

CHAPTER XXVII

PSMITH CONCLUDES HIS RIDE

The Kid, as he had stated to Psmith at their last interview that he intended to do, had begun his training for his match with Eddie Wood, at White Plains, a village distant but a few miles from New York. It was his practice to open a course of training with a little gentle road-work; and it was while jogging along the highway a couple of miles from his training-camp, in company with the two thick-necked gentlemen who acted as his sparring-partners, that he had come upon the broken-down taxi-cab.

If this had happened after his training had begun in real earnest, he would have averted his eyes from the spectacle, however alluring, and continued on his way without a pause. But now, as he had not yet settled down to genuine hard work, he felt justified in turning aside and looking into the matter. The fact that the chauffeur, who seemed to be a taciturn man, lacking the conversational graces, manifestly objected to an audience, deterred him not at all. One cannot have everything in this world, and the Kid and his attendant thick-necks were content to watch the process of mending the tyre, without demanding the additional joy of sparkling small-talk from the man in charge of the operations.

"Guy's had a breakdown, sure," said the first of the thick-necks.

"Surest thing you know," agreed his colleague.

"Seems to me the tyre's punctured," said the Kid.

All three concentrated their gaze on the machine

"Kid's right," said thick-neck number one. "Guy's been an' bust a tyre."

"Surest thing you know," said thick-neck number two.

They observed the perspiring chauffeur in silence for a while.

"Wonder how he did that, now?" speculated the Kid.

"Guy ran over a nail, I guess," said thick-neck number one.

"Surest thing you know," said the other, who, while perhaps somewhat lacking in the matter of original thought, was a most useful fellow to have by one. A sort of Boswell.

"Did you run over a nail?" the Kid inquired of the chauffeur.

The chauffeur ignored the question.

"This is his busy day," said the first thick-neck with satire.

"Guy's too full of work to talk to us."

"Deaf, shouldn't wonder," surmised the Kid.

"Say, wonder what he's doin' with a taxi so far out of the city."

"Some guy tells him to drive him out here, I guess. Say, it'll cost him something, too. He'll have to strip off a few from his roll to pay for this."

Psmith, in the interior of the cab, glanced at Mr. Parker.

"You heard, Comrade Parker? He is right, I fancy. The bill--"

Mr. Parker dug viciously at him with the revolver.

"Keep quiet," he whispered, "or you'll get hurt."

Psmith suspended his remarks.

Outside, the conversation had begun again.

"Pretty rich guy inside," said the Kid, following up his companion's train of thought. "I'm goin' to rubber in at the window."

Psmith, meeting Mr. Parker's eye, smiled pleasantly. There was no answering smile on the other's face.

There came the sound of the Kid's feet grating on the road as he turned; and as he heard it Mr. Parker, that eminent tactician, for the first time lost his head. With a vague idea of screening Psmith from the eyes of the man in the road he half rose. For an instant the muzzle of the pistol ceased to point at Psmith's waistcoat. It was the very chance Psmith had been waiting for. His left hand shot out, grasped the other's wrist, and gave it a sharp wrench. The revolver went off with a deafening report, the bullet passing through the back of the cab; then fell to the floor, as the fingers lost their hold. The next moment Psmith's right fist, darting upwards, took Mr. Parker neatly under the angle of the jaw.

The effect was instantaneous. Psmith had risen from his seat as he delivered the blow, and it consequently got the full benefit of his weight, which was not small. Mr. Parker literally crumpled up. His head jerked back, then fell limply on his chest. He would have slipped to the floor had not Psmith pushed him on to the seat.

The interested face of the Kid appeared at the window. Behind him could be seen portions of the faces of the two thick-necks.

"Ah, Comrade Brady!" said Psmith genially. "I heard your voice,

and was hoping you might look in for a chat."

"What's doin', Mr. Smith?" queried the excited Kid.

"Much, Comrade Brady, much. I will tell you all anon. Meanwhile, however, kindly knock that chauffeur down and sit on his head. He's a bad person."

"De guy's beat it," volunteered the first thick-neck.

"Surest thing you know," said the other.

"What's been doin', Mr. Smith?" asked the Kid.

"I'll tell you about it as we go, Comrade Brady," said Psmith, stepping into the road. "Riding in a taxi is pleasant provided it is not overdone. For the moment I have had sufficient. A bit of walking will do me good."

"What are you going to do with this guy, Mr. Smith?" asked the Kid, pointing to Parker, who had begun to stir slightly.

Psmith inspected the stricken one gravely.

"I have no use for him, Comrade Brady," he said. "Our ride together gave me as much of his society as I desire for to-day. Unless you

or either of your friends are collecting Parkers, I propose that we leave him where he is. We may as well take the gun, however. In my opinion, Comrade Parker is not the proper man to have such a weapon. He is too prone to go firing it off in any direction at a moment's notice, causing inconvenience to all." He groped on the floor of the cab for the revolver. "Now, Comrade Brady," he said, straightening himself up, "I am at your disposal. Shall we be pushing on?"

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It was late in the evening when Psmith returned to the metropolis, after a pleasant afternoon at the Brady training-camp. The Kid, having heard the details of the ride, offered once more to abandon his match with Eddie Wood, but Psmith would not hear of it. He was fairly satisfied that the opposition had fired their last shot, and that their next move would be to endeavour to come to terms. They could not hope to catch him off his guard a second time, and, as far as hired assault and battery were concerned, he was as safe in New York, now that Bat Jarvis had declared himself on his side, as he would have been in the middle of a desert. What Bat said was law on the East Side. No hooligan, however eager to make money, would dare to act against a protégé of the Groome Street leader.

The only flaw in Psmith's contentment was the absence of Billy Windsor. On this night of all nights the editorial staff of Cosy

Moments should have been together to celebrate the successful outcome of their campaign. Psmith dined alone, his enjoyment of the rather special dinner which he felt justified in ordering in honour of the occasion somewhat diminished by the thought of Billy's hard case. He had seen Mr William Collier in *The Man from Mexico*, and that had given him an understanding of what a term of imprisonment on Blackwell's Island meant. Billy, during these lean days, must be supporting life on bread, bean soup, and water. Psmith, toying with the hors d'oeuvre, was somewhat saddened by the thought.

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All was quiet at the office on the following day. Bat Jarvis, again accompanied by the faithful Otto, took up his position in the inner room, prepared to repel all invaders; but none arrived. No sounds broke the peace of the outer office except the whistling of Master Maloney.

Things were almost dull when the telephone bell rang. Psmith took down the receiver.

"Hullo?" he said.

"I'm Parker," said a moody voice.

Psmith uttered a cry of welcome.

"Why, Comrade Parker, this is splendid! How goes it? Did you get back all right yesterday? I was sorry to have to tear myself away, but I had other engagements. But why use the telephone? Why not come here in person? You know how welcome you are. Hire a taxi-cab and come right round."

Mr. Parker made no reply to the invitation.

"Mr. Waring would like to see you."

"Who, Comrade Parker?"

"Mr. Stewart Waring."

"The celebrated tenement house-owner?"

Silence from the other end of the wire. "Well," said Psmith, "what step does he propose to take towards it?"

"He tells me to say that he will be in his office at twelve o'clock to-morrow morning. His office is in the Morton Building, Nassau Street."

Psmith clicked his tongue regretfully.

"Then I do not see how we can meet," he said. "I shall be here."

"He wishes to see you at his office."

"I am sorry, Comrade Parker. It is impossible. I am very busy just now, as you may know, preparing the next number, the one in which we publish the name of the owner of the Pleasant Street Tenements. Otherwise, I should be delighted. Perhaps later, when the rush of work has diminished somewhat."

"Am I to tell Mr. Waring that you refuse?"

"If you are seeing him at any time and feel at a loss for something to say, perhaps you might mention it. Is there anything else I can do for you, Comrade Parker?"

"See here--"

"Nothing? Then good-bye. Look in when you're this way."

He hung up the receiver.

As he did so, he was aware of Master Maloney standing beside the table.

"Yes, Comrade Maloney?"

"Telegram," said Pugsy. "For Mr. Windsor."

Psmith ripped open the envelope.

The message ran:

"Returning to-day. Will be at office to-morrow morning," and it was signed "Wilberfloss."

"See who's here!" said Psmith softly.