

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Jeeves in the Offing

P.G. Wodehouse

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Copyright

### *A Jeeves and Wooster novel*

Jeeves is on holiday in Herne Bay, and while he's away the world caves in on Bertie Wooster. For start, he's astonished to read in *The Times* of his engagement to the mercurial Bobbie Wickham. Then at Brinkley Court, his Aunt Dahlia's establishment, he finds his awful former head master in attendance ready to award the prizes at Market Snodsbury Grammar School. And finally the Brinkley butler turns out for reasons of his own to be Bertie's nemesis in disguise, the brain surgeon Sir Roderick Glossop.

With all occasions informing against him, Bertie has to hightail it to Herne Bay to liberate Jeeves from his shrimping net. And after that, the fun really starts.

**Pelham Grenville Wodehouse** (always known as ‘Plum’) wrote more than ninety novels and some three hundred short stories over 73 years. He is widely recognised as the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century writer of humour in the English language.

Wodehouse mixed the high culture of his classical education with the popular slang of the suburbs of both England and America, becoming a ‘cartoonist of words’. Drawing on the antics of a near-contemporary world, he placed his Drones, Earls, Ladies (including draconian aunts and eligible girls) and Valets, in a recently vanished society, whose reality is transformed by his remarkable imagination into something timeless and enduring.

Perhaps best known for the escapades of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, Wodehouse also created the world of Blandings Castle, home to Lord Emsworth and his cherished pig, the Empress of Blandings. His stories include gems concerning the irrepressible and disreputable Ukridge; Psmith, the elegant socialist; the ever-so-slightly-unscrupulous Fifth Earl of Ickenham, better known as Uncle Fred; and those related by Mr Mulliner, the charming raconteur of *The Angler’s Rest*, and the Oldest Member of the Golf Club.

Wodehouse collaborated with a variety of partners on straight plays and worked principally alongside Guy Bolton on providing the lyrics and script for musical comedies with such composers as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. He liked to say that the royalties for ‘Just My Bill’, which Jerome Kern incorporated into *Showboat*, were enough to keep him in tobacco and whisky for the rest of his life.

In 1936 he was awarded The Mark Twain Medal for ‘having made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the happiness of the world’. He was made a Doctor of Letters by Oxford University in 1939 and in 1975, aged 93, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. He died shortly afterwards, on Valentine’s Day.

To have created so many characters that require no introduction places him in a very select group of writers, lead by Shakespeare and Dickens.

**Fiction**

*Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*  
*The Adventures of Sally*  
*Bachelors Anonymous*  
*Barmy in Wonderland*  
*Big Money*  
*Bill the Conqueror*  
*Blandings Castle and Elsewhere*  
*Carry On, Jeeves*  
*The Clicking of Cuthbert*  
*Cocktail Time*  
*The Code of the Woosters*  
*The Coming of Bill*  
*Company for Henry*  
*A Damsel in Distress*  
*Do Butlers Burgle Banks*  
*Doctor Sally*  
*Eggs, Beans and Crumpets*  
*A Few Quick Ones*  
*French Leave*  
*Frozen Assets*  
*Full Moon*  
*Galahad at Blandings*  
*A Gentleman of Leisure*  
*The Girl in Blue*  
*The Girl on the Boat*  
*The Gold Bat*  
*The Head of Kay's*  
*The Heart of a Goof*  
*Heavy Weather*  
*Hot Water*  
*Ice in the Bedroom*  
*If I Were You*  
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*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*  
*Jill the Reckless*  
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*Louder and Funnier*  
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*Plum Pie*  
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*A Prefect's Uncle*  
*The Prince and Betty*  
*Psmith, Journalist*  
*Psmith in the City*  
*Quick Service*  
*Right Ho, Jeeves*  
*Ring for Jeeves*  
*Sam me Sudden*  
*Service with a Smile*  
*The Small Bachelor*  
*Something Fishy*  
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*Spring Fever*  
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*Sunset at Blandings*  
*The Swoop*  
*Tales of St Austin's*  
*Thank You, Jeeves*  
*Ukridge*  
*Uncle Dynamite*

*Uncle Fred in the Springtime*

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*Uneasy Money*

*Very Good, Jeeves*

*The White Feather*

*William Tell Told Again*

*Young Men in Spats*

### **Omnibuses**

*The World of Blandings*

*The World of Jeeves*

*The World of Mr Mulliner*

*The World of Psmith*

*The World of Ukridge*

*The World of Uncle Fred*

*Wodehouse Nuggets (edited by Richard Usborne)*

*The World of Wodehouse Clergy*

*The Hollywood Omnibus*

*Weekend Wodehouse*

### **Paperback Omnibuses**

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*The Aunts Omnibus*

*The Drones Omnibus*

*The Jeeves Omnibus 1*

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### **Letters**

*Yours, Plum*

# Jeeves in the Offing

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P.G. Wodehouse





# CHAPTER 1

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JEEVES PLACED THE sizzling eggs and b. on the breakfast table, and Reginald ('Kipper') Herring and I, licking the lips, squared our elbows and got down to it. A lifelong buddy of mine, this Herring, linked to me by what are called imperishable memories. Years ago, when striplings, he and I had done a stretch together at Malvern House, Bramley-on-Sea, the preparatory school conducted by that princeling of stinkers, Aubrey Upjohn M.A., and had frequently stood side by side in the Upjohn study awaiting the receipt of six of the juiciest from a cane of the type that biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder, as the fellow said. So we were, you might say, rather like a couple of old sweats who had fought shoulder to shoulder on Crispin's day, if I've got the name right.

The *plat du jour* having gone down the hatch, accompanied by some fluid ounces of strengthening coffee, I was about to reach for the marmalade, when I heard the telephone tootling out in the hall and I rose to attend to it.

'Bertram Wooster's residence,' I said, having connected with the instrument. 'Wooster in person at this end. Oh hullo,' I added, for the voice that boomed over the wire was that of Mrs Thomas Portarlington Travers of Brinkley Court, Market Snodsbury, near Droitwich – or, putting it another way, my good and deserving Aunt Dahlia. 'A very hearty pip-pip to you, old ancestor,' I said, well pleased, for she is a woman with whom it is always a privilege to chew the fat.

'And a rousing toodle-oo to you, you young blot on the landscape,' she replied cordially. 'I'm surprised to find you up as early as this. Or have you just got in from a night on the tiles?'

I hastened to rebut this slur.

'Certainly not. Nothing of that description whatsoever. I've been upping with the lark this last week, to keep Kipper Herring company. He's staying with me till he can get into his new flat. You remember old Kipper? I brought him down to Brinkley one summer. Chap with a cauliflower ear.'

'I know who you mean. Looks like Jack Dempsey.'

'That's right. Far more, indeed, than Jack Dempsey does. He's on the staff of the *Thursday Review*, a periodical of which you may or may not be a reader, and has to clock in at the office at daybreak. No doubt, when I apprise him of your call, he will send you his love, for I know he holds you in high esteem. The perfect hostess, he often describes you as. Well, it's nice to hear your voice again, old flesh and blood. How's everything down Market Snodsbury way?'

'Oh, we're jogging along. But I'm not speaking from Brinkley. I'm in London.'

'Till when?'

'Driving back this afternoon.'

'I'll give you lunch.'

'Sorry, can't manage it. I'm putting on the nosebag with Sir Roderick Glossop.'

This surprised me. The eminent brain specialist to whom she alluded was a man I would not have cared to lunch with myself, our relations having been on the stiff side since the night at Lady Wickham's place in Hertfordshire when, acting on the advice of my hostess's daughter Roberta, I had punctured his hot-water bottle with a darning needle in the small hours of the morning. Quite unintentional, of course. I had planned to puncture the h-w-b of his nephew Tuppy Glossop, with whom I had a feud on, and unknown to me they had changed rooms. Just one of those unfortunate misunderstandings.

'What on earth are you doing that for?'

‘Why shouldn’t I? He’s paying.’

~~I saw her point – a penny saved is a penny earned and all that sort of thing –~~ but I continued surprised. It amazed me that Aunt Dahlia, presumably a free agent, should have selected this very formidable loony-doctor to chew the mid-day chop with. However, one of the first lessons life teaches us is that aunts will be aunts, so I merely shrugged a couple of shoulders.

‘Well, it’s up to you, of course, but it seems a rash act. Did you come to London just to revel with Glossop?’

‘No, I’m here to collect my new butler and take him home with me.’

‘New butler? What’s become of Seppings?’

‘He’s gone.’

I clicked the tongue. I was very fond of the major-domo in question, having enjoyed many a port in his pantry, and this news saddened me.

‘No, really?’ I said. ‘Too bad. I thought he looked a little frail when I last saw him. Well, that’s how it goes. All flesh is grass, I often say.’

‘To Bognor Regis, for his holiday.’

I unclicked the tongue.

‘Oh, I see. That puts a different complexion on the matter. Odd how all these pillars of the home seem to be dashing away on toots these days. It’s like what Jeeves was telling me about the great racial movements of the middle ages. Jeeves starts his holiday this morning. He’s off to Herne Bay for the shrimping, and I’m feeling like that bird in the poem who lost his pet gazelle or whatever the animal was. I don’t know what I’m going to do without him.’

‘I’ll tell you what you’re going to do. Have you a clean shirt?’

‘Several.’

‘And a toothbrush?’

‘Two, both of the finest quality.’

‘Then pack them. You’re coming to Brinkley tomorrow.’

The gloom which always envelops Bertram Wooster like a fog when Jeeves is about to take his annual vacation lightened perceptibly. There are few things I find more agreeable than a sojourn at Aunt Dahlia’s rural lair. Picturesque scenery, gravel soil, main drainage, company’s own water and above all, the superb French cheffing of her French chef Anatole, God’s gift to the gastric juices. I’m on full hand, as you might put it.

‘What an admirable suggestion,’ I said. ‘You solve all my problems and bring the blue bird out of the hat. Rely on me. You will observe me bowling up in the Wooster sports model tomorrow afternoon with my hair in a braid and a song on my lips. My presence will, I feel sure, stimulate Anatole to new heights of endeavour. Got anybody else staying at the old snake pit?’

‘Five inmates in all.’

‘Five?’ I resumed my tongue-clicking. ‘Golly! Uncle Tom must be frothing at the mouth a bit,’ I said, for I knew the old buster’s distaste for guests in the home. Even a single weekender is sometimes enough to make him drain the bitter cup.

‘Tom’s not there. He’s gone to Harrogate with Cream.’

‘You mean lumbago.’

‘I don’t mean lumbago. I mean Cream. Homer Cream. Big American tycoon, who is visiting the West Coast shores. He suffers from ulcers, and his medicine man has ordered him to take the waters at Harrogate. Tom has gone with him to hold his hand and listen to him for an evening while he tells him how filthy the stuff tastes.’

‘Antagonistic.’

‘What?’

‘I mean altruistic. You are probably not familiar with the word, but it’s one I’ve heard Jeeves use. It’s what you say of a fellow who gives selfless service, not counting the cost.’

‘Selfless service, my foot! Tom’s in the middle of a very important business deal with Cream. If it goes through, he’ll make a packet free of income tax. So he’s sucking up to him like a Hollywood Yes-man.’

I gave an intelligent nod, though this of course was wasted on her because she couldn’t see me. She could readily understand my uncle-by-marriage’s mental processes. T. Portarlington Travers is a man who has accumulated the pieces of eight in sackfuls, but he is always more than willing to shove a brick extra away behind the brick in the fireplace, feeling – and rightly – that every little bit added to what you’ve got makes just a little bit more. And if there’s one thing that’s right up his street, it is not paying income tax. He grudges every penny the Government nicks him for.

‘That is why, when kissing me goodbye, he urged me with tears in his eyes to lush Mrs Cream and her son Willie up and treat them like royalty. So they’re at Brinkley, dug into the woodwork.’

‘Willie, did you say?’

‘Short for Wilbert.’

I mused. Willie Cream. The name seemed familiar somehow. I seemed to have heard it or seen it in the papers somewhere. But it eluded me.

‘Adela Cream writes mystery stories. Are you a fan of hers? No? Well, start boning up on them as soon as you directly you arrive, because every little helps. I’ve brought a complete set. They’re very good.’

‘I shall be delighted to run an eye over her material,’ I said, for I am what they call an a-something of novels of suspense. Aficionado, would that be it? ‘I can always do with another corpse or two. We have established, then, that among the inmates are this Mrs Cream and her son Wilbert. Who are the other three?’

‘Well, there’s Lady Wickham’s daughter Roberta.’

I started violently, as if some unseen hand had goosed me.

‘What! Bobbie Wickham? Oh, my gosh!’

‘Why the agitation? Do you know her?’

‘You bet I know her.’

‘I begin to see. Is she one of the gaggle of girls you’ve been engaged to?’

‘Not actually, no. We were never engaged. But that was merely because she wouldn’t meet me half way.’

‘Turned you down, did she?’

‘Yes, thank goodness.’

‘Why thank goodness? She’s a one-girl beauty chorus.’

‘She doesn’t try the eyes, I agree.’

‘A pippin, if ever there was one.’

‘Very true, but is being a pippin everything? What price the soul?’

‘Isn’t her soul like mother makes?’

‘Far from it. Much below par. What I could tell you . . . But no, let it go. Painful subj.’

I had been about to mention fifty-seven or so of the reasons why the prudent operator, if he valued his peace of mind, deemed it best to stay well away from the red-headed menace under advisement, but realized that at a moment when I was wanting to get back to the marmalade it would occupy too much time. It will be enough to say that I had long since come out of the ether and was fully cognisant

of the fact that in declining to fall in with my suggestion that we should start rounding up clergymen and bridesmaids, the beasel had rendered me a signal service, and I'll tell you why.

Aunt Dahlia, describing this young blister as a one-girl beauty chorus, had called her shots perfectly correctly. Her outer crust was indeed of a nature to cause those beholding it to rock back on their heels with a startled whistle. But while equipped with eyes like twin stars, hair ruddier than the cherry oomph, *espièglerie* and all the fixings, B. Wickham had also the disposition and general outlook of a life of a ticking bomb. In her society you always had the uneasy feeling that something was likely to go off at any moment with a pop. You never knew what she was going to do next or into what murky depths of soup she would carelessly plunge you.

'Miss Wickham, sir,' Jeeves had once said to me warningly at the time when the fever was at its height, 'lacks seriousness. She is volatile and frivolous. I would always hesitate to recommend as a life partner a young lady with quite such a vivid shade of red hair.'

His judgment was sound. I have already mentioned how with her subtle wiles this girl had induced me to sneak into Sir Roderick Glossop's sleeping apartment and apply the darning needle to his hot water bottle, and that was comparatively mild going for her. In a word, Roberta, daughter of the late Sir Cuthbert and Lady Wickham of Skeldings Hall, Herts, was pure dynamite and better kept at a distance by all those who aimed at leading the peaceful life. The prospect of being immured with her in the same house, with all the facilities a country house affords an enterprising girl for landing her nearest and dearest in the mulligatawny, made me singularly dubious about the shape of things to come.

And I was tottering under this blow when the old relative administered another, and it was a haymaker.

'And there's Aubrey Upjohn and his stepdaughter Phyllis Mills,' she said. 'That's the lot. What's the matter with you? Got asthma?'

I took her to be alluding to the sharp gasp which had escaped my lips, and I must confess that it had come out not unlike the last words of a dying duck. But I felt perfectly justified in gasping. A weak man would have howled like a banshee. There floated into my mind something Kipper Herring had once said to me. 'You know, Bertie,' he had said, in philosophical mood, 'we have much to be thankful for in this life of ours, you and I. However rough the going, there is one sustaining thought which we can hold. The storm clouds may lower and the horizon grow dark, we may get a nail in our shoe and be caught in the rain without an umbrella, we may come down to breakfast and find that someone else has taken the brown egg, but at least we have the consolation of knowing that we shall never see Aubrey Gawd-help-us Upjohn again. Always remember this in times of despondency,' he said, and I always had. And now here the boulder was, bobbing up right in my midst. Enough to make the stoutest-hearted go into his dying-duck routine.

'Aubrey Upjohn?' I quavered. 'You mean *my* Aubrey Upjohn?'

'That's the one. Soon after you made your escape from his chain gang he married Jane Mills, a friend of mine with a colossal amount of money. She died, leaving a daughter. I'm the daughter's godmother. Upjohn's retired now and going in for politics. The hot tip is that the boys in the back room are going to run him as the Conservative candidate in the Market Snodsbury division at the next by-election. What a thrill it'll be for you, meeting him again. Or does the prospect scare you?'

'Certainly not. We Woosters are intrepid. But what on earth did you invite him to Brinkley for?'

'I didn't. I only wanted Phyllis, but he came along, too.'

'You should have bunged him out.'

'I hadn't the heart to.'

‘Weak, very weak.’

~~‘Besides, I needed him in my business. He’s going to present the prizes at Market Snodsbury Grammar School. We’ve been caught short as usual, and somebody has got to make a speech on ideas and the great world outside to those blasted boys, so he fits in nicely. I believe he’s a very fine speaker. His only trouble is that he’s stymied unless he has his speech with him and can read it. Call it referring to his notes. Phyllis told me that. She types the stuff for him.’~~

‘A thoroughly low trick,’ I said severely. ‘Even I, who have never soared above the Yeoman’s Wedding Song at a village concert, wouldn’t have the crust to face my public unless I’d taken the trouble to memorize the words, though actually with the Yeoman’s Wedding Song it is possible to get by quite comfortably by keeping singing “Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong, I hurry along”. In short,

I would have spoken further, but at this point, after urging me to put a sock in it, and giving me a kindly word of warning not to step on any banana skins, she rang off.

## CHAPTER 2

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I CAME AWAY from the telephone on what practically amounted to leaden feet. Here, I was feeling, was a nice bit of box fruit. Bobbie Wickham, with her tendency to stir things up and with each new day discovering some new way of staggering civilization, would by herself have been bad enough. Add Aubrey Upjohn, and the mixture became too rich. I don't know if Kipper, when I rejoined him, noticed that my brow was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, as I have heard Jeeves put it. Probably not, for he was tucking into toast and marmalade at the moment, but it was. As had happened so often in the past, I was conscious of an impending doom. Exactly what form this would take I was of course unable to say – it might be one thing or it might be another – but a voice seemed to whisper to me that somehow at some not distant date Bertram was slated to get it in the gizzard.

'That was Aunt Dahlia, Kipper,' I said.

'Bless her jolly old heart,' he responded. 'One of the very best, and you can quote me as saying so. I shall never forget those happy days at Brinkley, and shall be glad at any time that suits her to cadge another invitation. Is she up in London?'

'Till this afternoon.'

'We fill her to the brim with rich foods, of course?'

'No, she's got a lunch date. She's browsing with Sir Roderick Glossop, the loony-doctor. You don't know him, do you?'

'Only from hearing you speak of him. A tough egg, I gather.'

'One of the toughest.'

'He was the chap, wasn't he, who found the twenty-four cats in your bedroom?'

'Twenty-three,' I corrected. I like to get things right. 'They were not my cats. They had been deposited there by my cousins Claude and Eustace. But I found them difficult to explain. He's a rather bad listener. I hope I shan't find him at Brinkley, too.'

'Are you going to Brinkley?'

'Tomorrow afternoon.'

'You'll enjoy that.'

'Well, shall I? The point is a very moot one.'

'You're crazy. Think of Anatole. Those dinners of his! Is the name of the Peri who stood disconsolate at the gate of Eden familiar to you?'

'I've heard Jeeves mention her.'

'Well, that's how I feel when I remember Anatole's dinners. When I reflect that every night he's dishing them up and I'm not there, I come within a very little of breaking down. What gives you the idea that you won't enjoy yourself? Brinkley Court's an earthly Paradise.'

'In many respects, yes, but life there at the moment has its drawbacks. There's far too much of the where-every-prospect-pleases-and-only-man-is-vile stuff buzzing around for my taste. Who do you think is staying at the old dosshouse? Aubrey Upjohn.'

It was plain that I had shaken him. His eyes widened, and an astonished piece of toast fell from his grasp.

'Old Upjohn? You're kidding.'

'No, he's there. Himself, not a picture. And it seems only yesterday that you were buoying me up by telling me I'd never have to see him again. The storm clouds may lower, you said, if you recollect . . .'

‘But how does he come to be at Brinkley?’

‘Precisely what I asked the aged relative, and she had an explanation that seems to cover the fact. Apparently after we took our eye off him he married a friend of hers, one Jane Mills, and acquired a stepdaughter, Phyllis Mills, whose godmother Aunt Dahlia is. The ancestor invited the Mills girl to Brinkley, and Upjohn came along for the ride.’

‘I see. I don’t wonder you’re trembling like a leaf.’

‘Not like a leaf, exactly, but . . . yes, I think you might describe me as trembling. One remembers that fishy eye of his.’

‘And the wide, bare upper lip. It won’t be pleasant having to gaze at those across the dinner table. Still, you’ll like Phyllis.’

‘Do you know her?’

‘We met out in Switzerland last Christmas. Slap her on the back, will you, and give her my regards. Nice girl, though goofy. She never told me she was related to Upjohn.’

‘She would naturally keep a thing like that dark.’

‘Yes, one sees that. Just as one would have tried to keep it dark if one had been mixed up in any way with Palmer the poisoner. What ghastly garbage that was he used to fling at us when we were serving our sentence at Malvern House. Remember the sausages on Sunday? And the boiled mutton with caper sauce?’

‘And the margarine. Recalling this last, it’s going to be a strain having to sit and watch him getting outside pounds of best country butter. Oh, Jeeves,’ I said, as he shimmered in to clear the table, ‘you never went to a preparatory school on the south coast of England, did you?’

‘No, sir, I was privately educated.’

‘Ah, then you wouldn’t understand. Mr Herring and I were discussing our former prep-school beau, Aubrey Upjohn, M.A. By the way, Kipper, Aunt Dahlia was telling me something about him which I never knew before and which ought to expose him to the odium of all thinking men. You remember those powerful end-of-term addresses he used to make to us? Well, he couldn’t have made them if he hadn’t had the stuff all typed out in his grasp, so that he could read it. Without his notes, as he called them, he’s a spent force. Revolting, that, Jeeves, don’t you think?’

‘Many orators are, I believe, similarly handicapped, sir.’

‘Too tolerant, Jeeves, far too tolerant. You must guard against this lax outlook. However, the reason I mention Upjohn to you is that he has come back into my life, or will be so coming in about two ticks. He’s staying at Brinkley, and I shall be going there tomorrow. That was Aunt Dahlia on the phone just now, and she demands my presence. Will you pack a few necessaries in a suitcase or so?’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘When are you leaving on your Herne Bay jaunt?’

‘I was thinking of taking a train this morning, sir, but if you would prefer that I remained till tomorrow –’

‘No, no, perfectly all right. Start as soon as you like. What’s the joke?’ I asked, as the door closed behind him, for I observed that Kipper was chuckling softly. Not an easy thing to do, of course, when your mouth’s full of toast and marmalade, but he was doing it.

‘I was thinking of Upjohn,’ he said.

I was amazed. It seemed incredible to me that anyone who had done time at Malvern House, Bramley-on-Sea, could chuckle, softly or otherwise, when letting the mind dwell on that outstanding menace. It was like laughing lightly while contemplating one of those horrors from outer space which are so much with us at the moment on the motion-picture screen.

'I envy you, Bertie,' he went on, continuing to chuckle. 'You have a wonderful treat in store. You are going to be present at the breakfast table when Upjohn opens his copy of this week's *Thursday Review* and starts to skim through the pages devoted to comments on current literature. I should explain that among the books that recently arrived at the office was a slim volume from his pen dealing with the Preparatory School and giving it an enthusiastic build-up. The formative years which we spent there, he said, were the happiest of our life.'

'Gadzooks!'

'He little knew that his brain child would be given to one of the old lags of Malvern House in my review. I'll tell you something, Bertie, that every young man ought to know. Never be a stinker because if you are, though you may flourish for a time like a green bay tree, sooner or later retribution will overtake you. I need scarcely tell you that I ripped the stuffing out of the beastly little brochure. The thought of those sausages on Sunday filled me with the righteous fury of a Juvenal.'

'Of a who?'

'Nobody you know. Before your time. I seemed inspired. Normally, I suppose, a book like that would get me a line and a half in the Other Recent Publications column, but I gave it six hundred words of impassioned prose. How extraordinarily fortunate you are to be in a position to watch his face as he reads them.'

'How do you know he'll read them?'

'He's a subscriber. There was a letter from him on the correspondence page a week or two ago, in which he specifically stated that he had been one for years.'

'Did you sign the thing?'

'No. Ye Ed is not keen on underlings advertising their names.'

'And it was really hot stuff?'

'Red hot. So eye him closely at the breakfast table. Mark his reaction. I confidently expect the blue of shame and remorse to mantle his cheek.'

'The only catch is that I don't come down to breakfast when I'm at Brinkley. Still, I suppose I could make a special effort.'

'Do so. You will find it well worth while,' said Kipper and shortly afterwards popped off to resume the earning of the weekly envelope.

He had been gone about twenty minutes when Jeeves came in, bowler hat in hand, to say goodbye. In a solemn moment, taxing our self-control to the utmost. However, we both kept the upper lip stiff, and after we had kidded back and forth for awhile he started to withdraw. He had reached the door when it suddenly occurred to me that he might have inside information about this Wilbert Cream of whom Aunt Dahlia had spoken. I have generally found that he knows everything about everyone.

'Oh, Jeeves,' I said. 'Half a jiffy.'

'Sir?'

'Something I want to ask you. It seems that among my fellow-guests at Brinkley will be a Mr Homer Cream, wife of an American big butter and egg man, and her son Wilbert, commonly known as Willie, and the name Willie Cream seemed somehow to touch a chord. Rightly or wrongly I associate it with trips we have taken to New York, but in what connection I haven't the vaguest. Does it ring any bell with you?'

'Why yes, sir. References to the gentleman are frequent in the tabloid newspapers of New York, notably in the column conducted by Mr Walter Winchell. He is generally alluded to under the sobriquet of Broadway Willie.'

'Of course! It all comes back to me. He's what they call a playboy.'



‘Precisely, sir. Notorious for his escapades.’

‘Yes, I’ve got him placed now. He’s the fellow who likes to let off stink bombs in night club which rather falls under the head of carrying coals to Newcastle, and seldom cashes a cheque at his bank without producing a gat and saying, “This is a stick-up.”’

‘And . . . No, sir, I regret that it has for the moment escaped my memory.’

‘What has?’

‘Some other little something, sir, that I was told regarding Mr Cream. Should I recall it, I will communicate with you.’

‘Yes, do. One wants the complete picture. Oh, gosh!’

‘Sir?’

‘Nothing, Jeeves. Just a thought has floated into my mind. All right, push off, or you’ll miss your train. Good luck to your shrimping net.’

I’ll tell you what the thought was that had floated. I have already indicated my qualms at the prospect of being cooped up in the same house with Bobbie Wickham and Aubrey Upjohn, for who could tell what the harvest might be? If in addition to these two heavies I was also to be cheek by jowl with a New York playboy apparently afflicted with bats in the belfry, it began to look as if this visit would prove too much for Bertram’s frail strength, and for an instant I toyed with the idea of sending a telegram of regret and oiling out.

Then I remembered Anatole’s cooking and was strong again. Nobody who has once tasted them would wantonly deprive himself of that wizard’s smoked offerings. Whatever spiritual agonies might be about to undergo at Brinkley Court, Market Snodsbury, near Droitwich, residence the butler would at least put me several *Suprêmes de fois gras au champagne* and *Mignonettes de Poulet Peppercorn* ahead of the game. Nevertheless, it would be paltering with the truth to say that I was at my ease as I thought of what lay before me in darkest Worcestershire, and the hand that lit the after-breakfast gasper shook quite a bit.

At this moment of nervous tension the telephone suddenly gave tongue again, causing me to skitter like the high hills, as if the Last Trump had sounded. I went to the instrument all of a twitter.

Some species of butler appeared to be at the other end.

‘Mr Wooster?’

‘On the spot.’

‘Good morning, sir. Her ladyship wishes to speak to you. Lady Wickham, sir. Here is Mr Wooster, m’lady.’

And Bobbie’s mother came on the air.

I should have mentioned, by the way, that during the above exchange of ideas with the butler I had been aware of a distant sound of sobbing, like background music, and it now became apparent that it was from the larynx of the relict of the late Sir Cuthbert that it was proceeding. There was a short intermission before she got the vocal cords working, and while I was waiting for her to start the dialogue I found myself wrestling with two problems that presented themselves – the first, What on earth is this woman ringing me up for?, the second, Having got the number, why does she sob?

It was Problem A that puzzled me particularly, for ever since that hot-water-bottle episode my relations with this parent of Bobbie’s had been on the strained side. It was, indeed, an open secret that my standing with her was practically that of a rat of the underworld. I had had this from Bobbie whose impersonation of her mother discussing me with sympathetic cronies had been exceptionally vivid, and I must confess that I wasn’t altogether surprised. No hostess, I mean to say, extending her hospitality to a friend of her daughter’s, likes to have the young visitor going about the place

puncturing people's water bottles and leaving at three in the morning without stopping to say goodbye. Yes, I could see her side of the thing all right, and I found it extraordinary that she should be seeking me out on the telephone in this fashion. Feeling as she did so allergic to Bertram, I wouldn't have thought she'd have phoned me with a ten-foot pole.

However, there beyond a question she was.

'Mr Wooster?'

'Oh, hullo, Lady Wickham.'

'Are you there?'

I put her straight on this point, and she took time out to sob again. She then spoke in a hoarse, throaty voice, like Tallulah Bankhead after swallowing a fish bone the wrong way.

'Is this awful news true?'

'Eh?'

'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!'

'I don't quite follow.'

'In this morning's *Times*.'

I'm pretty shrewd, and it seemed to me, reading between the lines, that there must have been something in the issue of *The Times* published that morning that for some reason had upset her, though why she should have chosen me to tell her troubles to was a mystery not easy to fathom. I was about to institute enquiries in the hope of spearheading a solution, when in addition to sobbing she started laughing in a hyaena-esque manner, making it clear to my trained ear that she was having hysterics. And before I could speak there was a dull thud suggestive of some solid body falling to earth, I knew not when and where, and when the dialogue was resumed, I found that the butler had put himself on as an understudy.

'Mr Wooster?'

'Still here.'

'I regret to say that her ladyship has fainted.'

'It was she I heard going bump?'

'Precisely, sir. Thank you very much, sir. Goodbye.'

He replaced the receiver and went about his domestic duties, these no doubt including the loosening of the stricken woman's corsets and burning feathers under her nose, leaving me to chew on the situation without further bulletins from the front.

It seemed to me that the thing to do here was to get hold of *The Times* and see what it had to offer in the way of enlightenment. It's a paper I don't often look at, preferring for breakfast reading the *Mirror* and the *Mail*, but Jeeves takes it in and I have occasionally borrowed his copy with a view to having a shot at the crossword puzzle. It struck me as a possibility that he might have left today's issue in the kitchen, and so it proved. I came back with it, lowered myself into a chair, lit another cigarette and proceeded to cast an eye on its contents.

At a cursory glance what might be called swoon material appeared to be totally absent from its columns. The Duchess of something had been opening a bazaar at Wimbledon in aid of a deserving charity, there was an article on salmon fishing on the Wye, and a Cabinet Minister had made a speech about conditions in the cotton industry, but I could see nothing in these items to induce a loss of consciousness. Nor did it seem probable that a woman would have passed out cold on reading that Herbert Robinson (26) of Grove Road, Ponder's End, had been jugged for stealing a pair of green and yellow checked trousers. I turned to the cricket news. Had some friend of hers failed to score in one of yesterday's county matches owing to a doubtful l.b.w. decision?

It was just after I had run the eye down the Births and Marriages that I happened to look at the

Engagements, and a moment later I was shooting out of my chair as if a spike had come through my cushioned seat and penetrated the fleshy parts.

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‘Jeeves!’ I yelled, and then remembered that he had long since gone with the wind. A bitter thought for if ever there was an occasion when his advice and counsel were of the essence, this occasion was that occasion. The best I could do, tackling it solo, was to utter a hollow gasp and bury the face in the hands. And though I seem to hear my public tut-tutting in disapproval of such neurotic behaviour, I think the verdict of history will be that the paragraph on which my gaze had rested was more than enough excuse a spot of face-burying.

It ran as follows:

#### FORTHCOMING MARRIAGES

The engagement is announced between Bertram Wilberforce Wooster of Berkeley Mansions, W. and Roberta, daughter of the late Sir Cuthbert Wickham and Lady Wickham of Skeldings Hall, Herts

## CHAPTER 3

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WELL, AS I was saying, I had several times when under the influence of her oomph taken up with Roberta Wickham the idea of such a merger, but – and here is the point I would stress – I could have sworn that on each occasion she had declined to co-operate, and that in a manner which left no room for doubt regarding her views. I mean to say, when a girl, offered a good man's heart, laughs like a bursting paper bag and tells him not to be a silly ass, the good man is entitled, I think, to assume that the whole thing is off. In the light of this announcement in *The Times* I could only suppose that on one of these occasions, unnoticed by me possibly because my attention had wandered, she must have drooped her eyes and come through with a murmured 'Right ho.' Though when this could have happened, I hadn't the foggiest.

It was, accordingly, as you will readily imagine, a Bertram Wooster with dark circles under his eyes and a brain threatening to come apart at the seams who braked the sports model on the following afternoon at the front door of Brinkley Court – a Bertram, in a word, who was asking himself what the dickens all this was about. Nonplussed more or less sums it up. It seemed to me that my first move must be to get hold of my fiancée and see if she had anything to contribute in the way of clarifying the situation.

As is generally the case at country houses on a fine day, there seemed to be nobody around. In due season the gang would assemble for tea on the lawn, but at the moment I could spot no friendly natives to tell me where I might find Bobbie. I proceeded, therefore, to roam hither and thither about the grounds and messuages in the hope of locating her, wishing that I had a couple of bloodhounds to aid me in my task, for the Travers demesne is a spacious one and there was a considerable amount of sunshine above, though none, I need scarcely mention, in my heart.

And I was tooling along a mossy path with the brow a bit wet with honest sweat, when there came to my ears the unmistakable sound of somebody reading poetry to someone, and the next moment I found myself confronting a mixed twosome who had dropped anchor beneath a shady tree in what was known as a leafy glade.

They had scarcely swum into my ken when the welkin started ringing like billy-o. This was due to the barking of a small dachshund, who now advanced on me with the apparent intention of seeing the colour of my insides. Milder counsels, however, prevailed, and on arriving at journey's end he merely rose like a rocket and licked me on the chin, seeming to convey the impression that in Bertram Wooster he had found just what the doctor ordered. I have noticed before in dogs this tendency to form a beautiful friendship immediately on getting within sniffing distance of me. Something to do, no doubt, with the characteristic Wooster smell, which for some reason seems to speak to their deep feelings. I tickled him behind the right ear and scratched the base of his spine for a moment or two: then, the civilities concluded, switched my attention to the poetry group.

It was the male half of the sketch who had been doing the reading, a willowy bird of about the same tonnage and general aspect of David Niven with ginger hair and a small moustache. As he was unquestionably not Aubrey Upjohn, I assumed that this must be Willie Cream, and it surprised me a bit to find him dishing out verse. One would have expected a New York playboy, widely publicized as one of the lads, to confine himself to prose, and dirty prose, at that. But no doubt these playboys have their softer moments.

His companion was a well-stacked young featherweight, who could be none other than the Phyllis

Mills of whom Kipper had spoken. Nice but goofy, Kipper had said, and a glance told me that he was right. One learns, as one goes through life, to spot goofiness in the other sex with an unerring eye, and this exhibit had a sort of mild, Soul's Awakening kind of expression which made it abundantly clear that, while not a super-goof like some of the female goofs I'd met, she was quite goofy enough to be going on with. Her whole aspect was that of a girl who at the drop of a hat would start talking baby talk.

This she now proceeded to do, asking me if I didn't think that Poppet, the dachshund, was a sweet little doggie. I assented rather austerely, for I prefer the shorter form more generally used, and she said she supposed I was Mrs Travers's nephew Bertie Wooster, which, as we knew, was substantially the case.

'I heard you were expected today. I'm Phyllis Mills,' she said, and I said I had divined as much and that Kipper had told me to slap her on the back and give her his best, and she said, 'Oh, Regg Herring? He's a sweetie-pie, isn't he?' and I agreed that Kipper was one of the sweetie-pies and not the worst of them, and she said, 'Yes, he's a lambkin.'

This duologue had, of course, left Wilbert Cream a bit out of it, just painted on the backdrop as you might say, and for some moments, knitting his brow, plucking at his moustache, shuffling the feet and allowing the limbs to twitch, he had been giving abundant evidence that in his opinion there was a crowd and that what the leafy glade needed to make it all that a leafy glade should be was a complete absence of Woosters. Taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, he said:

'Are you looking for someone?'

I replied that I was looking for Bobbie Wickham.

'I'd go on looking, if I were you. Bound to find her somewhere.'

'Bobbie?' said Phyllis Mills. 'She's down at the lake, fishing.'

'Then what you do,' said Wilbert Cream, brightening, 'is follow this path, bend right, sharp left, bend right again and there you are. You can't miss. Start at once, is my advice.'

I must say I felt that, related as I was by ties of blood, in a manner of speaking, to this leafy glade, was a bit thick being practically bounced from it by a mere visitor, but Aunt Dahlia had made it clear that the Cream family must not be thwarted or put upon in any way, so I did as he suggested, picking up the feet without anything in the nature of back chat. As I receded, I could hear in my rear the poet breaking out again.

The lake at Brinkley calls itself a lake, but when all the returns are in it's really more a sort of young pond. Big enough to mess about on in a punt, though, and for the use of those wishing to punt a boathouse has been provided with a small pier or landing stage attached to it. On this, rod in hand, Bobbie was seated, and it was with me the work of an instant to race up and breathe down the back of her neck.

'Hey!' I said.

'Hey to you with knobs on,' she replied. 'Oh, hullo, Bertie. You here?'

'You never spoke a truer word. If you can spare me a moment of your valuable time, young Robert –'

'Half a second, I think I've got a bite. No, false alarm. What were you saying?'

'I was saying –'

'Oh, by the way, I heard from Mother this morning.'

'I heard from her yesterday morning.'

'I was kind of expecting you would. You saw that thing in *The Times*?'

'With the naked eye.'

‘Puzzled you for a moment, perhaps?’

‘For several moments.’

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‘Well, I’ll tell you all about that. The idea came to me in a flash.’

‘You mean it was you who shoved that communiqué in the journal?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’ I said, getting right down to it in my direct way.

I thought I had her there, but no.

‘I was paving the way for Reggie.’

I passed a hand over my fevered brow.

‘Something seems to have gone wrong with my usually keen hearing,’ I said. ‘It sounds just as you were saying “I was paving the way for Reggie.”’

‘I was. I was making his path straight. Softening up Mother on his behalf.’

I passed another hand over my f. b.

‘Now you seem to be saying “Softening up Mother on his behalf.”’

‘That’s what I am saying. It’s perfectly simple. I’ll put it in words of one syllable for you. I love Reggie. Reggie loves me.’

‘Reggie’, of course, is two syllables, but I let it go.

‘Reggie who?’

‘Reggie Herring.’

I was amazed.

‘You mean old Kipper?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call him Kipper.’

‘I always have. Dash it,’ I said with some warmth, ‘if a fellow shows up at a private school on the south coast of England with a name like Herring, what else do you expect his playmates to call him? But how do you mean you love him and he loves you? You’ve never met him.’

‘Of course I’ve met him. We were in the same hotel in Switzerland last Christmas. I taught him to ski,’ she said, a dreamy look coming into her twin starlikes. ‘I shall never forget the day I helped him unscramble himself after he had taken a toss on the beginners’ slope. He had both legs wrapped round his neck. I think that is when love dawned. My heart melted as I sorted him out.’

‘You didn’t laugh?’

‘Of course I didn’t laugh. I was all sympathy and understanding.’

For the first time the thing began to seem plausible to me. Bobbie is a fun-loving girl, and the memory of her reaction when in the garden at Skeldings I had once stepped on the teeth of a rake and had the handle jump up and hit me on the tip of the nose was still laid away among my souvenirs. She had been convulsed with mirth. If, then, she had refrained from guffawing when confronted with the spectacle of Reginald Herring with both legs wrapped round his neck, her emotions must have been very deeply involved.

‘Well, all right,’ I said. ‘I accept your statement that you and Kipper are that way. But why, then, being so, did you blazen it forth to the world, if blazoning forth is the expression I want, that you were engaged to me?’

‘I told you. It was to soften Mother up.’

‘Which sounded to me like delirium straight from the sick bed.’

‘You don’t get the subtle strategy?’

‘Not by several parasangs.’

‘Well, you know how you stand with Mother.’

'Our relations are a bit distant.'

~~'She shudders at the mention of your name. So I thought if she thought I was going to marry you~~ and then found I wasn't, she'd be so thankful for the merciful escape I'd had that she'd be ready to accept anyone as a son-in-law, even someone like Reggie, who, though a wonder man, hasn't got his name in Debrett and isn't any too hot financially. Mother's idea of a mate for me has always been a well-to-do millionaire or a Duke with a large private income. Now do you follow?'

'Oh yes, I follow all right. You've been doing what Jeeves does, studying the psychology of the individual. But do you think it'll work?'

'Bound to. Let's take a parallel case. Suppose your Aunt Dahlia read in the paper one morning that you were going to be shot at sunrise.'

'I couldn't be. I'm never up so early.'

'But suppose she did? She'd be pretty worked up about it, wouldn't she?'

'Extremely, one imagines, for she loves me dearly. I'm not saying her manner toward me doesn't verge at times on the brusque. In childhood days she would occasionally clump me on the side of the head, and since I have grown to riper years she has more than once begged me to tie a brick around my neck and go and drown myself in the pond in the kitchen garden. Nevertheless, she loves her Bertram and if she heard I was to be shot at sunrise, she would, as you say, be as sore as a gumboil. But why? What's that got to do with it?'

'Well, suppose she then found out it was all a mistake and it wasn't you but somebody else who was to face the firing squad. That would make her happy, wouldn't it?'

'One can picture her dancing all over the place on the tips of her toes.'

'Exactly. She'd be so all over you that nothing you did would be wrong in her eyes. Whatever you wanted to do would be all right with her. Go to it, she would say. And that's how Mother will feel when she learns that I'm not marrying you after all. She'll be so relieved.'

I agreed that the relief would, of course, be stupendous.

'But you'll be giving her the inside facts in a day or two?' I said, for I was anxious to have assurance on this point. A man with an Engagement notice in *The Times* hanging over him cannot but feel uneasy.

'Well, call it a week or two. No sense in rushing things.'

'You want me to sink in?'

'That's the idea.'

'And meanwhile what's the drill? Do I kiss you a good deal from time to time?'

'No, you don't.'

'Right ho. I just want to know where I stand.'

'An occasional passionate glance will be ample.'

'It shall be attended to. Well, I'm delighted about you and Kipper or, as you would prefer to say, Reggie. There's nobody I'd rather see you centre-aisle-ing with.'

'It's very sporting of you to take it like this.'

'Don't give it a thought.'

'I'm awfully fond of you, Bertie.'

'Me, too, of you.'

'But I can't marry everybody, can I?'

'I wouldn't even try. Well, now that we've got all that straight, I suppose I'd better be going and saying "Come aboard" to Aunt Dahlia.'

'What's the time?'

‘Close on five.’

‘I must run like a hare. I’m supposed to be presiding at the tea table.’

‘You? Why you?’

‘Your aunt’s not here. She found a telegram when she got back yesterday saying that her son Bonzo was sick of a fever at his school, and dashed off to be with him. She asked me to deputy-hostess for her till her return, but I shan’t be able to for the next few days. I’ve got to dash back to Mother. Ever since she saw that thing in *The Times*, she’s been wiring me every hour on the hour to come home for a round table conference. What’s a guffin?’

‘I don’t know. Why?’

‘That’s what she calls you in her latest ’gram. Quote. “Cannot understand how you can be contemplating marrying that guffin.” Close quote. I suppose it’s more or less the same as a gabble, which was how you figured in one of her earlier communications.’

‘That sounds promising.’

‘Yes, I think the thing’s in the bag. After you, Reggie will come to her like rare and refreshing fruit. She’ll lay down the red carpet for him.’

And with a brief ‘Whoopee!’ she shot off in the direction of the house at forty or so m.p.h. I followed more slowly, for she had given me much food for thought, and I was musing.

Strange, I was feeling, this strong pro-Kipper sentiment in the Wickham bosom. I mean, consider the facts. What with that *espièglerie* of hers, which was tops, she had been pretty extensively wooed one quarter and another for years, and no business had resulted, so that it was generally assumed that only something extra special in the way of suitors would meet her specifications and that whoever eventually got his nose under the wire would be a king among men and pretty warm stuff. And she had gone and signed up with Kipper Herring.

Mind you, I’m not saying a word against old Kipper. The salt of the earth. But nobody could have called him a knock-out in the way of looks. Having gone in a lot for boxing from his earliest years, he had the cauliflower ear of which I had spoken to Aunt Dahlia and in addition to this a nose which some hidden hand had knocked slightly out of the straight. He would, in short, have been an unsatisfactory entrant to have backed in a beauty contest, even if the only other competitors had been Boris Karloff, King Kong and Oofy Prosser of the Drones.

But then, of course, one had to remind oneself that looks aren’t everything. A cauliflower ear can hide a heart of gold, as in Kipper’s case it did, his being about as gold as they come. His brain, too, might have helped to do the trick. You can’t hold down an editorial post on an important London weekly paper without being fairly well fixed with the little grey cells, and girls admire that sort of thing. And one had to remember that most of the bimbos to whom Roberta Wickham had been giving the bird through the years had been of the huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ type, fellows who had more or less shot their bolt after saying ‘Eh, what?’ and slapping their leg with a hunting crop. Kipper might have come as a nice change.

Still, the whole thing provided, as I say, food for thought, and I was in what is called a reverie as I made my way to the house, a reverie so profound that no turf accountant would have given any but the shortest odds against my sooner or later bumping into something. And this, to cut a long story short, I did. It might have been a tree, a bush or a rustic seat. In actual fact it turned out to be Aubrey Upjohn. He came on him round a corner and rammed him squarely before I could put the brakes on. I clutched him round the neck and he clutched me about the middle, and for some moments we tottered to and fro linked in a close embrace. Then, the mists clearing from my eyes, I saw who it was that I had been treading the measure with.



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