

CHAPTER XXII. WASHY STEPS INTO THE HALL OF FAME

At about nine o'clock next morning, in a suite at the Hotel Cosmopolis, Mrs. Cora Bates McCall, the eminent lecturer on Rational Eating, was seated at breakfast with her family. Before her sat Mr. McCall, a little hunted-looking man, the natural peculiarities of whose face were accentuated by a pair of glasses of semicircular shape, like half-moons with the horns turned up. Behind these, Mr. McCall's eyes played a perpetual game of peekaboo, now peering over them, anon ducking down and hiding behind them. He was sipping a cup of anti-caffeine. On his right, toying listlessly with a plateful of cereal, sat his son, Washington. Mrs. McCall herself was eating a slice of Health Bread and nut butter. For she practised as well as preached the doctrines which she had striven for so many years to inculcate in an unthinking populace. Her day always began with a light but nutritious breakfast, at which a peculiarly uninviting cereal, which looked and tasted like an old straw hat that had been run through a meat chopper, competed for first place in the dislike of her husband and son with a more than usually offensive brand of imitation coffee. Mr. McCall was inclined to think that he loathed the imitation coffee rather more than the cereal, but Washington held strong views on the latter's superior ghastliness. Both Washington and his father, however, would have been fair-minded enough to admit that it was a close thing.

Mrs. McCall regarded her offspring with grave approval.

"I am glad to see, Lindsay," she said to her husband, whose eyes sprang dutifully over the glass fence as he heard his name, "that Washy has recovered his appetite. When he refused his dinner last night, I was afraid that he might be sickening for something. Especially as he had quite a flushed look. You noticed his flushed look?"

"He did look flushed."

"Very flushed. And his breathing was almost stertorous. And, when he said that he had no appetite, I am bound to say that I was anxious. But he is evidently perfectly well this morning. You do feel perfectly well this morning, Washy?"

The heir of the McCall's looked up from his cereal. He was a long, thin boy of about sixteen, with pale red hair, sandy eyelashes, and a long neck.

"Uh-huh," he said.

Mrs. McCall nodded.

"Surely now you will agree, Lindsay, that a careful and rational diet is what a boy needs? Washy's constitution is superb. He has a remarkable stamina, and I attribute it entirely to my careful supervision of his food. I shudder when I think of the growing boys who are permitted by

irresponsible people to devour meat, candy, pie--" She broke off. "What is the matter, Washy?"

It seemed that the habit of shuddering at the thought of pie ran in the McCall family, for at the mention of the word a kind of internal shimmy had convulsed Washington's lean frame, and over his face there had come an expression that was almost one of pain. He had been reaching out his hand for a slice of Health Bread, but now he withdrew it rather hurriedly and sat back breathing hard.

"I'm all right," he said, huskily.

"Pie," proceeded Mrs. McCall, in her platform voice. She stopped again abruptly. "Whatever is the matter, Washington? You are making me feel nervous."

"I'm all right."

Mrs. McCall had lost the thread of her remarks. Moreover, having now finished her breakfast, she was inclined for a little light reading. One of the subjects allied to the matter of dietary on which she felt deeply was the question of reading at meals. She was of the opinion that the strain on the eye, coinciding with the strain on the digestion, could not fail to give the latter the short end of the contest; and it was a rule at her table that the morning paper should not even be glanced at till the conclusion of the meal. She said that it was upsetting to begin

the day by reading the paper, and events were to prove that she was occasionally right.

All through breakfast the New York Chronicle had been lying neatly folded beside her plate. She now opened it, and, with a remark about looking for the report of her yesterday's lecture at the Butterfly Club, directed her gaze at the front page, on which she hoped that an editor with the best interests of the public at heart had decided to place her.

Mr. McCall, jumping up and down behind his glasses, scrutinised her face closely as she began to read. He always did this on these occasions, for none knew better than he that his comfort for the day depended largely on some unknown reporter whom he had never met. If this unseen individual had done his work properly and as befitted the importance of his subject, Mrs. McCall's mood for the next twelve hours would be as uniformly sunny as it was possible for it to be. But sometimes the fellows scamped their job disgracefully; and once, on a day which lived in Mr. McCall's memory, they had failed to make a report at all.

To-day, he noted with relief, all seemed to be well. The report actually was on the front page, an honour rarely accorded to his wife's utterances. Moreover, judging from the time it took her to read the thing, she had evidently been reported at length.

"Good, my dear?" he ventured. "Satisfactory?"

"Eh?" Mrs. McCall smiled meditatively. "Oh, yes, excellent. They have used my photograph, too. Not at all badly reproduced."

"Splendid!" said Mr. McCall.

Mrs. McCall gave a sharp shriek, and the paper fluttered from her hand.

"My dear!" said Mr. McCall, with concern.

His wife had recovered the paper, and was reading with burning eyes. A bright wave of colour had flowed over her masterful features. She was breathing as stertorously as ever her son Washington had done on the previous night.

"Washington!"

A basilisk glare shot across the table and turned the long boy to stone--all except his mouth, which opened feebly.

"Washington! Is this true?"

Washy closed his mouth, then let it slowly open again.

"My dear!" Mr. McCall's voice was alarmed. "What is it?" His eyes had climbed up over his glasses and remained there. "What is the matter? Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong! Read for yourself!"

Mr. McCall was completely mystified. He could not even formulate a guess at the cause of the trouble. That it appeared to concern his son Washington seemed to be the one solid fact at his disposal, and that only made the matter still more puzzling. Where, Mr. McCall asked himself, did Washington come in?

He looked at the paper, and received immediate enlightenment. Headlines met his eyes:

GOOD STUFF IN THIS BOY.
ABOUT A TON OF IT.
SON OF CORA BATES McCALL
FAMOUS FOOD-REFORM LECTURER
WINS PIE-EATING CHAMPIONSHIP OF
WEST SIDE.

There followed a lyrical outburst. So uplifted had the reporter evidently felt by the importance of his news that he had been unable to confine himself to prose:--

My children, if you fail to shine or triumph in your

special line; if, let us say, your hopes are bent on
some day being President, and folks ignore your proper
worth, and say you've not a chance on earth--Cheer up!
for in these stirring days Fame may be won in many ways.
Consider, when your spirits fall, the case of Washington
McCall.

Yes, cast your eye on Washy, please! He looks just like
a piece of cheese: he's not a brilliant sort of chap: he
has a dull and vacant map: his eyes are blank, his face
is red, his ears stick out beside his head. In fact, to
end these compliments, he would be dear at thirty cents.
Yet Fame has welcomed to her Hall this self-same
Washington McCall.

His mother (nee Miss Cora Bates) is one who frequently
orates upon the proper kind of food which every menu
should include. With eloquence the world she weans from
chops and steaks and pork and beans. Such horrid things
she'd like to crush, and make us live on milk and mush.
But oh! the thing that makes her sigh is when she sees
us eating pie. (We heard her lecture last July upon "The
Nation's Menace--Pie.") Alas, the hit it made was small
with Master Washington McCall.

For yesterday we took a trip to see the great Pie

Championship, where men with bulging cheeks and eyes consume vast quantities of pies. A fashionable West Side crowd beheld the champion, Spike O'Dowd, endeavour to defend his throne against an upstart, Blake's Unknown. He wasn't an Unknown at all. He was young Washington McCall.

We freely own we'd give a leg if we could borrow, steal, or beg the skill old Homer used to show. (He wrote the Iliad, you know.) Old Homer swung a wicked pen, but we are ordinary men, and cannot even start to dream of doing justice to our theme. The subject of that great repast is too magnificent and vast. We can't describe (or even try) the way those rivals wolfed their pie.

Enough to say that, when for hours each had extended all his pow'rs, toward the quiet evenfall O'Dowd succumbed to young McCall.

The champion was a willing lad. He gave the public all he had. His was a genuine fighting soul. He'd lots of speed and much control. No yellow streak did he evince. He tackled apple-pie and mince. This was the motto on his shield--"O'Dowds may burst. They never yield." His eyes began to start and roll. He eased his belt another hole. Poor fellow! With a single glance one saw that he had not a chance. A python would have had to crawl and

own defeat from young McCall.

At last, long last, the finish came. His features overcast with shame, O'Dowd, who'd faltered once or twice, declined to eat another slice. He tottered off, and kindly men rallied around with oxygen. But Washy, Cora Bates's son, seemed disappointed it was done. He somehow made those present feel he'd barely started on his meal. We ask him, "Aren't you feeling bad?" "Me!" said the lion-hearted lad. "Lead me"--he started for the street--"where I can get a bite to eat!" Oh, what a lesson does it teach to all of us, that splendid speech! How better can the curtain fall on Master Washington McCall!

Mr. McCall read this epic through, then he looked at his son. He first looked at him over his glasses, then through his glasses, then over his glasses again, then through his glasses once more. A curious expression was in his eyes. If such a thing had not been so impossible, one would have said that his gaze had in it something of respect, of admiration, even of reverence.

"But how did they find out your name?" he asked, at length.

Mrs. McCall exclaimed impatiently.

"Is THAT all you have to say?"

"No, no, my dear, of course not, quite so. But the point struck me as curious."

"Wretched boy," cried Mrs. McCall, "were you insane enough to reveal your name?"

Washington wriggled uneasily. Unable to endure the piercing stare of his mother, he had withdrawn to the window, and was looking out with his back turned. But even there he could feel her eyes on the back of his neck.

"I didn't think it 'ud matter," he mumbled. "A fellow with tortoiseshell-rimmed specs asked me, so I told him. How was I to know--"

His stumbling defence was cut short by the opening of the door.

"Hallo-allo-allo! What ho! What ho!"

Archie was standing in the doorway, beaming ingratiatingly on the family.

The apparition of an entire stranger served to divert the lightning of Mrs. McCall's gaze from the unfortunate Washy. Archie, catching

it between the eyes, blinked and held on to the wall. He had begun to regret that he had yielded so weakly to Lucille's entreaty that he should look in on the McCalls and use the magnetism of his personality upon them in the hope of inducing them to settle the lawsuit. He wished, too, if the visit had to be paid that he had postponed it till after lunch, for he was never at his strongest in the morning. But Lucille had urged him to go now and get it over, and here he was.

"I think," said Mrs. McCall, icily, "that you must have mistaken your room."

Archie rallied his shaken forces.

"Oh, no. Rather not. Better introduce myself, what? My name's Moffam, you know. I'm old Brewster's son-in-law, and all that sort of rot, if you know what I mean." He gulped and continued. "I've come about this jolly old lawsuit, don't you know."

Mr. McCall seemed about to speak, but his wife anticipated him.

"Mr. Brewster's attorneys are in communication with ours. We do not wish to discuss the matter."

Archie took an uninvited seat, eyed the Health Bread on the breakfast table for a moment with frank curiosity, and resumed his discourse.

"No, but I say, you know! I'll tell you what happened. I hate to totter in where I'm not wanted and all that, but my wife made such a point of it. Rightly or wrongly she regards me as a bit of a hound in the diplomacy line, and she begged me to look you up and see whether we couldn't do something about settling the jolly old thing. I mean to say, you know, the old bird--old Brewster, you know--is considerably perturbed about the affair--hates the thought of being in a posish where he has either got to bite his old pal McCall in the neck or be bitten by him--and--well, and so forth, don't you know! How about it?" He broke off. "Great Scot! I say, what!"

So engrossed had he been in his appeal that he had not observed the presence of the pie-eating champion, between whom and himself a large potted plant intervened. But now Washington, hearing the familiar voice, had moved from the window and was confronting him with an accusing stare.

"HE made me do it!" said Washy, with the stern joy a sixteen-year-old boy feels when he sees somebody on to whose shoulders he can shift trouble from his own. "That's the fellow who took me to the place!"

"What are you talking about, Washington?"

"I'm telling you! He got me into the thing."

"Do you mean this--this--" Mrs. McCall shuddered. "Are you referring to

this pie-eating contest?"

"You bet I am!"

"Is this true?" Mrs. McCall glared stonily at Archie, "Was it you who lured my poor boy into that--that--"

"Oh, absolutely. The fact is, don't you know, a dear old pal of mine who runs a tobacco shop on Sixth Avenue was rather in the soup. He had backed a chappie against the champion, and the chappie was converted by one of your lectures and swore off pie at the eleventh hour. Dashed hard luck on the poor chap, don't you know! And then I got the idea that our little friend here was the one to step in and save the situash, so I broached the matter to him. And I'll tell you one thing," said Archie, handsomely, "I don't know what sort of a capacity the original chappie had, but I'll bet he wasn't in your son's class. Your son has to be seen to be believed! Absolutely! You ought to be proud of him!" He turned in friendly fashion to Washy. "Rummy we should meet again like this! Never dreamed I should find you here. And, by Jove, it's absolutely marvellous how fit you look after yesterday. I had a sort of idea you would be groaning on a bed of sickness and all that."

There was a strange gurgling sound in the background. It resembled something getting up steam. And this, curiously enough, is precisely what it was. The thing that was getting up steam was Mr. Lindsay McCall.

The first effect of the Washy revelations on Mr. McCall had been merely to stun him. It was not until the arrival of Archie that he had had leisure to think; but since Archie's entrance he had been thinking rapidly and deeply.

For many years Mr. McCall had been in a state of suppressed revolution. He had smouldered, but had not dared to blaze. But this startling upheaval of his fellow-sufferer, Washy, had acted upon him like a high explosive. There was a strange gleam in his eye, a gleam of determination. He was breathing hard.

"Washy!"

His voice had lost its deprecating mildness. It rang strong and clear.

"Yes, pop?"

"How many pies did you eat yesterday?"

Washy considered.

"A good few."

"How many? Twenty?"

"More than that. I lost count. A good few."

"And you feel as well as ever?"

"I feel fine."

Mr. McCall dropped his glasses. He glowered for a moment at the breakfast table. His eye took in the Health Bread, the imitation coffee-pot, the cereal, the nut-butter. Then with a swift movement he seized the cloth, jerked it forcibly, and brought the entire contents rattling and crashing to the floor.

"Lindsay!"

Mr. McCall met his wife's eye with quiet determination. It was plain that something had happened in the hinterland of Mr. McCall's soul.

"Cora," he said, resolutely, "I have come to a decision. I've been letting you run things your own way a little too long in this family. I'm going to assert myself. For one thing, I've had all I want of this food-reform foolery. Look at Washy! Yesterday that boy seems to have consumed anything from a couple of hundredweight to a ton of pie, and he has thriven on it! Thriven! I don't want to hurt your feelings, Cora, but Washington and I have drunk our last cup of anti-caffeine! If you care to go on with the stuff, that's your look-out. But Washy and I are through."

He silenced his wife with a masterful gesture and turned to Archie. "And there's another thing. I never liked the idea of that lawsuit, but I let you talk me into it. Now I'm going to do things my way. Mr. Moffam, I'm glad you looked in this morning. I'll do just what you want. Take me to Dan Brewster now, and let's call the thing off, and shake hands on it."

"Are you mad, Lindsay?"

It was Cora Bates McCall's last shot. Mr. McCall paid no attention to it. He was shaking hands with Archie.

"I consider you, Mr. Moffam," he said, "the most sensible young man I have ever met!"

Archie blushed modestly.

"Awfully good of you, old bean," he said. "I wonder if you'd mind telling my jolly old father-in-law that? It'll be a bit of news for him!"