

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRST BATTLE

The promptitude and despatch with which the Kid had attended to the gentleman with the black-jack had not been without its effect on the followers of the stricken one. Physical courage is not an outstanding quality of the New York hooligan. His personal preference is for retreat when it is a question of unpleasantness with a stranger. And, in any case, even when warring among themselves, the gangs exhibit a lively distaste for the hard knocks of hand-to-hand fighting. Their chosen method of battling is to lie down on the ground and shoot. This is more suited to their physique, which is rarely great. The gangster, as a rule, is stunted and slight of build.

The Kid's rapid work on the present occasion created a good deal of confusion. There was no doubt that much had been hoped for from speedy attack. Also, the generalship of the expedition had been in the hands of the fallen warrior. His removal from the sphere of active influence had left the party without a head. And, to add to their discomfiture, they could not account for the Kid. Psmith they knew, and Billy Windsor they knew, but who was this stranger with the square shoulders and the upper-cut that landed like a cannon-ball? Something approaching a panic prevailed among the gang.

It was not lessened by the behaviour of the intended victims. Billy Windsor, armed with the big stick which he had bought after the visit of Mr. Parker, was the first to join issue. He had been a few paces behind the others during the black-jack incident; but, dark as it was, he had seen enough to show him that the occasion was, as Psmith would have said, one for the Shrewd Blow rather than the Prolonged Parley. With a whoop of the purest Wyoming brand, he sprang forward into the confused mass of the enemy. A moment later Psmith and the Kid followed, and there raged over the body of the fallen leader a battle of Homeric type.

It was not a long affair. The rules and conditions governing the encounter offended the delicate sensibilities of the gang. Like artists who feel themselves trammelled by distasteful conventions, they were damped and could not do themselves justice. Their forte was long-range fighting with pistols. With that they felt en rapport. But this vulgar brawling in the darkness with muscular opponents who hit hard and often with sticks and hands was distasteful to them. They could not develop any enthusiasm for it. They carried pistols, but it was too dark and the combatants were too entangled to allow them to use these. Besides, this was not the dear, homely old Bowery, where a gentleman may fire a pistol without exciting vulgar comment. It was up-town, where curious crowds might collect at the first shot.

There was but one thing to be done. Reluctant as they might be to abandon their fallen leader, they must tear themselves away.

Already they were suffering grievously from the stick, the black-jack, and the lightning blows of the Kid. For a moment they hung, wavering; then stampeded in half a dozen different directions, melting into the night whence they had come.

Billy, full of zeal, pursued one fugitive some fifty yards down the street, but his quarry, exhibiting a rare turn of speed, easily outstripped him.

He came back, panting, to find Psmith and the Kid examining the fallen leader of the departed ones with the aid of a match, which went out just as Billy arrived.

"It is our friend of the earlier part of the evening, Comrade Windsor," said Psmith. "The merchant with whom we hob-nobbed on our way to the Highfield. In a moment of imprudence I mentioned Cosy Moments. I fancy that this was his first intimation that we were in the offing. His visit to the Highfield was paid, I think, purely from sport-loving motives. He was not on our trail. He came merely to see if Comrade Brady was proficient with his hands. Subsequent events must have justified our fighting editor in his eyes. It seems to be a moot point whether he will ever recover consciousness."

"Mighty good thing if he doesn't," said Billy uncharitably.

"From one point of view, Comrade Windsor, yes. Such an event would undoubtedly be an excellent thing for the public good. But from our point of view, it would be as well if he were to sit up and take notice. We could ascertain from him who he is and which particular collection of horny-handeds he represents. Light another match, Comrade Brady."

The Kid did so. The head of it fell off and dropped upon the up-turned face. The hooligan stirred, shook himself, sat up, and began to mutter something in a foggy voice.

"He's still woozy," said the Kid.

"Still--what exactly, Comrade Brady?"

"In the air," explained the Kid. "Bats in the belfry. Dizzy. See what I mean? It's often like that when a feller puts one in with a bit of weight behind it just where that one landed. Gum! I remember when I fought Martin Kelly; I was only starting to learn the game then. Martin and me was mixing it good and hard all over the ring, when suddenly he puts over a stiff one right on the point. What do you think I done? Fall down and take the count? Not on your life. I just turns round and walks straight out of the ring to my dressing-room. Willie Harvey, who was seconding me, comes tearing in after me, and finds me getting into my clothes.

'What's doing, Kid?' he asks. 'I'm going fishin', Willie,' I says.
'It's a lovely day.' 'You've lost the fight,' he says. 'Fight?'
says I. 'What fight?' See what I mean? I hadn't a notion of what
had happened. It was a half an hour and more before I could
remember a thing."

During this reminiscence, the man on the ground had contrived to
clear his mind of the mistiness induced by the Kid's upper-cut. The
first sign he showed of returning intelligence was a sudden dash
for safety up the road. But he had not gone five yards when he sat
down limply.

The Kid was inspired to further reminiscence. "Guess he's feeling
pretty poor," he said. "It's no good him trying to run for a while
after he's put his chin in the way of a real live one. I remember
when Joe Peterson put me out, way back when I was new to the
game--it was the same year I fought Martin Kelly. He had an awful
punch, had old Joe, and he put me down and out in the eighth round.
After the fight they found me on the fire-escape outside my
dressing-room. 'Come in, Kid,' says they. 'It's all right, chaps,'
I says, 'I'm dying.' Like that. 'It's all right, chaps, I'm dying.'
Same with this guy. See what I mean?"

They formed a group about the fallen black-jack expert.

"Pardon us," said Psmith courteously, "for breaking in upon your

reverie; but, if you could spare us a moment of your valuable time, there are one or two things which we should like to know."

"Sure thing," agreed the Kid.

"In the first place," continued Psmith, "would it be betraying professional secrets if you told us which particular bevy of energetic sandbaggers it is to which you are attached?"

"Gent," explained the Kid, "wants to know what's your gang."

The man on the ground muttered something that to Psmith and Billy was unintelligible.

"It would be a charity," said the former, "if some philanthropist would give this blighter elocution lessons. Can you interpret, Comrade Brady?"

"Says it's the Three Points," said the Kid.

"The Three Points? Let me see, is that Dude Dawson, Comrade Windsor, or the other gentleman?"

"It's Spider Reilly. Dude Dawson runs the Table Hill crowd."

"Perhaps this is Spider Reilly?"

"Nope," said the Kid. "I know the Spider. This ain't him. This is some other mutt."

"Which other mutt in particular?" asked Psmith. "Try and find out, Comrade Brady. You seem to be able to understand what he says. To me, personally, his remarks sound like the output of a gramophone with a hot potato in its mouth."

"Says he's Jack Repetto," announced the interpreter.

There was another interruption at this moment. The bashful Mr. Repetto, plainly a man who was not happy in the society of strangers, made another attempt to withdraw. Reaching out a pair of lean hands, he pulled the Kid's legs from under him with a swift jerk, and, wriggling to his feet, started off again down the road. Once more, however, desire outran performance. He got as far as the nearest street-lamp, but no farther. The giddiness seemed to overcome him again, for he grasped the lamp-post, and, sliding slowly to the ground, sat there motionless.

The Kid, whose fall had jolted and bruised him, was inclined to be wrathful and vindictive. He was the first of the three to reach the elusive Mr. Repetto, and if that worthy had happened to be standing instead of sitting it might have gone hard with him. But the Kid was not the man to attack a fallen foe. He contented

himself with brushing the dust off his person and addressing a richly abusive flow of remarks to Mr. Repetto.

Under the rays of the lamp it was possible to discern more closely the features of the black-jack exponent. There was a subtle but noticeable resemblance to those of Mr. Bat Jarvis. Apparently the latter's oiled forelock, worn low over the forehead, was more a concession to the general fashion prevailing in gang circles than an expression of personal taste. Mr. Repetto had it, too. In his case it was almost white, for the fallen warrior was an albino. His eyes, which were closed, had white lashes and were set as near together as Nature had been able to manage without actually running them into one another. His under-lip protruded and drooped. Looking at him, one felt instinctively that no judging committee of a beauty contest would hesitate a moment before him.

It soon became apparent that the light of the lamp, though bestowing the doubtful privilege of a clearer view of Mr. Repetto's face, held certain disadvantages. Scarcely had the staff of Cosy Moments reached the faint yellow pool of light, in the centre of which Mr. Repetto reclined, than, with a suddenness which caused them to leap into the air, there sounded from the darkness down the road the crack-crack-crack of a revolver. Instantly from the opposite direction came other shots. Three bullets flicked grooves in the roadway almost at Billy's feet. The Kid gave a sudden howl. Psmith's hat, suddenly imbued with life, sprang into the air and

vanished, whirling into the night.

The thought did not come to them consciously at the moment, there being little time to think, but it was evident as soon as, diving out of the circle of light into the sheltering darkness, they crouched down and waited for the next move, that a somewhat skilful ambush had been effected. The other members of the gang, who had fled with such remarkable speed, had by no means been eliminated altogether from the game. While the questioning of Mr. Repetto had been in progress, they had crept back, unperceived except by Mr. Repetto himself. It being too dark for successful shooting, it had become Mr. Repetto's task to lure his captors into the light, which he had accomplished with considerable skill.

For some minutes the battle halted. There was dead silence. The circle of light was empty now. Mr. Repetto had vanished. A tentative shot from nowhere ripped through the air close to where Psmith lay flattened on the pavement. And then the pavement began to vibrate and give out a curious resonant sound. To Psmith it conveyed nothing, but to the opposing army it meant much. They knew it for what it was. Somewhere--it might be near or far--a policeman had heard the shots, and was signalling for help to other policemen along the line by beating on the flag-stones with his night-stick, the New York constable's substitute for the London police-whistle.

The noise grew, filling the still air. From somewhere down the road

sounded the ring of running feet.

"De cops!" cried a voice. "Beat it!"

Next moment the night was full of clatter. The gang was "beating it."

Psmith rose to his feet and dusted his clothes ruefully. For the first time he realised the horrors of war. His hat had gone for ever. His trousers could never be the same again after their close acquaintance with the pavement.

The rescue party was coming up at the gallop.

The New York policeman may lack the quiet dignity of his London rival, but he is a hustler.

"What's doing?"

"Nothing now," said the disgusted voice of Billy Windsor from the shadows. "They've beaten it."

The circle of lamplight became as if by mutual consent a general rendezvous. Three grey-clad policemen, tough, clean-shaven men with keen eyes and square jaws, stood there, revolver in one hand, night-stick in the other. Psmith, hatless and dusty, joined them.

Billy Windsor and the Kid, the latter bleeding freely from his left ear, the lobe of which had been chipped by a bullet, were the last to arrive.

"What's bin the rough house?" inquired one of the policemen, mildly interested.

"Do you know a sportsman of the name of Repetto?" inquired Psmith.

"Jack Repetto! Sure."

"He belongs to the Three Points," said another intelligent officer, as one naming some fashionable club.

"When next you see him," said Psmith, "I should be obliged if you would use your authority to make him buy me a new hat. I could do with another pair of trousers, too; but I will not press the trousers. A new hat, is, however, essential. Mine has a six-inch hole in it."

"Shot at you, did they?" said one of the policemen, as who should say, "Dash the lads, they're always up to some of their larks."

"Shot at us!" burst out the ruffled Kid. "What do you think's bin happening? Think an aeroplane ran into my ear and took half of it off? Think the noise was somebody opening bottles of pop? Think

those guys that sneaked off down the road was just training for a Marathon?"

"Comrade Brady," said Psmith, "touches the spot. He--"

"Say, are you Kid Brady?" inquired one of the officers. For the first time the constabulary had begun to display any real animation.

"Reckoned I'd seen you somewhere!" said another. "You licked Cyclone Al. all right, Kid, I hear."

"And who but a bone-head thought he wouldn't?" demanded the third warmly. "He could whip a dozen Cyclone Al.'s in the same evening with his eyes shut."

"He's the next champeen," admitted the first speaker.

"If he puts it over Jimmy Garvin," argued the second.

"Jimmy Garvin!" cried the third. "He can whip twenty Jimmy Garvins with his feet tied. I tell you--"

"I am loath," observed Psmith, "to interrupt this very impressive brain-barbecue, but, trivial as it may seem to you, to me there is a certain interest in this other little matter of my ruined hat. I

know that it may strike you as hypersensitive of us to protest against being riddled with bullets, but--"

"Well, what's bin doin'?" inquired the Force. It was a nuisance, this perpetual harping on trifles when the deep question of the light-weight Championship of the World was under discussion, but the sooner it was attended to, the sooner it would be over.

Billy Windsor undertook to explain.

"The Three Points laid for us," he said. "Jack Repetto was bossing the crowd. I don't know who the rest were. The Kid put one over on to Jack Repetto's chin, and we were asking him a few questions when the rest came back, and started into shooting. Then we got to cover quick, and you came up and they beat it."

"That," said Psmith, nodding, "is a very fair précis of the evening's events. We should like you, if you will be so good, to corral this Comrade Repetto, and see that he buys me a new hat."

"We'll round Jack up," said one of the policemen indulgently.

"Do it nicely," urged Psmith. "Don't go hurting his feelings."

The second policeman gave it as his opinion that Jack was getting too gay. The third policeman conceded this. Jack, he said, had

shown signs for some time past of asking for it in the neck. It was an error on Jack's part, he gave his hearers to understand, to assume that the lid was completely off the great city of New York.

"Too blamed fresh he's gettin'," the trio agreed. They could not have been more disapproving if they had been prefects at Haileybury and Mr. Repetto a first-termer who had been detected in the act of wearing his cap on the back of his head.

They seemed to think it was too bad of Jack.

"The wrath of the Law," said Psmith, "is very terrible. We will leave the matter, then, in your hands. In the meantime, we should be glad if you would direct us to the nearest Subway station. Just at the moment, the cheerful lights of the Great White Way are what I seem to chiefly need."

CHAPTER XVII

GUERRILLA WARFARE

Thus ended the opening engagement of the campaign, seemingly in a victory for the Cosy Moments army. Billy Windsor, however, shook his head.