

CHAPTER XXVI

A FRIEND IN NEED

"The point is well taken," said Psmith thoughtfully.

"You think so?" said Mr. Parker.

"I am convinced of it."

"Good. But don't move. Put that hand back where it was."

"You think of everything, Comrade Parker."

He dropped his hand on to the seat, and remained silent for a few moments. The taxi-cab was buzzing along up Fifth Avenue now. Looking towards the window, Psmith saw that they were nearing the park. The great white mass of the Plaza Hotel showed up on the left.

"Did you ever stop at the Plaza, Comrade Parker?"

"No," said Mr. Parker shortly.

"Don't bite at me, Comrade Parker. Why be brusque on so joyous an occasion? Better men than us have stopped at the Plaza. Ah, the

Park! How fresh the leaves, Comrade Parker, how green the herbage!
Fling your eye at yonder grassy knoll."

He raised his hand to point. Instantly the revolver was against his waistcoat, making an unwelcome crease in that immaculate garment.

"I told you to keep that hand where it was."

"You did, Comrade Parker, you did. The fault," said Psmith handsomely, "was entirely mine. Carried away by my love of nature, I forgot. It shall not occur again."

"It had better not," said Mr. Parker unpleasantly. "If it does, I'll blow a hole through you."

Psmith raised his eyebrows.

"That, Comrade Parker," he said, "is where you make your error. You would no more shoot me in the heart of the metropolis than, I trust, you would wear a made-up tie with evening dress. Your skin, however unhealthy to the eye of the casual observer, is doubtless precious to yourself, and you are not the man I take you for if you would risk it purely for the momentary pleasure of plugging me with a revolver. The cry goes round criminal circles in New York, 'Comrade Parker is not such a fool as he looks.' Think for a moment what would happen. The shot would ring out, and instantly

bicycle-policemen would be pursuing this taxi-cab with the purposeful speed of greyhounds trying to win the Waterloo Cup. You would be headed off and stopped. Ha! What is this? Psmith, the People's Pet, weltering in his gore? Death to the assassin! I fear nothing could save you from the fury of the mob, Comrade Parker. I seem to see them meditatively plucking you limb from limb. 'She loves me!' Off comes an arm. 'She loves me not.' A leg joins the little heap of limbs on the ground. That is how it would be. And what would you have left out of it? Merely, as I say, the momentary pleasure of potting me. And it isn't as if such a feat could give you the thrill of successful marksmanship. Anybody could hit a man with a pistol at an inch and a quarter. I fear you have not thought this matter out with sufficient care, Comrade Parker. You said to yourself, 'Happy thought, I will kidnap Psmith!' and all your friends said, 'Parker is the man with the big brain!' But now, while it is true that I can't get out, you are moaning, 'What on earth shall I do with him, now that I have got him?'"

"You think so, do you?"

"I am convinced of it. Your face is contorted with the anguish of mental stress. Let this be a lesson to you, Comrade Parker, never to embark on any enterprise of which you do not see the end."

"I guess I see the end of this all right."

"You have the advantage of me then, Comrade Parker. It seems to me that we have nothing before us but to go on riding about New York till you feel that my society begins to pall."

"You figure you're clever, I guess."

"There are few brighter brains in this city, Comrade Parker. But why this sudden tribute?"

"You reckon you've thought it all out, eh?"

"There may be a flaw in my reasoning, but I confess I do not at the moment see where it lies. Have you detected one?"

"I guess so."

"Ah! And what is it?"

"You seem to think New York's the only place on the map."

"Meaning what, Comrade Parker?"

"It might be a fool trick to shoot you in the city as you say, but, you see, we aren't due to stay in the city. This cab is moving on."

"Like John Brown's soul," said Psmith, nodding. "I see. Then you

propose to make quite a little tour in this cab?"

"You've got it."

"And when we are out in the open country, where there are no witnesses, things may begin to move."

"That's it."

"Then," said Psmith heartily, "till that moment arrives what we must do is to entertain each other with conversation. You can take no step of any sort for a full half-hour, possibly more, so let us give ourselves up to the merriment of the passing instant. Are you good at riddles, Comrade Parker? How much wood would a wood-chuck chuck, assuming for purposes of argument that it was in the power of a wood-chuck to chuck wood?"

Mr. Parker did not attempt to solve this problem. He was sitting in the same attitude of watchfulness, the revolver resting on his knee. He seemed mistrustful of Psmith's right hand, which was hanging limply at his side. It was from this quarter that he seemed to expect attack. The cab was bowling easily up the broad street, past rows on rows of high houses, all looking exactly the same. Occasionally, to the right, through a break in the line of buildings, a glimpse of the river could be seen.

Psmith resumed the conversation.

"You are not interested in wood-chucks, Comrade Parker? Well, well, many people are not. A passion for the flora and fauna of our forests is innate rather than acquired. Let us talk of something else. Tell me about your home-life, Comrade Parker. Are you married? Are there any little Parkers running about the house? When you return from this very pleasant excursion will baby voices crow gleefully, 'Fahzer's come home'?"

Mr. Parker said nothing.

"I see," said Psmith with ready sympathy. "I understand. Say no more. You are unmarried. She wouldn't have you. Alas, Comrade Parker! However, thus it is! We look around us, and what do we see? A solid phalanx of the girls we have loved and lost. Tell me about her, Comrade Parker. Was it your face or your manners at which she drew the line?"

Mr. Parker leaned forward with a scowl. Psmith did not move, but his right hand, as it hung, closed. Another moment and Mr. Parker's chin would be in just the right position for a swift upper-cut. . .

This fact appeared suddenly to dawn on Mr. Parker himself. He drew back quickly, and half raised the revolver. Psmith's hand resumed its normal attitude.

"Leaving more painful topics," said Psmith, "let us turn to another point. That note which the grubby stripling brought to me at the office purported to come from Comrade Windsor, and stated that he had escaped from Blackwell's Island, and was awaiting my arrival at some address in the Bowery. Would you mind telling me, purely to satisfy my curiosity, if that note was genuine? I have never made a close study of Comrade Windsor's handwriting, and in an unguarded moment I may have assumed too much."

Mr. Parker permitted himself a smile.

"I guess you aren't so clever after all," he said. "The note was a fake all right."

"And you had this cab waiting for me on the chance?"

Mr. Parker nodded.

"Sherlock Holmes was right," said Psmith regretfully. "You may remember that he advised Doctor Watson never to take the first cab, or the second. He should have gone further, and urged him not to take cabs at all. Walking is far healthier."

"You'll find it so," said Mr. Parker.

Psmith eyed him curiously.

"What are you going to do with me, Comrade Parker?" he asked.

Mr. Parker did not reply. Psmith's eye turned again to the window. They had covered much ground since last he had looked at the view. They were off Manhattan Island now, and the houses were beginning to thin out. Soon, travelling at their present rate, they must come into the open country. Psmith relapsed into silence. It was necessary for him to think. He had been talking in the hope of getting the other off his guard; but Mr. Parker was evidently too keenly on the look-out. The hand that held the revolver never wavered. The muzzle, pointing in an upward direction, was aimed at Psmith's waist. There was no doubt that a move on his part would be fatal. If the pistol went off, it must hit him. If it had been pointed at his head in the orthodox way he might have risked a sudden blow to knock it aside, but in the present circumstances that would be useless. There was nothing to do but wait.

The cab moved swiftly on. Now they had reached the open country. An occasional wooden shack was passed, but that was all. At any moment the climax of the drama might be reached. Psmith's muscles stiffened for a spring. There was little chance of its being effective, but at least it would be better to put up some kind of a fight. And he had a faint hope that the suddenness of his movement might upset the other's aim. He was bound to be hit somewhere.

That was certain. But quickness might save him to some extent.

He braced his leg against the back of the cab. In another moment he would have sprung; but just then the smooth speed of the cab changed to a series of jarring bumps, each more emphatic than the last. It slowed down, then came to a halt. One of the tyres had burst.

There was a thud, as the chauffeur jumped down. They heard him fumbling in the tool-box. Presently the body of the machine was raised slightly as he got to work with the jack.

It was about a minute later that somebody in the road outside spoke.

"Had a breakdown?" inquired the voice. Psmith recognised it. It was the voice of Kid Brady.