

## 28. Psmith Arranges his Future

It was exactly four o'clock when Psmith, sliding unostentatiously from his stool, flicked divers pieces of dust from the leg of his trousers, and sidled towards the basement, where he was wont to keep his hat during business hours. He was aware that it would be a matter of some delicacy to leave the bank at that hour. There was a certain quantity of work still to be done in the Fixed Deposits Department--work in which, by rights, as Mike's understudy, he should have lent a sympathetic and helping hand. 'But what of that?' he mused, thoughtfully smoothing his hat with his knuckles. 'Comrade Gregory is a man who takes such an enthusiastic pleasure in his duties that he will go singing about the office when he discovers that he has got a double lot of work to do.'

With this comforting thought, he started on his perilous journey to the open air. As he walked delicately, not courting observation, he reminded himself of the hero of 'Pilgrim's Progress'. On all sides of him lay fearsome beasts, lying in wait to pounce upon him. At any moment Mr Gregory's hoarse roar might shatter the comparative stillness, or the sinister note of Mr Bickersdyke make itself heard.

'However,' said Psmith philosophically, 'these are Life's Trials, and must be borne patiently.'

A roundabout route, via the Postage and Inwards Bills Departments, took him to the swing-doors. It was here that the danger became acute. The doors were well within view of the Fixed Deposits Department, and Mr Gregory had an eye compared with which that of an eagle was more or less bleared.

Psmith sauntered to the door and pushed it open in a gingerly manner.

As he did so a bellow rang through the office, causing a timid customer, who had come in to arrange about an overdraft, to lose his nerve completely and postpone his business till the following afternoon.

Psmith looked up. Mr Gregory was leaning over the barrier which divided his lair from the outer world, and gesticulating violently.

'Where are you going,' roared the head of the Fixed Deposits.

Psmith did not reply. With a benevolent smile and a gesture intended to signify all would come right in the future, he slid through the swing-doors, and began to move down the street at a somewhat swifter pace than was his habit.

Once round the corner he slackened his speed.

'This can't go on,' he said to himself. 'This life of commerce is too great a strain. One is practically a hunted hare. Either the heads of

my department must refrain from View Halloos when they observe me going for a stroll, or I abandon Commerce for some less exacting walk in life.'

He removed his hat, and allowed the cool breeze to play upon his forehead. The episode had been disturbing.

He was to meet his father at the Mansion House. As he reached that land-mark he saw with approval that punctuality was a virtue of which he had not the sole monopoly in the Smith family. His father was waiting for him at the tryst.

'Certainly, my boy,' said Mr Smith senior, all activity in a moment, when Psmith had suggested going to Lord's. 'Excellent. We must be getting on. We must not miss a moment of the match. Bless my soul: I haven't seen a first-class match this season. Where's a cab? Hi, cabby! No, that one's got some one in it. There's another. Hi! Here, lunatic! Are you blind? Good, he's seen us. That's right. Here he comes. Lord's Cricket Ground, cabby, as quick as you can. Jump in, Rupert, my boy, jump in.'

Psmith rarely jumped. He entered the cab with something of the stateliness of an old Roman Emperor boarding his chariot, and settled himself comfortably in his seat. Mr Smith dived in like a rabbit.

A vendor of newspapers came to the cab thrusting an evening paper into

the interior. Psmith bought it.

'Let's see how they're getting on,' he said, opening the paper. 'Where are we? Lunch scores. Lord's. Aha! Comrade Jackson is in form.'

'Jackson?' said Mr Smith, 'is that the same youngster you brought home last summer? The batsman? Is he playing today?'

'He was not out thirty at lunch-time. He would appear to be making something of a stand with his brother Joe, who has made sixty-one up to the moment of going to press. It's possible he may still be in when we get there. In which case we shall not be able to slide into the pavilion.'

'A grand bat, that boy. I said so last summer. Better than any of his brothers. He's in the bank with you, isn't he?'

'He was this morning. I doubt, however, whether he can be said to be still in that position.'

'Eh? what? How's that?'

'There was some slight friction between him and the management. They wished him to be glued to his stool; he preferred to play for the county. I think we may say that Comrade Jackson has secured the Order of the Boot.'

'What? Do you mean to say--?'

Psmith related briefly the history of Mike's departure.

Mr Smith listened with interest.

'Well,' he said at last, 'hang me if I blame the boy. It's a sin cooping up a fellow who can bat like that in a bank. I should have done the same myself in his place.'

Psmith smoothed his waistcoat.

'Do you know, father,' he said, 'this bank business is far from being much of a catch. Indeed, I should describe it definitely as a bit off. I have given it a fair trial, and I now denounce it unhesitatingly as a shade too thick.'

'What? Are you getting tired of it?'

'Not precisely tired. But, after considerable reflection, I have come to the conclusion that my talents lie elsewhere. At lugging ledgers I am among the also-rans--a mere cipher. I have been wanting to speak to you about this for some time. If you have no objection, I should like to go to the Bar.'

'The Bar? Well--'

'I fancy I should make a pretty considerable hit as a barrister.'

Mr Smith reflected. The idea had not occurred to him before. Now that it was suggested, his always easily-fired imagination took hold of it readily. There was a good deal to be said for the Bar as a career.

Psmith knew his father, and he knew that the thing was practically as good as settled. It was a new idea, and as such was bound to be favourably received.

'What I should do, if I were you,' he went on, as if he were advising a friend on some course of action certain to bring him profit and pleasure, 'is to take me away from the bank at once. Don't wait. There is no time like the present. Let me hand in my resignation tomorrow. The blow to the management, especially to Comrade Bickersdyke, will be a painful one, but it is the truest kindness to administer it swiftly. Let me resign tomorrow, and devote my time to quiet study. Then I can pop up to Cambridge next term, and all will be well.'

'I'll think it over--' began Mr Smith.

'Let us hustle,' urged Psmith. 'Let us Do It Now. It is the only way. Have I your leave to shoot in my resignation to Comrade Bickersdyke tomorrow morning?'

Mr Smith hesitated for a moment, then made up his mind.

'Very well,' he said. 'I really think it is a good idea. There are great opportunities open to a barrister. I wish we had thought of it before.'

'I am not altogether sorry that we did not,' said Psmith. 'I have enjoyed the chances my commercial life has given me of associating with such a man as Comrade Bickersdyke. In many ways a master-mind. But perhaps it is as well to close the chapter. How it happened it is hard to say, but somehow I fancy I did not precisely hit it off with Comrade Bickersdyke. With Psmith, the worker, he had no fault to find; but it seemed to me sometimes, during our festive evenings together at the club, that all was not well. From little, almost imperceptible signs I have suspected now and then that he would just as soon have been without my company. One cannot explain these things. It must have been some incompatibility of temperament. Perhaps he will manage to bear up at my departure. But here we are,' he added, as the cab drew up. 'I wonder if Comrade Jackson is still going strong.'

They passed through the turnstile, and caught sight of the telegraph-board.

'By Jove!' said Psmith, 'he is. I don't know if he's number three or number six. I expect he's number six. In which case he has got ninety-eight. We're just in time to see his century.'