

CHAPTER XXIX

THE KNOCK-OUT FOR MR. WARING

"You!" cried Mr. Wilberfloss.

"The same," said Psmith.

"You!" exclaimed Messrs. Waterman, Asher, and the Reverend Edwin Philpotts.

"On the spot!" said Psmith.

Mr. Wilberfloss groped for a chair and sat down.

"Am I going mad?" he demanded feebly.

"Not so, Comrade Wilberfloss," said Psmith encouragingly. "All is well. The cry goes round New York, 'Comrade Wilberfloss is to the good. He does not gibber.'"

"Do I understand you to say that you own this paper?"

"I do."

"Since when?"

"Roughly speaking, about a month."

Among his audience (still excepting Mr. Jarvis, who was tickling one of the cats and whistling a plaintive melody) there was a tendency toward awkward silence. To start bally-ragging a seeming nonentity and then to discover he is the proprietor of the paper to which you wish to contribute is like kicking an apparently empty hat and finding your rich uncle inside it. Mr. Wilberfloss in particular was disturbed. Editorships of the kind which he aspired to are not easy to get. If he were to be removed from Cosy Moments he would find it hard to place himself anywhere else. Editors, like manuscripts, are rejected from want of space.

"Very early in my connection with this journal," said Psmith, "I saw that I was on to a good thing. I had long been convinced that about the nearest approach to the perfect job in this world, where good jobs are so hard to acquire, was to own a paper. All you had to do, once you had secured your paper, was to sit back and watch the other fellows work, and from time to time forward big cheques to the bank. Nothing could be more nicely attuned to the tastes of a Shropshire Psmith. The glimpses I was enabled to get of the workings of this little journal gave me the impression that Comrade White was not attached with any paternal fervour to Cosy Moments. He regarded it, I deduced, not so much as a life-work as in the light of an investment. I assumed that Comrade White had his price,

and wrote to my father, who was visiting Carlsbad at the moment, to ascertain what that price might be. He cabled it to me. It was reasonable. Now it so happens that an uncle of mine some years ago left me a considerable number of simoleons, and though I shall not be legally entitled actually to close in on the opulence for a matter of nine months or so, I anticipated that my father would have no objection to staking me to the necessary amount on the security of my little bit of money. My father has spent some time of late hurling me at various professions, and we had agreed some time ago that the Law was to be my long suit. Paper-owning, however, may be combined with being Lord Chancellor, and I knew he would have no objection to my being a Napoleon of the Press on this side. So we closed with Comrade White, and--"

There was a knock at the door, and Master Maloney entered with a card.

"Guy's waiting outside," he said.

"Mr. Stewart Waring," read Psmith. "Comrade Maloney, do you know what Mahomet did when the mountain would not come to him?"

"Search me," said the office-boy indifferently.

"He went to the mountain. It was a wise thing to do. As a general rule in life you can't beat it. Remember that, Comrade Maloney."

"Sure," said Pugsy. "Shall I send the guy in?"

"Surest thing you know, Comrade Maloney."

He turned to the assembled company.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you know how I hate to have to send you away, but would you mind withdrawing in good order? A somewhat delicate and private interview is in the offing. Comrade Jarvis, we will meet anon. Your services to the paper have been greatly appreciated. If I might drop in some afternoon and inspect the remainder of your zoo--?"

"Any time you're down Groome Street way. Glad."

"I will make a point of it. Comrade Wilberfloss, would you mind remaining? As editor of this journal, you should be present. If the rest of you would look in about this time to-morrow--Show Mr. Waring in, Comrade Maloney."

He took a seat.

"We are now, Comrade Wilberfloss," he said, "at a crisis in the affairs of this journal, but I fancy we shall win through."

The door opened, and Pugsy announced Mr. Waring.

The owner of the Pleasant Street Tenements was of what is usually called commanding presence. He was tall and broad, and more than a little stout. His face was clean-shaven and curiously expressionless. Bushy eyebrows topped a pair of cold grey eyes. He walked into the room with the air of one who is not wont to apologise for existing. There are some men who seem to fill any room in which they may be. Mr. Waring was one of these.

He set his hat down on the table without speaking. After which he looked at Mr. Wilberfloss, who shrank a little beneath his gaze.

Psmith had risen to greet him.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

"I prefer to stand."

"Just as you wish. This is Liberty Hall."

Mr. Waring again glanced at Mr. Wilberfloss.

"What I have to say is private," he said.

"All is well," said Psmith reassuringly. "It is no stranger that

you see before you, no mere irresponsible loungeer who has butted in by chance. That is Comrade J. Fillken Wilberfloss, the editor of this journal."

"The editor? I understood--"

"I know what you would say. You have Comrade Windsor in your mind. He was merely acting as editor while the chief was away hunting sand-eels in the jungles of Texas. In his absence Comrade Windsor and I did our best to keep the old journal booming along, but it lacked the master-hand. But now all is well: Comrade Wilberfloss is once more doing stunts at the old stand. You may speak as freely before him as you would before well, let us say Comrade Parker."

"Who are you, then, if this gentleman is the editor?"

"I am the proprietor."

"I understood that a Mr. White was the proprietor."

"Not so," said Psmith. "There was a time when that was the case, but not now. Things move so swiftly in New York journalistic matters that a man may well be excused for not keeping abreast of the times, especially one who, like yourself, is interested in politics and house-ownership rather than in literature. Are you sure you won't sit down?"

Mr. Waring brought his hand down with a bang on the table, causing Mr. Wilberfloss to leap a clear two inches from his chair.

"What are you doing it for?" he demanded explosively. "I tell you, you had better quit it. It isn't healthy."

Psmith shook his head.

"You are merely stating in other--and, if I may say so, inferior--words what Comrade Parker said to us. I did not object to giving up valuable time to listen to Comrade Parker. He is a fascinating conversationalist, and it was a privilege to hob-nob with him. But if you are merely intending to cover the ground covered by him, I fear I must remind you that this is one of our busy days. Have you no new light to fling upon the subject?"

Mr. Waring wiped his forehead. He was playing a lost game, and he was not the sort of man who plays lost games well. The Waring type is dangerous when it is winning, but it is apt to crumple up against strong defence.

His next words proved his demoralisation.

"I'll sue you for libel," said he.

Psmith looked at him admiringly.

"Say no more," he said, "for you will never beat that. For pure richness and whimsical humour it stands alone. During the past seven weeks you have been endeavouring in your cheery fashion to blot the editorial staff of this paper off the face of the earth in a variety of ingenious and entertaining ways; and now you propose to sue us for libel! I wish Comrade Windsor could have heard you say that. It would have hit him right."

Mr. Waring accepted the invitation he had refused before. He sat down.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

It was the white flag. The fight had gone out of him.

Psmith leaned back in his chair.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I've thought the whole thing out. The right plan would be to put the complete kybosh (if I may use the expression) on your chances of becoming an alderman. On the other hand, I have been studying the papers of late, and it seems to me that it doesn't much matter who gets elected. Of course the opposition papers may have allowed their zeal to run away with them, but even assuming that to be the case, the other candidates

appear to be a pretty fair contingent of blighters. If I were a native of New York, perhaps I might take a more fervid interest in the matter, but as I am merely passing through your beautiful little city, it doesn't seem to me to make any very substantial difference who gets in. To be absolutely candid, my view of the thing is this. If the People are chumps enough to elect you, then they deserve you. I hope I don't hurt your feelings in any way. I am merely stating my own individual opinion."

Mr. Waring made no remark.

"The only thing that really interests me," resumed Psmith, "is the matter of these tenements. I shall shortly be leaving this country to resume the strangle-hold on Learning which I relinquished at the beginning of the Long Vacation. If I were to depart without bringing off improvements down Pleasant Street way, I shouldn't be able to enjoy my meals. The startled cry would go round Cambridge: 'Something is the matter with Psmith. He is off his feed. He should try Blenkinsop's Balm for the Bilious.' But no balm would do me any good. I should simply droop and fade slowly away like a neglected lily. And you wouldn't like that, Comrade Wilberfloss, would you?"

Mr. Wilberfloss, thus suddenly pulled into the conversation, again leaped in his seat.

"What I propose to do," continued Psmith, without waiting for an answer, "is to touch you for the good round sum of five thousand and three dollars."

Mr. Waring half rose.

"Five thousand dollars!"

"Five thousand and three dollars," said Psmith. "It may possibly have escaped your memory, but a certain minion of yours, one J. Repetto, utterly ruined a practically new hat of mine. If you think that I can afford to come to New York and scatter hats about as if they were mere dross, you are making the culminating error of a misspent life. Three dollars are what I need for a new one. The balance of your cheque, the five thousand, I propose to apply to making those tenements fit for a tolerably fastidious pig to live in."

"Five thousand!" cried Mr. Waring. "It's monstrous."

"It isn't," said Psmith. "It's more or less of a minimum. I have made inquiries. So out with the good old cheque-book, and let's all be jolly."

"I have no cheque-book with me."

"I have," said Psmith, producing one from a drawer. "Cross out the name of my bank, substitute yours, and fate cannot touch us."

Mr. Waring hesitated for a moment, then capitulated. Psmith watched, as he wrote, with an indulgent and fatherly eye.

"Finished?" he said. "Comrade Maloney."

"Youse hollering fer me?" asked that youth, appearing at the door.

"Bet your life I am, Comrade Maloney. Have you ever seen an untamed mustang of the prairie?"

"Nope. But I've read about dem."

"Well, run like one down to Wall Street with this cheque, and pay it in to my account at the International Bank."

Pugsy disappeared.

"Cheques," said Psmith, "have been known to be stopped. Who knows but what, on reflection, you might not have changed your mind?"

"What guarantee have I," asked Mr. Waring, "that these attacks on me in your paper will stop?"

"If you like," said Psmith, "I will write you a note to that effect. But it will not be necessary. I propose, with Comrade Wilberfloss's assistance, to restore Cosy Moments to its old style. Some days ago the editor of Comrade Windsor's late daily paper called up on the telephone and asked to speak to him. I explained the painful circumstances, and, later, went round and hob-nobbed with the great man. A very pleasant fellow. He asks to re-engage Comrade Windsor's services at a pretty sizeable salary, so, as far as our prison expert is concerned, all may be said to be well. He has got where he wanted. Cosy Moments may therefore ease up a bit. If, at about the beginning of next month, you should hear a deafening squeal of joy ring through this city, it will be the infants of New York and their parents receiving the news that Cosy Moments stands where it did. May I count on your services, Comrade Wilberfloss? Excellent. I see I may. Then perhaps you would not mind passing the word round among Comrades Asher, Waterman, and the rest of the squad, and telling them to burnish their brains and be ready to wade in at a moment's notice. I fear you will have a pretty tough job roping in the old subscribers again, but it can be done. I look to you, Comrade Wilberfloss. Are you on?"

Mr. Wilberfloss, wriggling in his chair, intimated that he was.

CONCLUSION

IT was a drizzly November evening. The streets of Cambridge were a compound of mud, mist, and melancholy. But in Psmith's rooms the fire burned brightly, the kettle droned, and all, as the proprietor had just observed, was joy, jollity, and song. Psmith, in pyjamas and a college blazer, was lying on the sofa. Mike, who had been playing football, was reclining in a comatose state in an arm-chair by the fire.

"How pleasant it would be," said Psmith dreamily, "if all our friends on the other side of the Atlantic could share this very peaceful moment with us! Or perhaps not quite all. Let us say, Comrade Windsor in the chair over there, Comrades Brady and Maloney on the table, and our old pal Wilberfloss sharing the floor with B. Henderson Asher, Bat Jarvis, and the cats. By the way, I think it would be a graceful act if you were to write to Comrade Jarvis from time to time telling him how your Angoras are getting on. He regards you as the World's Most Prominent Citizen. A line from you every now and then would sweeten the lad's existence."

Mike stirred sleepily in his chair.

"What?" he said drowsily.

"Never mind, Comrade Jackson. Let us pass lightly on. I am filled with a strange content to-night. I may be wrong, but it seems to me

that all is singularly to de good, as Comrade Maloney would put it. Advices from Comrade Windsor inform me that that prince of blighters, Waring, was rejected by an intelligent electorate. Those keen, clear-sighted citizens refused to vote for him to an extent that you could notice without a microscope. Still, he has one consolation. He owns what, when the improvements are completed, will be the finest and most commodious tenement houses in New York. Millionaires will stop at them instead of going to the Plaza. Are you asleep, Comrade Jackson?"

"Um-m," said Mike.

"That is excellent. You could not be better employed. Keep listening. Comrade Windsor also stated--as indeed did the sporting papers--that Comrade Brady put it all over friend Eddie Wood, administering the sleep-producer in the eighth round. My authorities are silent as to whether or not the lethal blow was a half-scissor hook, but I presume such to have been the case. The Kid is now definitely matched against Comrade Garvin for the championship, and the experts seem to think that he should win. He is a stout fellow, is Comrade Brady, and I hope he wins through. He will probably come to England later on. When he does, we must show him round. I don't think you ever met him, did you, Comrade Jackson?"

"Ur-r," said Mike.

"Say no more," said Psmith. "I take you."

He reached out for a cigarette.

"These," he said, comfortably, "are the moments in life to which we look back with that wistful pleasure. What of my boyhood at Eton? Do I remember with the keenest joy the brain-tourneys in the old form-room, and the bally rot which used to take place on the Fourth of June? No. Burned deeply into my memory is a certain hot bath I took after one of the foulest cross-country runs that ever occurred outside Dante's Inferno. So with the present moment. This peaceful scene, Comrade Jackson, will remain with me when I have forgotten that such a person as Comrade Repetto ever existed. These are the real Cosy Moments. And while on that subject you will be glad to hear that the little sheet is going strong. The man Wilberfloss is a marvel in his way. He appears to have gathered in the majority of the old subscribers again. Hopping mad but a brief while ago, they now eat out of his hand. You've really no notion what a feeling of quiet pride it gives you owning a paper. I try not to show it, but I seem to myself to be looking down on the world from some lofty peak. Yesterday night, when I was looking down from the peak without a cap and gown, a proctor slid up. To-day I had to dig down into my jeans for a matter of two plunks. But what of it? Life must inevitably be dotted with these minor tragedies. I do not repine. The whisper goes round, 'Psmith bites the bullet, and

wears a brave smile.' Comrade Jackson--"

A snore came from the chair.

Psmith sighed. But he did not repine. He bit the bullet. His eyes closed.

Five minutes later a slight snore came from the sofa, too.

The man behind Cosy Moments slept.