

CHAPTER XXVIII

STANDING ROOM ONLY

In the light of subsequent events it was perhaps the least bit unfortunate that Mr. Jarvis should have seen fit to bring with him to the office of Cosy Moments on the following morning two of his celebrated squad of cats, and that Long Otto, who, as usual, accompanied him, should have been fired by his example to the extent of introducing a large and rather boisterous yellow dog. They were not to be blamed, of course. They could not know that before the morning was over space in the office would be at a premium. Still, it was unfortunate.

Mr. Jarvis was slightly apologetic.

"T'ought I'd bring de kits along," he said. "Dey started in scrappin' yesterday when I was here, so to-day I says I'll keep my eye on dem."

Psmith inspected the menagerie without resentment.

"Assuredly, Comrade Jarvis," he said. "They add a pleasantly cosy and domestic touch to the scene. The only possible criticism I can find to make has to do with their probable brawling with the dog."

"Oh, dey won't scrap wit de dawg. Dey knows him."

"But is he aware of that? He looks to me a somewhat impulsive animal. Well, well, the matter's in your hands. If you will undertake to look after the refereeing of any pogrom that may arise, I say no more."

Mr. Jarvis's statement as to the friendly relations between the animals proved to be correct. The dog made no attempt to annihilate the cats. After an inquisitive journey round the room he lay down and went to sleep, and an era of peace set in. The cats had settled themselves comfortably, one on each of Mr. Jarvis's knees, and Long Otto, surveying the ceiling with his customary glassy stare, smoked a long cigar in silence. Bat breathed a tune, and scratched one of the cats under the ear. It was a soothing scene.

But it did not last. Ten minutes had barely elapsed when the yellow dog, sitting up with a start, uttered a whine. In the outer office could be heard a stir and movement. The next moment the door burst open and a little man dashed in. He had a peeled nose and showed other evidences of having been living in the open air. Behind him was a crowd of uncertain numbers. Psmith recognised the leaders of this crowd. They were the Reverend Edwin T. Philpotts and Mr. B. Henderson Asher.

"Why, Comrade Asher," he said, "this is indeed a Moment of Mirth. I

have been wondering for weeks where you could have got to. And Comrade Philpotts! Am I wrong in saying that this is the maddest, merriest day of all the glad New Year?"

The rest of the crowd had entered the room.

"Comrade Waterman, too!" cried Psmith. "Why we have all met before. Except--"

He glanced inquiringly at the little man with the peeled nose.

"My name is Wilberfloss," said the other with austerity. "Will you be so good as to tell me where Mr. Windsor is?"

A murmur of approval from his followers.

"In one moment," said Psmith. "First, however, let me introduce two important members of our staff. On your right, Mr. Bat Jarvis. On your left, Mr. Long Otto. Both of Groome Street."

The two Bowery boys rose awkwardly. The cats fell in an avalanche to the floor. Long Otto, in his haste, trod on the dog, which began barking, a process which it kept up almost without a pause during the rest of the interview.

"Mr. Wilberfloss," said Psmith in an aside to Bat, "is widely known

as a cat fancier in Brooklyn circles."

"Honest?" said Mr. Jarvis. He tapped Mr. Wilberfloss in friendly fashion on the chest. "Say," he asked, "did youse ever have a cat wit one blue and one yellow eye?"

Mr. Wilberfloss side-stepped and turned once more to Psmith, who was offering B. Henderson Asher a cigarette.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Who am I?" repeated Psmith in an astonished tone.

"Who are you?"

"I am Psmith," said the old Etonian reverently. "There is a preliminary P before the name. This, however, is silent. Like the tomb. Compare such words as ptarmigan, psalm, and phthisis."

"These gentlemen tell me you're acting editor. Who appointed you?"

Psmith reflected.

"It is rather a nice point," he said. "It might be claimed that I appointed myself. You may say, however, that Comrade Windsor appointed me."

"Ah! And where is Mr. Windsor?"

"In prison," said Psmith sorrowfully.

"In prison!"

Psmith nodded.

"It is too true. Such is the generous impulsiveness of Comrade Windsor's nature that he hit a policeman, was promptly gathered in, and is now serving a sentence of thirty days on Blackwell's Island."

Mr. Wilberfloss looked at Mr. Philpotts. Mr. Asher looked at Mr. Wilberfloss. Mr. Waterman started, and stumbled over a cat.

"I never heard of such a thing," said Mr. Wilberfloss.

A faint, sad smile played across Psmith's face.

"Do you remember, Comrade Waterman--I fancy it was to you that I made the remark--my commenting at our previous interview on the rashness of confusing the unusual with the improbable? Here we see Comrade Wilberfloss, big-brained though he is, falling into error."

"I shall dismiss Mr. Windsor immediately," said the big-brained

one.

"From Blackwell's Island?" said Psmith. "I am sure you will earn his gratitude if you do. They live on bean soup there. Bean soup and bread, and not much of either."

He broke off, to turn his attention to Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Waterman, between whom bad blood seemed to have arisen. Mr. Jarvis, holding a cat in his arms, was glowering at Mr. Waterman, who had backed away and seemed nervous.

"What is the trouble, Comrade Jarvis?"

"Dat guy dere wit two left feet," said Bat querulously, "goes and treads on de kit. I--"

"I assure you it was a pure accident. The animal--"

Mr. Wilberfloss, eyeing Bat and the silent Otto with disgust, intervened.

"Who are these persons, Mr. Smith?" he inquired.

"Poisson yourself," rejoined Bat, justly incensed. "Who's de little guy wit de peeled breezer, Mr. Smith?"

Psmith waved his hands.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," he said, "let us not descend to mere personalities. I thought I had introduced you. This, Comrade Jarvis, is Mr. Wilberfloss, the editor of this journal. These, Comrade Wilberfloss--Zam-buk would put your nose right in a day--are, respectively, Bat Jarvis and Long Otto, our acting fighting-editors, vice Kid Brady, absent on unavoidable business."

"Kid Brady!" shrilled Mr. Wilberfloss. "I insist that you give me a full explanation of this matter. I go away by my doctor's orders for ten weeks, leaving Mr. Windsor to conduct the paper on certain well-defined lines. I return yesterday, and, getting into communication with Mr. Philpotts, what do I find? Why, that in my absence the paper has been ruined."

"Ruined?" said Psmith. "On the contrary. Examine the returns, and you will see that the circulation has gone up every week. *Cosy Moments* was never so prosperous and flourishing. Comrade Otto, do you think you could use your personal influence with that dog to induce it to suspend its barking for a while? It is musical, but renders conversation difficult."

Long Otto raised a massive boot and aimed it at the animal, which, dodging with a yelp, cannoned against the second cat and had its nose scratched. Piercing shrieks cleft the air.

"I demand an explanation," roared Mr. Wilberfloss above the din.

"I think, Comrade Otto," said Psmith, "it would make things a little easier if you removed that dog."

He opened the door. The dog shot out. They could hear it being ejected from the outer office by Master Maloney. When there was silence, Psmith turned courteously to the editor.

"You were saying, Comrade Wilberfloss?"

"Who is this person Brady? With Mr. Philpotts I have been going carefully over the numbers which have been issued since my departure--"

"An intellectual treat," murmured Psmith.

"--and in each there is a picture of this young man in a costume which I will not particularise--"

"There is hardly enough of it to particularise."

"--together with a page of disgusting autobiographical matter."

Psmith held up his hand.

"I protest," he said. "We court criticism, but this is mere abuse. I appeal to these gentlemen to say whether this, for instance, is not bright and interesting."

He picked up the current number of *Cosy Moments*, and turned to the Kid's page.

"This," he said. "Describing a certain ten-round unpleasantness with one Mexican Joe. 'Joe comes up for the second round and he gives me a nasty look, but I thinks of my mother and swats him one in the lower ribs. He hollers foul, but nix on that. Referee says, "Fight on." Joe gives me another nasty look. "All right, Kid," he says; "now I'll knock you up into the gallery." And with that he cuts loose with a right swing, but I falls into the clinch, and then---!"

"Bah!" exclaimed Mr. Wilberfloss.

"Go on, boss," urged Mr. Jarvis approvingly. "It's to de good, dat stuff."

"There!" said Psmith triumphantly. "You heard? Comrade Jarvis, one of the most firmly established critics east of Fifth Avenue, stamps Kid Brady's reminiscences with the hall-mark of his approval."

"I falls fer de Kid every time," assented Mr. Jarvis.

"Assuredly, Comrade Jarvis. You know a good thing when you see one. Why," he went on warmly, "there is stuff in these reminiscences which would stir the blood of a jelly-fish. Let me quote you another passage to show that they are not only enthralling, but helpful as well. Let me see, where is it? Ah, I have it. 'A bully good way of putting a guy out of business is this. You don't want to use it in the ring, because by Queensberry Rules it's a foul; but you will find it mighty useful if any thick-neck comes up to you in the street and tries to start anything. It's this way. While he's setting himself for a punch, just place the tips of the fingers of your left hand on the right side of his chest. Then bring down the heel of your left hand. There isn't a guy living that could stand up against that. The fingers give you a leverage to beat the band. The guy doubles up, and you upper-cut him with your right, and out he goes.' Now, I bet you never knew that before, Comrade Philpotts. Try it on your parishioners."

"Cosy Moments," said Mr. Wilberfloss irately, "is no medium for exploiting low prize-fighters."

"Low prize-fighters! Comrade Wilberfloss, you have been misinformed. The Kid is as decent a little chap as you'd meet anywhere. You do not seem to appreciate the philanthropic motives of the paper in adopting Comrade Brady's cause. Think of it,

Comrade Wilberfloss. There was that unfortunate stripling with only two pleasures in life, to love his mother and to knock the heads off other youths whose weight coincided with his own; and misfortune, until we took him up, had barred him almost completely from the second pastime. Our editorial heart was melted. We adopted Comrade Brady. And look at him now! Matched against Eddie Wood! And Comrade Waterman will support me in my statement that a victory over Eddie Wood means that he gets a legitimate claim to meet Jimmy Garvin for the championship."

"It is abominable," burst forth Mr. Wilberfloss. "It is disgraceful. I never heard of such a thing. The paper is ruined."

"You keep reverting to that statement, Comrade Wilberfloss. Can nothing reassure you? The returns are excellent. Prosperity beams on us like a sun. The proprietor is more than satisfied."

"The proprietor?" gasped Mr. Wilberfloss. "Does he know how you have treated the paper?"

"He is cognisant of our every move."

"And he approves?"

"He more than approves."

Mr. Wilberfloss snorted.

"I don't believe it," he said.

The assembled ex-contributors backed up this statement with a united murmur. B. Henderson Asher snorted satirically.

"They don't believe it," sighed Psmith. "Nevertheless, it is true."

"It is not true," thundered Mr. Wilberfloss, hopping to avoid a perambulating cat. "Nothing will convince me of it. Mr. Benjamin White is not a maniac."

"I trust not," said Psmith. "I sincerely trust not. I have every reason to believe in his complete sanity. What makes you fancy that there is even a possibility of his being--er--?"

"Nobody but a lunatic would approve of seeing his paper ruined."

"Again!" said Psmith. "I fear that the notion that this journal is ruined has become an obsession with you, Comrade Wilberfloss. Once again I assure you that it is more than prosperous."

"If," said Mr. Wilberfloss, "you imagine that I intend to take your word in this matter, you are mistaken. I shall cable Mr. White

to-day, and inquire whether these alterations in the paper meet with his approval."

"I shouldn't, Comrade Wilberfloss. Cables are expensive, and in these hard times a penny saved is a penny earned. Why worry Comrade White? He is so far away, so out of touch with our New York literary life. I think it is practically a certainty that he has not the slightest inkling of any changes in the paper."

Mr. Wilberfloss uttered a cry of triumph.

"I knew it," he said, "I knew it. I knew you would give up when it came to the point, and you were driven into a corner. Now, perhaps, you will admit that Mr. White has given no sanction for the alterations in the paper?"

A puzzled look crept into Psmith's face.

"I think, Comrade Wilberfloss," he said, "we are talking at cross-purposes. You keep harping on Comrade White and his views and tastes. One would almost imagine that you fancied that Comrade White was the proprietor of this paper."

Mr. Wilberfloss stared. B. Henderson Asher stared. Every one stared, except Mr. Jarvis, who, since the readings from the Kid's reminiscences had ceased, had lost interest in the discussion, and

was now entertaining the cats with a ball of paper tied to a string.

"Fancied that Mr. White . . .?" repeated Mr. Wilberfloss. "I don't follow you. Who is, if he isn't?"

Psmith removed his monocle, polished it thoughtfully, and put it back in its place.

"I am," he said.