

## CHAPTER XII

### A RED TAXIMETER

The Astor Hotel faces on to Times Square. A few paces to the right of the main entrance the Times Building towers to the sky; and at the foot of this the stream of traffic breaks, forming two channels. To the right of the building is Seventh Avenue, quiet, dark, and dull. To the left is Broadway, the Great White Way, the longest, straightest, brightest, wickedest street in the world.

Psmith and Billy, having left the Astor, started to walk down Broadway to Billy's lodgings in Fourteenth Street. The usual crowd was drifting slowly up and down in the glare of the white lights.

They had reached Herald Square, when a voice behind them exclaimed, "Why, it's Mr. Windsor!"

They wheeled round. A flashily dressed man was standing with outstretched hand.

"I saw you come out of the Astor," he said cheerily. "I said to myself, 'I know that man.' Darned if I could put a name to you, though. So I just followed you along, and right here it came to me."

"It did, did it?" said Billy politely.

"It did, sir. I've never set eyes on you before, but I've seen so many photographs of you that I reckon we're old friends. I know your father very well, Mr. Windsor. He showed me the photographs. You may have heard him speak of me--Jack Lake? How is the old man? Seen him lately?"

"Not for some time. He was well when he last wrote."

"Good for him. He would be. Tough as a plank, old Joe Windsor. We always called him Joe."

"You'd have known him down in Missouri, of course?" said Billy.

"That's right. In Missouri. We were side-partners for years. Now, see here, Mr. Windsor, it's early yet. Won't you and your friend come along with me and have a smoke and a chat? I live right here in Thirty-Third Street. I'd be right glad for you to come."

"I don't doubt it," said Billy, "but I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us."

"In a hurry, are you?"

"Not in the least."

"Then come right along."

"No, thanks."

"Say, why not? It's only a step."

"Because we don't want to. Good night."

He turned, and started to walk away. The other stood for a moment, staring; then crossed the road.

Psmith broke the silence.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Comrade Windsor," he said tentatively, "but were you not a trifle--shall we say abrupt?--with the old family friend?"

Billy Windsor laughed.

"If my father's name was Joseph," he said, "instead of being William, the same as mine, and if he'd ever been in Missouri in his life, which he hasn't, and if I'd been photographed since I was a kid, which I haven't been, I might have gone along. As it was, I thought it better not to."

"These are deep waters, Comrade Windsor. Do you mean to intimate--?"

"If they can't do any better than that, we shan't have much to worry us. What do they take us for, I wonder? Farmers? Playing off a comic-supplement bluff like that on us!"

There was honest indignation in Billy's voice.

"You think, then, that if we had accepted Comrade Lake's invitation, and gone along for a smoke and a chat, the chat would not have been of the pleasantest nature?"

"We should have been put out of business."

"I have heard so much," said Psmith, thoughtfully, "of the lavish hospitality of the American."

"Taxi, sir?"

A red taximeter cab was crawling down the road at their side. Billy shook his head.

"Not that a taxi would be an unsound scheme," said Psmith.

"Not that particular one, if you don't mind."

"Something about it that offends your aesthetic taste?" queried Psmith sympathetically.

"Something about it makes my aesthetic taste kick like a mule," said Billy.

"Ah, we highly strung literary men do have these curious prejudices. We cannot help it. We are the slaves of our temperaments. Let us walk, then. After all, the night is fine, and we are young and strong."

They had reached Twenty-Third Street when Billy stopped. "I don't know about walking," he said. "Suppose we take the Elevated?"

"Anything you wish, Comrade Windsor. I am in your hands."

They cut across into Sixth Avenue, and walked up the stairs to the station of the Elevated Railway. A train was just coming in.

"Has it escaped your notice, Comrade Windsor," said Psmith after a pause, "that, so far from speeding to your lodgings, we are going in precisely the opposite direction? We are in an up-town train."

"I noticed it," said Billy briefly.

"Are we going anywhere in particular?"

"This train goes as far as Hundred and Tenth Street. We'll go up to there."

"And then?"

"And then we'll come back."

"And after that, I suppose, we'll make a trip to Philadelphia, or Chicago, or somewhere? Well, well, I am in your hands, Comrade Windsor. The night is yet young. Take me where you will. It is only five cents a go, and we have money in our purses. We are two young men out for reckless dissipation. By all means let us have it."

At Hundred and Tenth Street they left the train, went down the stairs, and crossed the street. Half-way across Billy stopped.

"What now, Comrade Windsor?" inquired Psmith patiently. "Have you thought of some new form of entertainment?"

Billy was making for a spot some few yards down the road. Looking in that direction, Psmith saw his objective. In the shadow of the Elevated there was standing a taximeter cab.

"Taxi, sir?" said the driver, as they approached.

"We are giving you a great deal of trouble," said Billy. "You must be losing money over this job. All this while you might be getting fares down-town."

"These meetings, however," urged Psmith, "are very pleasant."

"I can save you worrying," said Billy. "My address is 84 East Fourteenth Street. We are going back there now."

"Search me," said the driver, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I thought perhaps you did," replied Billy. "Good night."

"These things are very disturbing," said Psmith, when they were in the train. "Dignity is impossible when one is compelled to be the Hunted Fawn. When did you begin to suspect that yonder merchant was doing the sleuth-hound act?"

"When I saw him in Broadway having a heart-to-heart talk with our friend from Missouri."

"He must be something of an expert at the game to have kept on our track."

"Not on your life. It's as easy as falling off a log. There are only certain places where you can get off an Elevated train. All he'd got to do was to get there before the train, and wait. I didn't expect to dodge him by taking the Elevated. I just wanted to make certain of his game."

The train pulled up at the Fourteenth Street station. In the roadway at the foot of the opposite staircase was a red taximeter cab.