

CHAPTER XXV

TRAPPED

Mr. Jarvis was as good as his word. On the following morning, at ten o'clock to the minute, he made his appearance at the office of Cosy Moments, his fore-lock more than usually well oiled in honour of the occasion, and his right coat-pocket bulging in a manner that betrayed to the initiated eye the presence of the faithful "canister." With him, in addition to his revolver, he brought a long, thin young man who wore under his brown tweed coat a blue-and-red striped jersey. Whether he brought him as an ally in case of need or merely as a kindred soul with whom he might commune during his vigil, was not ascertained.

Pugsy, startled out of his wonted calm by the arrival of this distinguished company, observed the pair, as they passed through into the inner office, with protruding eyes, and sat speechless for a full five minutes. Psmith received the new-corners in the editorial sanctum with courteous warmth. Mr. Jarvis introduced his colleague.

"Thought I'd bring him along. Long Otto's his monaker."

"You did very rightly, Comrade Jarvis," Psmith assured him. "Your unerring instinct did not play you false when it told you that

Comrade Otto would be as welcome as the flowers in May. With Comrade Otto I fancy we shall make a combination which will require a certain amount of tackling."

Mr. Jarvis confirmed this view. Long Otto, he affirmed, was no rube, but a scrapper from Biffville-on-the-Slosh. The hardiest hooligan would shrink from introducing rough-house proceedings into a room graced by the combined presence of Long Otto and himself.

"Then," said Psmith, "I can go about my professional duties with a light heart. I may possibly sing a bar or two. You will find cigars in that box. If you and Comrade Otto will select one apiece and group yourselves tastefully about the room in chairs, I will start in to hit up a slightly spicy editorial on the coming election."

Mr. Jarvis regarded the paraphernalia of literature on the table with interest. So did Long Otto, who, however, being a man of silent habit, made no comment. Throughout the seance and the events which followed it he confined himself to an occasional grunt. He seemed to lack other modes of expression. A charming chap, however.

"Is dis where youse writes up pieces fer de paper?" inquired Mr. Jarvis, eyeing the table.

"It is," said Psmith. "In Comrade Windsor's pre-dungeon days he was wont to sit where I am sitting now, while I bivouacked over there

at the smaller table. On busy mornings you could hear our brains buzzing in Madison Square Garden. But wait! A thought strikes me." He called for Pugsy.

"Comrade Maloney," he said, "if the Editorial Staff of this paper were to give you a day off, could you employ it to profit?"

"Surest t'ing you know," replied Pugsy with some fervour. "I'd take me goil to de Bronx Zoo."

"Your girl?" said Psmith inquiringly. "I had heard no inkling of this, Comrade Maloney. I had always imagined you one of those strong, rugged, blood-and-iron men who were above the softer emotions. Who is she?"

"Aw, she's a kid," said Pugsy. "Her pa runs a delicatessen shop down our street. She ain't a bad mutt," added the ardent swain. "I'm her steady."

"See that I have a card for the wedding, Comrade Maloney," said Psmith, "and in the meantime take her to the Bronx, as you suggest."

"Won't youse be wantin' me to-day."

"Not to-day. You need a holiday. Unflagging toil is sapping your

physique. Go up and watch the animals, and remember me very kindly to the Peruvian Llama, whom friends have sometimes told me I resemble in appearance. And if two dollars would in any way add to the gaiety of the jaunt . . ."

"Sure t'ing. T'anks, boss."

"It occurred to me," said Psmith, when he had gone, "that the probable first move of any enterprising Three Pointer who invaded this office would be to knock Comrade Maloney on the head to prevent his announcing him. Comrade Maloney's services are too valuable to allow him to be exposed to unnecessary perils. Any visitors who call must find their way in for themselves. And now to work. Work, the what's-its-name of the thingummy and the thing-um-a-bob of the what d'you-call-it."

For about a quarter of an hour the only sound that broke the silence of the room was the scratching of Psmith's pen and the musical exhortation of Messrs. Otto and Jarvis. Finally Psmith leaned back in his chair with a satisfied expression, and spoke.

"While, as of course you know, Comrade Jarvis," he said, "there is no agony like the agony of literary composition, such toil has its compensations. The editorial I have just completed contains its measure of balm. Comrade Otto will bear me out in my statement that there is a subtle joy in the manufacture of the well-formed phrase.

Am I not right, Comrade Otto?"

The long one gazed appealingly at Mr. Jarvis, who spoke for him.

"He's a bit shy on handin' out woids, is Otto," he said.

Psmith nodded.

"I understand. I am a man of few words myself. All great men are like that. Von Moltke, Comrade Otto, and myself. But what are words? Action is the thing. That is the cry. Action. If that is Comrade Otto's forte, so much the better, for I fancy that action rather than words is what we may be needing in the space of about a quarter of a minute. At least, if the footsteps I hear without are, as I suspect, those of our friends of the Three Points."

Jarvis and Long Otto turned towards the door. Psmith was right. Some one was moving stealthily in the outer office. Judging from the sound, more than one person.

"It is just as well," said Psmith softly, "that Comrade Maloney is not at his customary post. Now, in about a quarter of a minute, as I said--Aha!"

The handle of the door began to revolve slowly and quietly. The next moment three figures tumbled into the room. It was evident

that they had not expected to find the door unlocked, and the absence of resistance when they applied their weight had had surprising effects. Two of the three did not pause in their career till they cannoned against the table. The third, who was holding the handle, was more fortunate.

Psmith rose with a kindly smile to welcome his guests.

"Why, surely!" he said in a pleased voice. "I thought I knew the face. Comrade Repetto, this is a treat. Have you come bringing me a new hat?"

The white-haired leader's face, as he spoke, was within a few inches of his own. Psmith's observant eye noted that the bruise still lingered on the chin where Kid Brady's upper-cut had landed at their previous meeting.

"I cannot offer you all seats," he went on, "unless you care to dispose yourselves upon the tables. I wonder if you know my friend, Mr. Bat Jarvis? And my friend, Mr. L. Otto? Let us all get acquainted on this merry occasion."

The three invaders had been aware of the presence of the great Bat and his colleague for some moments, and the meeting seemed to be causing them embarrassment. This may have been due to the fact that both Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Otto had produced and were toying

meditatively with distinctly ugly-looking pistols.

Mr. Jarvis spoke.

"Well," he said, "what's doin'?"

Mr. Repetto, to whom the remark was directly addressed, appeared to have some difficulty in finding a reply. He shuffled his feet, and looked at the floor. His two companions seemed equally at a loss.

"Goin' to start any rough stuff?" inquired Mr. Jarvis casually.

"The cigars are on the table," said Psmith hospitably. "Draw up your chairs, and let's all be jolly. I will open the proceedings with a song."

In a rich baritone, with his eyeglass fixed the while on Mr. Repetto, he proceeded to relieve himself of the first verse of "I only know I love thee."

"Chorus, please," he added, as he finished. "Come along, Comrade Repetto. Why this shrinking coyness? Fling out your chest, and cut loose."

But Mr. Repetto's eye was fastened on Mr. Jarvis's revolver. The sight apparently had the effect of quenching his desire for song.

"'Lov' muh, ahnd ther world is--ah--mine!" concluded Psmith.

He looked round the assembled company.

"Comrade Otto," he observed, "will now recite that pathetic little poem 'Baby's Sock is now a Blue-bag.' Pray, gentlemen, silence for Comrade Otto."

He looked inquiringly at the long youth, who remained mute. Psmith clicked his tongue regretfully.

"Comrade Jarvis," he said, "I fear that as a smoking-concert this is not going to be a success. I understand, however. Comrade Repetto and his colleagues have come here on business, and nothing will make them forget it. Typical New York men of affairs, they close their minds to all influences that might lure them from their business. Let us get on, then. What did you wish to see me about, Comrade Repetto?"

Mr. Repetto's reply was unintelligible.

Mr. Jarvis made a suggestion.

"Youse had better beat it," he said.

Long Otto grunted sympathy with this advice.

"And youse had better go back to Spider Reilly," continued Mr. Jarvis, "and tell him that there's nothin' doin' in the way of rough house wit dis gent here." He indicated Psmith, who bowed. "And you can tell de Spider," went on Bat with growing ferocity, "dat next time he gits gay and starts in to shoot guys in me dance-joint I'll bite de head off'n him. See? Does dat go? If he t'inks his little two-by-four gang can put it across de Groome Street, he can try. Dat's right. An' don't fergit dis gent here and me is pals, and any one dat starts anyt'ing wit dis gent is going to have to git busy wit me. Does dat go?"

Psmith coughed, and shot his cuffs.

"I do not know," he said, in the manner of a chairman addressing a meeting, "that I have anything to add to the very well-expressed remarks of my friend, Comrade Jarvis. He has, in my opinion, covered the ground very thoroughly and satisfactorily. It now only remains for me to pass a vote of thanks to Comrade Jarvis and to declare this meeting at an end."

"Beat it," said Mr. Jarvis, pointing to the door.

The delegation then withdrew.

"I am very much obliged," said Psmith, "for your courtly assistance, Comrade Jarvis. But for you I do not care to think with what a splash I might not have been immersed in the gumbo. Thank you, Comrade Jarvis. And you, Comrade Otto."

"Aw chee!" said Mr. Jarvis, handsomely dismissing the matter. Mr. Otto kicked the leg of the table, and grunted.

* * *

For half an hour after the departure of the Three Pointers Psmith chatted amiably to his two assistants on matters of general interest. The exchange of ideas was somewhat one-sided, though Mr. Jarvis had one or two striking items of information to impart, notably some hints on the treatment of fits in kittens.

At the end of this period the conversation was once more interrupted by the sound of movements in the outer office.

"If dat's dose stiffs come back--" began Mr. Jarvis, reaching for his revolver.

"Stay your hand, Comrade Jarvis," said as a sharp knock sounded on the door. "I do not think it can be our late friends. Comrade Repetto's knowledge of the usages of polite society is too limited, I fancy, to prompt him to knock on doors. Come in."

The door opened. It was not Mr. Repetto or his colleagues, but another old friend. No other, in fact, than Mr. Francis Parker, he who had come as an embassy from the man up top in the very beginning of affairs, and had departed, wrathful, mouthing declarations of war. As on his previous visit, he wore the dude suit, the shiny shoes, and the tall-shaped hat.

"Welcome, Comrade Parker," said Psmith. "It is too long since we met. Comrade Jarvis I think you know. If I am right, that is to say, in supposing that it was you who approached him at an earlier stage in the proceedings with a view to engaging his sympathetic aid in the great work of putting Comrade Windsor and myself out of business. The gentleman on your left is Comrade Otto."

Mr. Parker was looking at Bat in bewilderment. It was plain that he had not expected to find Psmith entertaining such company.

"Did you come purely for friendly chit-chat, Comrade Parker," inquired Psmith, "or was there, woven into the social motives of your call, a desire to talk business of any kind?"

"My business is private. I didn't expect a crowd."

"Especially of ancient friends such as Comrade Jarvis. Well, well, you are breaking up a most interesting little symposium. Comrade

Jarvis, I think I shall be forced to postpone our very entertaining discussion of fits in kittens till a more opportune moment.

Meanwhile, as Comrade Parker wishes to talk over some private business--"

Bat Jarvis rose.

"I'll beat it," he said.

"Reluctantly, I hope, Comrade Jarvis. As reluctantly as I hint that I would be alone. If I might drop in some time at your private residence?"

"Sure," said Mr. Jarvis warmly.

"Excellent. Well, for the present, good-bye. And many thanks for your invaluable co-operation."

"Aw chee!" said Mr. Jarvis.

"And now, Comrade Parker," said Psmith, when the door had closed, "let her rip. What can I do for you?"

"You seem to be all to the merry with Bat Jarvis," observed Mr. Parker.

"The phrase exactly expresses it, Comrade Parker. I am as a tortoiseshell kitten to him. But, touching your business?"

Mr. Parker was silent for a moment.

"See here," he said at last, "aren't you going to be good? Say, what's the use of keeping on at this fool game? Why not quit it before you get hurt?"

Psmith smoothed his waistcoat reflectively.

"I may be wrong, Comrade Parker," he said, "but it seems to me that the chances of my getting hurt are not so great as you appear to imagine. The person who is in danger of getting hurt seems to me to be the gentleman whose name is on that paper which is now in my possession."

"Where is it?" demanded Mr. Parker quickly.

Psmith eyed him benevolently.

"If you will pardon the expression, Comrade Parker," he said,

"Aha! Meaning that I propose to keep that information to myself."

Mr. Parker shrugged his shoulders.

"You know your own business, I guess."

Psmith nodded.

"You are absolutely correct, Comrade Parker. I do. Now that Cosy Moments has our excellent friend Comrade Jarvis on its side, are you not to a certain extent among the Blenheim Oranges? I think so. I think so."

As he spoke there was a rap at the door. A small boy entered. In his hand was a scrap of paper.

"Guy asks me give dis to gazebo named Smiff," he said.

"There are many gazebos of that name, my lad. One of whom I am which, as Artemus Ward was wont to observe. Possibly the missive is for me."

He took the paper. It was dated from an address on the East Side.

"Dear Smith," it ran. "Come here as quick as you can, and bring some money. Explain when I see you."

It was signed "W. W."

So Billy Windsor had fulfilled his promise. He had escaped.

A feeling of regret for the futility of the thing was Psmith's first emotion. Billy could be of no possible help in the campaign at its present point. All the work that remained to be done could easily be carried through without his assistance. And by breaking out from the Island he had committed an offence which was bound to carry with it serious penalties. For the first time since his connection with Cosy Moments began Psmith was really disturbed.

He turned to Mr. Parker.

"Comrade Parker," he said, "I regret to state that this office is now closing for the day. But for this, I should be delighted to sit chatting with you. As it is--"

"Very well," said Mr. Parker. "Then you mean to go on with this business?"

"Though it snows, Comrade Parker."

They went out into the street, Psmith thoughtful and hardly realising the other's presence. By the side of the pavement a few yards down the road a taximeter-cab was standing. Psmith hailed it.

Mr. Parker was still beside him. It occurred to Psmith that it would not do to let him hear the address Billy Windsor had given in

his note.

"Turn and go on down the street," he said to the driver.

He had taken his seat and was closing the door, when it was snatched from his grasp and Mr. Parker darted on to the seat opposite. The next moment the cab had started up the street instead of down and the hard muzzle of a revolver was pressing against Psmith's waistcoat.

"Now what?" said Mr. Parker smoothly, leaning back with the pistol resting easily on his knee.