

CHAPTER XX

CORNERED

He stood in the doorway looking with some surprise at the group inside. He was a smallish, pale-faced man with protruding eyes and teeth which gave him a certain resemblance to a rabbit.

"Hello," he said.

"Welcome to New York," said Psmith.

Master Maloney, who had taken advantage of the interruption to edge farther into the room, now appeared to consider the question of his departure permanently shelved. He sidled to a corner and sat down on an empty soap-box with the air of a dramatic critic at the opening night of a new play. The scene looked good to him. It promised interesting developments. Master Maloney was an earnest student of the drama, as exhibited in the theatres of the East Side, and few had ever applauded the hero of "Escaped from Sing-Sing," or hissed the villain of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak-Model" with more fervour than he. He liked his drama to have plenty of action, and to his practised eye this one promised well. Psmith he looked upon as a quite amiable lunatic, from whom little was to be expected; but there was a set expression on Billy Windsor's face which suggested great things.

His pleasure was abruptly quenched. Billy Windsor, placing a firm hand on his collar, led him to the door and pushed him out, closing the door behind him.

The rent collector watched these things with a puzzled eye. He now turned to Psmith.

"Say, seen anything of the wops that live here?" he inquired.

"I am addressing--?" said Psmith courteously.

"My name's Gooch."

Psmith bowed.

"Touching these wops, Comrade Gooch," he said, "I fear there is little chance of your seeing them to-night, unless you wait some considerable time. With one of them--the son and heir of the family, I should say--we have just been having a highly interesting and informative chat. Comrade Maloney, who has just left us, acted as interpreter. The father, I am told, is in the dungeon below the castle moat for a brief spell for punching his foreman in the eye. The result? The rent is not forthcoming."

"Then it's outside for theirs," said Mr. Gooch definitely.

"It's a big shame," broke in Billy, "turning the kid out. Where's he to go?"

"That's up to him. Nothing to do with me. I'm only acting under orders from up top."

"Whose orders, Comrade Gooch?" inquired Psmith.

"The gent who owns this joint."

"Who is he?" said Billy.

Suspicion crept into the protruding eyes of the rent collector. He waxed wroth. "Say!" he demanded. "Who are you two guys, anyway, and what do you think you're doing here? That's what I'd like to know. What do you want with the name of the owner of this place? What business is it of yours?"

"The fact is, Comrade Gooch, we are newspaper men."

"I guessed you were," said Mr. Gooch with triumph. "You can't bluff me. Well, it's no good, boys. I've nothing for you. You'd better chase off and try something else."

He became more friendly.

"Say, though," he said, "I just guessed you were from some paper. I wish I could give you a story, but I can't. I guess it's this Cosy Moments business that's been and put your editor on to this joint, ain't it? Say, though, that's a queer thing, that paper. Why, only a few weeks ago it used to be a sort of take-home-and-read-to-the-kids affair. A friend of mine used to buy it regular. And then suddenly it comes out with a regular whoop, and started knocking these tenements and boosting Kid Brady, and all that. I can't understand it. All I know is that it's begun to get this place talked about. Why, you see for yourselves how it is. Here is your editor sending you down to get a story about it. But, say, those Cosy Moments guys are taking big risks. I tell you straight they are, and that goes. I happen to know a thing or two about what's going on on the other side, and I tell you there's going to be something doing if they don't cut it out quick. Mr.--" he stopped and chuckled, "Mr. Jones isn't the man to sit still and smile. He's going to get busy. Say, what paper do you boys come from?"

"Cosy Moments, Comrade Gooch," Psmith replied. "Immediately behind you, between you and the door, is Comrade Windsor, our editor. I am Psmith. I sub-edit."

For a moment the inwardness of the information did not seem to come

home to Mr. Gooch. Then it hit him. He spun round. Billy Windsor was standing with his back against the door and a more than nasty look on his face.

"What's all this?" demanded Mr. Gooch.

"I will explain all," said Psmith soothingly. "In the first place, however, this matter of Comrade Spaghetti's rent. Sooner than see that friend of my boyhood slung out to do the wandering-child-in-the-snow act, I will brass up for him."

"Confound his rent. Let me out."

"Business before pleasure. How much is it? Twelve dollars? For the privilege of suffocating in this compact little Black Hole? By my halidom, Comrade Gooch, that gentleman whose name you are so shortly to tell us has a very fair idea of how to charge! But who am I that I should criticise? Here are the simoleons, as our young friend, Comrade Maloney, would call them. Push me over a receipt."

"Let me out."

"Anon, gossip, anon.--Shakespeare. First, the receipt."

Mr. Gooch scribbled a few words in his notebook and tore out the page. Psmith thanked him.

"I will see that it reaches Comrade Spaghetti," he said. "And now to a more important matter. Don't put away that notebook. Turn to a clean page, moisten your pencil, and write as follows. Are you ready? By the way, what is your Christian name? . . . Gooch, Gooch, this is no way to speak! Well, if you are sensitive on the point, we will waive the Christian name. It is my duty to tell you, however, that I suspect it to be Percy. Let us push on. Are you ready, once more? Pencil moistened? Very well, then. 'I--comma--'being of sound mind and body'--comma--'and a bright little chap altogether'--comma--Why, you're not writing."

"Let me out," bellowed Mr. Gooch. "I'll summon you for assault and battery. Playing a fool game like this! Get away from that door."

"There has been no assault and battery yet, Comrade Gooch, but who shall predict how long so happy a state of things will last? Do not be deceived by our gay and smiling faces, Comrade Gooch. We mean business. Let me put the whole position of affairs before you; and I am sure a man of your perception will see that there is only one thing to be done."

He dusted the only chair in the room with infinite care and sat down. Billy Windsor, who had not spoken a word or moved an inch since the beginning of the interview, continued to stand and be silent. Mr. Gooch shuffled restlessly in the middle of the room.

"As you justly observed a moment ago," said Psmith, "the staff of Cosy Moments is taking big risks. We do not rely on your unsupported word for that. We have had practical demonstration of the fact from one J. Repetto, who tried some few nights ago to put us out of business. Well, it struck us both that we had better get hold of the name of the blighter who runs these tenements as quickly as possible, before Comrade Repetto's next night out. That is what we should like you to give us, Comrade Gooch. And we should like it in writing. And, on second thoughts, in ink. I have one of those patent non-leakable fountain pens in my pocket. The Old Journalist's Best Friend. Most of the ink has come out and is permeating the lining of my coat, but I think there is still sufficient for our needs. Remind me later, Comrade Gooch, to continue on the subject of fountain pens. I have much to say on the theme. Meanwhile, however, business, business. That is the cry."

He produced a pen and an old letter, the last page of which was blank, and began to write.

"How does this strike you?" he said. "'I--(I have left a blank for the Christian name: you can write it in yourself later)--'I, blank Gooch, being a collector of rents in Pleasant Street, New York, do hereby swear'--hush, Comrade Gooch, there is no need to do it yet--'that the name of the owner of the Pleasant Street tenements, who is responsible for the perfectly foul conditions

there, is--' And that is where you come in, Comrade Gooch. That is where we need your specialised knowledge. Who is he?"

Billy Windsor reached out and grabbed the rent collector by the collar. Having done this, he proceeded to shake him.

Billy was muscular, and his heart was so much in the business that Mr. Gooch behaved as if he had been caught in a high wind. It is probable that in another moment the desired information might have been shaken out of him, but before this could happen there was a banging at the door, followed by the entrance of Master Maloney. For the first time since Psmith had known him, Pugsy was openly excited.

"Say," he began, "youse had better beat it quick, you had. Dey's coming!"

"And now go back to the beginning, Comrade Maloney," said Psmith patiently, "which in the exuberance of the moment you have skipped. Who are coming?"

"Why, dem. De guys."

Psmith shook his head.

"Your habit of omitting essentials, Comrade Maloney, is going to

undo you one of these days. When you get to that ranch of yours, you will probably start out to gallop after the cattle without remembering to mount your mustang. There are four million guys in New York. Which section is it that is coming?"

"Gum! I don't know how many dere is ob dem. I seen Spider Reilly an' Jack Repetto an'--"

"Say no more," said Psmith. "If Comrade Repetto is there, that is enough for me. I am going to get on the roof and pull it up after me."

Billy released Mr. Gooch, who fell, puffing, on to the low bed, which stood in one corner of the room.

"They must have spotted us as we were coming here," he said, "and followed us. Where did you see them, Pugsy?"

"On de Street just outside. Dere was a bunch of dem talkin' togedder, and I hears dem say you was in here. One of dem seen you come in, an dere ain't no ways out but de front, so dey ain't hurryin'! Dey just reckon to pike along upstairs, lookin' into each room till dey finds you. An dere's a bunch of dem goin' to wait on de Street in case youse beat it past down de stairs while de udder guys is rubberin' for youse. Say, gents, it's pretty fierce, dis proposition. What are youse goin' to do?"

Mr. Gooch, from the bed, laughed unpleasantly.

"I guess you ain't the only assault-and-battery artists in the business," he said. "Looks to me as if some one else was going to get shaken up some."

Billy looked at Psmith.

"Well?" he said. "What shall we do? Go down and try and rush through?"

Psmith shook his head.

"Not so, Comrade Windsor, but about as much otherwise as you can jolly well imagine."

"Well, what then?"

"We will stay here. Or rather we will hop nimbly up on to the roof through that skylight. Once there, we may engage these varlets on fairly equal terms. They can only get through one at a time. And while they are doing it I will give my celebrated imitation of Horatius. We had better be moving. Our luggage, fortunately, is small. Merely Comrade Gooch. If you will get through the skylight, I will pass him up to you."

Mr. Gooch, with much verbal embroidery, stated that he would not go. Psmith acted promptly. Gripping the struggling rent collector round the waist, and ignoring his frantic kicks as mere errors in taste, he lifted him to the trap-door, whence the head, shoulders and arms of Billy Windsor protruded into the room. Billy collected the collector, and then Psmith turned to Pugsy.

"Comrade Maloney."

"Huh?"

"Have I your ear?"

"Huh?"

"Are you listening till you feel that your ears are the size of footballs? Then drink this in. For weeks you have been praying for a chance to show your devotion to the great cause; or if you haven't, you ought to have been. That chance has come. You alone can save us. In a sense, of course, we do not need to be saved. They will find it hard to get at us, I fancy, on the roof. But it ill befits the dignity of the editorial staff of a great New York weekly to roost like pigeons for any length of time; and consequently it is up to you."

"Shall I go for de cops, Mr. Smith?"

"No, Comrade Maloney, I thank you. I have seen the cops in action, and they did not impress me. We do not want allies who will merely shake their heads at Comrade Repetto and the others, however sternly. We want some one who will swoop down upon these merry roisterers, and, as it were, soak to them good. Do you know where Dude Dawson lives?"

The light of intelligence began to shine in Master Maloney's face. His eye glistened with respectful approval. This was strategy of the right sort.

"Dude Dawson? Nope. But I can ask around."

"Do so, Comrade Maloney. And when found, tell him that his old college chum, Spider Reilly, is here. He will not be able to come himself, I fear, but he can send representatives."

"Sure."

"That's all, then. Go downstairs with a gay and jaunty air, as if you had no connection with the old firm at all. Whistle a few lively bars. Make careless gestures. Thus shall you win through. And now it would be no bad idea, I fancy, for me to join the rest of the brains of the paper up aloft. Off you go, Comrade Maloney.

And, in passing, don't take a week about it. Leg it with all the speed you possess."

Pugsy vanished, and Psmith closed the door behind him. Inspection revealed the fact that it possessed no lock. As a barrier it was useless. He left it ajar, and, jumping up, gripped the edge of the opening in the roof and pulled himself through.

Billy Windsor was seated comfortably on Mr. Gooch's chest a few feet away. By his side was his big stick. Psmith possessed himself of this, and looked about him. The examination was satisfactory. The trap-door appeared to be the only means of access to the roof, and between their roof and that of the next house there was a broad gulf.

"Practically impregnable," he murmured. "Only one thing can dish us, Comrade Windsor; and that is if they have the sense to get on to the roof next door and start shooting. Even in that case, however, we have cover in the shape of the chimneys. I think we may fairly say that all is well. How are you getting along? Has the patient responded at all?"

"Not yet," said Billy. "But he's going to."

"He will be in your charge. I must devote myself exclusively to guarding the bridge. It is a pity that the trap has not got a bolt

this side. If it had, the thing would be a perfect picnic. As it is, we must leave it open. But we mustn't expect everything."

Billy was about to speak, but Psmith suddenly held up his hand warningly. From the room below came a sound of feet.

For a moment the silence was tense. Then from Mr. Gooch's lips there escaped a screech.

"This way! They're up--"

The words were cut short as Billy banged his hand over the speaker's mouth. But the thing was done.

"On top de roof," cried a voice. "Dey've beaten it for de roof."

The chair rasped over the floor. Feet shuffled. And then, like a jack-in-the-box, there popped through the opening a head and shoulders.