

CHAPTER XVIII

AN EPISODE BY THE WAY

It was Pugsy Maloney who, on the following morning, brought to the office the gist of what is related in this chapter. Pugsy's version was, however, brief and unadorned, as was the way with his narratives. Such things as first causes and piquant details he avoided, as tending to prolong the telling excessively, thus keeping him from perusal of his cowboy stories. The way Pugsy put it was as follows. He gave the thing out merely as an item of general interest, a bubble on the surface of the life of a great city. He did not know how nearly interested were his employers in any matter touching that gang which is known as the Three Points. Pugsy said: "Dere's trouble down where I live. Dude Dawson's mad at Spider Reilly, an' now de Table Hills are layin' for de T'ree Points. Sure." He had then retired to his outer fastness, yielding further details jerkily and with the distraught air of one whose mind is elsewhere.

Skilfully extracted and pieced together, these details formed themselves into the following typical narrative of East Side life in New York.

The really important gangs of New York are four. There are other less important institutions, but these are little more than mere

friendly gatherings of old boyhood chums for purposes of mutual companionship. In time they may grow, as did Bat Jarvis's coterie, into formidable organisations, for the soil is undoubtedly propitious to such growth. But at present the amount of ice which good judges declare them to cut is but small. They "stick up" an occasional wayfarer for his "cush," and they carry "canisters" and sometimes fire them off, but these things do not signify the cutting of ice. In matters political there are only four gangs which count, the East Side, the Groome Street, the Three Points, and the Table Hill. Greatest of these by virtue of their numbers are the East Side and the Groome Street, the latter presided over at the time of this story by Mr. Bat Jarvis. These two are colossal, and, though they may fight each other, are immune from attack at the hands of lesser gangs. But between the other gangs, and especially between the Table Hill and the Three Points, which are much of a size, warfare rages as briskly as among the republics of South America. There has always been bad blood between the Table Hill and the Three Points, and until they wipe each other out after the manner of the Kilkenny cats, it is probable that there always will be. Little events, trifling in themselves, have always occurred to shatter friendly relations just when there has seemed a chance of their being formed. Thus, just as the Table Hillites were beginning to forgive the Three Points for shooting the redoubtable Paul Horgan down at Coney Island, a Three Pointer injudiciously wiped out another of the rival gang near Canal Street. He pleaded self-defence, and in any case it was probably mere thoughtlessness,

but nevertheless the Table Hillites were ruffled.

That had been a month or so back. During that month things had been simmering down, and peace was just preparing to brood when there occurred the incident to which Pugsy had alluded, the regrettable falling out of Dude Dawson and Spider Reilly at Mr. Maginnis's dancing saloon, Shamrock Hall, the same which Bat Jarvis had been called in to protect in the days before the Groome Street gang began to be.

Shamrock Hall, being under the eyes of the great Bat, was, of course, forbidden ground; and it was with no intention of spoiling the harmony of the evening that Mr. Dawson had looked in. He was there in a purely private and peaceful character.

As he sat smoking, sipping, and observing the revels, there settled at the next table Mr. Robert ("Nigger") Coston, an eminent member of the Three Points.

There being temporary peace between the two gangs, the great men exchanged a not unfriendly nod and, after a short pause, a word or two. Mr. Coston, alluding to an Italian who had just pirouetted past, remarked that there sure was some class to the way that wop hit it up. Mr. Dawson said Yup, there sure was. You would have said that all Nature smiled.

Alas! The next moment the sky was covered with black clouds and the storm broke. For Mr. Dawson, continuing in this vein of criticism, rather injudiciously gave it as his opinion that one of the lady dancers had two left feet.

For a moment Mr. Coston did not see which lady was alluded to.

"De goil in de pink skoit," said Mr. Dawson, facilitating the other's search by pointing with a much-chewed cigarette. It was at this moment that Nature's smile was shut off as if by a tap. For the lady in the pink skirt had been in receipt of Mr. Coston's respectful devotion for the past eight days.

From this point onwards the march of events was rapid.

Mr. Coston, rising, asked Mr. Dawson who he thought he, Mr. Dawson, was.

Mr. Dawson, extinguishing his cigarette and placing it behind his ear, replied that he was the fellow who could bite his, Mr. Coston's, head off.

Mr. Coston said: "Huh?"

Mr. Dawson said: "Sure."

Mr. Coston called Mr. Dawson a pie-faced rubber-necked four-flusher.

Mr. Dawson called Mr. Coston a coon.

And that was where the trouble really started.

It was secretly a great grief to Mr. Coston that his skin was of so swarthy a hue. To be permitted to address Mr. Coston face to face by his nickname was a sign of the closest friendship, to which only Spider Reilly, Jack Repetto, and one or two more of the gang could aspire. Others spoke of him as Nigger, or, more briefly, Nig--strictly behind his back. For Mr. Coston had a wide reputation as a fighter, and his particular mode of battling was to descend on his antagonist and bite him. Into this action he flung himself with the passionate abandonment of the artist. When he bit he bit. He did not nibble.

If a friend had called Mr. Coston "Nig" he would have been running grave risks. A stranger, and a leader of a rival gang, who addressed him as "coon" was more than asking for trouble. He was pleading for it.

Great men seldom waste time. Mr. Coston, leaning towards Mr. Dawson, promptly bit him on the cheek. Mr. Dawson bounded from his seat. Such was the excitement of the moment that, instead of

drawing his "canister," he forgot that he had one on his person, and, seizing a mug which had held beer, bounced it vigorously on Mr. Coston's skull, which, being of solid wood, merely gave out a resonant note and remained unbroken.

So far the honours were comparatively even, with perhaps a slight balance in favour of Mr. Coston. But now occurred an incident which turned the scale, and made war between the gangs inevitable. In the far corner of the room, surrounded by a crowd of admiring friends, sat Spider Reilly, monarch of the Three Points. He had noticed that there was a slight disturbance at the other side of the hall, but had given it little attention till, the dancing ceasing suddenly and the floor emptying itself of its crowd, he had a plain view of Mr. Dawson and Mr. Coston squaring up at each other for the second round. We must assume that Mr. Reilly was not thinking what he did, for his action was contrary to all rules of gang-etiquette. In the street it would have been perfectly legitimate, even praiseworthy, but in a dance-hall belonging to a neutral power it was unpardonable.

What he did was to produce his "canister" and pick off the unsuspecting Mr. Dawson just as that exquisite was preparing to get in some more good work with the beer-mug. The leader of the Table Hillites fell with a crash, shot through the leg; and Spider Reilly, together with Mr. Coston and others of the Three Points, sped through the doorway for safety, fearing the wrath of Bat

Jarvis, who, it was known, would countenance no such episodes at the dance-hall which he had undertaken to protect.

Mr. Dawson, meanwhile, was attended to and helped home. Willing informants gave him the name of his aggressor, and before morning the Table Hill camp was in ferment. Shooting broke out in three places, though there were no casualties. When the day dawned there existed between the two gangs a state of war more bitter than any in their record; for this time it was no question of obscure nonentities. Chieftain had assaulted chieftain; royal blood had been spilt.

* * *

"Comrade Windsor," said Psmith, when Master Maloney had spoken his last word, "we must take careful note of this little matter. I rather fancy that sooner or later we may be able to turn it to our profit. I am sorry for Dude Dawson, anyhow. Though I have never met him, I have a sort of instinctive respect for him. A man such as he would feel a bullet through his trouser-leg more than one of common clay who cared little how his clothes looked."