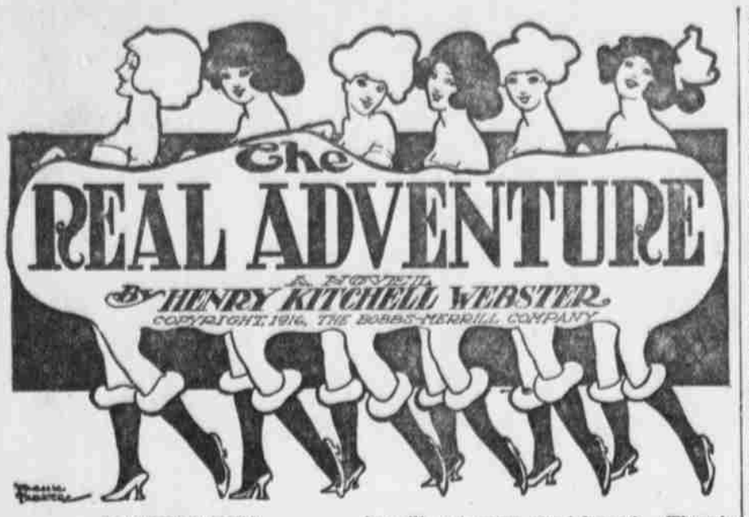

CHAPTER XXII.

—15—

Jimmy Wallace Throws a Bomb.

It was about eleven months after Rose had watched Rodney walking dejectedly away into the rain that Jimmy Wallace threw his bomb.

Every year he made two professional visits to New York; one in autumn, one in the spring, in order that he might have interesting matters to write about when the local theatrical doings had been exhausted. From his first spring pilgrimage after Rose's disappearance he came back wearing a deep-lying and contented smile, and a few days later, after a talk over the telephone with Rodney, he headed a column of gossip about the theater with the following paragraph:

"Come On In," as the latest of the New York revues is called, is much like all the others. It contains the same procession of specialty mongers, the same cacophony of rag-time, the same gangway out into the audience which refreshes tired business men with a thrilling worm's-eye view of dancing girls' knees au naturel. And up and down this straight and narrow pathway of the chorus there is the customary parade of the same haughty beauties of Broadway. Only in one item is there a deviation from the usual formula: the costumes. For several years past the revues at the theater (the Columbian) have been caparisoned with the decadent colors and bizarre designs of the exotic Mr. Grenville Melton. I knew there had been a change for the better as soon as I saw the first number, for these dresses have the stimulating quality of a healthy and vigorous imagination, as well as a vivid decorative value. They are exceedingly smart, of course, or else they would never do for a Broadway revue, but they are also alive, while those of Mr. Melton were invariably sickly. Curiously enough the name of the new costume designer has a special interest for Chicago. She is Doris Dane, who participated in "The Girl Upstairs" at the Globe. Miss Dane's stage experience here was brief, but nevertheless her striking success in her new profession will probably cause the formation of a large and enthusiastic "I-knew-her-when" club.

Jimmy expected to produce an effect with it. But what he did produce exceeded his wildest anticipations. The thing came out in the three o'clock edition, and before he left the office that afternoon he had received over the telephone six invitations to dinner; three of them for that night. He declined the first two on the ground of an enormous press of work incident to his fresh return from a fortnight in New York. But when Violet Williamson called up and said, with a reference to a previous engagement that was shamefully fictitous: "Jimmy, you haven't forgotten you're dining with us tonight, have you? It's just us, so you needn't dress," he answered:

"Oh, no, I've got it down on my calendar all right. Seven-thirty?"

Violet snickered and said: "You wait!—Or rather, don't wait. Make it seven."

Jimmy was glad to be let off that extra half hour of waiting. He was impatient for the encounter with Violet—a state of mind most rare with him. He meant to wring all the pleasure out of it he could by way of revenge for Violet's attitude toward Rose after her presence in the Globe chorus had become known—for that biting contempt which was the typical attitude of her class.

Violet said, the moment he appeared in the drawing room doorway: "John made me swear not to let you tell me a word until he came in. He's simply burbling. But there's one thing he won't mind your telling me, and that's her address. I'm simply perishing to write her a note and tell her how glad we were."

Jimmy made a little gesture of regret. He'd have spoken too, but she didn't give him time.

"You don't mean," she cried, "that you didn't find out where she lived while you were right there in New York!"

John came in just then, and Violet, turning to him tragically, repeated, "He doesn't even know where she lives!"

"Oh, I'm a boob, I know," said Jimmy. "But, as I told the other five . . ."

Violet frowned as she echoed, "The other five—what?"

Jimmy turned to John Williamson with a perfectly electric grin.

"The other five of Rose Aldrich's friends—and yours," he said, "who called me up this afternoon and invited me to dinner, and asked for her address so that they could write her notes and tell her how glad they were."

John said "Whoosh!"—all but upset a chair, and slammed it out of the way in order to jubilate properly.

Violet stood looking at them thoughtfully. A little flush of color was coming up into her face.

"You two men," she said, "are trying to act as if I weren't in this; as if I weren't just as glad as you are, and hadn't as good a right to be. John here," this was to Jimmy, "has been gloating ever since he came home with the paper. And you . . . Did you mean me by that snippy little thing you said about the 'I-knew-her-when club?' Well, you'll get your punishment. There's dinner! But you won't be allowed to eat. You'll have to begin at the beginning and tell us all about her."

Jimmy, his effect produced, his long-meditated vengeance completed by the flare of color he'd seen come up in Violet's cheeks, settled down seriously to the telling of his tale, stopping occasionally to bolt a little food just before his plate was snatched away from him, but otherwise without intermission.

He'd suspected nothing about the costumes on that opening night of "Come On In," until a realization of how amazingly good they were made him search his program. The line "Costumes by Dane" had lighted up in his mind a wild surmise of the truth, though he admitted it had seemed almost too good to be true. Because the costumes were really wonderful.

He cast about, he said, for some way of finding out who Dane really was. And, having learned that Galbraith was putting on the show at the Casino he looked him up.

Galbraith proved a mine of information—no, he was more like one of those oil wells technically known as a gusher. He simply spouted facts about Rose, and couldn't be stopped. She was his own discovery. He'd seen her possibilities when she designed and executed those twelve costumes for the sextette in "The Girl Upstairs." He'd brought her down to New York to act as his assistant. She worked for Galbraith the greater part of last season. Jimmy had never known of anybody having just that sort of job before. Galbraith, busy with two or three productions at once, had put over a lot of the work of conducting rehearsals on her shoulders. He'd get a number started, having figured out the maneuvers the chorus were to go through, the steps they'd use, and so on, and Rose would actually take his place; would be in complete charge of the rehearsal as the director's representative.

The costuming last season had been a side issue, at the beginning at least, but she'd done part of the costumes for one of his productions, and they were so strikingly successful that Abe Shuman had snatched her away from him.

"The funny thing is the way she does them," Jimmy said. "Everybody else who designs costumes just draws them: dinky little water colored plates, and the plates are sent out to a company like the Star Costume company and they execute them. But Rose can't draw a bit. She got a mannequin—not an ordinary dressmaker's form, but a regular painter's mannequin—with legs and made her costumes on the thing; or at least cut out a sort of pattern of them in cloth. But somehow or other, the designing of them and the execution are more mixed up together by Rose's method than by the orthodox one. She wanted to get some women in to sew for her, and see the whole job through herself; deliver the costumes complete, and get paid for them. But it seems that the Shumans, on the side, owned the Star company and raked off a big profit on the costumes that way. I don't know all the details. I don't know that Galbraith did. But anyhow, the first thing anybody knew, Rose had financed herself. She got one of those rich young bachelor women in New York to go into the thing with her, and organized a company, and made Abe Shuman an offer on all the costumes for 'Come On In.' Galbraith thinks that Abe Shuman thought she was sure to lose a lot of money on it and go broke, and that then he could put her to work at a salary, so he gave her the job. But she didn't lose. She evidently made a chunk out of it, and her reputation at the same time."

Violet was immensely thrilled by this recital. "Won't she be perfectly wonderful," she exclaimed, "for the Junior league show, when she comes back!"

Jimmy found an enormous satisfaction in saying: "Oh, she'll be too expensive for you. She's a regular robber, she says."

"She says!" cried Violet. "Do you mean you've talked with her?"

"Do you think I'd have come back from New York without?" said Jimmy. "Galbraith told me to drop in at the Casino that same afternoon. Some of the costumes were to be tried on, and 'Miss Dane' would be there.

"Well, and she came. I almost fell over her out there in the dark, because of course the auditorium wasn't lighted at all. I'll admit she rather took my breath, just glancing up at me, and then peering to make out who I was, and then her face going all alight with that smile of hers. I didn't know what to call her, and was stammering over a mixture of Miss Dane and Mrs. Aldrich, when she laughed and held out a hand to me and said she didn't remember whether I'd ever called her Rose or not, but she'd like to hear someone call her that, and wouldn't I begin?"

Jimmy explained there hadn't been any chance to talk much. "The costumes began coming up on the stage just then (on chorus girls, of course), and she was up over the runway in a minute, talking them over with Galbraith. When she'd finished, she came down to me again for a minute, but it was hardly longer than that really. She said she wished she might see me again, but that she couldn't ask me to come to the studio, because it was a perfect bedlam, and that there was no use asking me to come to her apartment, because she was never there herself these days, except for about seven hours a night of the hardest kind of sleep. If I could stay around till her rush was over . . . But then, of course, she knew I couldn't."

"And you never thought of asking her," Violet wailed, "where the apartment was, so that the rest of us, if we were in New York, could look her up, or write to her from here?"

"No," Jimmy said. "I never thought of asking for her address. But it's the easiest thing in the world to get. Call up Rodney. He knows."

"What makes you think he knows?" Violet demanded.

"Well, for one thing," said Jimmy, "when Rose was asking for news of all of you, she said: 'I hear from Rodney regularly. Only he doesn't tell me much gossip.'"

"Hears from him!" gasped Violet. "Regularly!" She was staring at Jimmy in a dazed sort of way. "Well, does she write to him? Has she made it up with him? Is she coming back?"

"I suppose you can just hear me asking her all those questions? Casually, in the aisle of a theater, while she was getting ready for a running jump into a taxi?"

The color came up into Violet's face again. There was a maddening sort of jubilant jocularity about these men, the looks and almost winks they exchanged, the distinctly saucy quality of the things they said to her.

"Of course," she said coolly, "if Rose had told me that she heard from Rodney regularly, although he didn't send her much of the gossip, I shouldn't have had to ask her those questions. I'd have known from the way she looked and the way her voice sounded,

"You Two Men . . . Are Trying to Act as If I Weren't in on This."

whether she was writing to Rodney or not, and whether she meant to come back to him or not; whether she was ready to make it up if he was—all that. Any woman who knew her at all would. Only a man, perfectly infatuated, grinning . . . See if you can't tell what she looked like and how she said it."

Jimmy, meek again, attempted the task.

"Well," he said, "she didn't look me in the eye and register deep meanings or anything like that. I don't know where she looked. As far as the inflection of her voice went, it was just as casual as if she'd been telling me what she'd had for lunch. But the quality of her voice just richened up a bit, as if the words tasted good to her. And she smiled, just barely, as if she knew I'd be staggered and didn't care. There you are! Now interpret unto me this dream, oh, Joseph."

Violet's eyes were shining. "Why, it's as plain," she said. "Can't you see that she's just waiting for him; that she'll come like a shot the minute he says the word? And there he is eating his heart out for her, and in his rage charging poor John perfectly terrific prices for his legal services, when all he's got to do is to say 'please,' in order to be happy."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Rodney Gets a Clear View of Himself.

It was Rose herself who began this correspondence with Rodney, within a month of her arrival in New York.

If Rodney had done an unthinkable thing; if he had kept copies of his letters to Rose, along with her answers, in a chronological file, he would have made the discovery that the stiffness of those letters had gradually worn away and that they were now a good deal more than mere pro forma bulletins. There had crept into them, so subtly and so gently that between one of them and the next no striking difference was to be observed, a friendliness, quite cool, but wonderfully firm. She was frankly jubilant over the success of her costumes in "Come On In," and she inclosed with her letter a complete set of newspaper reviews of the piece.

It was a week later that she wrote: "I met James Randolph coming up Broadway yesterday afternoon, about five o'clock. He's changed, somehow, since I saw him last; as brilliant as ever, but rather—lurid. Do you suppose things are going badly between him and Eleanor? He told me he hadn't seen you forever. Why don't you drop in on him?"

It was quite true that Rodney had seen very little of the Randolphs since Rose went away. When it came to confronting his friends, in the knowledge that they knew that Rose had left him for the Globe chorus, he found that James Randolph was one he didn't care to face. He knew too much. He'd be too infernally curious, too full of surmises, eager for experiments.

But Rose's letter put a different face on the matter. The fact that she'd put him, partly at least, in possession of what she had observed and what she guessed, gave him a sort of shield against the doctor. So one evening about nine o'clock he slipped out and walked around to the new house which Bertie Willis had built for Eleanor.

Rodney reflected, as he stood at the door after ringing the bell, that his own house was quite meek and conventional alongside this. Bertie had gone his limit.

The grin which his reflection afforded him was still on Rodney's lips when, a servant having opened the door, he found himself face to face with the architect. Bertie, top-coated and hat in hand, was waiting for Eleanor, who was coming down the stairs followed by a maid with her carriage-coat. He returned Rodney's nod pretty stiffly, as was natural enough, since Rodney's grin had distinctly brightened up at sight of him.

Eleanor said, rather negligently: "Hello, Rod. We're just dashing off to the Palace to see a perfectly exquisite little dancer Bertie's discovered down there. She comes on at half past nine, so we've got to fly. Want to come?"

"No," Rodney said. "I came over to see Jim. Is he at home?"

The maid was holding out the coat for Eleanor's arms. But Eleanor, at Rodney's question, just stood for a second quite still. She wasn't looking at anybody, but the expression in her eyes was sullen. "Yes, he's at home," she said at last.

"Busy, I suppose," said Rodney. Her inflection had dictated this reply.

"Yes, he's busy," she repeated absently and in a tone still more coldly hostile, though Rodney perceived that the hostility was not meant for him. She looked around at Bertie.

"Wait two minutes," she said, "if you don't mind." Then, to Rodney, "Come along." And she led the way up the lustrous, velvety teakwood stair.

He followed her. But, arrived at the drawing room floor, he stopped. "Look here," he said. "If Jim's busy . . ."

"Oh, don't be too dense, Rodney!" she said. "A man has to be 'busy' when he's known to be in the house and won't entertain his wife's guests. Go up, sing out who you are, and go right in." She gave him a nod and a hard little smile, and went downstairs again to Bertie.

Rodney found the door Eleanor had indicated, knocked smartly on it, and sang out at the same time, "This is Rodney Aldrich. May I come in?"

"Come in, of course," Randolph called. "I'm glad to see you," he added, coming to meet his guest, "but do you mind telling me how you got in here? Some poor wretch will lose his job, you know, if Eleanor finds out about this. When I'm in this room, sacred to reflection and research, it's a first-class crime to let me be disturbed." It didn't need his sardonic grin to point the satire of his words.

Rodney said curtly: "Eleanor sent me up herself. I didn't much want to come, to tell the truth, when I heard you were busy."

"Eleanor!" her husband repeated, "I thought she'd gone out—with her poodle."

Rodney said, with unconcealed distaste: "They were on the point of going out when I came in. That's how Eleanor happened to see me."

With a visible effort Randolph recovered a more normal manner. "I'm glad it happened that way," he said. "Get yourself a drink. You'll find anything you want over there, I guess, and something to smoke; then we'll sit down and have an old-fashioned talk."

The source of drinks he indicated was a well-stocked cellarette at the other side of the room. But Rodney's eye fell first on a decanter and siphon on the table, within reach of the chair Randolph had been sitting in.

"I don't believe I want anything more to drink just now," Rodney said. And, as he followed Rodney's glance, Randolph allowed himself another sardonic grin.

The preliminaries were gone through rather elaborately; chairs drawn up and adjusted, ash-trays put within reach; cigars got going satisfactorily. But the talk they were supposed to prepare the way for, didn't at once begin.

Randolph took another stiffish drink and settled back into a dull, sullen abstraction. Finally, for the sake of saying something, Rodney remarked: "This is a wonderful room, isn't it?"

Randolph roused himself. "Never been in here before?" he asked. "Well then, here's two more rooms you must see."

The first one, opening from the study, explained its purpose at a glance, with a desk and typewriter, and filing cabinets around the walls. "Rubber floor," Randolph pointed out, "felt ceiling; absolutely sound-proof. Here's where my stenographer sits all day, ready—like a fireman. And this," he concluded, leading the way to the other room, "is the holy of holies."

It had a rubber floor, too, and, Rodney supposed, a felt ceiling. But its only furniture was one chair and a canvas cot.

"Sound-proof too," said Randolph. "But sounding boards or something in all the walls. I press this button, start a dictaphone, and talk in any direction, anywhere. It's all taken down. Here's where I'm supposed to think, make discoveries and things. I tried it for a while."

They went back into the study.

"Clever beasts, though—poodles," he remarked, as he nodded Rodney to his chair and poured himself another drink. "Learn their tricks very nicely. But, good heavens, Aldrich, think of him as a man! Think what our American married women are up against, when they want somebody to play off against their husbands and have to fall back on tired little beasts like that. Eleanor doesn't mean anything. She's trying to make me jealous. That's her newest experiment. But it's downright pitiful, I say."

Rodney got up out of his chair. It wasn't a possible conversation. "I'll be running along, I think," he said. "I've a lot of proof to correct tonight, and you've got work of your own, I expect."

"Sit down again," said Randolph sharply. "I'm just getting drunk. But that can wait. I'm going to talk. I've got to talk. And if you go, I swear I'll call up Eleanor's butler and talk to him. You'll keep it to yourself, anyway." He added, as Rodney hesitated, "I want to tell you about Rose. I saw her in New York, you know."

Rodney sat down again. "Yes," he said, "so she wrote. Tell me how she looked. She's been working tremendously hard, and I'm a little afraid she's overdoing it."

"She looks," Randolph said very deliberately, "a thousand years old." He laughed at the sharp contraction of Rodney's brows. "Oh, not like that! She's as beautiful as ever. Her skin's still got that bloom on it, and she still flushes up when she smiles. She's lost five pounds, perhaps, but that's just condition. And vitality! But a thousand years old, just the same."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that," said Rodney.

"Why, look here," Randolph said. "You know what a kid she was when you married her. Schoolgirl! I used to tell her things and she'd listen, all eyes—holding her breath! Until I felt almost as wise as she thought I was. She was always game, even then. If she started a thing, she saw it through. If she said, 'Tell it to me straight,' why, she took it, whatever it might be, standing up. She wasn't afraid of anything. Courage of innocence. Because she didn't know. Well, she's courageous now, because she knows. She understands—I tell you—everything.

"Why, look here! We all but ran into each other on the corner, there, of Broadway and Forty-second street; shook hands, said howdy-do. If I had a spare half-hour, would I come and have tea with her here at the Knickerbocker? She'd nodded at two or three passing people while we stood there. And then somebody said, 'Hello, Dane,' and stopped. A miserable, shabby, shivering little painted thing. Rose said 'Hello' and asked how she was getting along. Was she working now? She said no; did Rose know of anything? Rose said, 'Give me your address, and if I can find anything I'll let you know.' The horrible little beast told her where she lived and went away. Rose didn't say anything to me, except that she was somebody who'd been out in a road company with her. But there was a look in her eyes . . . ! Oh, she knew—everything. Knew what the kid was headed for. Knew there was nothing to be done about it. She had no flutters about it, didn't pull a long face, didn't, as I told you, say a word. But there was a look in her eyes, somehow, that understood and faced—everything. And then we went in and had our tea.

"I had a thousand curiosities about her. I'd have found out anything I could. But it was she who did the finding out. Beyond inquiring about you, how lately I'd seen you, and so on, she hardly asked a question; but pretty soon I saw that she understood me. She knew what was the matter with me; knew what I'd made of myself. And she didn't even despise me!

"I came back here to kick this thing to pieces, give myself a fresh start. And when I got here, I hadn't the sand. I got drunk instead." He poured himself another long drink and sipped slowly.

"Everybody knows," he said at last, "that down-and-outs almost invariably take to drugs or drink. But I know why they do."

That remark stung Rodney out of his long silence. During the whole of Randolph's recital of his encounter with Rose he'd never once lifted his eyes from the gray ash of his cigar. He didn't want to look at Randolph, nor think about him. Just wanted to remember every word he said, so that he could carry the picture away intact.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Pay Her to Wait.

Shoe Salesman—But, my dear Madam, you had better purchase a pair while they are only twelve dollars. The price will soon go to twenty-five dollars.

Complacent Customer—Oh, then I won't take any just now. If they go that high I'll just wait for my second childhood and then I can—hope—foot.

W. N. U., OMAHA, NO. 40--1917.

What He Wished.

Titles of books are confusing to those who study them, and even more so to the parents who have to buy them. A few days ago the Greencastle public schools opened, and S. C. Sayers of the store of Sayers & Hamilton, was stunned for a few minutes when a school patron asked for "Physic and Health and a Compound Arithmetic." He thought for a minute and handed the woman a "Physiology and Health and a Complete Arithmetic."—Indianapolis News.

A Combination.

"Are you going to fight or raise food?"

"Little of both, suh," replied Erastus Pinkley. "I's gineter git my chicken coop well populated an' den I's gineter hang right over it wif a shotgun."

A woman's idea of economy is to have her husband waste $3 worth of time putting up a ten-cent shelf.

A weak mind is like a microscope, which magnifies trifling things but cannot perceive great ones.