

CHAPTER XXIII

REDUCTIONS IN THE STAFF

The first member of the staff of Cosy Moments to arrive at the office on the following morning was Master Maloney. This sounds like the beginning of a "Plod and Punctuality," or "How Great Fortunes have been Made" story; but, as a matter of fact, Master Maloney was no early bird. Larks who rose in his neighbourhood, rose alone. He did not get up with them. He was supposed to be at the office at nine o'clock. It was a point of honour with him, a sort of daily declaration of independence, never to put in an appearance before nine-thirty. On this particular morning he was punctual to the minute, or half an hour late, whichever way you choose to look at it.

He had only whistled a few bars of "My Little Irish Rose," and had barely got into the first page of his story of life on the prairie when Kid Brady appeared. The Kid, as was his habit when not in training, was smoking a big black cigar. Master Maloney eyed him admiringly. The Kid, unknown to that gentleman himself, was Pugsy's ideal. He came from the Plains; and had, indeed, once actually been a cowboy; he was a coming champion; and he could smoke black cigars. It was, therefore, without his usual well-what-is-it-now? air that Pugsy laid down his book, and prepared to converse.

"Say, Mr. Smith or Mr. Windsor about, Pugsy?" asked the Kid.

"Naw, Mr. Brady, they ain't came yet," replied Master Maloney respectfully.

"Late, ain't they?"

"Sure. Mr. Windsor generally blows in before I do."

"Wonder what's keepin' them."

"P'raps, dey've bin put out of business," suggested Pugsy nonchalantly.

"How's that?"

Pugsy related the events of the previous day, relaxing something of his austere calm as he did so. When he came to the part where the Table Hill allies swooped down on the unsuspecting Three Pointers, he was almost animated.

"Say," said the Kid approvingly, "that Smith guy's got more grey matter under his thatch than you'd think to look at him. I--"

"Comrade Brady," said a voice in the doorway, "you do me proud."

"Why, say," said the Kid, turning, "I guess the laugh's on me. I didn't see you, Mr. Smith. Pugsy's been tellin' me how you sent him for the Table Hills yesterday. That was cute. It was mighty smart. But say, those guys are goin' some, ain't they now! Seems as if they was dead set on puttin' you out of business."

"Their manner yesterday, Comrade Brady, certainly suggested the presence of some sketchy outline of such an ideal in their minds. One Sam, in particular, an ebony-hued sportsman, threw himself into the task with great vim. I rather fancy he is waiting for us with his revolver to this moment. But why worry? Here we are, safe and sound, and Comrade Windsor may be expected to arrive at any moment. I see, Comrade Brady, that you have been matched against one Eddie Wood."

"It's about that I wanted to see you, Mr. Smith. Say, now that things have been and brushed up so, what with these gang guys layin' for you the way they're doin', I guess you'll be needin' me around here. Isn't that right? Say the word and I'll call off this Eddie Wood fight."

"Comrade Brady," said Psmith with some enthusiasm, "I call that a sporting offer. I'm very much obliged. But we mustn't stand in your way. If you eliminate this Comrade Wood, they will have to give you a chance against Jimmy Garvin, won't they?"

"I guess that's right, sir," said the Kid. "Eddie stayed nineteen rounds against Jimmy, and if I can put him away, it gets me into line with Jimmy, and he can't side-step me."

"Then go in and win, Comrade Brady. We shall miss you. It will be as if a ray of sunshine had been removed from the office. But you mustn't throw a chance away. We shall be all right, I think."

"I'll train at White Plains," said the Kid. "That ain't far from here, so I'll be pretty near in case I'm wanted. Hullo, who's here?"

He pointed to the door. A small boy was standing there, holding a note.

"Mr. Smith?"

"Sir to you," said Psmith courteously.

"P. Smith?"

"The same. This is your lucky day."

"Cop at Jefferson Market give me dis to take to youse."

"A cop in Jefferson Market?" repeated Psmith. "I did not know I

had friends among the constabulary there. Why, it's from Comrade Windsor." He opened the envelope and read the letter. "Thanks," he said, giving the boy a quarter-dollar.

It was apparent the Kid was politely endeavouring to veil his curiosity. Master Maloney had no such scruples.

"What's in de letter, boss?" he inquired.

"The letter, Comrade Maloney, is from our Mr. Windsor, and relates in terse language the following facts, that our editor last night hit a policeman in the eye, and that he was sentenced this morning to thirty days on Blackwell's Island."

"He's de guy!" admitted Master Maloney approvingly.

"What's that?" said the Kid. "Mr. Windsor bin punchin' cops! What's he bin doin' that for?"

"He gives no clue. I must go and find out. Could you help Comrade Maloney mind the shop for a few moments while I push round to Jefferson Market and make inquiries?"

"Sure. But say, fancy Mr. Windsor cuttin' loose that way!" said the Kid admiringly.

The Jefferson Market Police Court is a little way down town, near Washington Square. It did not take Psmith long to reach it, and by the judicious expenditure of a few dollars he was enabled to obtain an interview with Billy in a back room.

The chief editor of *Cosy Moments* was seated on a bench, looking upon the world through a pair of much blackened eyes. His general appearance was dishevelled. He had the air of a man who has been caught in the machinery.

"Hullo, Smith," he said. "You got my note all right then?"

Psmith looked at him, concerned.

"Comrade Windsor," he said, "what on earth has been happening to you?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Billy. "That's nothing."

"Nothing! You look as if you had been run over by a motor-car."

"The cops did that," said Billy, without any apparent resentment.

"They always turn nasty if you put up a fight. I was a fool to do it, I suppose, but I got so mad. They knew perfectly well that I had nothing to do with any pool-room downstairs."

Psmith's eye-glass dropped from his eye.

"Pool-room, Comrade Windsor?"

"Yes. The house where I live was raided late last night. It seems that some gamblers have been running a pool-room on the ground floor. Why the cops should have thought I had anything to do with it, when I was sleeping peacefully upstairs, is more than I can understand. Anyway, at about three in the morning there was the dickens of a banging at my door. I got up to see what was doing, and found a couple of Policemen there. They told me to come along with them to the station. I asked what on earth for. I might have known it was no use arguing with a New York cop. They said they had been tipped off that there was a pool-room being run in the house, and that they were cleaning up the house, and if I wanted to say anything I'd better say it to the magistrate. I said, all right, I'd put on some clothes and come with them. They said they couldn't wait about while I put on clothes. I said I wasn't going to travel about New York in pyjamas, and started to get into my shirt. One of them gave me a shove in the ribs with his night-stick, and told me to come along quick. And that made me so mad I hit out." A chuckle escaped Billy. "He wasn't expecting it, and I got him fair. He went down over the bookcase. The other cop took a swipe at me with his club, but by that time I was so mad I'd have taken on Jim Jeffries, if he had shown up and got in my way. I just sailed in, and was beginning to make the man think that he had stumbled on Stanley

Ketchel or Kid Brady or a dynamite explosion by mistake, when the other fellow loosed himself from the bookcase, and they started in on me together, and there was a general rough house, in the middle of which somebody seemed to let off about fifty thousand dollars' worth of fireworks all in a bunch; and I didn't remember anything more till I found myself in a cell, pretty nearly knocked to pieces. That's my little life-history. I guess I was a fool to cut loose that way, but I was so mad I didn't stop to think."

Psmith sighed.

"You have told me your painful story," he said. "Now hear mine. After parting with you last night, I went meditatively back to my Fourth Avenue address, and, with a courtly good night to the large policeman who, as I have mentioned in previous conversations, is stationed almost at my very door, I passed on into my room, and had soon sunk into a dreamless slumber. At about three o'clock in the morning I was aroused by a somewhat hefty banging on the door."

"What!"

"A banging at the door," repeated Psmith. "There, standing on the mat, were three policemen. From their remarks I gathered that certain bright spirits had been running a gambling establishment in the lower regions of the building--where, I think I told you, there is a saloon--and the Law was now about to clean up the place. Very

cordially the honest fellows invited me to go with them. A conveyance, it seemed, waited in the street without. I pointed out, even as you appear to have done, that sea-green pyjamas with old rose frogs were not the costume in which a Shropshire Psmith should be seen abroad in one of the world's greatest cities; but they assured me--more by their manner than their words--that my misgivings were out of place, so I yielded. These men, I told myself, have lived longer in New York than I. They know what is done and what is not done. I will bow to their views. So I went with them, and after a very pleasant and cosy little ride in the patrol waggon, arrived at the police station. This morning I chatted a while with the courteous magistrate, convinced him by means of arguments and by silent evidence of my open, honest face and unwavering eye that I was not a professional gambler, and came away without a stain on my character."

Billy Windsor listened to this narrative with growing interest.

"Gum! it's them!" he cried.

"As Comrade Maloney would say," said Psmith, "meaning what, Comrade Windsor?"

"Why, the fellows who are after that paper. They tipped the police off about the pool-rooms, knowing that we should be hauled off without having time to take anything with us. I'll bet anything you

like they have been in and searched our rooms by now."

"As regards yours, Comrade Windsor, I cannot say. But it is an undoubted fact that mine, which I revisited before going to the office, in order to correct what seemed to me even on reflection certain drawbacks to my costume, looks as if two cyclones and a threshing machine had passed through it."

"They've searched it?"

"With a fine-toothed comb. Not one of my objects of vertu but has been displaced."

Billy Windsor slapped his knee.

"It was lucky you thought of sending that paper by post," he said.

"We should have been done if you hadn't. But, say," he went on miserably, "this is awful. Things are just warming up for the final burst, and I'm out of it all."

"For thirty days," sighed Psmith. "What Cosy Moments really needs is a sitz-redacteur."

"A what?"

"A sitz-redacteur, Comrade Windsor, is a gentleman employed by

German newspapers with a taste for lèse majesté to go to prison whenever required in place of the real editor. The real editor hints in his bright and snappy editorial, for instance, that the Kaiser's moustache reminds him of a bad dream. The police force swoops down en masse on the office of the journal, and are met by the sitz-redacteur, who goes with them peaceably, allowing the editor to remain and sketch out plans for his next week's article on the Crown Prince. We need a sitz-redacteur on Cosy Moments almost as much as a fighting editor; and we have neither."

"The Kid has had to leave then?"

"He wants to go into training at once. He very sportingly offered to cancel his match, but of course that would never do. Unless you consider Comrade Maloney equal to the job, I must look around me for some one else. I shall be too fully occupied with purely literary matters to be able to deal with chance callers. But I have a scheme."

"What's that?"

"It seems to me that we are allowing much excellent material to lie unused in the shape of Comrade Jarvis."

"Bat Jarvis."

"The same. The cat-specialist to whom you endeared yourself somewhat earlier in the proceedings by befriending one of his wandering animals. Little deeds of kindness, little acts of love, as you have doubtless heard, help, etc. Should we not give Comrade Jarvis an opportunity of proving the correctness of this statement? I think so. Shortly after you--if you will forgive me for touching on a painful subject--have been haled to your dungeon, I will push round to Comrade Jarvis's address, and sound him on the subject. Unfortunately, his affection is confined, I fancy, to you. Whether he will consent to put himself out on my behalf remains to be seen. However, there is no harm in trying. If nothing else comes of the visit, I shall at least have had the opportunity of chatting with one of our most prominent citizens."

A policeman appeared at the door.

"Say, pal," he remarked to Psmith, "you'll have to be fading away soon, I guess. Give you three minutes more. Say it quick."

He retired. Billy leaned forward to Psmith.

"I guess they won't give me much chance," he whispered, "but if you see me around in the next day or two, don't be surprised."

"I fail to follow you, Comrade Windsor."

"Men have escaped from Blackwell's Island before now. Not many, it's true; but it has been done."

Psmith shook his head.

"I shouldn't," he said. "They're bound to catch you, and then you will be immersed in the soup beyond hope of recovery. I shouldn't wonder if they put you in your little cell for a year or so."

"I don't care," said Billy stoutly. "I'd give a year later on to be round and about now."

"I shouldn't," urged Psmith. "All will be well with the paper. You have left a good man at the helm."

"I guess I shan't get a chance, but I'll try it if I do."

The door opened and the policeman reappeared.

"Time's up, I reckon."

"Well, good-bye, Comrade Windsor," said Psmith regretfully.

"Abstain from undue worrying. It's a walk-over from now on, and there's no earthly need for you to be around the office. Once, I admit, this could not have been said. But now things have simplified themselves. Have no fear. This act is going to be a

scream from start to finish."