

CHAPTER VIII

THE HONEYED WORD

Master Maloney's statement that "about 'steen visitors" had arrived in addition to Messrs. Asher, Waterman, and the Rev. Philpotts proved to have been due to a great extent to a somewhat feverish imagination. There were only five men in the room.

As Psmith entered, every eye was turned upon him. To an outside spectator he would have seemed rather like a very well-dressed Daniel introduced into a den of singularly irritable lions. Five pairs of eyes were smouldering with a long-nursed resentment. Five brows were corrugated with wrathful lines. Such, however, was the simple majesty of Psmith's demeanour that for a moment there was dead silence. Not a word was spoken as he paced, wrapped in thought, to the editorial chair. Stillness brooded over the room as he carefully dusted that piece of furniture, and, having done so to his satisfaction, hitched up the knees of his trousers and sank gracefully into a sitting position.

This accomplished, he looked up and started. He gazed round the room.

"Ha! I am observed!" he murmured.

The words broke the spell. Instantly, the five visitors burst simultaneously into speech.

"Are you the acting editor of this paper?"

"I wish to have a word with you, sir."

"Mr. Windsor, I presume?"

"Pardon me!"

"I should like a few moments' conversation."

The start was good and even; but the gentleman who said "Pardon me!" necessarily finished first with the rest nowhere.

Psmith turned to him, bowed, and fixed him with a benevolent gaze through his eye-glass.

"Are you Mr. Windsor, sir, may I ask?" inquired the favoured one.

The others paused for the reply.

"Alas! no," said Psmith with manly regret.

"Then who are you?"

"I am Psmith."

There was a pause.

"Where is Mr. Windsor?"

"He is, I fancy, champing about forty cents' worth of lunch at some neighbouring hostelry."

"When will he return?"

"Anon. But how much anon I fear I cannot say."

The visitors looked at each other.

"This is exceedingly annoying," said the man who had said "Pardon me!" "I came for the express purpose of seeing Mr. Windsor."

"So did I," chimed in the rest. "Same here. So did I."

Psmith bowed courteously.

"Comrade Windsor's loss is my gain. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Are you on the editorial staff of this paper?"

"I am acting sub-editor. The work is not light," added Psmith gratuitously. "Sometimes the cry goes round, 'Can Psmith get through it all? Will his strength support his unquenchable spirit?' But I stagger on. I do not repine."

"Then maybe you can tell me what all this means?" said a small round gentleman who so far had done only chorus work.

"If it is in my power to do so, it shall be done, Comrade--I have not the pleasure of your name."

"My name is Waterman, sir. I am here on behalf of my wife, whose name you doubtless know."

"Correct me if I am wrong," said Psmith, "but I should say it, also, was Waterman."

"Luella Granville Waterman, sir," said the little man proudly. Psmith removed his eye-glass, polished it, and replaced it in his eye. He felt that he must run no risk of not seeing clearly the husband of one who, in his opinion, stood alone in literary circles as a purveyor of sheer bilge.

"My wife," continued the little man, producing an envelope

and handing it to Psmith, "has received this extraordinary communication from a man signing himself W. Windsor. We are both at a loss to make head or tail of it."

Psmith was reading the letter.

"It seems reasonably clear to me," he said.

"It is an outrage. My wife has been a contributor to this journal from its foundation. Her work has given every satisfaction to Mr. Wilberfloss. And now, without the slightest warning, comes this peremptory dismissal from W. Windsor. Who is W. Windsor? Where is Mr. Wilberfloss?"

The chorus burst forth. It seemed that that was what they all wanted to know: Who was W. Windsor? Where was Mr. Wilberfloss?

"I am the Reverend Edwin T. Philpotts, sir," said a cadaverous-looking man with pale blue eyes and a melancholy face. "I have contributed 'Moments of Meditation' to this journal for a very considerable period of time."

"I have read your page with the keenest interest," said Psmith. "I may be wrong, but yours seems to me work which the world will not willingly let die."

The Reverend Edwin's frosty face thawed into a bleak smile.

"And yet," continued Psmith, "I gather that Comrade Windsor, on the other hand, actually wishes to hurry on its decease. It is these strange contradictions, these clashings of personal taste, which make up what we call life. Here we have, on the one hand--"

A man with a face like a walnut, who had hitherto lurked almost unseen behind a stout person in a serge suit, bobbed into the open, and spoke his piece.

"Where's this fellow Windsor? W. Windsor. That's the man we want to see. I've been working for this paper without a break, except when I had the mumps, for four years, and I've reason to know that my page was as widely read and appreciated as any in New York. And now up comes this Windsor fellow, if you please, and tells me in so many words the paper's got no use for me."

"These are life's tragedies," murmured Psmith.

"What's he mean by it? That's what I want to know. And that's what these gentlemen want to know--See here--"

"I am addressing--?" said Psmith.

"Asher's my name. B. Henderson Asher. I write 'Moments of Mirth.'"

A look almost of excitement came into Psmith's face, such a look as a visitor to a foreign land might wear when confronted with some great national monument. That he should be privileged to look upon the author of "Moments of Mirth" in the flesh, face to face, was almost too much.

"Comrade Asher," he said reverently, "may I shake your hand?"

The other extended his hand with some suspicion.

"Your 'Moments of Mirth,'" said Psmith, shaking it, "have frequently reconciled me to the toothache."

He reseated himself.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is a painful case. The circumstances, as you will readily admit when you have heard all, are peculiar. You have asked me where Mr. Wilberfloss is. I do not know."

"You don't know!" exclaimed Mr. Waterman.

"I don't know. You don't know. They," said Psmith, indicating the rest with a wave of the hand, "don't know. Nobody knows. His locality is as hard to ascertain as that of a black cat in a coal-cellar on a moonless night. Shortly before I joined this

journal, Mr. Wilberfloss, by his doctor's orders, started out on a holiday, leaving no address. No letters were to be forwarded. He was to enjoy complete rest. Where is he now? Who shall say? Possibly legging it down some rugged slope in the Rockies, with two bears and a wild cat in earnest pursuit. Possibly in the midst of some Florida everglade, making a noise like a piece of meat in order to snare crocodiles. Possibly in Canada, baiting moose-traps. We have no data."

Silent consternation prevailed among the audience. Finally the Rev. Edwin T. Philpotts was struck with an idea.

"Where is Mr. White?" he asked.

The point was well received.

"Yes, where's Mr. Benjamin White?" chorused the rest.

Psmith shook his head.

"In Europe. I cannot say more."

The audience's consternation deepened.

"Then, do you mean to say," demanded Mr. Asher, "that this fellow Windsor's the boss here, that what he says goes?"

Psmith bowed.

"With your customary clear-headedness, Comrade Asher, you have got home on the bull's-eye first pop. Comrade Windsor is indeed the boss. A man of intensely masterful character, he will brook no opposition. I am powerless to sway him. Suggestions from myself as to the conduct of the paper would infuriate him. He believes that radical changes are necessary in the programme of Cosy Moments, and he means to put them through if it snows. Doubtless he would gladly consider your work if it fitted in with his ideas. A snappy account of a glove-fight, a spine-shaking word-picture of a railway smash, or something on those lines, would be welcomed. But--"

"I have never heard of such a thing," said Mr. Waterman indignantly.

Psmith sighed.

"Some time ago," he said, "--how long it seems!--I remember saying to a young friend of mine of the name of Spiller, 'Comrade Spiller, never confuse the unusual with the impossible.' It is my guiding rule in life. It is unusual for the substitute-editor of a weekly paper to do a Captain Kidd act and take entire command of the journal on his own account; but is it impossible? Alas no. Comrade Windsor has done it. That is where you, Comrade Asher, and you, gentlemen, have landed yourselves squarely in the broth. You have

confused the unusual with the impossible."

"But what is to be done?" cried Mr. Asher.

"I fear that there is nothing to be done, except wait. The present régime is but an experiment. It may be that when Comrade Wilberfloss, having dodged the bears and eluded the wild cat, returns to his post at the helm of this journal, he may decide not to continue on the lines at present mapped out. He should be back in about ten weeks."

"Ten weeks!"

"I fancy that was to be the duration of his holiday. Till then my advice to you gentlemen is to wait. You may rely on me to keep a watchful eye upon your interests. When your thoughts tend to take a gloomy turn, say to yourselves, 'All is well. Psmith is keeping a watchful eye upon our interests.'"

"All the same, I should like to see this W. Windsor," said Mr. Asher.

Psmith shook his head.

"I shouldn't," he said. "I speak in your best interests. Comrade Windsor is a man of the fiercest passions. He cannot brook

interference. Were you to question the wisdom of his plans, there is no knowing what might not happen. He would be the first to regret any violent action, when once he had cooled off, but would that be any consolation to his victim? I think not. Of course, if you wish it, I could arrange a meeting--"

Mr. Asher said no, he thought it didn't matter.

"I guess I can wait," he said.

"That," said Psmith approvingly, "is the right spirit. Wait. That is the watch-word. And now," he added, rising, "I wonder if a bit of lunch somewhere might not be a good thing? We have had an interesting but fatiguing little chat. Our tissues require restoring. If you gentlemen would care to join me--"

Ten minutes later the company was seated in complete harmony round a table at the Knickerbocker. Psmith, with the dignified bonhomie of a seigneur of the old school, was ordering the wine; while B. Henderson Asher, brimming over with good-humour, was relating to an attentive circle an anecdote which should have appeared in his next instalment of "Moments of Mirth."