What!" cried Otis Pilkington, startled out of his lethargy by this appalling suggestion. Was he, the man who, after planking down thirty-two thousand eight hundred and fifty, nine dollars, sixty-eight cents for "props" and "frames" and "rehl," had sold out for a paltry ten thousand, to be still further victimized?

"They do deserve it, don't they, after working so hard?"

"It's impossible," said Otis Pilkington vehemently. "Out of the question."

"But, Otie, darling, I was talking to Mr. Mason when he came down to Newport to see the piece last summer, and he told me that the

management nearly always gives a supper to the company, especially if they have had a lot of extra rehearsing to do."

"Well, let Goble give them a supper if he wants to."

"But you know that Mr. Goble, though he has his name on the programme as the manager, has really nothing to do with it. You own the piece, don't you?"

For a moment Mr. Pilkington felt an impulse to reveal all, but refrained. He knew his Aunt Olive too well. If she found out that he had parted at a heavy loss with this valuable property, her whole attitude towards him would change--or, rather it would revert to her normal attitude, which was not unlike that of a severe nurse to a weak-minded child. Even in his agony there had been a certain faint consolation, due to the entirely unwonted note of respect in the voice with which she had addressed him since the fall of the curtain. He shrank from forfeiting this respect, unentitled though he was to it.

"Yes," he said in his precise voice. "That, of course, is so."

"Well, then!" said Mrs. Peagrim.

"But it seems so unnecessary! And think what it would cost."

This was a false step. Some of the reverence left Mrs. Peagrim's

voice, and she spoke a little coldly. A gay and gallant spender herself, she had often had occasion to rebuke a tendency to over-parsimony in her nephew.

"We must not be mean, Otie!" she said.

Mr. Pilkington keenly resented her choice of pronouns. "We" indeed! Who was going to foot the bill? Both of them, hand in hand, or he alone, the chump, the boob, the easy mark who got this sort of thing wished on him!

"I don't think it would be possible to get the stage for a supper-party," he pleaded, shifting his ground. "Goble wouldn't give it to us."

"As if Mr. Goble would refuse you anything after you have written a wonderful success for this theatre! And isn't he getting his share of the profits? Directly after the performance you must go round and ask him. Of course he will be delighted to give you the stage. I will be hostess," said Mrs. Peagrim radiantly. "And now, let me see, whom shall we invite?"

Mr. Pilkington stared gloomily at the floor, too bowed down by his weight of cares to resent the "we," which had plainly come to stay. He was trying to estimate the size of the gash which this preposterous entertainment would cleave in the Pilkington bank-roll. He doubted if

it was possible to go through with it under five hundred dollars; and, if, as seemed only too probable, Mrs. Peagrim took the matter in hand and gave herself her head, it might get into four figures.

"Major Selby, of course," said Mrs. Peagrim musingly, with a cooing note in her voice. Long since had that polished man of affairs made a deep impression upon her. "Of course Major Selby, for one. And Mr. Rooke. Then there are one or two of my friends who would be hurt if they were left out. How about Mr. Mason? Isn't he a friend of yours?"

Mr. Pilkington snorted. He had endured much and was prepared to endure more, but he drew the line at squandering his money on the man who had sneaked up behind his brain-child with a hatchet and chopped its precious person into little bits.

"He is not a friend of mine," he said stiffly, "and I do not wish him to be invited!"

Having attained her main objective, Mrs. Peagrim was prepared to yield minor points.

"Very well, if you do not like him," she said. "But I thought he was quite an intimate of yours. It was you who asked me to invite him to Newport last summer."

"Much," said Mr. Pilkington coldly, "has happened since last summer."

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Peagrim again. "Then we will not include Mr. Mason. Now, directly the curtain has fallen, Otie dear, pop right round and find Mr. Goble and tell him what you want."

II

It is not only twin-souls in this world who yearn to meet each other. Between Otis Pilkington and Mr. Goble there was little in common, yet, at the moment when Otis set out to find Mr. Goble, the thing which Mr. Goble desired most in the world was an interview with Otis. Since the end of the first act, the manager had been in a state of mental upheaval. Reverting to the gold-mine simile again, Mr. Goble was in the position of a man who has had a chance of purchasing such a mine and now, learning too late of the discovery of the reef, is feeling the truth of the poet's dictum that "of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" The electric success of "The Rose of America" had stunned Mr. Goble; and realizing, as he did, that he might have bought Otis Pilkington's share dirt cheap at almost any point of the preliminary tour, he was having a bad half hour with himself. The only ray in the darkness which brooded on his indomitable soul was the thought that it might still be possible, by getting hold of Mr. Pilkington before the notices appeared, and shaking his head sadly and talking about the misleading hopes which young authors so often draw from an enthusiastic first-night reception

and impressing upon him that first-night receptions do not deceive your expert who has been fifteen years in the show-business and mentioning gloomily that he had heard a coupla the critics roasting the show to beat the band ... by doing all these things, it might still be possible to depress Mr. Pilkington's young enthusiasm and induce him to sell his share at a sacrifice price to a great-hearted friend who didn't think the thing would run a week but was willing to buy as a sporting speculation, because he thought Mr. Pilkington a good kid, and after all these shows that flop in New York sometimes have a chance on the road.

Such were the meditations of Mr. Goble, and, on the final fall of the curtain, amid unrestrained enthusiasm on the part of the audience, he had despatched messengers in all directions with instructions to find Mr. Pilkington and conduct him to the presence. Meanwhile, he waited impatiently on the empty stage.

The sudden advent of Wally Mason, who appeared at this moment, upset Mr. Goble terribly. Wally was a factor in the situation which he had not considered. An infernal, tactless fellow, always trying to make mischief and upset honest merchants, Wally, if present at the interview with Otis Pilkington, would probably try to act in restraint of trade and would blurt out some untimely truth about the prospects of the piece. Not for the first time, Mr. Goble wished Wally a sudden stroke of apoplexy.

"Went well, eh?" said Wally amiably. He did not like Mr. Goble, but on the first night of a successful piece personal antipathies may be sunk. Such was his effervescent good humour at the moment that he was prepared to treat Mr. Goble as a man and a brother.

"H'm!" replied Mr. Goble doubtfully, paving the way.

"What are you h'ming about?" demanded Wally, astonished. "The thing's a riot."

"You never know," responded Mr. Goble in the minor key.

"Well!" Wally stared. "I don't know what more you want. The audience sat up on its hind legs and squealed, didn't they?"

"I've an idea," said Mr. Goble, raising his voice as the long form of Mr. Pilkington crossed the stage towards them, "that the critics will roast it. If you ask me," he went on loudly, "it's just the sort of show the critics will pan the life out of. I've been fifteen years in the...."

"Critics!" cried Wally. "Well, I've just been talking to Alexander of the Times, and he said it was the best musical piece he had ever seen and that all the other men he had talked to thought the same."

Mr. Goble turned a distorted face to Mr. Pilkington. He wished that

Wally would go. But Wally, he reflected, bitterly, was one of those men who never go. He faced Mr. Pilkington and did the best he could.

"Of course it's got a chance," he said gloomily. "Any show has got a chance! But I don't know.... I don't know...."

Mr. Pilkington was not interested in the future prospects of "The Rose of America." He had a favour to ask, and he wanted to ask it, have it refused if possible, and get away. It occurred to him that, by substituting for the asking of a favour a peremptory demand, he might save himself a thousand dollars.

"I want the stage after the performance to-morrow night, for a supper to the company," he said brusquely.

He was shocked to find Mr. Goble immediately complaisant.

"Why, sure," said Mr. Goble readily. "Go as far as you like!" He took Mr. Pilkington by the elbow and drew him up-stage, lowering his voice to a confidential undertone. "And now, listen," he said, "I've something I want to talk to you about. Between you and I and the lamp-post, I don't think this show will last a month in New York. It don't add up right! There's something all wrong about it."

Mr. Pilkington assented with an emphasis which amazed the manager. "I quite agree with you! If you had kept it the way it was

originally...."

"Too late for that!" sighed Mr. Goble, realizing that his star was in the ascendant. He had forgotten for the moment that Mr. Pilkington was an author. "We must make the best of a bad job! Now, you're a good kid and I wouldn't like you to go around town saying that I had let you in. It isn't business, maybe, but, just because I don't want you to have any kick coming, I'm ready to buy your share of the thing and call it a deal. After all, it may get money on the road. It ain't likely, but there's a chance, and I'm willing to take it. Well, listen, I'm probably robbing myself, but I'll give you fifteen thousand if you want to sell."

A hated voice spoke at his elbow.

"I'll make you a better offer than that," said Wally. "Give me your share of the show for three dollars in cash and I'll throw in a pair of sock-suspenders and an Ingersoll. Is it a go?"

Mr. Goble regarded him balefully.

"Who told you to butt in?" he enquired sourly.

"Conscience!" replied Wally. "Old Henry W. Conscience! I refuse to stand by and see the slaughter of the innocents. Why don't you wait till he's dead before you skin him!" He turned to Mr. Pilkington.

"Don't you be a fool!" he said earnestly. "Can't you see the thing is the biggest hit in years? Do you think Jesse James here would be offering you a cent for your share if he didn't know there was a fortune in it? Do you imagine...?"

"It is immaterial to me," interrupted Otis Pilkington loftily, "what Mr. Goble offers. I have already sold my interest!"

"What!" cried Mr. Goble.

"When?" cried Wally.

"I sold it half-way through the road-tour," said Mr. Pilkington, "to a lawyer, acting on behalf of a client whose name I did not learn."

In the silence which followed this revelation, another voice spoke.

"I should like to speak to you for a moment, Mr. Goble, if I may." It was Jill, who had joined the group unperceived.

Mr. Goble glowered at Jill, who met his gaze composedly.

"I'm busy!" snapped Mr. Goble. "See me to-morrow!"

"I would prefer to see you now."

"You would prefer!" Mr. Goble waved his hands despairingly, as if calling on heaven to witness the persecution of a good man.

Jill exhibited a piece of paper stamped with the letter-heading of the management.

"It's about this," she said. "I found it in the box as I was going out."

"What's that?"

"It seems to be a fortnight's notice."

"And that," said Mr. Goble, "is what it is!"

Wally uttered an exclamation.

"Do you mean to say...?"

"Yes, I do!" said the manager, turning on him. He felt that he had out-manoeuvred Wally. "I agreed to let her open in New York, and she's done it, hasn't she? Now she can get out. I don't want her. I wouldn't have her if you paid me. She's a nuisance in the company, always making trouble, and she can go."

"But I would prefer not to go," said Jill.

"You would prefer!" The phrase infuriated Mr. Goble. "And what has what you would prefer got to do with it?"

"Well, you see," said Jill, "I forgot to tell you before, but I own the piece!"

III

Mr. Goble's jaw fell. He had been waving his hands in another spacious gesture, and he remained frozen with outstretched arms, like a semaphore. This evening had been a series of shocks for him, but this was the worst shock of all.

"You--what!" he stammered.

"I own the piece," repeated Jill. "Surely that gives me authority to say what I want done and what I don't want done."

There was a silence, Mr. Goble, who was having difficulty with his vocal chords, swallowed once or twice. Wally and Mr. Pilkington stared dumbly. At the back of the stage, a belated scene-shifter, homeward bound, was whistling as much as he could remember of the refrain of a popular song.

"What do you mean you own the piece?" Mr. Goble at length gurgled.

"I bought it."

"You bought it?"

"I bought Mr. Pilkington's share through a lawyer for ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars! Where did you get ten thousand dollars?" Light broke upon Mr. Goble. The thing became clear to him. "Damn it!" he cried. "I might have known you had some man behind you! You'd never have been so darned fresh if you hadn't had some John in the background, paying the bills! Well, of all the...."

He broke off abruptly, not because he had said all that he wished to say, for he had only touched the fringe of his subject, but because at this point Wally's elbow smote him in the parts about the third button of his waistcoat and jarred all the breath out of him.

"Be quiet!" said Wally dangerously. He turned to Jill. "Jill, you don't mind telling me how you got ten thousand dollars, do you?"

"Of course not, Wally. Uncle Chris sent it to me. Do you remember giving me a letter from him at Rochester? The cheque was in that."

Wally stared.

"Your uncle! But he hasn't any money!"

"He must have made it somehow."

"But he couldn't! How could he?"

Otis Pilkington suddenly gave tongue. He broke in on them with a loud noise that was half a snort and half a yell. Stunned by the information that it was Jill who had bought his share in the piece, Mr. Pilkington's mind had recovered slowly and then had begun to work with a quite unusual rapidity. During the preceding conversation he had been doing some tense thinking, and now he saw all.

"It's a swindle! It's a deliberate swindle!" shrilled Mr. Pilkington.

The tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles flashed sparks. "I've been made a fool of! I've been swindled! I've been robbed!"

Jill regarded him with wide eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean!"

"I certainly do not! You were perfectly willing to sell the piece."

"I'm not talking about that! You know what I mean! I've been robbed!"

Wally snatched at his arm as it gyrated past him in a gesture of anguish which rivalled the late efforts in that direction of Mr. Goble, who was now leaning against the safety-curtain trying to get his breath back.

"Don't be a fool," said Wally curtly. "Talk sense! You know perfectly well that Miss Mariner wouldn't swindle you."

"She may not have been in it," conceded Mr. Pilkington. "I don't know whether she was or not. But that uncle of hers swindled me out of ten thousand dollars! The smooth old crook!"

"Don't talk like that about Uncle Chris!" said Jill, her eyes flashing. "Tell me what you mean."

"Yes, come on, Pilkington," said Wally grimly. "You've been scattering some pretty serious charges about. Let's hear what you base them on. Be coherent for a couple of seconds."

Mr. Goble filled his depleted lungs.

"If you ask me...." he began.

"We don't," said Wally curtly. "This has nothing to do with you. Well," he went on, "we're waiting to hear what this is all about."

Mr. Pilkington gulped. Like most men of weak intellect who are preyed on by the wolves of the world, he had ever a strong distaste for admitting that he had been deceived. He liked to regard himself as a shrewd young man who knew his way about and could take care of himself.

"Major Selby," he said, adjusting his spectacles, which emotion had caused to slip down his nose, "came to me a few weeks ago with a proposition. He suggested the formation of a company to start Miss Mariner in the motion-pictures."

"What!" cried Jill.

"In the motion-pictures," repeated Mr. Pilkington. "He wished to know if I cared to advance any capital towards the venture. I thought it over carefully and decided that I was favourably disposed towards the scheme. I...." Mr. Pilkington gulped again. "I gave him a cheque for ten thousand dollars!"

"Of all the fools!" said Mr. Goble with a sharp laugh. He caught Wally's eye and subsided once more.

Mr. Pilkington's fingers strayed agitatedly to his spectacles.

"I may have been a fool," he cried shrilly, "though I was perfectly willing to risk the money had it been applied to the object for which I gave it. But when it comes to giving ten thousand dollars just to have it paid back to me in exchange for a very valuable piece of theatrical property ... my own money ... handed back to me...!"

Words failed Mr. Pilkington.

"I've been deliberately swindled!" he added, after a moment, harking back to the main motive.

Jill's heart was like lead. She could not doubt for an instant the truth of what the victim had said. Woven into every inch of the fabric, plainly hall-marked on its surface, she could perceive the signature of Uncle Chris. If he had come and confessed to her himself, she could not have been more certain that he had acted precisely as Mr. Pilkington had charged. There was that same impishness, that same bland unscrupulousness, that same pathetic desire to do her a good turn however it might affect anybody else which, if she might compare the two things, had caused him to pass her off on unfortunate Mr. Mariner of Brookport as a girl of wealth with tastes in the direction of real estate.

Wally was not so easily satisfied.

"You've no proof whatever...."

Jill shook her head.

"It's true, Wally. I know Uncle Chris. It must be true."

"But, Jill...!"

"It must be. How else could Uncle Chris have got the money?"

Mr. Pilkington, much encouraged by this ready acquiescence in his theories, got under way once more.

"The man's a swindler! A swindler! He's robbed me! I have been robbed! He never had any intention of starting a motion-picture company. He planned it all out...!"

Jill cut into the babble of his denunciations. She was sick at heart, and she spoke almost listlessly.

"Mr. Pilkington!" The victim stopped. "Mr. Pilkington, if what you say is true, and I'm afraid there is no doubt that it is, the only thing I can do is to give you back your property. So will you please try to understand that everything is just as it was before you gave my uncle the money. You've got back your ten thousand dollars and you've got back your piece, so there's nothing more to talk about."

Mr. Pilkington, dimly realizing that the financial aspect of the affair had been more or less satisfactorily adjusted, was nevertheless conscious of a feeling that he was being thwarted. He had much more to say about Uncle Chris and his methods of doing business, and it irked him to be cut short like this.

"Yes, but I do not think.... That's all very well, but I have by no means finished...."

"Yes, you have," said Wally.

"There's nothing more to talk about," repeated Jill. "I'm sorry this should have happened, but you've nothing to complain about now, have you? Good night."

And she turned quickly away, and walked towards the door.

"But I hadn't finished!" wailed Mr. Pilkington, clutching at Wally. He was feeling profoundly aggrieved. If it is bad to be all dressed up and no place to go, it is almost worse to be full of talk and to have no one to talk it to. Otis Pilkington had at least another twenty minutes of speech inside him on the topic of Uncle Chris, and Wally was the nearest human being with a pair of ears.

Wally was in no mood to play the part of confidant. He pushed Mr.

Pilkington earnestly in the chest and raced after Jill. Mr.

Pilkington, with the feeling that the world was against him, tottered back into the arms of Mr. Goble, who had now recovered his breath and was ready to talk business.

"Have a good cigar," said Mr. Goble, producing one. "Now, see here, let's get right down to it. If you'd care to sell out for twenty thousand...."

"I would not care to sell out for twenty thousand!" yelled the overwrought Mr. Pilkington. "I wouldn't sell out for a million! You're a swindler! You want to rob me! You're a crook!"

"Yes, yes," assented Mr. Goble gently. "But, all joking aside, suppose I was to go up to twenty-five thousand...?" He twined his fingers lovingly in the slack of Mr. Pilkington's coat. "Come now! You're a good kid I shall we say twenty-five thousand?"

"We will not say twenty-five thousand! Let me go!"

"Now, now, now!" pleaded Mr. Goble. "Be sensible! Don't get all worked up! Say, do have a good cigar!"

"I won't have a good cigar!" shouted Mr. Pilkington.

He detached himself with a jerk, and stalked with long strides up the

stage. Mr. Goble watched him go with a lowering gaze. A heavy sense of the unkindness of fate was oppressing Mr. Goble. If you couldn't gyp a bone-headed amateur out of a piece of property, whom could you gyp? Mr. Goble sighed. It hardly seemed to him worth while going on.

IV

Out in the street Wally had overtaken Jill, and they faced one another in the light of a street lamp. Forty-first Street at midnight is a quiet oasis. They had it to themselves.

Jill was pale, and she was breathing quickly, but she forced a smile.

"Well, Wally," she said. "My career as a manager didn't last long, did it?"

"What are you going to do?"

Jill looked down the street.

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose I shall have to start trying to find something."

"But...."

Jill drew him suddenly into the dark alley-way leading to the stage-door of the Gotham Theatre's nearest neighbour, and, as she did so, a long, thin form, swathed in an overcoat and surmounted by an opera-hat, flashed past.

"I don't think I could have gone through another meeting with Mr. Pilkington," said Jill. "It wasn't his fault, and he was quite justified, but what he said about Uncle Chris rather hurt."

Wally, who had ideas of his own similar to those of Mr. Pilkington on the subject of Uncle Chris and had intended to express them, prudently kept them unspoken.

"I suppose," he said, "there is no doubt...?"

"There can't be. Poor Uncle Chris! He is like Freddie. He means well!"

There was a pause. They left the alley and walked down the street.

"Where are you going now?" asked Wally.

"I'm going home."

"Where's home?"

"Forty-ninth Street. I live in a boarding-house there."

A sudden recollection of the boarding-house at which she had lived in Atlantic City smote Wally, and it turned the scale. He had not intended to speak, but he could not help himself.

"Jill!" he cried. "It's no good. I must say it! I want to get you out of all this. I want to take care of you. Why should you go on living this sort of life, when.... Why won't you let me...?"

He stopped. Even as he spoke, he realized the futility of what he was saying. Jill was not a girl to be won with words.

They walked on in silence for a moment. They crossed Broadway, noisy with night traffic, and passed into the stillness on the other side.

"Wally," said Jill at last.

She was looking straight in front of her. Her voice was troubled.

"Yes?"

Jill hesitated.

"Wally, you wouldn't want me to marry you if you knew you weren't the only man in the world that mattered to me, would you?"

They had reached Sixth Avenue before Wally replied.

"No!" he said.

For an instant, Jill could not have said whether the feeling that shot through her like the abrupt touching of a nerve was relief or disappointment. Then suddenly she realized that it was disappointment. It was absurd to her to feel disappointed, but at that moment she would have welcomed a different attitude in him. If only this problem of hers could be taken forcefully out of her hands, what a relief it would be. If only Wally, masterfully insistent, would batter down her hesitations and grab her, knock her on the head and carry her off like a caveman, care less about her happiness and concentrate on his own, what a solution it would be.... But then he wouldn't be Wally.... Nevertheless, Jill gave a little sigh. Her new life had changed her already. It had blunted the sharp edge of her independence. To-night she was feeling the need of some one to lean on--some one strong and cosy and sympathetic who would treat her like a little girl and shield her from all the roughness of life. The fighting spirit had gone out of her, and she was no longer the little warrior facing the world with a brave eye and a tilted chin. She wanted to cry and be petted.

"No!" said Wally again. There had been the faintest suggestion of a doubt when he had spoken the word before, but now it shot out like a bullet. "And I'll tell you why. I want you--and, if you married me feeling like that, it wouldn't be you. I want Jill, the whole Jill,

and nothing but Jill, and, if I can't have that, I'd rather not have anything. Marriage isn't a motion-picture close-up with slow fade-out on the embrace. It's a partnership, and what's the good of a partnership if your heart's not in it? It's like collaborating with a man you dislike.... I believe you wish sometimes--not often, perhaps, but when you're feeling lonely and miserable--that I would pester and bludgeon you into marrying me.... What's the matter?"

Jill had started. It was disquieting to have her thoughts read with such accuracy.

"Nothing," she said.

"It wouldn't be any good," Wally went on, "because it wouldn't be me. I couldn't keep that attitude up, and I know I should hate myself for ever having tried it. There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to help you, though I know it's no use offering to do anything. You're a fighter, and you mean to fight your own battle. It might happen that, if I kept after you and badgered you and nagged you, one of these days, when you were feeling particularly all alone in the world and tired of fighting for yourself, you might consent to marry me. But it wouldn't do. Even if you reconciled yourself to it, it wouldn't do. I suppose the cave-woman sometimes felt rather relieved when everything was settled for her with a club, but I'm sure the caveman must have had a hard time ridding himself of the thought that he had behaved like a cad and taken a mean advantage. I don't

want to feel like that. I couldn't make you happy if I felt like that. Much better to have you go on regarding me as a friend ... knowing that, if ever your feelings do change, that I am right there, waiting...."

"But by that time your feelings will have changed!"

Wally laughed.

"Never!"

"You'll meet some other girl...."

"I've met every girl in the world! None of them will do!" The lightness came back into Wally's voice. "I'm sorry for the poor things, but they won't do! Take 'em away! There's only one girl in the world for me--oh, confound it! why is it that one always thinks in song-titles! Well, there it is. I'm not going to bother you. We're pals. And, as a pal, may I offer you my bank-roll?"

"No!" said Jill. She smiled up at him. "I believe you would give me your coat if I asked you for it!"

Wally stopped.

"Do you want it? Here you are!"

"Wally, behave! There's a policeman looking at you!"

"Oh, well, if you won't! It's a good coat, all the same."

They turned the corner and stopped before a brown-stone house, with a long ladder of untidy steps running up to the front door.

"Is this where you live?" Wally asked. He looked at the gloomy place disapprovingly. "You do choose the most awful places!"

"I don't choose them. They're thrust on me. Yes, this is where I live. If you want to know the exact room, it's the third window up there over the front door. Well, good night."

"Good night," said Wally. He paused. "Jill."

"Yes?"

"I know it's not worth mentioning, and it's breaking out agreement to mention it, but you do understand, don't you?"

"Yes, Wally dear, I understand."

"I'm round the corner, you know, waiting! And if you ever do change, all you've got to do is just to come to me and say 'It's all

right!'...."

Jill laughed a little shakily.

"That doesn't sound very romantic!"

"Not sound romantic? If you can think of any three words in the language that sound more romantic, let me have them! Well, never mind how they sound, just say them, and watch the result! But you must get to bed. Good night."

"Good night, Wally."

She passed in through the dingy door. It closed behind her, and Wally stood for some moments staring at it with a gloomy repulsion. He thought he had never seen a dingier door.

Then he started to walk back to his apartment. He walked very quickly, with clenched hands. He was wondering if after all there was not something to be said for the methods of the caveman when he went a-wooing. Twinges of conscience the caveman may have had when all was over, but at least he had established his right to look after the woman he loved.