

Psmith, Journalist



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PREFACE

THE conditions of life in New York are so different from those of London that a story of this kind calls for a little explanation. There are several million inhabitants of New York. Not all of them eke out a precarious livelihood by murdering one another, but there is a definite section of the population which murders—not casually, on the spur of the moment, but on definitely commercial lines at so many dollars per murder. The "gangs" of New York exist in fact. I have not invented them. Most of the incidents in this story are based on actual happenings. The Rosenthal case, where four men, headed by a genial individual calling himself "Gyp the Blood" shot a fellow-citizen in cold blood in a spot as public and fashionable as Piccadilly Circus and escaped in a motor-car, made such a stir a few years ago that the noise of it was heard all over the world and not, as is generally the case with the doings of the gangs, in New York only. Rosenthal cases on a smaller and less sensational scale are frequent occurrences on Manhattan Island. It was the prominence of the victim rather than the unusual nature of the occurrence that excited the New York press. Most gang victims get a quarter of a column in small type.

P. G. WODEHOUSE New York, 1915

CHAPTER I — "COSY MOMENTS"

The man in the street would not have known it, but a great crisis was imminent in New York journalism.

Everything seemed much as usual in the city. The cars ran blithely on Broadway. Newsboys shouted "Wux-try!" into the ears of nervous pedestrians with their usual Caruso-like vim. Society passed up and down Fifth Avenue in its automobiles, and was there a furrow of anxiety upon Society's brow? None. At a thousand street corners a thousand policemen preserved their air of massive superiority to the things of this world. Not one of them showed the least sign of perturbation. Nevertheless, the crisis was at hand. Mr. J. Fillken Wilberfloss, editor-in-chief of *Cosy Moments*, was about to leave his post and start on a ten weeks' holiday.

In New York one may find every class of paper which the imagination can conceive. Every grade of society is catered for. If an Esquimau came to New York, the first thing he would find on the bookstalls in all probability would be the *Blubber Magazine*, or some similar production written by Esquimaux for Esquimaux. Everybody reads in New York, and reads all the time. The New Yorker peruses his favourite paper while he is being jammed into a crowded compartment on the subway or leaping like an antelope into a moving Street car.

There was thus a public for *Cosy Moments*. *Cosy Moments*, as its name (an inspiration of Mr. Wilberfloss's own) is designed to imply, is a journal for the home. It is the sort of paper which the father of the family is expected to take home with him from his office and read aloud to the chicks before bed-time. It was founded by its proprietor, Mr. Benjamin White, as an antidote to yellow journalism. One is forced to admit that up to the present yellow journalism seems to be competing against it with a certain measure of success. Headlines are still of as generous a size as heretofore, and there is no tendency on the part of editors to scamp the details of the last murder-case.

Nevertheless, *Cosy Moments* thrives. It has its public.

Its contents are mildly interesting, if you like that sort of thing. There is a "Moments in the Nursery" page, conducted by Luella Granville Waterman, to which parents are invited to contribute the bright speeches of their offspring, and which bristles with little stories about the nursery canary, by Jane (aged six), and other works of rising young authors. There is a "Moments of Meditation" page, conducted by the Reverend Edwin T. Philpotts; a "Moments Among the Masters" page, consisting of assorted chunks looted from the literature of the past, when foreheads were bulgy and thoughts profound, by Mr. Wilberfloss himself; one or two other pages; a short story; answers to

correspondents on domestic matters; and a "Moments of Mirth" page, conducted by an alleged humorist of the name of B. Henderson Asher, which is about the most painful production ever served up to a confiding public.

The guiding spirit of *Cosy Moments* was Mr. Wilberfloss. Circumstances had left the development of the paper mainly to him. For the past twelve months the proprietor had been away in Europe, taking the waters at Carlsbad, and the sole control of *Cosy Moments* had passed into the hands of Mr. Wilberfloss. Nor had he proved unworthy of the trust or unequal to the duties. In that year *Cosy Moments* had reached the highest possible level of domesticity. Anything not calculated to appeal to the home had been rigidly excluded. And as a result the circulation had increased steadily. Two extra pages had been added, "Moments Among the Shoppers" and "Moments with Society." And the advertisements had grown in volume. But the work had told upon the Editor. Work of that sort carries its penalties with it. Success means absorption, and absorption spells softening of the brain.

Whether it was the strain of digging into the literature of the past every week, or the effort of reading B. Henderson Asher's "Moments of Mirth" is uncertain. At any rate, his duties, combined with the heat of a New York summer, had sapped Mr. Wilberfloss's health to such an extent that the doctor had ordered him ten weeks' complete rest in the mountains. This Mr. Wilberfloss could, perhaps, have endured, if this had been all. There are worse places than the mountains of America in which to spend ten weeks of the tail-end of summer, when the sun has ceased to grill and the mosquitoes have relaxed their exertions. But it was not all. The doctor, a far-seeing man who went down to first causes, had absolutely declined to consent to Mr. Wilberfloss's suggestion that he should keep in touch with the paper during his vacation. He was adamant. He had seen copies of *Cosy Moments* once or twice, and he refused to permit a man in the editor's state of health to come in contact with Luella Granville Waterman's "Moments in the Nursery" and B. Henderson Asher's "Moments of Mirth." The medicine-man put his foot down firmly.

"You must not see so much as the cover of the paper for ten weeks," he said. "And I'm not so sure that it shouldn't be longer. You must forget that such a paper exists. You must dismiss the whole thing from your mind, live in the open, and develop a little flesh and muscle."

To Mr. Wilberfloss the sentence was almost equivalent to penal servitude. It was with tears in his voice that he was giving his final instructions to his sub-editor, in whose charge the paper would be left during his absence. He had taken a long time doing this. For two days he had been fussing in and out of the office, to the discontent of its inmates, more especially Billy Windsor, the sub-editor, who was now listening moodily to the last harangue of the series, with the air of one

whose heart is not in the subject. Billy Windsor was a tall, wiry, loose-jointed young man, with unkempt hair and the general demeanour of a caged eagle. Looking at him, one could picture him astride of a bronco, rounding up cattle, or cooking his dinner at a camp-fire. Somehow he did not seem to fit into the *Cosy Moments* atmosphere.

"Well, I think that that is all, Mr. Windsor," chirruped the editor. He was a little man with a long neck and large *pince-nez*, and he always chirruped. "You understand the general lines on which I think the paper should be conducted?" The sub-editor nodded. Mr. Wilberfloss made him tired. Sometimes he made him more tired than at other times. At the present moment he filled him with an aching weariness. The editor meant well, and was full of zeal, but he had a habit of covering and recovering the ground. He possessed the art of saying the same obvious thing in a number of different ways to a degree which is found usually only in politicians. If Mr. Wilberfloss had been a politician, he would have been one of those dealers in glittering generalities who used to be fashionable in American politics.

"There is just one thing," he continued "Mrs. Julia Burdett Parslow is a little inclined—I may have mentioned this before—"

"You did," said the sub-editor.

Mr. Wilberfloss chirruped on, unchecked.

"A little inclined to be late with her 'Moments with Budding Girlhood'. If this should happen while I am away, just write her a letter, quite a pleasant letter, you understand, pointing out the necessity of being in good time. The machinery of a weekly paper, of course, cannot run smoothly unless contributors are in good time with their copy. She is a very sensible woman, and she will understand, I am sure, if you point it out to her."

The sub-editor nodded.

"And there is just one other thing. I wish you would correct a slight tendency I have noticed lately in Mr. Asher to be just a trifle—well, not precisely risky, but perhaps a shade broad in his humour."

"His what?" said Billy Windsor.

"Mr. Asher is a very sensible man, and he will be the first to acknowledge that his sense of humour has led him just a little beyond the bounds. You understand? Well, that is all, I think. Now I must really be going, or I shall miss my train. Good-bye, Mr. Windsor."

"Good-bye," said the sub-editor thankfully.

At the door Mr. Wilberfloss paused with the air of an exile bidding farewell to his native land, sighed, and trotted out.

Billy Windsor put his feet upon the table, and with a deep scowl resumed his task of reading the proofs of Luella Granville Waterman's "Moments in the Nursery."

CHAPTER II — BILLY WINDSOR

Billy Windsor had started life twenty-five years before this story opens on his father's ranch in Wyoming. From there he had gone to a local paper of the type whose Society column consists of such items as "Pawnee Jim Williams was to town yesterday with a bunch of other cheap skates. We take this opportunity of once more informing Jim that he is a liar and a skunk," and whose editor works with a revolver on his desk and another in his hip-pocket. Graduating from this, he had proceeded to a reporter's post on a daily paper in a Kentucky town, where there were blood feuds and other Southern devices for preventing life from becoming dull. All this time New York, the magnet, had been tugging at him. All reporters dream of reaching New York. At last, after four years on the Kentucky paper, he had come East, minus the lobe of one ear and plus a long scar that ran diagonally across his left shoulder, and had worked without much success as a free-lance. He was tough and ready for anything that might come his way, but these things are a great deal a matter of luck. The cub-reporter cannot make a name for himself unless he is favoured by fortune. Things had not come Billy Windsor's way. His work had been confined to turning in reports of fires and small street accidents, which the various papers to which he supplied them cut down to a couple of inches.

Billy had been in a bad way when he had happened upon the sub-editorship of *Cosy Moments*. He despised the work with all his heart, and the salary was infinitesimal. But it was regular, and for a while Billy felt that a regular salary was the greatest thing on earth. But he still dreamed of winning through to a post on one of the big New York dailies, where there was something doing and a man would have a chance of showing what was in him.

The unfortunate thing, however, was that *Cosy Moments* took up his time so completely. He had no chance of attracting the notice of big editors by his present work, and he had no leisure for doing any other.

All of which may go to explain why his normal aspect was that of a caged eagle.

To him, brooding over the outpourings of Luella Granville Waterman, there entered Pugsy Maloney, the office-boy, bearing a struggling cat.

"Say!" said Pugsy.

He was a nonchalant youth, with a freckled, mask-like face, the expression of which never varied. He appeared unconscious of the cat. Its existence did not seem to occur to him.

"Well?" said Billy, looking up. "Hello, what have you got there?"

Master Maloney eyed the cat, as if he were seeing it for the first time.

"It's a kitty what I got in de street," he said.

"Don't hurt the poor brute. Put her down."

Master Maloney obediently dropped the cat, which sprang nimbly on to an upper shelf of the book-case.

"I wasn't hoitin' her," he said, without emotion. "Dere was two fellers in de street sickin' a dawg on to her. An' I comes up an' says, 'G'wan! What do youse t'ink you're doin', fussin' de poor dumb animal?' An' one of de guys, he says, 'G'wan! Who do youse t'ink youse is?' An' I says, 'I'm de guy what's goin' to swat youse one on de coco if youse don't quit fussin' de poor dumb animal.' So wit dat he makes a break at swattin' me one, but I swats him one, an' I swats de odder feller one, an' den I swats dem bote some more, an' I gets de kitty, an' I brings her in here, cos I t'inks maybe youse'll look after her."

And having finished this Homeric narrative, Master Maloney fixed an expressionless eye on the ceiling, and was silent.

Billy Windsor, like most men of the plains, combined the toughest of muscle with the softest of hearts. He was always ready at any moment to become the champion of the oppressed on the slightest provocation. His alliance with Pugsy Maloney had begun on the occasion when he had rescued that youth from the clutches of a large negro, who, probably from the soundest of motives, was endeavouring to slay him. Billy had not inquired into the rights and wrongs of the matter: he had merely sailed in and rescued the office-boy. And Pugsy, though he had made no verbal comment on the affair, had shown in many ways that he was not ungrateful.

"Bully for you, Pugsy!" he cried. "You're a little sport. Here"—he produced a dollar-bill—"go out and get some milk for the poor brute. She's probably starving. Keep the change."

"Sure thing," assented Master Maloney. He strolled slowly out, while Billy Windsor, mounting a chair, proceeded to chirrup and snap his fingers in the effort to establish the foundations of an *entente cordiale* with the rescued cat.

By the time that Pugsy returned, carrying a five-cent bottle of milk, the animal had vacated the book-shelf, and was sitting on the table, washing her face. The milk having been poured into the lid of a tobacco-tin, in lieu of a saucer, she suspended her operations and adjourned for refreshments. Billy, business being business, turned again to Luella Granville Waterman, but Pugsy, having no immediate duties on hand, concentrated himself on the cat.

"Say!" he said.

"Well?"

"Dat kitty."

"What about her?"

"Pipe de leather collar she's wearin'."

Billy had noticed earlier in the proceedings that a narrow leather collar encircled the cat's neck. He had not paid any particular attention

to it. "What about it?" he said.

"Guess I know where dat kitty belongs. Dey all have dose collars. I guess she's one of Bat Jarvis's kitties. He's got a lot of dem for fair, and every one wit one of dem collars round deir neck."

"Who's Bat Jarvis? Do you mean the gang-leader?"

"Sure. He's a cousin of mine," said Master Maloney with pride.

"Is he?" said Billy. "Nice sort of fellow to have in the family. So you think that's his cat?"

"Sure. He's got twenty-t'ree of dem, and dey all has dose collars."

"Are you on speaking terms with the gentleman?"

"Huh?"

"Do you know Bat Jarvis to speak to?"

"Sure. He's me cousin."

"Well, tell him I've got the cat, and that if he wants it he'd better come round to my place. You know where I live?"

"Sure."

"Fancy you being a cousin of Bat's, Pugsy. Why did you never tell us? Are you going to join the gang some day?"

"Nope. Nothin' doin'. I'm goin' to be a cow-boy."

"Good for you. Well, you tell him when you see him. And now, my lad, out you get, because if I'm interrupted any more I shan't get through to-night."

"Sure," said Master Maloney, retiring.

"Oh, and Pugsy . . ."

"Huh?"

"Go out and get a good big basket. I shall want one to carry this animal home in."

"Sure," said Master Maloney.

CHAPTER III — AT "THE GARDENIA"

"It would ill beseem me, Comrade Jackson," said Psmith, thoughtfully sipping his coffee, "to run down the metropolis of a great and friendly nation, but candour compels me to state that New York is in some respects a singularly blighted town."

"What's the matter with it?" asked Mike.

"Too decorous, Comrade Jackson. I came over here principally, it is true, to be at your side, should you be in any way persecuted by scoundrels. But at the same time I confess that at the back of my mind there lurked a hope that stirring adventures might come my way. I had heard so much of the place. Report had it that an earnest seeker after amusement might have a tolerably spacious rag in this modern Byzantium. I thought that a few weeks here might restore that keen edge to my nervous system which the languor of the past term had in a measure blunted. I wished my visit to be a tonic rather than a sedative. I anticipated that on my return the cry would go round Cambridge, 'Psmith has been to New York. He is full of oats. For he on honey-dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise. He is hot stuff. Rah!' But what do we find?"

He paused, and lit a cigarette.

"What do we find?" he asked again.

"I don't know," said Mike. "What?"

"A very judicious query, Comrade Jackson. What, indeed? We find a town very like London. A quiet, self-respecting town, admirable to the apostle of social reform, but disappointing to one who, like myself, arrives with a brush and a little bucket of red paint, all eager for a treat. I have been here a week, and I have not seen a single citizen clubbed by a policeman. No negroes dance cake-walks in the street. No cow-boy has let off his revolver at random in Broadway. The cables flash the message across the ocean, 'Psmith is losing his illusions.'"

Mike had come to America with a team of the M.C.C. which was touring the cricket-playing section of the United States. Psmith had accompanied him in a private capacity. It was the end of their first year at Cambridge, and Mike, with a century against Oxford to his credit, had been one of the first to be invited to join the tour. Psmith, who had played cricket in a rather desultory way at the University, had not risen to these heights. He had merely taken the opportunity of Mike's visit to the other side to accompany him. Cambridge had proved pleasant to Psmith, but a trifle quiet. He had welcomed the chance of getting a change of scene.

So far the visit had failed to satisfy him. Mike, whose tastes in pleasure were simple, was delighted with everything. The cricket so far had been

rather of the picnic order, but it was very pleasant; and there was no limit to the hospitality with which the visitors were treated. It was this more than anything which had caused Psmith's grave disapproval of things American. He was not a member of the team, so that the advantages of the hospitality did not reach him. He had all the disadvantages. He saw far too little of Mike. When he wished to consult his confidential secretary and adviser on some aspect of Life, that invaluable official was generally absent at dinner with the rest of the team. To-night was one of the rare occasions when Mike could get away. Psmith was becoming bored. New York is a better city than London to be alone in, but it is never pleasant to be alone in any big city.

As they sat discussing New York's shortcomings over their coffee, a young man passed them, carrying a basket, and seated himself at the next table. He was a tall, loose-jointed young man, with unkempt hair.

A waiter made an ingratiating gesture towards the basket, but the young man stopped him. "Not on your life, sonny," he said. "This stays right here." He placed it carefully on the floor beside his chair, and proceeded to order dinner.

Psmith watched him thoughtfully.

"I have a suspicion, Comrade Jackson," he said, "that this will prove to be a somewhat stout fellow. If possible, we will engage him in conversation. I wonder what he's got in the basket. I must get my Sherlock Holmes system to work. What is the most likely thing for a man to have in a basket? You would reply, in your unthinking way, 'sandwiches.' Error. A man with a basketful of sandwiches does not need to dine at restaurants. We must try again."

The young man at the next table had ordered a jug of milk to be accompanied by a saucer. These having arrived, he proceeded to lift the basket on to his lap, pour the milk into the saucer, and remove the lid from the basket. Instantly, with a yell which made the young man's table the centre of interest to all the diners, a large grey cat shot up like a rocket, and darted across the room. Psmith watched with silent interest.

It is hard to astonish the waiters at a New York restaurant, but when the cat performed this feat there was a squeal of surprise all round the room. Waiters rushed to and fro, futile but energetic. The cat, having secured a strong strategic position on the top of a large oil-painting which hung on the far wall, was expressing loud disapproval of the efforts of one of the waiters to drive it from its post with a walking-stick. The young man, seeing these manoeuvres, uttered a wrathful shout, and rushed to the rescue.

"Comrade Jackson," said Psmith, rising, "we must be in this."

When they arrived on the scene of hostilities, the young man had just possessed himself of the walking-stick, and was deep in a complex argument with the head-waiter on the ethics of the matter. The head-

waiter, a stout impassive German, had taken his stand on a point of etiquette. "Id is," he said, "to bring gats into der grill-room vorbidden. No gentleman would gats into der grill-room bring. Der gentleman—"

The young man meanwhile was making enticing sounds, to which the cat was maintaining an attitude of reserved hostility. He turned furiously on the head-waiter.

"For goodness' sake," he cried, "can't you see the poor brute's scared stiff? Why don't you clear your gang of German comedians away, and give her a chance to come down?"

"Der gentleman—" argued the head-waiter.

Psmith stepped forward and touched him on the arm.

"May I have a word with you in private?"

"Zo?"

Psmith drew him away.

"You don't know who that is?" he whispered, nodding towards the young man.

"No gentleman he is," asserted the head-waiter. "Der gentleman would not der gat into—"

Psmith shook his head pityingly.

"These petty matters of etiquette are not for his Grace—but, hush, he wishes to preserve his incognito."

"Ingognito?"

"You understand. You are a man of the world, Comrade—may I call you Freddie? You understand, Comrade Freddie, that in a man in his Grace's position a few little eccentricities may be pardoned. You follow me, Frederick?"

The head-waiter's eye rested upon the young man with a new interest and respect.

"He is noble?" he inquired with awe.

"He is here strictly incognito, you understand," said Psmith warningly. The head-waiter nodded.

The young man meanwhile had broken down the cat's reserve, and was now standing with her in his arms, apparently anxious to fight all-comers in her defence. The head-waiter approached deferentially.

"Der gentleman," he said, indicating Psmith, who beamed in a friendly manner through his eye-glass, "haf everything exblained. All will now quite satisfactory be."

The young man looked inquiringly at Psmith, who winked encouragingly. The head-waiter bowed.

"Let me present Comrade Jackson," said Psmith, "the pet of our English Smart Set. I am Psmith, one of the Shropshire Psmiths. This is a great moment. Shall we be moving back? We were about to order a second instalment of coffee, to correct the effects of a fatiguing day. Perhaps you would care to join us?"

"Sure," said the alleged duke.