

### 30. The Last Sad Farewells

As it happened, that was precisely what Mr Bickersdyke was doing. He was feeling thoroughly pleased with life. For nearly nine months Psmith had been to him a sort of spectre at the feast inspiring him with an ever-present feeling of discomfort which he had found impossible to shake off. And tonight he saw his way of getting rid of him.

At five minutes past four Mr Gregory, crimson and wrathful, had plunged into his room with a long statement of how Psmith, deputed to help in the life and thought of the Fixed Deposits Department, had left the building at four o'clock, when there was still another hour and a half's work to be done.

Moreover, Mr Gregory deposed, the errant one, seen sliding out of the swinging door, and summoned in a loud, clear voice to come back, had flatly disobeyed and had gone upon his ways 'Grinning at me,' said the aggrieved Mr Gregory, 'like a dashed ape.' A most unjust description of the sad, sweet smile which Psmith had bestowed upon him from the doorway.

Ever since that moment Mr Bickersdyke had felt that there was a silver lining to the cloud. Hitherto Psmith had left nothing to be desired in the manner in which he performed his work. His righteousness in the office had clothed him as in a suit of mail. But now he had slipped. To

go off an hour and a half before the proper time, and to refuse to return when summoned by the head of his department--these were offences for which he could be dismissed without fuss. Mr Bickersdyke looked forward to tomorrow's interview with his employee.

Meanwhile, having enjoyed an excellent dinner, he was now, as Psmith had predicted, engaged with a cigar and a cup of coffee in the lower smoking-room of the Senior Conservative Club.

Psmith and Mike entered the room when he was about half through these luxuries.

Psmith's first action was to summon a waiter, and order a glass of neat brandy. 'Not for myself,' he explained to Mike. 'For Comrade Bickersdyke. He is about to sustain a nasty shock, and may need a restorative at a moment's notice. For all we know, his heart may not be strong. In any case, it is safest to have a pick-me-up handy.'

He paid the waiter, and advanced across the room, followed by Mike. In his hand, extended at arm's length, he bore the glass of brandy.

Mr Bickersdyke caught sight of the procession, and started. Psmith set the brandy down very carefully on the table, beside the manager's coffee cup, and, dropping into a chair, regarded him pityingly through his eyeglass. Mike, who felt embarrassed, took a seat some little way behind his companion. This was Psmith's affair, and he proposed to

allow him to do the talking.

Mr Bickersdyke, except for a slight deepening of the colour of his complexion, gave no sign of having seen them. He puffed away at his cigar, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

'An unpleasant task lies before us,' began Psmith in a low, sorrowful voice, 'and it must not be shirked. Have I your ear, Mr Bickersdyke?'

Addressed thus directly, the manager allowed his gaze to wander from the ceiling. He eyed Psmith for a moment like an elderly basilisk, then looked back at the ceiling again.

'I shall speak to you tomorrow,' he said.

Psmith heaved a heavy sigh.

'You will not see us tomorrow,' he said, pushing the brandy a little nearer.

Mr Bickersdyke's eyes left the ceiling once more.

'What do you mean?' he said.

'Drink this,' urged Psmith sympathetically, holding out the glass. 'Be brave,' he went on rapidly. 'Time softens the harshest blows. Shocks

stun us for the moment, but we recover. Little by little we come to ourselves again. Life, which we had thought could hold no more pleasure for us, gradually shows itself not wholly grey.'

Mr Bickersdyke seemed about to make an observation at this point, but Psmith, with a wave of the hand, hurried on.

'We find that the sun still shines, the birds still sing. Things which used to entertain us resume their attraction. Gradually we emerge from the soup, and begin--'

'If you have anything to say to me,' said the manager, 'I should be glad if you would say it, and go.'

'You prefer me not to break the bad news gently?' said Psmith. 'Perhaps you are wise. In a word, then,'--he picked up the brandy and held it out to him--'Comrade Jackson and myself are leaving the bank.'

'I am aware of that,' said Mr Bickersdyke drily.

Psmith put down the glass.

'You have been told already?' he said. 'That accounts for your calm. The shock has expended its force on you, and can do no more. You are stunned. I am sorry, but it had to be. You will say that it is madness for us to offer our resignations, that our grip on the work of the bank

made a prosperous career in Commerce certain for us. It may be so. But somehow we feel that our talents lie elsewhere. To Comrade Jackson the management of the Psmith estates seems the job on which he can get the rapid half-Nelson. For my own part, I feel that my long suit is the Bar. I am a poor, unready speaker, but I intend to acquire a knowledge of the Law which shall outweigh this defect. Before leaving you, I should like to say--I may speak for you as well as myself, Comrade Jackson--?'

Mike uttered his first contribution to the conversation--a gurgle--and relapsed into silence again.

'I should like to say,' continued Psmith, 'how much Comrade Jackson and I have enjoyed our stay in the bank. The insight it has given us into your masterly handling of the intricate mechanism of the office has been a treat we would not have missed. But our place is elsewhere.'

He rose. Mike followed his example with alacrity. It occurred to Mr Bickersdyke, as they turned to go, that he had not yet been able to get in a word about their dismissal. They were drifting away with all the honours of war.

'Come back,' he cried.

Psmith paused and shook his head sadly.

'This is unmanly, Comrade Bickersdyke,' he said. 'I had not expected this. That you should be dazed by the shock was natural. But that you should beg us to reconsider our resolve and return to the bank is unworthy of you. Be a man. Bite the bullet. The first keen pang will pass. Time will soften the feeling of bereavement. You must be brave. Come, Comrade Jackson.'

Mike responded to the call without hesitation.

'We will now,' said Psmith, leading the way to the door, 'push back to the flat. My father will be round there soon.' He looked over his shoulder. Mr Bickersdyke appeared to be wrapped in thought.

'A painful business,' sighed Psmith. 'The man seems quite broken up. It had to be, however. The bank was no place for us. An excellent career in many respects, but unsuitable for you and me. It is hard on Comrade Bickersdyke, especially as he took such trouble to get me into it, but I think we may say that we are well out of the place.'

Mike's mind roamed into the future. Cambridge first, and then an open-air life of the sort he had always dreamed of. The Problem of Life seemed to him to be solved. He looked on down the years, and he could see no troubles there of any kind whatsoever. Reason suggested that there were probably one or two knocking about somewhere, but this was no time to think of them. He examined the future, and found it good.

'I should jolly well think,' he said simply, 'that we might.'