

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE BATTLE OF PLEASANT STREET

The new arrival was a young man with a shock of red hair, an ingrowing Roman nose, and a mouth from which force or the passage of time had removed three front teeth. He held on to the edges of the trap with his hands, and stared in a glassy manner into Psmith's face, which was within a foot of his own.

There was a momentary pause, broken by an oath from Mr. Gooch, who was still undergoing treatment in the background.

"Aha!" said Psmith genially. "Historic picture. 'Doctor Cook discovers the North Pole.'"

The red-headed young man blinked. The strong light of the open air was trying to his eyes.

"Youse had better come down," he observed coldly. "We've got youse."

"And," continued Psmith, unmoved, "is instantly handed a gum-drop by his faithful Esquimaux."

As he spoke, he brought the stick down on the knuckles which

disfigured the edges of the trap. The intruder uttered a howl and dropped out of sight. In the room below there were whisperings and mutterings, growing gradually louder till something resembling coherent conversation came to Psmith's ears, as he knelt by the trap making meditative billiard-shots with the stick at a small pebble.

"Aw g'wan! Don't be a quitter!"

"Who's a quitter?"

"Youse is a quitter. Get on top de roof. He can't hoit youse."

"De guy's gotten a big stick." Psmith nodded appreciatively. "I and Roosevelt," he murmured.

A somewhat baffled silence on the part of the attacking force was followed by further conversation.

"Gum! some guy's got to go up." Murmur of assent from the audience. A voice, in inspired tones: "Let Sam do it!"

This suggestion made a hit. There was no doubt about that. It was a success from the start. Quite a little chorus of voices expressed sincere approval of the very happy solution to what had seemed an insoluble problem. Psmith, listening from above, failed to detect

in the choir of glad voices one that might belong to Sam himself. Probably gratification had rendered the chosen one dumb.

"Yes, let Sam do it!" cried the unseen chorus. The first speaker, unnecessarily, perhaps--for the motion had been carried almost unanimously--but possibly with the idea of convincing the one member of the party in whose bosom doubts might conceivably be harboured, went on to adduce reasons.

"Sam bein' a coon," he argued, "ain't goin' to git hoit by no stick. Youse can't hoit a coon by soakin' him on de coco, can you, Sam?"

Psmith waited with some interest for the reply, but it did not come. Possibly Sam did not wish to generalise on insufficient experience.

"Solvitur ambulando," said Psmith softly, turning the stick round in his fingers. "Comrade Windsor!"

"Hullo?"

"Is it possible to hurt a coloured gentleman by hitting him on the head with a stick?"

"If you hit him hard enough."

"I knew there was some way out of the difficulty," said Psmith with satisfaction. "How are you getting on up at your end of the table, Comrade Windsor?"

"Fine."

"Any result yet?"

"Not at present."

"Don't give up."

"Not me."

"The right spirit, Comrade Win--"

A report like a cannon in the room below interrupted him. It was merely a revolver shot, but in the confined space it was deafening. The bullet sang up into the sky.

"Never hit me!" said Psmith with dignified triumph.

The noise was succeeded by a shuffling of feet. Psmith grasped his stick more firmly. This was evidently the real attack. The revolver shot had been a mere demonstration of artillery to cover the

infantry's advance.

Sure enough, the next moment a woolly head popped through the opening, and a pair of rolling eyes gleamed up at the old Etonian.

"Why, Sam!" said Psmith cordially, "this is well met! I remember you. Yes, indeed, I do. Wasn't you the feller with the open umbrella that I met one rainy morning on the Av-en-ue? What, are you coming up? Sam, I hate to do it, but--"

A yell rang out.

"What was that?" asked Billy Windsor over his shoulder.

"Your statement, Comrade Windsor, has been tested and proved correct."

By this time the affair had begun to draw a "gate." The noise of the revolver had proved a fine advertisement. The roof of the house next door began to fill up. Only a few of the occupants could get a clear view of the proceedings, for a large chimney-stack intervened. There was considerable speculation as to what was passing between Billy Windsor and Mr. Gooch. Psmith's share in the entertainment was more obvious. The early comers had seen his interview with Sam, and were relating it with gusto to their friends. Their attitude towards Psmith was that of a group of men

watching a terrier at a rat-hole. They looked to him to provide entertainment for them, but they realised that the first move must be with the attackers. They were fair-minded men, and they did not expect Psmith to make any aggressive move.

Their indignation, when the proceedings began to grow slow, was directed entirely at the dilatory Three Pointers. With an aggrieved air, akin to that of a crowd at a cricket match when batsmen are playing for a draw, they began to "barrack." They hooted the Three Pointers. They begged them to go home and tuck themselves up in bed. The men on the roof were mostly Irishmen, and it offended them to see what should have been a spirited fight so grossly bungled.

"G'wan away home, ye quitters!" roared one.

"Call yersilves the Three Points, do ye? An' would ye know what I call ye? The Young Ladies' Seminary!" bellowed another with withering scorn.

A third member of the audience alluded to them as "stiffs."

"I fear, Comrade Windsor," said Psmith, "that our blithe friends below are beginning to grow a little unpopular with the many-headed. They must be up and doing if they wish to retain the esteem of Pleasant Street. Aha!"

Another and a longer explosion from below, and more bullets wasted themselves on air. Psmith sighed.

"They make me tired," he said. "This is no time for a feu de joie. Action! That is the cry. Action! Get busy, you blighters!"

The Irish neighbours expressed the same sentiment in different and more forcible words. There was no doubt about it--as warriors, the Three Pointers had failed to give satisfaction.

A voice from the room called up to Psmith.

"Say!"

"You have our ear," said Psmith.

"What's that?"

"I said you had our ear."

"Are youse stiffs comin' down off out of dat roof?"

"Would you mind repeating that remark?"

"Are youse guys goin' to quit off out of dat roof?"

"Your grammar is perfectly beastly," said Psmith severely.

"Hey!"

"Well?"

"Are youse guys--?"

"No, my lad," said Psmith, "since you ask, we are not. And why? Because the air up here is refreshing, the view pleasant, and we are expecting at any moment an important communication from Comrade Gooch."

"We're goin' to wait here till youse come down."

"If you wish it," said Psmith courteously, "by all means do. Who am I that I should dictate your movements? The most I aspire to is to check them when they take an upward direction."

There was silence below. The time began to pass slowly. The Irishmen on the other roof, now definitely abandoning hope of further entertainment, proceeded with hoots of scorn to climb down one by one into the recesses of their own house.

Suddenly from the street far below there came a fusillade of shots and a babel of shouts and counter-shouts. The roof of the house



next door, which had been emptying itself slowly and reluctantly, filled again with a magical swiftness, and the low wall facing into the street became black with the backs of those craning over.

"What's that?" inquired Billy.

"I rather fancy," said Psmith, "that our allies of the Table Hill contingent must have arrived. I sent Comrade Maloney to explain matters to Dude Dawson, and it seems as if that golden-hearted sportsman had responded. There appear to be great doings in the street."

In the room below confusion had arisen. A scout, clattering upstairs, had brought the news of the Table Hillites' advent, and there was doubt as to the proper course to pursue. Certain voices urged going down to help the main body. Others pointed out that that would mean abandoning the siege of the roof. The scout who had brought the news was eloquent in favour of the first course.

"Gum!" he cried, "don't I keep tellin' youse dat de Table Hills is here? Sure, dere's a whole bunch of dem, and unless youse come on down dey'll bite de hull head off of us lot. Leave those stiffs on de roof. Let Sam wait here with his canister, and den dey can't get down, 'cos Sam'll pump dem full of lead while dey're beatin' it t'roo de trap-door. Sure."

Psmith nodded reflectively.

"There is certainly something in what the bright boy says," he murmured. "It seems to me the grand rescue scene in the third act has sprung a leak. This will want thinking over."

In the street the disturbance had now become terrific. Both sides were hard at it, and the Irishmen on the roof, rewarded at last for their long vigil, were yelling encouragement promiscuously and whooping with the unfettered ecstasy of men who are getting the treat of their lives without having paid a penny for it.

The behaviour of the New York policeman in affairs of this kind is based on principles of the soundest practical wisdom. The unthinking man would rush in and attempt to crush the combat in its earliest and fiercest stages. The New York policeman, knowing the importance of his own safety, and the insignificance of the gangster's, permits the opposing forces to hammer each other into a certain distaste for battle, and then, when both sides have begun to have enough of it, rushes in himself and clubs everything in sight. It is an admirable process in its results, but it is sure rather than swift.

Proceedings in the affair below had not yet reached the police interference stage. The noise, what with the shots and yells from the street and the ear-piercing approval of the roof-audience, was

just working up to a climax.

Psmith rose. He was tired of kneeling by the trap, and there was no likelihood of Sam making another attempt to climb through. He walked towards Billy.

As he did so, Billy got up and turned to him. His eyes were gleaming with excitement. His whole attitude was triumphant. In his hand he waved a strip of paper.

"I've got it," he cried.

"Excellent, Comrade Windsor," said Psmith. "Surely we must win through now. All we have to do is to get off this roof, and fate cannot touch us. Are two mammoth minds such as ours unequal to such a feat? It can hardly be. Let us ponder."

"Why not go down through the trap? They've all gone to the street."

Psmith shook his head.

"All," he replied, "save Sam. Sam was the subject of my late successful experiment, when I proved that coloured gentlemen's heads could be hurt with a stick. He is now waiting below, armed with a pistol, ready--even anxious--to pick us off as we climb through the trap. How would it be to drop Comrade Gooch through

first, and so draw his fire? Comrade Gooch, I am sure, would be delighted to do a little thing like that for old friends of our standing or--but what's that!"

"What's the matter?"

"Is that a ladder that I see before me, its handle to my hand? It is! Comrade Windsor, we win through. Cosy Moments' editorial staff may be tree'd, but it cannot be put out of business. Comrade Windsor, take the other end of that ladder and follow me."

The ladder was lying against the farther wall. It was long, more than long enough for the purpose for which it was needed. Psmith and Billy rested it on the coping, and pushed it till the other end reached across the gulf to the roof of the house next door, Mr. Gooch eyeing them in silence the while.

Psmith turned to him.

"Comrade Gooch," he said, "do nothing to apprise our friend Sam of these proceedings. I speak in your best interests. Sam is in no mood to make nice distinctions between friend and foe. If you bring him up here, he will probably mistake you for a member of the staff of Cosy Moments, and loose off in your direction without waiting for explanations. I think you had better come with us. I will go first, Comrade Windsor, so that if the ladder breaks, the

paper will lose merely a sub-editor, not an editor."

He went down on all-fours, and in this attitude wormed his way across to the opposite roof, whose occupants, engrossed in the fight in the street, in which the police had now joined, had their backs turned and did not observe him. Mr. Gooch, pallid and obviously ill-attuned to such feats, followed him; and finally Billy Windsor reached the other side.

"Neat," said Psmith complacently. "Uncommonly neat. Comrade Gooch reminded me of the untamed chamois of the Alps, leaping from crag to crag."

In the street there was now comparative silence. The police, with their clubs, had knocked the last remnant of fight out of the combatants. Shooting had definitely ceased.

"I think," said Psmith, "that we might now descend. If you have no other engagements, Comrade Windsor, I will take you to the Knickerbocker, and buy you a square meal. I would ask for the pleasure of your company also, Comrade Gooch, were it not that matters of private moment, relating to the policy of the paper, must be discussed at the table. Some other day, perhaps. We are infinitely obliged to you for your sympathetic co-operation in this little matter. And now good-bye. Comrade Windsor, let us debouch."