

CHAPTER XIX

IN PLEASANT STREET

Careful inquiries, conducted incognito by Master Maloney among the denizens of Pleasant Street, brought the information that rents in the tenements were collected not weekly but monthly, a fact which must undoubtedly cause a troublesome hitch in the campaign. Rent-day, announced Pugsy, fell on the last day of the month.

"I rubbered around," he said, "and did de sleut' act, and I finds t'ings out. Dere's a feller comes round 'bout supper time dat day, an' den it's up to de fam'lies what lives in de tenements to dig down into deir jeans fer de stuff, or out dey goes dat same night."

"Evidently a hustler, our nameless friend," said Psmith.

"I got dat from a kid what knows anuder kid what lives dere," explained Master Maloney. "Say," he proceeded confidentially, "dat kid's in bad, sure he is. Dat second kid, de one what lives dere. He's a wop kid, an--"

"A what, Comrade Maloney?"

"A wop. A Dago. Why, don't you get next? Why, an Italian. Sure, dat's right. Well, dis kid, he is sure to de bad, 'cos his father

come over from Italy to work on de Subway."

"I don't see why that puts him in bad," said Billy Windsor wonderingly.

"Nor I," agreed Psmith. "Your narratives, Comrade Maloney, always seem to me to suffer from a certain lack of construction. You start at the end, and then you go back to any portion of the story which happens to appeal to you at the moment, eventually winding up at the beginning. Why should the fact that this stripling's father has come over from Italy to work on the Subway be a misfortune?"

"Why, sure, because he got fired an' went an' swatted de foreman one on de coco, an' de magistrate gives him t'oit days."

"And then, Comrade Maloney? This thing is beginning to get clearer. You are like Sherlock Holmes. After you've explained a thing from start to finish--or, as you prefer to do, from finish to start--it becomes quite simple."

"Why, den dis kid's in bad for fair, 'cos der ain't nobody to pungle de bones."

"Pungle de what, Comrade Maloney?"

"De bones. De stuff. Dat's right. De dollars. He's all alone, dis

kid, so when de rent-guy blows in, who's to slip him over de simoleons? It'll be outside for his, quick."

Billy warmed up at this tale of distress in his usual way.

"Somebody ought to do something. It's a vile shame the kid being turned out like that."

"We will see to it, Comrade Windsor. Cosy Moments shall step in. We will combine business with pleasure, paying the stripling's rent and corralling the rent-collector at the same time. What is today? How long before the end of the month? Another week! A murrain on it, Comrade Windsor. Two murrains. This delay may undo us."

But the days went by without any further movement on the part of the enemy. A strange quiet seemed to be brooding over the other camp. As a matter of fact, the sudden outbreak of active hostilities with the Table Hill contingent had had the effect of taking the minds of Spider Reilly and his warriors off Cosy Moments and its affairs, much as the unexpected appearance of a mad bull would make a man forget that he had come out butterfly-hunting. Psmith and Billy could wait; they were not likely to take the offensive; but the Table Hillites demanded instant attention.

War had broken out, as was usual between the gangs, in a somewhat tentative fashion at first sight. There had been sniping and skirmishes by the wayside, but as yet no pitched battle. The two

armies were sparring for an opening.

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The end of the week arrived, and Psmith and Billy, conducted by Master Maloney, made their way to Pleasant Street. To get there it was necessary to pass through a section of the enemy's country; but the perilous passage was safely negotiated. The expedition reached its unsavoury goal intact.

The wop kid, whose name, it appeared, was Giuseppe Orloni, inhabited a small room at the very top of the building next to the one Psmith and Mike had visited on their first appearance in Pleasant Street. He was out when the party, led by Pugsy up dark stairs, arrived; and, on returning, seemed both surprised and alarmed to see visitors. Pugsy undertook to do the honours. Pugsy as interpreter was energetic but not wholly successful. He appeared to have a fixed idea that the Italian language was one easily mastered by the simple method of saying "da" instead of "the," and tacking on a final "a" to any word that seemed to him to need one.

"Say, kid," he began, "has da rent-a-man come yet-a?"

The black eyes of the wop kid clouded. He gesticulated, and said something in his native language.

"He hasn't got next," reported Master Maloney. "He can't git on to me curves. Dese wop kids is all boneheads. Say, kid, look-a here." He walked out of the room and closed the door; then, rapping on it smartly from the outside, re-entered and, assuming a look of extreme ferocity, stretched out his hand and thundered: "Unbelt-a! Slip-a me da stuff!"

The wop kid's puzzlement became pathetic.

"This," said Psmith, deeply interested, "is getting about as tense as anything I ever struck. Don't give in, Comrade Maloney. Who knows but that you may yet win through? I fancy the trouble is that your too perfect Italian accent is making the youth home-sick. Once more to the breach, Comrade Maloney."

Master Maloney made a gesture of disgust. "I'm t'roo. Dese Dagoes makes me tired. Dey don't know enough to go upstairs to take de Elevated. Beat it, you mutt," he observed with moody displeasure to the wop kid, accompanying the words with a gesture which conveyed its own meaning. The wop kid, plainly glad to get away, slipped out of the door like a shadow.

Pugsy shrugged his shoulders.

"Gents," he said resignedly, "it's up to youse."

"I fancy," said Psmith, "that this is one of those moments when it is necessary for me to unlimber my Sherlock Holmes system. As thus. If the rent collector had been here, it is certain, I think, that Comrade Spaghetti, or whatever you said his name was, wouldn't have been. That is to say, if the rent collector had called and found no money waiting for him, surely Comrade Spaghetti would have been out in the cold night instead of under his own roof-tree. Do you follow me, Comrade Maloney?"

"That's right," said Billy Windsor. "Of course."

"Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary," murmured Psmith.

"So all we have to do is to sit here and wait."

"All?" said Psmith sadly. "Surely it is enough. For of all the scaly localities I have struck this seems to me the scaliest. The architect of this Stately Home of America seems to have had a positive hatred for windows. His idea of ventilation was to leave a hole in the wall about the size of a lima bean and let the thing go at that. If our friend does not arrive shortly, I shall pull down the roof. Why, gadzooks! Not to mention stap my vitals! Isn't that a trap-door up there? Make a long-arm, Comrade Windsor."

Billy got on a chair and pulled the bolt. The trap-door opened downwards. It fell, disclosing a square of deep blue sky.

"Gum!" he said. "Fancy living in this atmosphere when you don't have to. Fancy these fellows keeping that shut all the time."

"I expect it is an acquired taste," said Psmith, "like Limburger cheese. They don't begin to appreciate air till it is thick enough to scoop chunks out of with a spoon. Then they get up on their hind legs and inflate their chests and say, 'This is fine! This beats ozone hollow!' Leave it open, Comrade Windsor. And now, as to the problem of dispensing with Comrade Maloney's services?"

"Sure," said Billy. "Beat it, Pugsy, my lad."

Pugsy looked up, indignant.

"Beat it?" he queried.

"While your shoe leather's good," said Billy. "This is no place for a minister's son. There may be a rough house in here any minute, and you would be in the way."

"I want to stop and pipe de fun," objected Master Maloney.

"Never mind. Cut off. We'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

Master Maloney prepared reluctantly to depart. As he did so there

was a sound of a well-shod foot on the stairs, and a man in a snuff-coloured suit, wearing a brown Homburg hat and carrying a small notebook in one hand, walked briskly into the room. It was not necessary for Psmith to get his Sherlock Holmes system to work. His whole appearance proclaimed the new-comer to be the long-expected collector of rents.