CHAPTER XIII

REVIEWING THE SITUATION

Arriving at the bed-sitting-room, Billy proceeded to occupy the rocking-chair, and, as was his wont, began to rock himself rhythmically to and fro. Psmith seated himself gracefully on the couch-bed. There was a silence.

The events of the evening had been a revelation to Psmith. He had not realised before the extent of the ramifications of New York's underworld. That members of the gangs should crop up in the Astor roof-garden and in gorgeous raiment in the middle of Broadway was a surprise. When Billy Windsor had mentioned the gangs, he had formed a mental picture of low-browed hooligans, keeping carefully to their own quarter of the town. This picture had been correct, as far as it went, but it had not gone far enough. The bulk of the gangs of New York are of the hooligan class, and are rarely met with outside their natural boundaries. But each gang has its more prosperous members; gentlemen, who, like the man of the Astor roof-garden, support life by more delicate and genteel methods than the rest. The main body rely for their incomes, except at election-time, on such primitive feats as robbing intoxicated pedestrians. The aristocracy of the gangs soar higher.

It was a considerable time before Billy spoke.

"Say," he said, "this thing wants talking over."

"By all means, Comrade Windsor."

"It's this way. There's no doubt now that we're up against a mighty big proposition."

"Something of the sort would seem to be the case."

"It's like this. I'm going to see this through. It isn't only that I want to do a bit of good to the poor cusses in those tenements, though I'd do it for that alone. But, as far as I'm concerned, there's something to it besides that. If we win out, I'm going to get a job out of one of the big dailies. It'll give me just the chance I need. See what I mean? Well, it's different with you. I don't see that it's up to you to run the risk of getting yourself put out of business with a black-jack, and maybe shot. Once you get mixed up with the gangs there's no saying what's going to be doing. Well, I don't see why you shouldn't quit. All this has got nothing to do with you. You're over here on a vacation. You haven't got to make a living this side. You want to go about and have a good time, instead of getting mixed up with--"

He broke off.

"Well, that's what I wanted to say, anyway," he concluded.

Psmith looked at him reproachfully.

"Are you trying to sack me, Comrade Windsor?"

"How's that?"

"In various treatises on 'How to Succeed in Literature,'" said Psmith sadly, "which I have read from time to time, I have always found it stated that what the novice chiefly needed was an editor who believed in him. In you, Comrade Windsor, I fancied that I had found such an editor."

"What's all this about?" demanded Billy. "I'm making no kick about your work."

"I gathered from your remarks that you were anxious to receive my resignation."

"Well, I told you why. I didn't want you be black-jacked."

"Was that the only reason?"

"Sure."

"Then all is well," said Psmith, relieved. "For the moment I fancied that my literary talents had been weighed in the balance and adjudged below par. If that is all--why, these are the mere everyday risks of the young journalist's life. Without them we should be dull and dissatisfied. Our work would lose its fire. Men such as ourselves, Comrade Windsor, need a certain stimulus, a certain fillip, if they are to keep up their high standards. The knowledge that a low-browed gentleman is waiting round the corner with a sand-bag poised in air will just supply that stimulus. Also that fillip. It will give our output precisely the edge it requires."

"Then you'll stay in this thing? You'll stick to the work?"

"Like a conscientious leech, Comrade Windsor."

"Bully for you," said Billy.

It was not Psmith's habit, when he felt deeply on any subject, to exhibit his feelings; and this matter of the tenements had hit him harder than any one who did not know him intimately would have imagined. Mike would have understood him, but Billy Windsor was too recent an acquaintance. Psmith was one of those people who are content to accept most of the happenings of life in an airy spirit of tolerance. Life had been more or less of a game with him up till

now. In his previous encounters with those with whom fate had brought him in contact there had been little at stake. The prize of victory had been merely a comfortable feeling of having had the best of a battle of wits; the penalty of defeat nothing worse than the discomfort of having failed to score. But this tenement business was different. Here he had touched the realities. There was something worth fighting for. His lot had been cast in pleasant places, and the sight of actual raw misery had come home to him with an added force from that circumstance. He was fully aware of the risks that he must run. The words of the man at the Astor, and still more the episodes of the family friend from Missouri and the taximeter cab, had shown him that this thing was on a different plane from anything that had happened to him before. It was a fight without the gloves, and to a finish at that. But he meant to see it through. Somehow or other those tenement houses had got to be cleaned up. If it meant trouble, as it undoubtedly did, that trouble would have to be faced.

"Now that Comrade Jarvis," he said, "showing a spirit of forbearance which, I am bound to say, does him credit, has declined the congenial task of fracturing our occiputs, who should you say, Comrade Windsor, would be the chosen substitute?"

Billy shook his head. "Now that Bat has turned up the job, it might be any one of three gangs. There are four main gangs, you know. Bat's is the biggest. But the smallest of them's large enough to

put us away, if we give them the chance."

"I don't quite grasp the nice points of this matter. Do you mean that we have an entire gang on our trail in one solid mass, or will it be merely a section?"

"Well, a section, I guess, if it comes to that. Parker, or whoever fixed this thing up, would go to the main boss of the gang. If it was the Three Points, he'd go to Spider Reilly. If it was the Table Hill lot, he'd look up Dude Dawson. And so on."

"And what then?"

"And then the boss would talk it over with his own special partners. Every gang-leader has about a dozen of them. A sort of Inner Circle. They'd fix it up among themselves. The rest of the gang wouldn't know anything about it. The fewer in the game, you see, the fewer to split up the dollars."

"I see. Then things are not so black. All we have to do is to look out for about a dozen hooligans with a natural dignity in their bearing, the result of intimacy with the main boss. Carefully eluding these aristocrats, we shall win through. I fancy, Comrade Windsor, that all may yet be well. What steps do you propose to take by way of self-defence?"

"Keep out in the middle of the street, and not go off the Broadway after dark. You're pretty safe on Broadway. There's too much light for them there."

"Now that our sleuth-hound friend in the taximeter has ascertained your address, shall you change it?"

"It wouldn't do any good. They'd soon find where I'd gone to. How about yours?"

"I fancy I shall be tolerably all right. A particularly massive policeman is on duty at my very doors. So much for our private lives. But what of the day-time? Suppose these sandbag-specialists drop in at the office during business hours. Will Comrade Maloney's frank and manly statement that we are not in be sufficient to keep them out? I doubt it. All unused to the nice conventions of polite society, these rugged persons will charge through. In such circumstances good work will be hard to achieve. Your literary man must have complete quiet if he is to give the public of his best. But stay. An idea!"

"Well?"

"Comrade Brady. The Peerless Kid. The man Cosy Moments is running for the light-weight championship. We are his pugilistic sponsors. You may say that it is entirely owing to our efforts that he has

obtained this match with--who exactly is the gentleman Comrade Brady fights at the Highfield Club on Friday night?"

"Cyclone Al. Wolmann, isn't it?"

"You are right. As I was saying, but for us the privilege of smiting Comrade Cyclone Al. Wolmann under the fifth rib on Friday night would almost certainly have been denied to him."

It almost seemed as if he were right. From the moment the paper had taken up his cause, Kid Brady's star had undoubtedly been in the ascendant. People began to talk about him as a likely man. Edgren, in the Evening World, had a paragraph about his chances for the light-weight title. Tad, in the Journal, drew a picture of him. Finally, the management of the Highfield Club had signed him for a ten-round bout with Mr. Wolmann. There were, therefore, reasons why Cosy Moments should feel a claim on the Kid's services.

"He should," continued Psmith, "if equipped in any degree with finer feelings, be bubbling over with gratitude towards us. 'But for Cosy Moments,' he should be saying to himself, 'where should I be? Among the also-rans.' I imagine that he will do any little thing we care to ask of him. I suggest that we approach Comrade Brady, explain the facts of the case, and offer him at a comfortable salary the post of fighting-editor of Cosy Moments. His duties will be to sit in the room opening out of ours, girded as to

the loins and full of martial spirit, and apply some of those half-scissor hooks of his to the persons of any who overcome the opposition of Comrade Maloney. We, meanwhile, will enjoy that leisure and freedom from interruption which is so essential to the artist."

"It's not a bad idea," said Billy.

"It is about the soundest idea," said Psmith, "that has ever been struck. One of your newspaper friends shall supply us with tickets, and Friday night shall see us at the Highfield."