

## CHAPTER XV

### JILL EXPLAINS

I

The lobby of the Hotel Cosmopolis is the exact centre of New York, the spot where at certain hours one is sure of meeting everybody one knows. The first person that Nelly and Freddie saw, as they passed through the swing doors, was Jill. She was seated on the chair by the big pillar in the middle of the hall.

"What ho!" said Freddie. "Waiting for someone?"

"Hullo, Freddie. Yes, I'm waiting for Wally Mason. I got a note from him this morning, asking me to meet him here. I'm a little early. I haven't congratulated you yet. You're wonderful!"

"Thanks, old girl. Our young hero is making pretty hefty strides in his chosen profesh, what? Mr. Rooke, who appears quite simple and unspoiled by success, replied to our representative's enquiry as to his future plans, that he proposed to stagger into the grill-room and imbibe about eighteen dollars' worth of lunch. Yes, it is a bit of all right, taking it by and large, isn't it? I mean to say, the salary, the jolly old salary, you know ... quite a help when a

fellow's lost all his money!"

Jill was surprised to observe that the Last of the Rookes was contorting his face in an unsightly manner that seemed to be an attempt at a wink, pregnant with hidden meaning. She took her cue dutifully, though without understanding.

"Oh, yes," she replied.

Freddie seemed grateful. With a cordial "Cheerio!" he led Nelly off to the grill-room.

"I didn't know Jill knew Mr. Mason," said Nelly, as they sat down at their table.

"No?" said Freddie absently, running an experienced eye over the bill of fare. He gave an elaborate order. "What was that? Oh, absolutely! Jill and I and Wally were children together."

"How funny you should all be together again like this."

"Yes. Oh, good Lord!"

"What's the matter?"

"It's nothing. I meant to send a cable to a pal of mine in England,

I'll send it after lunch."

Freddie took out his handkerchief, and tied a knot in it. He was slightly ashamed of the necessity of taking such a precaution, but it was better to be on the safe side. His interview with Jill at the theatre had left him with the conviction that there was only one thing for him to do, and that was to cable poor old Derek to forget impending elections and all the rest of it and pop over to America at once. He knew that he would never have the courage to re-open the matter with Jill himself. As an ambassador he was a spent force. If Jill was to be wooed from her mood of intractability, Derek was the only man to do it. Freddie was convinced that, seeing him in person, she would melt and fall into his arms. Too dashed absurd, Freddie felt, two loving hearts being separated like this and all that sort of thing. He replaced his handkerchief in his pocket, relieved, and concentrated himself on the entertainment of Nelly. A simple task for the longer he was with this girl, the easier did it seem, to talk to her.

Jill, left alone in the lobby, was finding the moments pass quite pleasantly. She liked watching the people as they came in. One or two of the girls of the company fluttered in like birds, were swooped upon by their cavaliers, and fluttered off to the grill-room. The red-headed Babe passed her with a genial nod, and, shortly after, Lois Denham, the willowy recipient of sunbursts from her friend Izzy of the hat-checks, came by in company with a sallow, hawk-faced young man

with a furtive eye, whom Jill took--correctly--to be Izzy himself.

Lois was looking pale and proud, and, from the few words which came to Jill's ears as they neared her, seemed to be annoyed at having been kept waiting.

It was immediately after this that the swing-doors revolved rather more violently than usual, and Mr. Goble burst into view.

There was a cloud upon Mr. Goble's brow, seeming to indicate that his grievance against life had not yet been satisfactorily adjusted; but it passed as he saw Jill, and he came up to her with what he would probably have claimed to be an ingratiating smile.

"Hullo!" said Mr. Goble. "All alone?"

Jill was about to say that the condition was merely temporary when the manager went on.

"Come and have a bit of lunch."

"Thank you very much," said Jill, with the politeness of dislike, "but I'm waiting for someone."

"Chuck him!" advised Mr. Goble cordially.

"No, thanks, I couldn't, really."

The cloud began to descend again upon Mr. Goble's brow. He was accustomed to having these invitations of his treated as royal commands.

"Come along!"

"I'm afraid it's impossible."

Mr. Goble subjected her to a prolonged stare, seemed about to speak, changed his mind, and swung off moodily in the direction of the grill-room. He was not used to this sort of treatment.

He had hardly gone, when Wally appeared.

"What was he saying to you?" demanded Wally abruptly, without preliminary greeting.

"He was asking me to lunch."

Wally was silent for a moment. His good-natured face wore an unwonted scowl.

"He went in there, of course?" he said, pointing to the grill-room.

"Yes."

"Then let's go into the other room," said Wally. He regained his good humour. "It was awfully good of you to come. I didn't know whether you would be able to."

"It was very nice of you to invite me."

Wally grinned.

"How perfect our manners are! It's a treat to listen! How did you know that that was the one hat in New York I wanted you to wear?"

"Oh, these things get about. Do you like it?"

"It's wonderful. Let's take this table, shall we?"

## II

They sat down. The dim, tapestry-hung room soothed Jill. She was feeling a little tired after the rehearsal. At the far end of the room an orchestra was playing a tune that she remembered and liked. Her mind went back to the last occasion on which she and Wally had sat opposite each other at a restaurant. How long ago it seemed! She returned to the present to find Wally speaking to her.

"You left very suddenly the other night," said Wally.

"I didn't want to meet Freddie."

Wally looked at her commiseratingly.

"I don't want to spoil your lunch," he said, "but Freddie knows all. He has tracked you down. He met Nelly Bryant, whom he seems to have made friends with in London, and she told him where you were and what you were doing. For a girl who fled at his mere approach the night before last, you don't seem very agitated by the news," he said, as Jill burst into a peal of laughter.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Freddie got Mr. Pilkington to put him in the chorus of the piece. He was rehearsing when I arrived at the theatre this morning, and having a terrible time with Mr. Miller. And, later on, Mr. Goble had a quarrel with the man who was playing the Englishman, and the man threw up his part, and Mr. Goble said he could get any one in the chorus to play it just as well, and he chose Freddie. So now Freddie is one of the principals, and bursting with pride!"

Wally threw his head back and uttered a roar of appreciation which

caused a luncher at a neighbouring table to drop an oyster which he was poising in mid-air.

"Don't make such a noise!" said Jill severely. "Everyone's looking at you."

"I must! It's the most priceless thing I ever heard. I've always maintained and I always will maintain that for pure lunacy nothing can touch the musical comedy business. There isn't anything that can't happen in musical comedy. 'Alice in Wonderland' is nothing to it."

"Have you felt that, too? That's exactly how I feel. It's like a perpetual 'Mad Hatter's Tea-Party.'"

"But what on earth made Freddie join the company at all?"

A sudden gravity descended upon Jill. The words had reminded her of the thing which she was perpetually striving to keep out of her thoughts.

"He said he wanted to be there to keep an eye on me."

Gravity is infectious. Wally's smile disappeared. He, too, had been recalled to thoughts which were not pleasant.

Wally crumbled his roll. There was a serious expression on his face.



"Freddie was quite right. I didn't think he had so much sense."

"Freddie was not right," flared Jill. The recollection of her conversation with that prominent artist still had the power to fire her independent soul. "I'm not a child. I can look after myself. What I do is my own business."

"I'm afraid you're going to find that your business is several people's business. I am interested in it myself. I don't like your being on the stage. Now bite my head off!"

"It's very kind of you to bother about me...."

"I said 'Bite my head off!' I didn't say 'Freeze me!' I take the licence of an old friend who in his time has put worms down your back, and I repeat--I don't like your being on the stage."

"I shouldn't have thought you would have been so"--Jill sought for a devastating adjective--"so mid-Victorian!"

"As far as you are concerned, I'm the middest Victorian in existence. Mid is my middle name." Wally met her indignant gaze squarely.

"I--do--not--like--your--being--on--the--stage! Especially in any company which Ike Goble is running."

"Why Mr. Goble particularly?"

"Because he is not the sort of man you ought to be coming in contact with."

"What nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense at all. I suppose you've read a lot about the morals of theatrical managers...."

"Yes. And it seemed to be exaggerated and silly."

"So it is. There's nothing wrong with most of them. As a general thing, they are very decent fellows--extraordinarily decent if you think of the position they are in. I don't say that in a business way there's much they won't try to put over on you. In the theatre, when it comes to business, everything goes except biting and gouging. 'There's never a law of God or man runs north of fifty-three.' If you alter that to 'north of Forty-first Street' it doesn't scan as well, but it's just as true. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Golden Rule is suspended there. You get used to it after you have been in the theatre for a while, and, except for leaving your watch and pocket-book at home when you have to pay a call on a manager and keeping your face to him so that he can't get away with your back collar-stud, you don't take any notice of it. It's all a game. If a manager swindles you, he wins the hole and takes the honour. If you

foil him, you are one up. In either case, it makes no difference to the pleasantness of your relations. You go on calling him by his first name, and he gives you a couple of cigars out of his waistcoat pocket and says you're a good kid. There is nothing personal in it. He has probably done his best friend out of a few thousand dollars the same morning, and you see them lunching together after the ceremony as happily as possible. You've got to make allowances for managers. They are the victims of heredity. When a burglar marries a hat-check girl, their offspring goes into the theatrical business automatically, and he can't shake off the early teaching which he imbibed at his father's knee. But morals...."

Wally broke off to allow the waiter to place a fried sole before him. Waiters always select the moment when we are talking our best to intrude themselves.

"As regards morals," resumed Wally, "that is a different matter. Most managers are respectable, middle-aged men with wives and families. They are in the business to make money, and they don't want anything else out of it. The girls in their companies are like so many clerks to them, just machines that help to bring the money in. They don't know half a dozen of them to speak to. But our genial Ike is not like that." Wally consumed a mouthful of sole. "Ike Goble is a bad citizen. He paws! He's a slinker and a prowler and a leerer. He's a pest and a worm! He's fat and soft and flabby. He has a greasy soul, a withered heart, and an eye like a codfish. Not knocking him, of course!" added

Wally magnanimously. "Far be it from me to knock anyone! But, speaking with the utmost respect and viewing him in the most favourable light, he is a combination of tom-cat and the things you see when you turn over a flat stone! Such are the reasons why I am sorry that you are in his company."

Jill had listened to this diatribe with a certain uneasiness. Her brief encounters with Mr. Goble told her that every word was probably true. She could still feel the unpleasant sensation of being inspected by the eye which Wally had compared--quite justly--to that of a codfish. But her pride forbade any admission of weakness.

"I can take care of myself," she said.

"I don't doubt it," said Wally. "And you could probably take care of yourself if you fell into a muddy pond. But I shouldn't like to stand on the bank and watch you doing it. I know what girls in the chorus have to go through. Hanging about for hours in draughts, doing nothing, while the principals go through their scenes, and yelled at if they try to relieve the tedium of captivity with a little light conversation...."

"Yes," admitted Jill. "There has been a good lot of that."

"There always is. I believe if the stage-carpenter was going to stick a screw in a flat, they would call a chorus-rehearsal to watch him do

it.... Jill, you must get out of it. It's no life for you. The work...."

"I like the work."

"While it's new, perhaps, but...."

Jill interrupted him passionately.

"Oh, can't you understand!" she cried. "I want the work. I need it. I want something to do, something to occupy my mind. I hate talking about it, but you know how things are with me. Freddie must have told you. Even if he didn't, you must have guessed, meeting me here all alone and remembering how things were when we last met. You must understand! Haven't you ever had a terrible shock or a dreadful disappointment that seemed to smash up the whole world? And didn't you find that the only possible thing to do was to work and work and work as hard as ever you could? When I first came to America, I nearly went mad. Uncle Chris sent me down to a place on Long Island, and I had nothing to do all day but think. I couldn't stand it. I ran away and came to New York and met Nelly Bryant and got this work to do. It saved me. It kept me busy all day and tired me out and didn't give me time to think. The harder it is, the better it suits me. It's an antidote. I simply wouldn't give it up now. As for what you were saying, I must put up with that. The other girls do, so why shouldn't I?"

"They are toughened to it."

"Then I must get toughened to it. What else is there for me to do? I must do something."

"Marry me!" said Wally, reaching across the table and putting his hand on hers. The light in his eyes lit up his homely face like a lantern.

### III

The suddenness of it startled Jill into silence. She snatched her hand away and drew back, looking at him in wonderment. She was confusedly aware of a babble of sound--people talking, people laughing, the orchestra playing a lively tune. All her senses seemed to have become suddenly more acute. She was intensely alive to small details. Then, abruptly, the whole world condensed itself into two eyes that were fastened upon hers--compelling eyes which she felt a panic desire to avoid.

She turned her head away, and looked out into the restaurant. It seemed incredible that all these people, placidly intent upon their food and their small talk, should not be staring at her, wondering what she was going to say; nudging each other and speculating. Their detachment made her feel alone and helpless. She was nothing to them

and they did not care what happened to her, just as she had been nothing to those frozen marshes down at Brookport. She was alone in an indifferent world, with her own problems to settle for herself.

Other men had asked Jill to marry them--a full dozen of them, here and there in country houses and at London dances, before she had met and loved Derek Underhill; but nothing that she had had in the way of experience had prepared her for Wally. These others had given her time to marshal her forces, to collect herself, to weigh them thoughtfully in the balance. Before speaking, they had signalled their devotion in a hundred perceptible ways--by their pinkness, their stammering awkwardness, by the glassy look in their eyes. They had not shot a proposal at her like a bullet from out of the cover of a conversation that had nothing to do with their emotions at all.

Yet, now that the shock of it was dying away, she began to remember signs she would have noticed, speeches which ought to have warned her....

"Wally!" she gasped.

She found that he affected her in an entirely different fashion from the luckless dozen of those London days. He seemed to matter more, to be more important, almost--though she rebelled at the word--more dangerous.

"Let me take you out of it all! You aren't fit for this sort of life.

I can't bear to see you...."

Jill bent forward and touched his hand. He started as though he had been burned. The muscles of his throat were working.

"Wally, it's--" She paused for a word. "Kind" was horrible. It would have sounded cold, almost supercilious. "Sweet" was the sort of thing she could imagine Lois Denham saying to her friend Izzy. She began her sentence again. "You're a dear to say that, but...."

Wally laughed chokingly.

"You think I'm altruistic? I'm not. I'm just as selfish and self-centred as any other man who wants a thing very badly. I'm as altruistic as a child crying for the moon. I want you to marry me because I love you, because there never was anybody like you, because you're the whole world, because I always have loved you. I've been dreaming about you for a dozen years, thinking about you, wondering about you--wondering where you were, what you were doing, how you looked. I used to think that it was just sentimentality, that you merely stood for a time of my life when I was happier than I have ever been since. I used to think that you were just a sort of peg on which I was hanging a pleasant sentimental regret for days which could never come back. You were a memory that seemed to personify all the other memories of the best time of my life. You were the goddess of old



associations. Then I met you in London, and it was different. I wanted you--you! I didn't want you because you recalled old times and were associated with dead happiness, I wanted you! I knew I loved you directly you spoke to me at the theatre that night of the fire. I loved your voice and your eyes and your smile and your courage. And then you told me you were engaged. I might have expected it, but I couldn't keep my jealousy from showing itself, and you snubbed me as I deserved. But now ... things are different now. Everything's different, except my love."

Jill turned her face to the wall beside her. A man at the next table, a corpulent, red-faced man, had begun to stare. He could have heard nothing, for Wally had spoken in a low voice; but plainly he was aware that something more interesting was happening at their table than at any of the other tables, and he was watching with a bovine inquisitiveness which affected Jill with a sense of outrage. A moment before, she had resented the indifference of the outer world. Now, this one staring man seemed like a watching multitude. There were tears in her eyes, and she felt that the red-faced man suspected it.

"Wally...." Her voice broke. "It's impossible."

"Why? Why, Jill?"

"Because.... Oh, it's impossible!"

There was a silence.

"Because...." He seemed to find a difficulty in speaking. "Because of Underhill?"

Jill nodded. She felt wretched. The monstrous incongruity of her surroundings oppressed her. The orchestra had dashed into a rollicking melody, which set her foot tapping in spite of herself. At a near-by table somebody was shouting with laughter. Two waiters at a service-stand were close enough for her to catch snatches of their talk. They were arguing about an order of fried potatoes. Once again her feelings veered round, and she loathed the detachment of the world. Her heart ached for Wally. She could not look at him, but she knew exactly what she would see if she did--honest, pleading eyes searching her face for something which she could not give.

"Yes," she said.

The table creaked. Wally was leaning further forward. He seemed like something large and pathetic--a big dog in trouble. She hated to be hurting him. And all the time her foot tapped accompaniment to the rag-time tune.

"But you can't live all your life with a memory," said Wally.

Jill turned and faced him. His eyes seemed to leap at her, and they

were just as she had pictured them.

"You don't understand," she said gently. "You don't understand."

"It's ended. It's over."

Jill shook her head.

"You can't still love him, after what has happened!"

"I don't know," said Jill unhappily.

The words seemed to bewilder Wally as much as they had bewildered Freddie.

"You don't know?"

Jill shut her eyes tight. Wally quivered. It was a trick she had had as a child. In perplexity, she had always screwed up her eyes just like that, as if to shut herself up in herself.

"Don't talk for a minute, Wally," she said. "I want to think."

Her eyes opened.

"It's like this," she said. He had seen her look at him in exactly the

same way a hundred times. "I don't suppose I can make you understand, but this is how it is. Suppose you had a room, and it was full--of things. Furniture. And there wasn't any space left. You--you couldn't put anything else in till you had taken all that out, could you? It might not be worth anything, but it would still be there, taking up all the room."

Wally nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I see."

"My heart's full, Wally dear. I know it's just lumber that's choking it up, but it's difficult to get it out. It takes time getting it out. I put it in, thinking it was wonderful furniture, the most wonderful in the world, and--I was cheated. It was just lumber. But it's there. It's still there. It's there all the time. And what am I to do?"

The orchestra crashed, and was silent. The sudden stillness seemed to break a spell. The world invaded the little island where they sat. A chattering party of girls and men brushed past them. The waiter, judging that they had been there long enough, slipped a strip of paper, decorously turned upside down, in front of Wally. He took the money, and went away to get change.

Wally turned to Jill.

"I understand," he said. "All this hasn't happened, and we're just as good pals as before?"

"Yes."

"But...." He forced a laugh ... "mark my words, a time may come, and then...!"

"I don't know," said Jill.

"A time may come," repeated Wally. "At any rate, let me think so. It has nothing to do with me. It's for you to decide, absolutely. I'm not going to pursue you with my addresses! If ever you get that room of yours emptied, you won't have to hang out a 'To Let' sign. I shall be waiting, and you will know where to find me. And, in the meantime, yours to command, Wallace Mason. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear." Jill looked at him affectionately. "There's nobody I'd rather open that room to than you, Wally. You know that."

"Is that the solemn truth?"

"The solemn truth."

"Then," said Wally, "in two minutes you will see a startled waiter. There will be about fourteen dollars change out of that twenty he took

away. I'm going to give it all to him."

"You mustn't!"

"Every cent!" said Wally firmly. "And the young Greek brigand who stole my hat at the door is going to get a dollar! That, as our ascetic and honourable friend Goble would say, is the sort of little guy I am!"

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The red-faced man at the next table eyed them as they went out, leaving behind them a waiter who clutched totteringly for support at the back of a chair.

"Had a row," he decided, "but made it up."

He called for a toothpick.