

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A GATHERING OF CAT-SPECIALISTS

Master Maloney raised his eyes for a moment from his book as Psmith re-entered the office.

"Dere's a guy in dere waitin' ter see youse," he said briefly, jerking his head in the direction of the inner room.

"A guy waiting to see me, Comrade Maloney? With or without a sand-bag?"

"Says his name's Jackson," said Master Maloney, turning a page.

Psmith moved quickly to the door of the inner room.

"Why, Comrade Jackson," he said, with the air of a father welcoming home the prodigal son, "this is the maddest, merriest day of all the glad New Year. Where did you come from?"

Mike, looking very brown and in excellent condition, put down the paper he was reading.

"Hullo, Psmith," he said. "I got back this morning. We're playing a game over in Brooklyn to-morrow."

"No engagements of any importance to-day?"

"Not a thing. Why?"

"Because I propose to take you to visit Comrade Jarvis, whom you will doubtless remember."

"Jarvis?" said Mike, puzzled. "I don't remember any Jarvis."

"Let your mind wander back a little through the jungle of the past. Do you recollect paying a visit to Comrade Windsor's room--"

"By the way, where is Windsor?"

"In prison. Well, on that evening--"

"In prison?"

"For thirty days. For slugging a policeman. More of this, however, anon. Let us return to that evening. Don't you remember a certain gentleman with just about enough forehead to keep his front hair from getting all tangled up with his eye-brows?"

"Oh, the cat chap? I know."

"As you very justly observe, Comrade Jackson, the cat chap. For going straight to the mark and seizing on the salient point of a situation, I know of no one who can last two minutes against you. Comrade Jarvis may have other sides to his character--possibly many--but it is as a cat chap that I wish to approach him to-day."

"What's the idea? What are you going to see him for?"

"We," corrected Psmith. "I will explain all at a little luncheon at which I trust that you will be my guest. Already, such is the stress of this journalistic life, I hear my tissues crying out imperatively to be restored. An oyster and a glass of milk somewhere round the corner, Comrade Jackson? I think so, I think so."

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"I was reading *Cosy Moments* in there," said Mike, as they lunched.

"You certainly seem to have bucked it up rather. Kid Brady's reminiscences are hot stuff."

"Somewhat sizzling, Comrade Jackson," admitted Psmith. "They have, however, unfortunately cost us a fighting editor."

"How's that?"

"Such is the boost we have given Comrade Brady, that he is now never without a match. He has had to leave us to-day to go to White Plains to train for an encounter with a certain Mr. Wood, a four-ounce-glove juggler of established fame."

"I expect you need a fighting editor, don't you?"

"He is indispensable, Comrade Jackson, indispensable."

"No rotting. Has anybody cut up rough about the stuff you've printed?"

"Cut up rough? Gadzooks! I need merely say that one critical reader put a bullet through my hat--"

"Rot! Not really?"

"While others kept me tree'd on top of a roof for the space of nearly an hour. Assuredly they have cut up rough, Comrade Jackson."

"Great Scott! Tell us."

Psmith briefly recounted the adventures of the past few weeks.

"But, man," said Mike, when he had finished "why on earth don't you call in the police?"

"We have mentioned the matter to certain of the force. They appeared tolerably interested, but showed no tendency to leap excitedly to our assistance. The New York policeman, Comrade Jackson, like all great men, is somewhat peculiar. If you go to a New York policeman and exhibit a black eye, he will examine it and express some admiration for the abilities of the citizen responsible for the same. If you press the matter, he becomes bored, and says, 'Ain't youse satisfied with what youse got? G'wan!' His advice in such cases is good, and should be followed. No; since coming to this city I have developed a habit of taking care of myself, or employing private help. That is why I should like you, if you will, to come with me to call upon Comrade Jarvis. He is a person of considerable influence among that section of the populace which is endeavouring to smash in our occiputs. Indeed, I know of nobody who cuts a greater quantity of ice. If I can only enlist Comrade Jarvis's assistance, all will be well. If you are through with your refreshment, shall we be moving in his direction? By the way, it will probably be necessary in the course of our interview to allude to you as one of our most eminent living cat-fanciers. You do not object? Remember that you have in your English home seventy-four fine cats, mostly Angoras. Are you on to that? Then let us be going. Comrade Maloney has given me the address. It is a goodish step down on the East side. I should like to take a taxi, but it might seem ostentatious. Let us walk."

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They found Mr. Jarvis in his Groome Street fancier's shop, engaged in the intellectual occupation of greasing a cat's paws with butter. He looked up as they entered, and began to breathe a melody with a certain coyness.

"Comrade Jarvis," said Psmith, "we meet again. You remember me?"

"Nope," said Mr. Jarvis, pausing for a moment in the middle of a bar, and then taking up the air where he had left off. Psmith was not discouraged.

"Ah," he said tolerantly, "the fierce rush of New York life. How it wipes from the retina of to-day the image impressed on it but yesterday. Are you with me, Comrade Jarvis?"

The cat-expert concentrated himself on the cat's paws without replying.

"A fine animal," said Psmith, adjusting his eyeglass. "To which particular family of the *Felis Domestica* does that belong? In colour it resembles a Neapolitan ice more than anything."

Mr. Jarvis's manner became unfriendly.

"Say, what do youse want? That's straight ain't it? If youse want to buy a boid or a snake why don't youse say so?"

"I stand corrected," said Psmith. "I should have remembered that time is money. I called in here partly on the strength of being a colleague and side-partner of Comrade Windsor--"

"Mr. Windsor! De gent what caught my cat?"

"The same--and partly in order that I might make two very eminent cat-fanciers acquainted. This," he said, with a wave of his hand in the direction of the silently protesting Mike, "is Comrade Jackson, possibly the best known of our English cat-fanciers. Comrade Jackson's stud of Angoras is celebrated wherever the King's English is spoken, and in Hoxton."

Mr. Jarvis rose, and, having inspected Mike with silent admiration for a while, extended a well-battered hand towards him. Psmith looked on benevolently.

"What Comrade Jackson does not know about cats," he said, "is not knowledge. His information on Angoras alone would fill a volume."

"Say,"--Mr. Jarvis was evidently touching on a point which had weighed deeply upon him--"why's catnip called catnip?"

Mike looked at Psmith helplessly. It sounded like a riddle, but it was obvious that Mr. Jarvis's motive in putting the question was not frivolous. He really wished to know.

"The word, as Comrade Jackson was just about to observe," said Psmith, "is a corruption of cat-mint. Why it should be so corrupted I do not know. But what of that? The subject is too deep to be gone fully into at the moment. I should recommend you to read Comrade Jackson's little brochure on the matter. Passing lightly on from that--"

"Did youse ever have a cat dat ate beetles?" inquired Mr. Jarvis.

"There was a time when many of Comrade Jackson's felidae supported life almost entirely on beetles."

"Did they git thin?"

Mike felt that it was time, if he was to preserve his reputation, to assert himself.

"No," he replied firmly.

Mr. Jarvis looked astonished.

"English beetles," said Psmith, "don't make cats thin. Passing

lightly--"

"I had a cat oncest," said Mr. Jarvis, ignoring the remark and sticking to his point, "dat ate beetles and got thin and used to tie itself into knots."

"A versatile animal," agreed Psmith.

"Say," Mr. Jarvis went on, now plainly on a subject near to his heart, "dem beetles is fierce. Sure. Can't keep de cats off of eatin' dem, I can't. First t'ing you know dey've swallowed dem, and den dey gits thin and ties theirselves into knots."

"You should put them into strait-waistcoats," said Psmith.

"Passing, however, lightly--"

"Say, ever have a cross-eyed cat?"

"Comrade Jackson's cats," said Psmith, "have happily been almost free from strabismus."

"Dey's lucky, cross-eyed cats is. You has a cross-eyed cat, and not'in' don't never go wrong. But, say, was dere ever a cat wit one blue eye and one yaller one in your bunch? Gum, it's fierce when it's like dat. It's a real skiddoo, is a cat wit one blue eye and one yaller one. Puts you in bad, surest t'ing you know. Oncest

a guy give me a cat like dat, and first t'ing you know I'm in bad all round. It wasn't till I give him away to de cop on de corner and gets me one dat's cross-eyed dat I lifts de skiddoo off of me."

"And what happened to the cop?" inquired Psmith, interested.

"Oh, he got in bad, sure enough," said Mr. Jarvis without emotion.

"One of de boys what he'd pinched and had sent to de Island once lays for him and puts one over him wit a black-jack. Sure. Dat's what comes of havin' a cat wit one blue eye and one yaller one."

Mr. Jarvis relapsed into silence. He seemed to be meditating on the inscrutable workings of Fate. Psmith took advantage of the pause to leave the cat topic and touch on matter of more vital import.

"Tense and exhilarating as is this discussion of the optical peculiarities of cats," he said, "there is another matter on which, if you will permit me, I should like to touch. I would hesitate to bore you with my own private troubles, but this is a matter which concerns Comrade Windsor as well as myself, and I know that your regard for Comrade Windsor is almost an obsession."

"How's that?"

"I should say," said Psmith, "that Comrade Windsor is a man to whom you give the glad hand."

"Sure. He's to the good, Mr. Windsor is. He caught me cat."

"He did. By the way, was that the one that used to tie itself into knots?"

"Nope. Dat was anudder."

"Ah! However, to resume. The fact is, Comrade Jarvis, we are much persecuted by scoundrels. How sad it is in this world! We look to every side. We look north, east, south, and west, and what do we see? Mainly scoundrels. I fancy you have heard a little about our troubles before this. In fact, I gather that the same scoundrels actually approached you with a view to engaging your services to do us in, but that you very handsomely refused the contract."

"Sure," said Mr. Jarvis, dimly comprehending.

"A guy comes to me and says he wants you and Mr. Windsor put through it, but I gives him de t'run down. 'Nuttin' done,' I says. 'Mr. Windsor caught me cat.'"

"So I was informed," said Psmith. "Well, failing you, they went to a gentleman of the name of Reilly."

"Spider Reilly?"

"You have hit it, Comrade Jarvis. Spider Reilly, the lessee and manager of the Three Points gang."

"Dose T'ree Points, dey're to de bad. Dey're fresh."

"It is too true, Comrade Jarvis."

"Say," went on Mr. Jarvis, waxing wrathful at the recollection, "what do youse t'ink dem fresh stiffs done de udder night. Started some rough woik in me own dance-joint."

"Shamrock Hall?" said Psmith.

"Dat's right. Shamrock Hall. Got gay, dey did, wit some of de Table Hillers. Say, I got it in for dem gazebos, sure I have. Surest t'ing you know."

Psmith beamed approval.

"That," he said, "is the right spirit. Nothing could be more admirable. We are bound together by our common desire to check the ever-growing spirit of freshness among the members of the Three Points. Add to that the fact that we are united by a sympathetic knowledge of the manners and customs of cats, and especially that Comrade Jackson, England's greatest fancier, is our mutual friend,

and what more do we want? Nothing."

"Mr. Jackson's to de good," assented Mr. Jarvis, eyeing Mike in friendly fashion.

"We are all to de good," said Psmith. "Now the thing I wished to ask you is this. The office of the paper on which I work was until this morning securely guarded by Comrade Brady, whose name will be familiar to you."

"De Kid?"

"On the bull's-eye, as usual, Comrade Jarvis. Kid Brady, the coming light-weight champion of the world. Well, he has unfortunately been compelled to leave us, and the way into the office is consequently clear to any sand-bag specialist who cares to wander in. Matters connected with the paper have become so poignant during the last few days that an inrush of these same specialists is almost a certainty, unless--and this is where you come in."

"Me?"

"Will you take Comrade Brady's place for a few days?"

"How's that?"

"Will you come in and sit in the office for the next day or so and help hold the fort? I may mention that there is money attached to the job. We will pay for your services. How do we go, Comrade Jarvis?"

Mr. Jarvis reflected but a brief moment.

"Why, sure," he said. "Me fer dat. When do I start?"

"Excellent, Comrade Jarvis. Nothing could be better. I am obliged. I rather fancy that the gay band of Three Pointers who will undoubtedly visit the offices of Cosy Moments in the next few days, probably to-morrow, are due to run up against the surprise of their lives. Could you be there at ten to-morrow morning?"

"Sure t'ing. I'll bring me canister."

"I should," said Psmith. "In certain circumstances one canister is worth a flood of rhetoric. Till to-morrow, then, Comrade Jarvis. I am very much obliged to you."

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"Not at all a bad hour's work," said Psmith complacently, as they turned out of Groome Street. "A vote of thanks to you, Comrade

Jackson, for your invaluable assistance."

"It strikes me I didn't do much," said Mike with a grin.

"Apparently, no. In reality, yes. Your manner was exactly right. Reserved, yet not haughty. Just what an eminent cat-fancier's manner should be. I could see that you made a pronounced hit with Comrade Jarvis. By the way, if you are going to show up at the office to-morrow, perhaps it would be as well if you were to look up a few facts bearing on the feline world. There is no knowing what thirst for information a night's rest may not give Comrade Jarvis. I do not presume to dictate, but if you were to make yourself a thorough master of the subject of catnip, for instance, it might quite possibly come in useful."