

CHAPTER XX

DEREK LOSES ONE BIRD AND SECURES ANOTHER

It is safest for the historian, if he values accuracy, to wait till a thing has happened before writing about it. Otherwise he may commit himself to statements which are not borne out by the actual facts. Mrs. Peagrim, recording in advance the success of her party at the Gotham Theatre, had done this. It is true that she was a "radiant and vivacious hostess," and it is possible, her standard not being very high, that she had "never looked more charming." But, when she went on to say that all present were in agreement that they had never spent a more delightful evening, she deceived the public. Uncle Chris, for one; Otis Pilkington, for another, and Freddie Rooke, for a third, were so far from spending a delightful evening that they found it hard to mask their true emotions and keep a smiling face to the world.

Otis Pilkington, indeed, found it impossible, and, ceasing to try, left early. Just twenty minutes after the proceedings had begun, he seized his coat and hat, shot out into the night, made off blindly up Broadway, and walked twice round Central Park before his feet gave out and he allowed himself to be taken back to his apartment in a taxi. Jill had been very kind and very sweet and very regretful, but it was only too manifest that on the question of becoming Mrs. Otis

Pilkington her mind was made up. She was willing to like him, to be a sister to him, to watch his future progress with considerable interest, but she would not marry him.

One feels sorry for Otis Pilkington in his hour of travail. This was the fifth or sixth time that this sort of thing had happened to him, and he was getting tired of it. If he could have looked into the future--five years almost to a day from that evening--and seen himself walking blushfully down the aisle of St. Thomas' with Roland Trevis' sister Angela on his arm, his gloom might have been lightened. More probably, however, it would have been increased. At the moment, Roland Trevis' sister Angela was fifteen, frivolous, and freckled and, except that he rather disliked her and suspected her--correctly--of laughing at him, amounted to just nil in Mr. Pilkington's life. The idea of linking his lot with hers would have appalled him, enthusiastically though he was in favour of it five years later.

However, Mr. Pilkington was unable to look into the future, so his reflections on this night of sorrow were not diverted from Jill. He thought sadly of Jill till two-thirty, when he fell asleep in his chair and dreamed of her. At seven o'clock his Japanese valet, who had been given the night off, returned home, found him, and gave him breakfast. After which, Mr. Pilkington went to bed, played three games of solitaire, and slept till dinner-time, when he awoke to take up the burden of life again. He still brooded on the tragedy which had shattered him. Indeed, it was only two weeks later, when at a dance he

was introduced to a red-haired girl from Detroit, that he really got over it.

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The news was conveyed to Freddie Rooke by Uncle Chris. Uncle Chris, with something of the emotions of a condemned man on the scaffold waiting for a reprieve, had watched Jill and Mr. Pilkington go off together into the dim solitude at the back of the orchestra chairs, and, after an all too brief interval, had observed the latter whizzing back, his every little movement having a meaning of its own--and that meaning one which convinced Uncle Chris that Freddie, in estimating Mr. Pilkington as a sixty to one chance, had not erred in his judgment of form.

Uncle Chris found Freddie in one of the upper boxes, talking to Nelly Bryant. Dancing was going on down on the stage, but Freddie, though normally a young man who shook a skilful shoe, was in no mood for dancing to-night. The return to the scenes of his former triumphs and the meeting with the companions of happier days, severed from him by a two-weeks' notice, had affected Freddie powerfully. Eyeing the happy throng below, he experienced the emotions of that Peri who, in the poem, "at the gate of Eden stood disconsolate."

Excusing himself from Nelly and following Uncle Chris into the passage-way outside the box, he heard the other's news listlessly. It

came as no shock to Freddie. He had never thought Mr. Pilkington anything to write home about, and had never supposed that Jill would accept him. He said as much. Sorry for the chap in a way, and all that, but had never imagined for an instant that he would click.

"Where is Underhill?" asked Uncle Chris agitated.

"Derek? Oh, he isn't here yet."

"But why isn't he here? I understood that you were bringing him with you."

"That was the scheme, but it seems he had promised some people he met on the boat to go to a theatre and have a bit of supper with them afterwards. I only heard about it when I got back this morning."

"Good God, boy! Didn't you tell him that Jill would be here to-night?"

"Oh, rather. And he's coming on directly he can get away from these people. Ought to be here any moment now."

Uncle Chris plucked at his moustache gloomily. Freddie's detachment depressed him. He had looked for more animation and a greater sense of the importance of the issue.

"Well, pip-pip for the present," said Freddie, moving toward the box.

"Have to be getting back. See you later."

He disappeared, and Uncle Chris turned slowly to descend the stairs. As he reached the floor below, the door of the stage-box opened, and Mrs. Peagrim came out.

"Oh, Major Selby!" cried the radiant and vivacious hostess. "I couldn't think where you had got to. I have been looking for you everywhere."

Uncle Chris quivered slightly, but braced himself to do his duty.

"May I have the pleasure...?" he began, then broke off as he saw the man who had come out of the box behind his hostess. "Underhill!" He grasped his hand and shook it warmly. "My dear fellow! I had no notion that you had arrived!"

"Sir Derek came just a moment ago," said Mrs. Peagrim.

"How are you, Major Selby?" said Derek. He was a little surprised at the warmth of his reception. He had not anticipated this geniality.

"My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," cried Uncle Chris. "But, as I was saying, Mrs. Peagrim, may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"I don't think I will dance this one," said Mrs. Peagrim surprisingly.

"I'm sure you two must have ever so much to talk about. Why don't you take Sir Derek and give him a cup of coffee?"

"Capital idea!" said Uncle Chris. "Come this way, my dear fellow. As Mrs. Peagrim says, I have ever so much to talk about. Along this passage, my boy. Be careful. There's a step. Well, well, well! It's delightful to see you again!" He massaged Derek's arm affectionately. Every time he had met Mrs. Peagrim that evening he had quailed inwardly at what lay before him, should some hitch occur to prevent the re-union of Derek and Jill: and now that the other was actually here, handsomer than ever and more than ever the sort of man no girl could resist, he declined to admit the possibility of a hitch. His spirits soared. "You haven't seen Jill yet, of course?"

"No." Derek hesitated. "Is Jill.... Does she.... I mean...."

Uncle Chris resumed his osteopathy. He kneaded his companion's coat-sleeve with a jovial hand.

"My dear fellow, of course! I am sure that a word or two from you will put everything right. We all make mistakes. I have made them myself. I am convinced that everything will be perfectly all right.... Ah, there she is. Jill, my dear, here is an old friend to see you!"

Since the hurried departure of Mr. Pilkington, Jill had been sitting in the auditorium, lazily listening to the music and watching the couples dancing on the stage. She found herself drifting into a mood of gentle contentment, and was at a loss to account for this. She was happy--quietly and peacefully happy, when she was aware that she ought to have been both agitated and apprehensive. When she had anticipated the recent interview with Otis Pilkington, which she had known was bound to come sooner or later, it had been shrinkingly and with foreboding. She hated hurting people's feelings, and, though she read Mr. Pilkington's character accurately enough to know that time would heal any anguish which she might cause him, she had had no doubt that the temperamental surface of that long young man, when he succeeded in getting her alone, was going to be badly bruised. And it had fallen out just as she had expected. Mr. Pilkington had said his say and departed, a pitiful figure, a spectacle which should have wrung her heart. It had not wrung her heart. Except for one fleeting instant when she was actually saying the fatal words, it had not interfered with her happiness at all; and already she was beginning to forget that the incident had ever happened.

And, if the past should have depressed her, the future might have been expected to depress her even more. There was nothing in it, either immediate or distant, which could account for her feeling gently contented. And yet, as she leaned back in her seat, her heart was dancing in time to the dance-music of Mrs. Peagrim's hired orchestra.

It puzzled Jill.

And then, quite suddenly, yet with no abruptness or sense of discovery, just as if it were something which she had known all along, the truth came upon her. It was Wally, the thought of Wally, the knowledge that Wally existed, that made her happy. He was a solid, comforting, reassuring fact in a world of doubts and perplexities. She did not need to be with him to be fortified, it was enough just to think of him. Present or absent, his personality heartened her like fine weather or music or a sea-breeze--or like that friendly, soothing night-light which they used to leave in her nursery when she was little, to scare away the goblins and see her safely over the road that led to the gates of the city of dreams.

Suppose there were no Wally...?

Jill gave a sudden gasp, and sat up, tingling. She felt as she had sometimes felt as a child, when, on the edge of sleep, she had dreamed that she was stepping off a precipice and had woken, tense and alert, to find that there was no danger after all. But there was a difference between that feeling and this. She had woken, but to find that there was danger. It was as though some inner voice was calling to her to be careful, to take thought. Suppose there were no Wally?... And why should there always be Wally? He had said confidently enough that there would never be another girl.... But there were thousands of other girls, millions of other girls, and could she suppose that one

of them would not have the sense to snap up a treasure like Wally? A sense of blank desolation swept over Jill. Her quick imagination, leaping ahead, had made the vague possibility of a distant future an accomplished fact. She felt, absurdly, a sense of overwhelming loss.

Into her mind, never far distant from it, came the thought of Derek. And, suddenly, Jill made another discovery. She was thinking of Derek, and it was not hurting. She was thinking of him quite coolly and clearly and her heart was not aching.

She sat back and screwed her eyes tight, as she had always done when puzzled. Something had happened to her, but how it had happened and when it had happened and why it had happened she could not understand. She only knew that now for the first time she had been granted a moment of clear vision and was seeing things truly.

She wanted Wally. She wanted him in the sense that she could not do without him. She felt nothing of the fiery tumult which had come upon her when she first met Derek. She and Wally would come together with a smile and build their life on an enduring foundation of laughter and happiness and good-fellowship. Wally had never shaken and never would shake her senses as Derek had done. If that was love, then she did not love Wally. But her clear vision told her that it was not love. It might be the blazing and crackling of thorns, but it was not the fire. She wanted Wally. She needed him as she needed the air and the sunlight.

She opened her eyes and saw Uncle Chris coming down the aisle towards her. There was a man with him, and, as they moved closer in the dim light, Jill saw that it was Derek.

"Jill, my dear," said Uncle Chris, "here is an old friend to see you!"

And, having achieved their bringing together, he proceeded to withdraw delicately whence he had come. It is pleasant to be able to record that he was immediately seized upon by Mrs. Peagrim, who had changed her mind about not dancing, and led off to be her partner in a fox-trot, in the course of which she trod on his feet three times.

"Why, Derek!" said Jill cheerfully. Except for a mild wonder how he came to be there, she found herself wholly unaffected by the sight of him. "Whatever are you doing here?"

Derek sat down beside her. The cordiality of her tone had relieved, yet at the same time disconcerted him. Man seldom attains to perfect contentment in this world, and Derek, while pleased that Jill apparently bore him no ill-will, seemed to miss something in her manner which he would have been glad to find there.

"Jill!" he said huskily.

It seemed to Derek only decent to speak huskily. To his orderly mind

this situation could be handled only in one way. It was a plain, straight issue of the strong man humbling himself--not too much of course, but sufficiently: and it called, in his opinion, for the low voice, the clenched hand, and the broken whisper. Speaking as he had spoken, he had given the scene the right key from the start--or would have done if she had not got in ahead of him and opened it on a note of absurd cheeriness? Derek found himself resenting her cheeriness. Often as he had attempted during the voyage from England to visualize to himself this first meeting, he had never pictured Jill smiling brightly at him. It was a jolly smile, and made her look extremely pretty, but it jarred upon him. A moment before he had been half relieved, half disconcerted: now he was definitely disconcerted. He searched in his mind for a criticism of her attitude, and came to the conclusion that what was wrong with it was that it was too friendly. Friendliness is well enough in its way, but in what should have been a tense clashing of strong emotions it did not seem to Derek fitting.

"Did you have a pleasant trip?" asked Jill. "Have you come over on business?"

A feeling of bewilderment came upon Derek. It was wrong, it was all wrong. Of course, she might be speaking like this to cloak intense feeling, but, if so, she had certainly succeeded. From her manner, he and she might be casual acquaintances. A pleasant trip! In another minute she would be asking him how he had come out on the sweepstake on the ship's run. With a sense of putting his shoulder to some heavy

weight and heaving at it, he sought to lift the conversation to a higher plane.

"I came to find you!" he said; still huskily but not so huskily as before. There are degrees of huskiness, and Derek's was sharpened a little by a touch of irritation.

"Yes?" said Jill.

Derek was now fermenting. What she ought to have said, he did not know, but he knew that it was not "Yes?" "Yes?" in the circumstances was almost as bad as "Really?"

There was a pause. Jill was looking at him with a frank and unembarrassed gaze which somehow deepened his sense of annoyance. Had she looked at him coldly, he could have understood and even appreciated it. He had been expecting coldness, and had braced himself to combat it. He was still not quite sure in his mind whether he was playing the rôle of a penitent or a King Cophetua, but in either character he might have anticipated a little temporary coldness, which it would have been his easy task to melt. But he had never expected to be looked at as if he were a specimen in a museum, and that was how he was feeling now. Jill was not looking at him--she was inspecting him, examining him, and he chafed under the process.

Jill, unconscious of the discomfort she was causing, continued to

gaze. She was trying to discover in just what respect he had changed from the god he had been. Certainly not in looks. He was as handsome as ever--handsomer, indeed, for the sunshine and clean breezes of the Atlantic had given him an exceedingly becoming coat of tan. And yet he must have changed, for now she could look upon him quite dispassionately and criticize him without a tremor. It was like seeing a copy of a great painting. Everything was there, except the one thing that mattered, the magic and the glamour. It was like.... She suddenly remembered a scene in the dressing-room when the company had been in Baltimore. Lois Denham, duly the recipient of the sunburst which her friend Izzy had promised her, had unfortunately, in a spirit of girlish curiosity, taken it to a jeweller to be priced, and the jeweller had blasted her young life by declaring it a paste imitation. Jill recalled how the stricken girl--previous to calling Izzy on the long distance and telling him a number of things which, while probably not news to him, must have been painful hearing--had passed the vile object round the dressing-room for inspection. The imitation was perfect. It had been impossible for the girls to tell that the stones were not real diamonds. Yet the jeweller, with his sixth sense, had seen through them in a trifle under ten seconds. Jill came to the conclusion that her newly-discovered love for Wally Mason had equipped her with a sixth sense, and that by its aid she was really for the first time seeing Derek as he was.

Derek had not the privilege of being able to read Jill's thoughts. All he could see was the outer Jill, and the outer Jill, as she had always

done, was stirring his emotions. Her daintiness afflicted him. Not for the first, the second, or the third time since they had come into each other's lives, he was astounded at the strength of the appeal which Jill had for him when they were together, as contrasted with its weakness when they were apart. He made another attempt to establish the scene on a loftier plane.

"What a fool I was!" he sighed. "Jill! Can you ever forgive me?"

He tried to take her hand. Jill skilfully eluded him.

"Why, of course I've forgiven you, Derek, if there was, anything to forgive."

"Anything to forgive!" Derek began to get into his stride. These were the lines on which he had desired the interview to develop. "I was a brute! A cad!"

"Oh, no!"

"I was. Oh, I have been through hell!"

Jill turned her head away. She did not want to hurt him, but nothing could have kept her from smiling. She had been so sure that he would say that sooner or later.

"Jill!" Derek had misinterpreted the cause of her movement, and had attributed it to emotion. "Tell me that everything is as it was before."

Jill turned.

"I'm afraid I can't say that, Derek."

"Of course not!" agreed Derek in a comfortable glow of manly remorse. He liked himself in the character of the strong man abashed. "It would be too much to expect, I know. But, when we are married...."

"Do you really want to marry me?"

"Jill!"

"I wonder!"

"How can you doubt it?"

Jill looked at him.

"Have you thought what it would mean?"

"What it would mean?"

"Well, your mother...."

"Oh!" Derek dismissed Lady Underhill with a grand gesture.

"Yes," persisted Jill, "but, if she disapproved of your marrying me before, wouldn't she disapprove a good deal more now, when I haven't a penny in the world and am just in the chorus...."

A sort of strangled sound proceeded from Derek's throat.

"In the chorus!"

"Didn't you know? I thought Freddie must have told you."

"In the chorus!" Derek stammered. "I thought you were here as a guest of Mrs. Peagrim's."

"So I am--like all the rest of the company."

"But.... But...."

"You see, it would be bound to make everything a little difficult," said Jill. Her face was grave, but her lips were twitching. "I mean, you are rather a prominent man, aren't you, and if you married a chorus-girl...."

"Nobody would know," said Derek limply.

Jill opened her eyes.

"Nobody would know!" She laughed. "But, of course, you've never met our Press-agent. If you think that nobody would know that a girl in the company had married a baronet who was a member of parliament and expected to be in the Cabinet in a few years, you're wronging him! The news would be on the front page of all the papers the very next day--columns of it, with photographs. There would be articles about it in the Sunday papers. Illustrated! And then it would be cabled to England and would appear in the papers there.... You see, you're a very important person, Derek."

Derek sat clutching the arms of his chair. His face was chalky. Though he had never been inclined to underestimate his importance as a figure in the public eye, he had overlooked the disadvantages connected with such an eminence. He gurgled wordlessly. He had been prepared to brave Lady Underhill's wrath and assert his right to marry whom he pleased, but this was different.

Jill watched him curiously and with a certain pity. It was so easy to read what was passing in his mind. She wondered what he would say, how he would flounder out of his unfortunate position. She had no illusions about him now. She did not even contemplate the possibility of chivalry winning the battle which was going on within him.

"It would be very awkward, wouldn't it?" she said.

And then pity had its way with Jill. He had treated her badly; for a time she had thought that he had crushed all the heart out of her: but he was suffering, and she hated to see anybody suffer.

"Besides," she said, "I'm engaged to somebody else."

As a suffocating man, his lips to the tube of oxygen, gradually comes back to life, Derek revived--slowly as the meaning of her words sank into his mind, then with a sudden abruptness.

"What?" he cried.

"I'm going to marry somebody else. A man named Wally Mason."

Derek swallowed. The chalky look died out of his face, and he flushed hotly. His eyes, half relieved, half indignant, glowed under their pent-house of eyebrow. He sat for a moment in silence.

"I think you might have told me before!" he said huffily.

Jill laughed.

"Yes, I suppose I ought to have told you before."

"Leading me on...!"

Jill patted him on the arm.

"Never mind, Derek! It's all over now. And it was great fun, wasn't it!"

"Fun!"

"Shall we go and dance? The music is just starting."

"I won't dance!"

Jill got up.

"I must," she said. "I'm so happy I can't keep still. Well, good-bye, Derek, in case I don't see you again. It was nice meeting after all this time. You haven't altered a bit!"

Derek watched her flit down the aisle, saw her jump up the little ladder on to the stage, watched her vanish into the swirl of the dance. He reached for a cigarette, opened his case, and found it empty. He uttered a mirthless, Byronic laugh. The thing seemed to him symbolic.

III

Not having a cigarette of his own, Derek got up and went to look for the only man he knew who could give him one: and after a search of a few minutes came upon Freddie all alone in a dark corner, apart from the throng. It was a very different Freddie from the moody youth who had returned to the box after his conversation with Uncle Chris. He was leaning against a piece of scenery with his head tilted back and a beam of startled happiness on his face. So rapt was he in his reflections that he did not become aware of Derek's approach until the latter spoke.

"Got a cigarette, Freddie?"

Freddie withdrew his gaze from the roof.

"Hullo, old son! Cigarette? Certainly and by all means. Cigarettes? Where are the cigarettes? Mr. Rooke, forward! Show cigarettes." He extended his case to Derek, who helped himself in sombre silence, finding his boyhood's friend's exuberance hard to bear. "I say, Derek, old scream, the most extraordinary thing has happened! You'll never guess. To cut a long story short and come to the blow-out of the scenario, I'm engaged! Engaged, old crumpet! You know what I mean--engaged to be married!"

"Ugh!" said Derek gruffly, frowning over his cigarette.

"Don't wonder you're surprised," said Freddie, looking at him a little wistfully, for his friend had scarcely been gushing, and he would have welcomed a bit of enthusiasm. "Can hardly believe it myself."

Derek awoke to a sense of the conventions.

"Congratulate you," he said. "Do I know her?"

"Not yet, but you will soon. She's a girl in the company--in the chorus as a matter of fact. Girl named Nelly Bryant. An absolute corker. I'll go further--a topper. You'll like her, old man."

Derek was looking at him, amazed.

"Good Heavens!" he said.

"Extraordinary how these things happen," proceeded Freddie. "Looking back, I can see, of course, that I always thought her a topper, but the idea of getting engaged--I don't know--sort of thing that doesn't occur to a chappie, if you know what I mean. What I mean to say is, we had always been the greatest of pals and all that, but it never struck me that she would think it much of a wheeze getting hooked up for life with a chap like me. We just sort of drifted along and so forth. All very jolly and what not. And then this evening--I don't know. I had a

bit of a hump, what with one thing and another, and she was most dashed sweet and patient and soothing and--and--well, and what not, don't you know, and suddenly--deuced rummy sensation--the jolly old scales seemed to fall, if you follow me, from my good old eyes; I don't know if you get the idea. I suddenly seemed to look myself squarely in the eyeball and say to myself, 'Freddie, old top, how do we go? Are we not missing a good thing?' And, by Jove, thinking it over, I found that I was absolutely correct-o! You've no notion how dashed sympathetic she is, old man! I mean to say, I had this hump, you know, owing to one thing and another, and was feeling that life was more or less of a jolly old snare and delusion, and she bucked me up and all that, and suddenly I found myself kissing her and all that sort of rot, and she was kissing me and so on and so forth, and she's got the most ripping eyes, and there was nobody about, and the long and the short of it was, old boy, that I said, 'Let's get married!' and she said, 'When?' and that was that, if you see what I mean. The scheme now is to pop down to the City Hall and get a licence, which it appears you have to have if you want to bring this sort of binge off with any success and vim, and then what ho for the padre! Looking at it from every angle, a bit of a good egg, what? Happiest man in the world, and all that sort of thing."

At this point in his somewhat incoherent epic Freddie paused. It had occurred to him that he had perhaps laid himself open to a charge of monopolising the conversation.

"I say! You'll forgive my dwelling a bit on this thing, won't you? Never found a girl who would look twice at me before, and it's rather unsettled the old bean. Just occurred to me that I may have been talking about my own affairs a bit. Your turn now, old thing. Sit down, as the blighters in the novels used to say, and tell me the story of your life. You've seen Jill, of course?"

"Yes," said Derek shortly.

"And it's all right, eh? Fine! We'll make a double wedding of it, what? Not a bad idea, that! I mean to say, the man of God might make a reduction for quantity and shade his fee a bit. Do the job half price!"

Derek threw down the end of his cigarette, and crushed it with his heel. A closer observer than Freddie would have detected long ere this the fact that his demeanour was not that of a happy and successful wooer.

"Jill and I are not going to be married," he said.

A look of blank astonishment came into Freddie's cheerful face. He could hardly believe that he had heard correctly. It is true that, in gloomier mood, he had hazarded the theory to Uncle Chris that Jill's independence might lead her to refuse Derek, but he had not really believed in the possibility of such a thing even at the time, and now,

in the full flood of optimism consequent on his own engagement, it seemed even more incredible.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "Did she give you the raspberry?"

It is to be doubted whether the pride of the Underhills would have permitted Derek to reply in the affirmative, even if Freddie had phrased his question differently; but the brutal directness of the query made such a course impossible for him. Nothing was dearer to Derek than his self-esteem, and, even at the expense of the truth, he was resolved to shield it from injury. To face Freddie and confess that any girl in the world had given him, Derek Underhill, what he coarsely termed the raspberry was a task so revolting as to be utterly beyond his powers.

"Nothing of the kind!" he snapped. "It was because we both saw that the thing would be impossible. Why didn't you tell me that Jill was in the chorus of this damned piece?"

Freddie's mouth slowly opened. He was trying not to realize the meaning of what his friend was saying. His was a faithful soul, and for years--to all intents and purposes for practically the whole of his life--he had looked up to Derek and revered him. He absolutely refused to believe that Derek was intending to convey what he seemed to be trying to convey; for, if he was, well ... by Jove ... it was too rotten and Algy Martyn had been right after all and the fellow was

simply....

"You don't mean, old man," said Freddie with an almost pleading note in his voice, "that you're going to back out of marrying Jill because she's in the chorus?"

Derek looked away, and scowled. He was finding Freddie, in the capacity of inquisitor, as trying as he had found him in the rôle of exuberant fiancé. It offended his pride to have to make explanations to one whom he had always regarded with a patronizing tolerance as not a bad fellow in his way but in every essential respect negligible.

"I have to be sensible," he said, chafing as the indignity of his position intruded itself more and more. "You know what it would mean.... Paragraphs in all the papers.... photographs ... the news cabled to England ... everybody reading it and misunderstanding.... I've got my career to think of.... It would cripple me...."

His voice trailed off, and there was silence for a moment. Then Freddie burst into speech. His good-natured face was hard with unwonted scorn. Its cheerful vacuity had changed to stony contempt. For the second time in the evening the jolly old scales had fallen from Freddie's good old eyes, and, as Jill had done, he saw Derek as he was.

"My sainted aunt!" he said slowly. "So that's it, what? Well, I've

always thought a dashed lot of you, as you know. I've always looked up to you as a bit of a nib and wished I was like you. But, great Scott! if that's the sort of a chap you are, I'm deuced glad I'm not! I'm going to wake up in the middle of the night and think how unlike you I am and pat myself on the back! Ronny Devereux was perfectly right. A tick's a tick, and that's all there is to say about it. Good old Ronny told me what you were, and, like a silly ass, I wasted a lot of time trying to make him believe you weren't that sort of chap at all. It's no good standing there looking like your mother," said Freddie firmly. "This is where we jolly well part brass-rags! If we ever meet again, I'll trouble you not to speak to me, because I've a reputation to keep up! So there you have it in a bally nutshell!"

Scarcely had Freddie ceased to administer it to his former friend in a bally nutshell, when Uncle Chris, warm and dishevelled from the dance as interpreted by Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim, came bustling up, saving Derek the necessity of replying to the harangue.

"Well, Underhill, my dear fellow," began Uncle Chris affably, attaching himself to the other's arm, "what...?"

He broke off, for Derek, freeing his arm with a wrench, turned and walked rapidly away. Derek had no desire to go over the whole thing again with Uncle Chris. He wanted to be alone, to build up, painfully and laboriously, the ruins of his self-esteem. The pride of the Underhills had had a bad evening.

Uncle Chris turned to Freddie.

"What is the matter?" he asked blankly.

"I'll tell you what's the jolly old matter!" cried Freddie. "The blighter isn't going to marry poor Jill after all! He's changed his rotten mind! It's off!"

"Off?"

"Absolutely off!"

"Absolutely off?"

"Napoo!" said Freddie. "He's afraid of what will happen to his blasted career if he marries a girl who's been in the chorus."

"But, my dear boy!" Uncle Chris blinked. "But, my dear boy! This is ridiculous.... Surely, if I were to speak a word...."

"You can if you like. I wouldn't speak to the man again if you paid me! But it won't do any good, so what's the use?"

Slowly Uncle Chris adjusted his mind to the disaster.

"Then you mean...?"

"It's off!" said Freddie.

For a moment Uncle Chris stood motionless. Then, with a sudden jerk, he seemed to stiffen his backbone. His face was bleak, but he pulled at his moustache jauntily.

"Morituri te salutant!" he said. "Good-bye, Freddie, my boy."

He turned away, gallant and upright, the old soldier.

"Where are you going?" asked Freddie.

"Over the top!" said Uncle Chris.

"What do you mean?"

"I am going," said Uncle Chris steadily, "to find Mrs. Peagrim!"

"Good God!" cried Freddie. He followed him, protesting weakly, but the other gave no sign that he had heard. Freddie saw him disappear into the stage-box, and, turning, found Jill at his elbow.

"Where did Uncle Chris go?" asked Jill. "I want to speak to him."

"He's in the stage-box, with Mrs. Peagrim."

"With Mrs. Peagrim?"

"Proposing to her," said Freddie solemnly.

Jill stared.

"Proposing to Mrs. Peagrim? What do you mean?"

Freddie drew her aside, and began to explain.

IV

In the dimness of the stage-box, his eyes a little glassy and a dull despair in his soul, Uncle Chris was wondering how to begin. In his hot youth he had been rather a devil of a fellow in between dances, a coo-er of soft phrases and a stealer of never very stoutly withheld kisses. He remembered one time in Bangalore ... but that had nothing to do with the case. The point was, how to begin with Mrs. Peagrim. The fact that twenty-five years ago he had crushed in his arms beneath the shadows of the deodars a girl whose name he had forgotten, though he remembered that she had worn a dress of some pink stuff, was immaterial and irrelevant. Was he to crush Mrs. Peagrim in his arms? Not, thought Uncle Chris to himself, on a bet. He contented himself

for the moment with bending an intense gaze upon her and asking if she was tired.

"A little," panted Mrs. Peagrim, who, though she danced often and vigorously, was never in the best of condition, owing to her habit of neutralizing the beneficent effects of exercise by surreptitious candy-eating. "I'm a little out of breath."

Uncle Chris had observed this for himself, and it had not helped him to face his task. Lovely woman loses something of her queenly dignity when she puffs. Inwardly, he was thinking how exactly his hostess resembled the third from the left of a troupe of performing sea-lions which he had seen some years ago on one of his rare visits to a vaudeville house.

"You ought not to tire yourself," he said with a difficult tenderness.

"I am so fond of dancing," pleaded Mrs. Peagrim. Recovering some of her breath, she gazed at her companion with a sort of short-winded archness. "You are always so sympathetic, Major Selby."

"Am I?" said Uncle Chris. "Am I?"

"You know you are!"

Uncle Chris swallowed quickly.

"I wonder if you have ever wondered," he began, and stopped. He felt that he was not putting it as well as he might. "I wonder if it has ever struck you that there's a reason." He stopped again. He seemed to remember reading something like that in an advertisement in a magazine, and he did not want to talk like an advertisement. "I wonder if it has ever struck you, Mrs. Peagrim," he began again, "that any sympathy on my part might be due to some deeper emotion which.... Have you never suspected that you have never suspected...." Uncle Chris began to feel that he must brace himself up. Usually a man of fluent speech, he was not at his best to-night. He was just about to try again, when he caught his hostess' eye, and the soft gleam in it sent him cowering back into the silence as if he were taking cover from an enemy's shrapnel.

Mrs. Peagrim touched him on the arm.

"You were saying...?" she murmured encouragingly.

Uncle Chris shut his eyes. His fingers pressed desperately into the velvet curtain beside him. He felt as he had felt when a raw lieutenant in India, during his first hill-campaign, when the etiquette of the service had compelled him to rise and walk up and down in front of his men under a desultory shower of jezail-bullets. He seemed to hear the damned things whop-whopping now ... and almost wished that he could really hear them. One or two good bullets just

now would be a welcome diversion.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Peagrim.--

"Have you never felt," babbled Uncle Chris, "that, feeling as I feel, I might have felt ... that is to say might be feeling a feeling...?"

There was a tap at the door of the box. Uncle Chris started violently. Jill came in.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she said. "I wanted to speak...."

"You wanted to speak to me?" said Uncle Chris, bounding up.

"Certainly, certainly, certainly, of course. If you will excuse me for a moment?"

Mrs. Peagrim bowed coldly. The interruption had annoyed her. She had no notion who Jill was, and she resented the intrusion at this particular juncture intensely. Not so Uncle Chris, who skipped out into the passage like a young lamb.

"Am I in time?" asked Jill in a whisper.

"In time?"

"You know what I mean. Uncle Chris, listen to me! You are not to

propose to that awful woman. Do you understand?"

Uncle Chris shook his head.

"The die is cast!"

"The die isn't anything of the sort," said Jill. "Unless...." She stopped, aghast. "You don't mean that you have done it already?"

"Well, no. To be perfectly accurate, no. But...."

"Then that's all right. I know why you were doing it, and it was very sweet of you, but you mustn't."

"But, Jill, you don't understand."

"I do understand."

"I have a motive...."

"I know your motive. Freddie told me. Don't you worry yourself about me, dear, because I am all right. I am going to be married."

A look of ecstatic relief came into Uncle Chris' face.

"Then Underhill...?"

"I am not marrying Derek. Somebody else. I don't think you know him, but I love him, and so will you." She pulled his face down and kissed him. "Now you can go back."

Uncle Chris was almost too overcome to speak. He gulped a little.

"Jill," he said shakily, "this is a ... this is a great relief."

"I knew it would be."

"If you are really going to marry a rich man...."

"I didn't say he was rich."

The joy ebbed from Uncle Chris' face.

"If he is not rich, if he cannot give you everything of which I...."

"Oh, don't be absurd! Wally has all the money anybody needs. What's money?"

"What's money?" Uncle Chris stared. "Money, my dear child, is ... is ... well, you mustn't talk of it in that light way. But, if you think you will really have enough...?"

"Of course we shall. Now you can go back. Mrs. Peagrim will be wondering what has become of you."

"Must I?" said Uncle Chris doubtfully.

"Of course. You must be polite."

"Very well," said Uncle Chris. "But it will be a little difficult to continue the conversation on what you might call general lines. However!"

* * * * *

Back in the box, Mrs. Peagrim was fanning herself with manifest impatience.

"What did that girl want?" she demanded.

Uncle Chris seated himself with composure. The weakness had passed, and he was himself again.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. Some trivial difficulty, which I was able to dispose of in a few words."

Mrs. Peagrim would have liked to continue her researches, but a feeling that it was wiser not to stray too long from the main point

restrained her. She bent towards him.

"You were going to say something when that girl interrupted us."

Uncle Chris shot his cuffs with a debonair gesture.

"Was I? Was I? To be sure, yes. I was saying that you ought not to let yourself get tired. Deuce of a thing, getting tired. Plays the dickens with the system."

Mrs. Peagrim was disconcerted. The atmosphere seemed to have changed, and she did not like it. She endeavoured to restore the tone of the conversation.

"You are so sympathetic," she sighed, feeling that she could not do better than to begin again at that point. The remark had produced good results before and it might do so a second time.

"Yes," agreed Uncle Chris cheerily. "You see, I have seen something of all this sort of thing, and I realize the importance of it. I know what all this modern rush and strain of life is for a woman in your position. Parties every night ... dancing ... a thousand and one calls on the vitality ... bound to have an effect sooner or later, unless--unless," said Uncle Chris solemnly, "one takes steps. Unless one acts in time. I had a friend--" His voice sank--"I had a very dear friend over in London, Lady Alice--but the name would convey

nothing--the point is that she was in exactly the same position as you. On the rush all the time. Never stopped. The end was inevitable. She caught cold, hadn't sufficient vitality to throw it off, went to a dance in mid-winter, contracted pneumonia...." Uncle Chris sighed. "All over in three days," he said sadly. "Now at that time," he resumed, "I did not know what I know now. If I had heard of Nervino then...." He shook his head. "It might have saved her life. It would have saved her life. I tell you, Mrs. Peagrim, that there is nothing, there is no lack of vitality which Nervino cannot set right. I am no physician myself, I speak as a layman, but it acts on the red corpuscles of the blood...."

Mrs. Peagrim's face was stony. She had not spoken before, because he had given her no opportunity, but she spoke now in a hard voice.

"Major Selby!"

"Mrs. Peagrim?"

"I am not interested in patent medicines!"

"One can hardly call Nervino that," said Uncle Chris reproachfully.

"It is a sovereign specific. You can get it at any drug store. It comes in two sizes, the dollar-fifty--or large--size, and the...."

Mrs. Peagrim rose majestically.

"Major Selby, I am tired...."

"Precisely. And, as I say, Nervino...."

"Please," said Mrs. Peagrim coldly, "go to the stage-door and see if you can find my limousine. It should be waiting in the street."

"Certainly," said Uncle Chris. "Why, certainly, certainly, certainly."

He left the box and proceeded across the stage. He walked with a lissom jauntiness. His eye was bright. One or two of those whom he passed on his way had the idea that this fine-looking man was in pain. They fancied that he was moaning. But Uncle Chris was not moaning. He was humming a gay snatch from the lighter music of the 'nineties.