

CHAPTER XXII

CONCERNING MR. WARING

Psmith pushed back his chair slightly, stretched out his legs, and lit a cigarette. The resources of the Knickerbocker Hotel had proved equal to supplying the fatigued staff of Cosy Moments with an excellent dinner, and Psmith had stoutly declined to talk business until the coffee arrived. This had been hard on Billy, who was bursting with his news. Beyond a hint that it was sensational he had not been permitted to go.

"More bright young careers than I care to think of," said Psmith, "have been ruined by the fatal practice of talking shop at dinner. But now that we are through, Comrade Windsor, by all means let us have it. What's the name which Comrade Gooch so eagerly divulged?"

Billy leaned forward excitedly.

"Stewart Waring," he whispered.

"Stewart who?" asked Psmith.

Billy stared.

"Great Scott, man!" he said, "haven't you heard of Stewart Waring?"

"The name seems vaguely familiar, like isinglass or Post-toasties. I seem to know it, but it conveys nothing to me."

"Don't you ever read the papers?"

"I toy with my American of a morning, but my interest is confined mainly to the sporting page which reminds me that Comrade Brady has been matched against one Eddie Wood a month from to-day. Gratifying as it is to find one of the staff getting on in life, I fear this will cause us a certain amount of inconvenience. Comrade Brady will have to leave the office temporarily in order to go into training, and what shall we do then for a fighting editor? However, possibly we may not need one now. Cosy Moments should be able shortly to give its message to the world and ease up for a while. Which brings us back to the point. Who is Stewart Waring?"

"Stewart Waring is running for City Alderman. He's one of the biggest men in New York!"

"Do you mean in girth? If so, he seems to have selected the right career for himself."

"He's one of the bosses. He used to be Commissioner of Buildings for the city."

"Commissioner of Buildings? What exactly did that let him in for?"

"It let him in for a lot of graft."

"How was that?"

"Oh, he took it off the contractors. Shut his eyes and held out his hands when they ran up rotten buildings that a strong breeze would have knocked down, and places like that Pleasant Street hole without any ventilation."

"Why did he throw up the job?" inquired Psmith. "It seems to me that it was among the World's Softest. Certain drawbacks to it, perhaps, to the man with the Hair-Trigger Conscience; but I gather that Comrade Waring did not line up in that class. What was his trouble?"

"His trouble," said Billy, "was that he stood in with a contractor who was putting up a music-hall, and the contractor put it up with material about as strong as a heap of meringues, and it collapsed on the third night and killed half the audience."

"And then?"

"The papers raised a howl, and they got after the contractor, and the contractor gave Waring away. It killed him for the time being."

"I should have thought it would have had that excellent result permanently," said Psmith thoughtfully. "Do you mean to say he got back again after that?"

"He had to quit being Commissioner, of course, and leave the town for a time; but affairs move so fast here that a thing like that blows over. He made a bit of a pile out of the job, and could afford to lie low for a year or two."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years. People don't remember a thing here that happened five years back unless they're reminded of it."

Psmith lit another cigarette.

"We will remind them," he said.

Billy nodded.

"Of course," he said, "one or two of the papers against him in this Aldermanic Election business tried to bring the thing up, but they didn't cut any ice. The other papers said it was a shame, hounding a man who was sorry for the past and who was trying to make good now; so they dropped it. Everybody thought that Waring was on the

level now. He's been shooting off a lot of hot air lately about philanthropy and so on. Not that he has actually done a thing--not so much as given a supper to a dozen news-boys; but he's talked, and talk gets over if you keep it up long enough."

Psmith nodded adhesion to this dictum.

"So that naturally he wants to keep it dark about these tenements. It'll smash him at the election when it gets known."

"Why is he so set on becoming an Alderman," inquired Psmith.

"There's a lot of graft to being an Alderman," explained Billy.

"I see. No wonder the poor gentleman was so energetic in his methods. What is our move now, Comrade Windsor?"

Billy stared.

"Why, publish the name, of course."

"But before then? How are we going to ensure the safety of our evidence? We stand or fall entirely by that slip of paper, because we've got the beggar's name in the writing of his own collector, and that's proof positive."

"That's all right," said Billy, patting his breast-pocket.

"Nobody's going to get it from me."

Psmith dipped his hand into his trouser-pocket.

"Comrade Windsor," he said, producing a piece of paper, "how do we go?"

He leaned back in his chair, surveying Billy blandly through his eye-glass. Billy's eyes were goggling. He looked from Psmith to the paper and from the paper to Psmith.

"What--what the--?" he stammered. "Why, it's it!"

Psmith nodded.

"How on earth did you get it?"

Psmith knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"Comrade Windsor," he said, "I do not wish to cavil or carp or rub it in in any way. I will merely remark that you pretty nearly landed us in the soup, and pass on to more congenial topics. Didn't you know we were followed to this place?"

"Followed!"

"By a merchant in what Comrade Maloney would call a tall-shaped hat. I spotted him at an early date, somewhere down by Twenty-ninth Street. When we dived into Sixth Avenue for a space at Thirty-third Street, did he dive, too? He did. And when we turned into Forty-second Street, there he was. I tell you, Comrade Windsor, leeches were aloof, and burrs non-adhesive compared with that tall-shaped-hatted blighter."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember, as you came to the entrance of this place, somebody knocking against you?"

"Yes, there was a pretty big crush in the entrance."

"There was; but not so big as all that. There was plenty of room for this merchant to pass if he had wished. Instead of which he butted into you. I happened to be waiting for just that, so I managed to attach myself to his wrist with some vim and give it a fairly hefty wrench. The paper was inside his hand."

Billy was leaning forward with a pale face.

"Jove!" he muttered.

"That about sums it up," said Psmith.

Billy snatched the paper from the table and extended it towards him.

"Here," he said feverishly, "you take it. Gum, I never thought I was such a mutt! I'm not fit to take charge of a toothpick. Fancy me not being on the watch for something of that sort. I guess I was so tickled with myself at the thought of having got the thing, that it never struck me they might try for it. But I'm through. No more for me. You're the man in charge now."

Psmith shook his head.

"These stately compliments," he said, "do my old heart good, but I fancy I know a better plan. It happened that I chanced to have my eye on the blighter in the tall-shaped hat, and so was enabled to land him among the ribstones; but who knows but that in the crowd on Broadway there may not lurk other, unidentified blighters in equally tall-shaped hats, one of whom may work the same sleight-of-hand speciality on me? It was not that you were not capable of taking care of that paper: it was simply that you didn't happen to spot the man. Now observe me closely, for what follows is an exhibition of Brain."

He paid the bill, and they went out into the entrance-hall of the

hotel. Psmith, sitting down at a table, placed the paper in an envelope and addressed it to himself at the address of Cosy Moments. After which, he stamped the envelope and dropped it into the letter-box at the back of the hall.

"And now, Comrade Windsor," he said, "let us stroll gently homewards down the Great White Way. What matter though it be fairly stiff with low-browed bravoes in tall-shaped hats? They cannot harm us. From me, if they search me thoroughly, they may scoop a matter of eleven dollars, a watch, two stamps, and a packet of chewing-gum. Whether they would do any better with you I do not know. At any rate, they wouldn't get that paper; and that's the main thing."

"You're a genius," said Billy Windsor.

"You think so?" said Psmith diffidently. "Well, well, perhaps you are right, perhaps you are right. Did you notice the hired ruffian in the flannel suit who just passed? He wore a baffled look, I fancy. And hark! Wasn't that a muttered 'Failed!' I heard? Or was it the breeze moaning in the tree-tops? To-night is a cold, disappointing night for Hired Ruffians, Comrade Windsor."