

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MAN AT THE ASTOR

The duties of Master Pugsy Maloney at the offices of Cosy Moments were not heavy; and he was accustomed to occupy his large store of leisure by reading narratives dealing with life in the prairies, which he acquired at a neighbouring shop at cut rates in consideration of their being shop-soiled. It was while he was engrossed in one of these, on the morning following the visit of Mr. Parker, that the seedy-looking man made his appearance. He walked in from the street, and stood before Master Maloney.

"Hey, kid," he said.

Pugsy looked up with some hauteur. He resented being addressed as "kid" by perfect strangers.

"Editor in, Tommy?" inquired the man.

Pugsy by this time had taken a thorough dislike to him. To be called "kid" was bad. The subtle insult of "Tommy" was still worse.

"Nope," he said curtly, fixing his eyes again on his book. A movement on the part of the visitor attracted his attention. The seedy man was making for the door of the inner room. Pugsy

instantly ceased to be the student and became the man of action. He sprang from his seat and wriggled in between the man and the door.

"Youse can't butt in dere," he said authoritatively. "Chase yerself."

The man eyed him with displeasure.

"Fresh kid!" he observed disapprovingly.

"Fade away," urged Master Maloney.

The visitor's reply was to extend a hand and grasp Pugsy's left ear between a long finger and thumb. Since time began, small boys in every country have had but one answer for this action. Pugsy made it. He emitted a piercing squeal in which pain, fear, and resentment strove for supremacy.

The noise penetrated into the editorial sanctum, losing only a small part of its strength on the way. Psmith, who was at work on a review of a book of poetry, looked up with patient sadness.

"If Comrade Maloney," he said, "is going to take to singing as well as whistling, I fear this journal must put up its shutters. Concentrated thought will be out of the question."

A second squeal rent the air. Billy Windsor jumped up.

"Somebody must be hurting the kid," he exclaimed.

He hurried to the door and flung it open. Psmith followed at a more leisurely pace. The seedy man, caught in the act, released Master Maloney, who stood rubbing his ear with resentment written on every feature.

On such occasions as this Billy was a man of few words. He made a dive for the seedy man; but the latter, who during the preceding moment had been eyeing the two editors as if he were committing their appearance to memory, sprang back, and was off down the stairs with the agility of a Marathon runner.

"He blows in," said Master Maloney, aggrieved, "and asks is de editor dere. I tells him no, 'cos youse said youse wasn't, and he nips me by the ear when I gets busy to stop him gettin' t'roo."

"Comrade Maloney," said Psmith, "you are a martyr. What would Horatius have done if somebody had nipped him by the ear when he was holding the bridge? The story does not consider the possibility. Yet it might have made all the difference. Did the gentleman state his business?"

"Nope. Just tried to butt t'roo."

"Another of these strong silent men. The world is full of us. These are the perils of the journalistic life. You will be safer and happier when you are rounding up cows on your mustang."

"I wonder what he wanted," said Billy, when they were back again in the inner room.

"Who can say, Comrade Windsor? Possibly our autographs. Possibly five minutes' chat on general subjects."

"I don't like the look of him," said Billy.

"Whereas what Comrade Maloney objected to was the feel of him. In what respect did his look jar upon you? His clothes were poorly cut, but such things, I know, leave you unmoved."

"It seems to me," said Billy thoughtfully, "as if he came just to get a sight of us."

"And he got it. Ah, Providence is good to the poor."

"Whoever's behind those tenements isn't going to stick at any odd trifle. We must watch out. That man was probably sent to mark us down for one of the gangs. Now they'll know what we look like, and they can get after us."

"These are the drawbacks to being public men, Comrade Windsor. We must bear them manfully, without wincing."

Billy turned again to his work.

"I'm not going to wince," he said, "so's you could notice it with a microscope. What I'm going to do is to buy a good big stick. And I'd advise you to do the same."

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It was by Psmith's suggestion that the editorial staff of *Cosy Moments* dined that night in the roof-garden at the top of the Astor Hotel.

"The tired brain," he said, "needs to recuperate. To feed on such a night as this in some low-down hostelry on the level of the street, with German waiters breathing heavily down the back of one's neck and two fiddles and a piano whacking out 'Beautiful Eyes' about three feet from one's tympanum, would be false economy. Here, fanned by cool breezes and surrounded by fair women and brave men, one may do a bit of tissue-restoring. Moreover, there is little danger up here of being slugged by our moth-eaten acquaintance of this morning. A man with trousers like his would not be allowed in. We shall probably find him waiting for us at the

main entrance with a sand-bag, when we leave, but, till then--"

He turned with gentle grace to his soup.

It was a warm night, and the roof-garden was full. From where they sat they could see the million twinkling lights of the city.

Towards the end of the meal, Psmith's gaze concentrated itself on the advertisement of a certain brand of ginger-ale in Times Square.

It is a mass of electric light arranged in the shape of a great bottle, and at regular intervals there proceed from the bottle's mouth flashes of flame representing ginger-ale. The thing began to exercise a hypnotic effect on Psmith. He came to himself with a start, to find Billy Windsor in conversation with a waiter.

"Yes, my name's Windsor," Billy was saying.

The waiter bowed and retired to one of the tables where a young man in evening clothes was seated. Psmith recollected having seen this solitary diner looking in their direction once or twice during dinner, but the fact had not impressed him.

"What is happening, Comrade Windsor?" he inquired. "I was musing with a certain tenseness at the moment, and the rush of events has left me behind."

"Man at that table wanted to know if my name was Windsor," said

Billy.

"Ah?" said Psmith, interested; "and was it?"

"Here he comes. I wonder what he wants. I don't know the man from Adam."

The stranger was threading his way between the tables.

"Can I have a word with you, Mr. Windsor?" he said.

Billy looked at him curiously. Recent events had made him wary of strangers.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

A waiter was bringing a chair. The young man seated himself.

"By the way," added Billy; "my friend, Mr. Smith."

"Pleased to meet you," said the other.

"I don't know your name," Billy hesitated.

"Never mind about my name," said the stranger. "It won't be needed. Is Mr. Smith on your paper? Excuse my asking."

Psmith bowed. "That's all right, then. I can go ahead." He bent forward.

"Neither of you gentlemen are hard of hearing, eh?"

"In the old prairie days," said Psmith, "Comrade Windsor was known to the Indians as Boola-Ba-Na-Gosh, which, as you doubtless know, signifies Big-Chief-Who-Can-Hear-A-Fly-Clear-Its-Throat. I too can hear as well as the next man. Why?"

"That's all right, then. I don't want to have to shout it. There's some things it's better not to yell."

He turned to Billy, who had been looking at him all the while with a combination of interest and suspicion. The man might or might not be friendly. In the meantime, there was no harm in being on one's guard. Billy's experience as a cub-reporter had given him the knowledge that is only given in its entirety to police and newspaper men: that there are two New Yorks. One is a modern, well-policed city, through which one may walk from end to end without encountering adventure. The other is a city as full of sinister intrigue, of whisperings and conspiracies, of battle, murder, and sudden death in dark by-ways, as any town of mediaeval Italy. Given certain conditions, anything may happen to any one in New York. And Billy realised that these conditions now prevailed in



his own case. He had come into conflict with New York's underworld. Circumstances had placed him below the surface, where only his wits could help him.

"It's about that tenement business," said the stranger.

Billy bristled. "Well, what about it?" he demanded truculently.

The stranger raised a long and curiously delicately shaped hand.

"Don't bite at me," he said. "This isn't my funeral. I've no kick coming. I'm a friend."

"Yet you don't tell us your name."

"Never mind my name. If you were in my line of business, you wouldn't be so durned stuck on this name thing. Call me Smith, if you like."

"You could select no nobler pseudonym," said Psmith cordially.

"Eh? Oh, I see. Well, make it Brown, then. Anything you please. It don't signify. See here, let's get back. About this tenement thing. You understand certain parties have got it in against you?"

"A charming conversationalist, one Comrade Parker, hinted at something of the sort," said Psmith, "in a recent interview. Cosy

Moments, however, cannot be muzzled."

"Well?" said Billy.

"You're up against a big proposition."

"We can look after ourselves."

"Gum! you'll need to. The man behind is a big bug."

Billy leaned forward eagerly.

"Who is he?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. You wouldn't expect a man like that to give himself away."

"Then how do you know he's a big bug?"

"Precisely," said Psmith. "On what system have you estimated the size of the gentleman's bughood?"

The stranger lit a cigar.

"By the number of dollars he was ready to put up to have you done in."

Billy's eyes snapped.

"Oh?" he said. "And which gang has he given the job to?"

"I wish I could tell you. He--his agent, that is--came to Bat Jarvis."

"The cat-expert?" said Psmith. "A man of singularly winsome personality."

"Bat turned the job down."

"Why was that?" inquired Billy.

"He said he needed the money as much as the next man, but when he found out who he was supposed to lay for, he gave his job the frozen face. Said you were a friend of his and none of his fellows were going to put a finger on you. I don't know what you've been doing to Bat, but he's certainly Willie the Long-Lost Brother with you."

"A powerful argument in favour of kindness to animals!" said Psmith. "Comrade Windsor came into possession of one of Comrade

Jarvis's celebrated stud of cats. What did he do? Instead of having the animal made into a nourishing soup, he restored it to its bereaved owner. Observe the sequel. He is now as a prize tortoiseshell to Comrade Jarvis."

"So Bat wouldn't stand for it?" said Billy.

"Not on his life. Turned it down without a blink. And he sent me along to find you and tell you so."

"We are much obliged to Comrade Jarvis," said Psmith.

"He told me to tell you to watch out, because another gang is dead sure to take on the job. But he said you were to know he wasn't mixed up in it. He also said that any time you were in bad, he'd do his best for you. You've certainly made the biggest kind of hit with Bat. I haven't seen him so worked up over a thing in years. Well, that's all, I reckon. Guess I'll be pushing along. I've a date to keep. Glad to have met you. Glad to have met you, Mr. Smith. Pardon me, you have an insect on your coat."

He flicked at Psmith's coat with a quick movement. Psmith thanked him gravely.

"Good night," concluded the stranger, moving off. For a few moments after he had gone, Psmith and Billy sat smoking in silence.

They had plenty to think about.

"How's the time going?" asked Billy at length. Psmith felt for his watch, and looked at Billy with some sadness.

"I am sorry to say, Comrade Windsor--"

"Hullo," said Billy, "here's that man coming back again."

The stranger came up to their table, wearing a light overcoat over his dress clothes. From the pocket of this he produced a gold watch.

"Force of habit," he said apologetically, handing it to Psmith.

"You'll pardon me. Good night, gentlemen, again."