

## CHAPTER XXI

### WALLY MASON LEARNS A NEW EXERCISE

I

Up on the roof of his apartment, far above the bustle and clamour of the busy city, Wally Mason, at eleven o'clock on the morning after Mrs. Peagrim's Bohemian party, was greeting the new day, as was his custom, by going through his ante-breakfast exercises. Mankind is divided into two classes--those who do setting-up exercises before breakfast and those who know they ought to but don't. To the former and more praiseworthy class Wally had belonged since boyhood. Life might be vain and the world a void, but still he touched his toes the prescribed number of times and twisted his muscular body about according to the ritual. He did so this morning a little more vigorously than usual, partly because he had sat up too late the night before and thought too much and smoked too much, with the result that he had risen heavy-eyed, at the present disgraceful hour, and partly because he hoped by wearying the flesh to still the restlessness of the spirit. Spring generally made Wally restless, but never previously had it brought him this distracted feverishness. So he lay on his back and waved his legs in the air, and it was only when he had risen and was about to go still further into the matter that he perceived Jill standing beside him.

"Good Lord!" said Wally.

"Don't stop," said Jill. "I'm enjoying it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, I only just arrived. I rang the bell, and the nice old lady who is cooking your lunch told me you were out here."

"Not lunch. Breakfast."

"Breakfast! At this hour?"

"Won't you join me?"

"I'll join you. But I had my breakfast long ago."

Wally found his despondency magically dispelled. It was extraordinary how the mere sight of Jill could make the world a different place. It was true the sun had been shining before her arrival, but in a flabby, weak-minded way, not with the brilliance it had acquired immediately he heard her voice.

"If you don't mind waiting for about three minutes while I have a shower and dress...."

"Oh, is the entertainment over?" asked Jill, disappointed. "I always arrive too late for everything."

"One of these days you shall see me go through the whole programme, including shadow-boxing and the goose-step. Bring your friends! But at the moment I think it would be more of a treat for you to watch me eat an egg. Go and look at the view. From over there you can see Hoboken."

"I've seen it. I don't think much of it."

"Well, then, on this side we have Brooklyn. There is no stint. Wander to and fro and enjoy yourself. The rendezvous is in the sitting-room in about four moments."

Wally vaulted through the passage-window and disappeared. Then he returned and put his head out.

"I say!"

"Yes?"

"Just occurred to me. Your uncle won't be wanting this place for half an hour or so, will he? I mean, there will be time for me to have a bite of breakfast?"

"I don't suppose he will require your little home till some time in the evening."

"Fine!"

Wally disappeared again, and a few moments later Jill heard the faint splashing of water. She walked to the parapet and looked down. On the windows of the nearer buildings the sun cast glittering beams, but further away a faint, translucent mist hid the city. There was Spring humidity in the air. In the street she had found it oppressive: but on the breezy summit of this steel-and-granite cliff the air was cool and exhilarating. Peace stole into Jill's heart as she watched the boats dropping slowly down the East River, which gleamed like dull steel through the haze. She had come to Journey's End, and she was happy. Trouble and heartache seemed as distant as those hurrying black ants down on the streets. She felt far away from the world on an enduring mountain of rest. She gave a little sigh of contentment and turned to go in as Wally called.

In the sitting-room her feeling of security deepened. Here, the world was farther away than ever. Even the faint noises which had risen to the roof were inaudible, and only the cosy tick-tock of the grandfather's clock punctuated the stillness.

She looked at Wally with a quickening sense of affection. He had the divine gift of silence at the right time. Yes, this was home. This was

where she belonged.

"It didn't take me in, you know," said Jill at length, resting her arms on the table and regarding him severely.

Wally looked up.

"What didn't take you in?"

"That bath of yours. Yes, I know you turned on the cold shower, but you stood at a safe distance and watched it show!"

Wally waved his fork.

"As Heaven is my witness.... Look at my hair! Still damp! And I can show you the towel."

"Well, then, I'll bet it was the hot water. Why weren't you at Mrs. Peagrim's party last night?"

"It would take too long to explain all my reasons, but one of them was that I wasn't invited. How did it go off?"

"Splendidly. Freddie's engaged!"

Wally lowered his coffee cup.

"Engaged! You don't mean what is sometimes slangily called betrothed?"

"I do. He's engaged to Nelly Bryant. Nelly told me all about it when she got home last night. It seems that Freddie said to her 'What ho!' and she said 'You bet!' and Freddie said 'Pip pip!' and the thing was settled." Jill bubbled. "Freddie wants to go into vaudeville with her!"

"No! The Juggling Rookes? Or Rooke and Bryant, the cross-talk team, a thoroughly refined act, swell dressers on and off?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't matter. Nelly is domestic. She's going to have a little home in the country, where she can grow chickens and pigs."

"Father's in the pigstye, you can tell him by his hat, eh?"

"Yes. They will be very happy. Freddie will be a father to her parrot."

Wally's cheerfulness diminished a trifle. The contemplation of Freddie's enviable lot brought with it the inevitable contrast with his own. A little home in the country.... Oh, well!

II

There was a pause. Jill was looking a little grave.

"Wally!"

"Yes?"

She turned her face away, for there was a gleam of mischief in her eyes which she did not wish him to observe.

"Derek was at the party!"

Wally had been about to butter a piece of toast. The butter, jerked from the knife by the convulsive start which he gave, popped up in a semi-circle and plumped on to the tablecloth. He recovered himself quickly.

"Sorry!" he said. "You mustn't mind that. They want me to be second-string for the "Boosting the Butter" event at the next Olympic Games, and I'm practising all the time.... Underhill was there, eh?"

"Yes."

"You met him?"

"Yes."

Wally fiddled with his knife.

"Did he come over.... I mean ... had he come specially to see you?"

"Yes."

"I see."

There was another pause.

"He wants to marry you?"

"He said he wanted to marry me."

Wally got up and went to the window. Jill could smile safely now, and she did, but her voice was still grave.

"What ought I to do, Wally? I thought I would ask you as you are such a friend."

Wally spoke without turning.

"You ought to marry him, of course."



"You think so?"

"You ought to marry him, of course," said Wally doggedly. "You love him, and the fact that he came all the way to America must mean that he still loves you. Marry him!"

"But...." Jill hesitated. "You see, there's a difficulty."

"What difficulty?"

"Well ... it was something I said to him just before he went away. I said something that made it a little difficult."

Wally continued to inspect the roofs below.

"What did you say?"

"Well ... it was something ... something that I don't believe he liked ... something that may interfere with his marrying me."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I was going to marry you!"

Wally spun round. At the same time he leaped in the air. The effect of the combination of movements was to cause him to stagger across the

room and, after two or three impromptu dance steps which would have interested Mrs. Peagrim, to clutch at the mantelpiece to save himself from falling. Jill watched him with quiet approval.

"Why, that's wonderful, Wally! Is that another of your morning exercises? If Freddie does go into vaudeville, you ought to get him to let you join the troupe."

Wally was blinking at her from the mantelpiece.

"Jill!"

"Yes?"

"What--what--what...!"

"Now, don't talk like Freddie, even if you are going into vaudeville with him."

"You said you were going to marry me?"

"I said I was going to marry you!"

"But--do you mean...?"

The mischief died out of Jill's eyes. She met his gaze frankly and

seriously.

"The lumber's gone, Wally," she said. "But my heart isn't empty. It's quite, quite full, and it's going to be full for ever and ever and ever."

Wally left the mantelpiece, and came slowly towards her.

"Jill!" He choked. "Jill!"

Suddenly he pounced on her and swung her off her feet. She gave a little breathless cry.

"Wally! I thought you didn't approve of cavemen!"

"This," said Wally, "is just another new morning exercise I've thought of!"

Jill sat down, gasping.

"Are you going to do that often, Wally?"

"Every day for the rest of my life!"

"Goodness!"

"Oh, you'll get used to it. It'll grow on you."

"You don't think I am making a mistake marrying you?"

"No, no! I've given the matter a lot of thought, and ... in fact, no, no!"

"No," said Jill thoughtfully. "I think you'll make a good husband. I mean, suppose we ever want the piano moved or something.... Wally!" she broke off suddenly.

"You have our ear."

"Come out on the roof," said Jill. "I want to show you something funny."

Wally followed her out. They stood at the parapet together, looking down.

"There!" said Jill, pointing.

Wally looked puzzled.

"I see many things, but which is the funny one?"

"Why, all these people. Over there--and there--and there. Scuttering

about and thinking they know everything there is to know, and not one of them has the least idea that I am the happiest girl on earth!"

"Or that I'm the happiest man! Their ignorance is--what is the word I want? Abysmal. They don't know what it's like to stand beside you and see that little dimple in your chin.... They don't know you've got a little dimple in your chin.... They don't know.... They don't know.... Why, I don't suppose a single one of them even knows that I'm just going to kiss you!"

"Those girls in that window over there do," said Jill. "They are watching us like hawks."

"Let 'em!" said Wally briefly.

THE END