



Jeeves in the Springtime

<https://americanliterature.com/author/p-g-wodehouse/short-story/jeeves-in-the-springtime>

by P. G. Wodehouse

(Originally published: 1921)

"Morning, Jeeves," I said.

"Good morning, sir," said Jeeves.

He put the good old cup of tea softly on the table by my bed, and I took a refreshing sip. Just right, as usual. Not too hot, not too sweet, not too weak, not too strong, not too much milk, and not a drop spilled in the saucer. A most amazing cove, Jeeves. So dashed competent in every respect. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I mean to say, take just one small instance. Every other valet I've ever had used to barge into my room in the morning while I was still asleep, causing much misery; but Jeeves seems to know when I'm awake by a sort of telepathy. He always floats in with the cup exactly two minutes after I come to life. Makes a deuce of a lot of difference to a fellow's day.

"How's the weather, Jeeves?"

"Exceptionally clement, sir."

"Anything in the papers?"

"Some slight friction threatening in the Balkans, sir. Otherwise, nothing."

"I say, Jeeves, a man I met at the club last night told me to put my shirt on Privateer for the two o'clock race this afternoon. How about it?"

"I should not advocate it, sir. The stable is not sanguine."

That was enough for me. Jeeves knows. How, I couldn't say, but he knows. There was a time when I would laugh lightly, and go ahead, and lose my little all against his advice, but not now.

"Talking of shirts," I said, "have those mauve ones I ordered arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir. I sent them back."

"Sent them back?"

"Yes, sir. They would not have become you."

Well, I must say I'd thought fairly highly of those shirtings, but I bowed to superior knowledge. Weak? I don't know. Most fellows, no doubt, are all for having their valets confine their activities to creasing trousers and what not without trying to run the home; but it's different with Jeeves. Right from the first day he came to me, I have looked on him as a sort of guide, philosopher, and friend.

"Mr. Little rang up on the telephone a few moments ago, sir. I informed him that you were not yet awake."

"Did he leave a message?"

"No, sir. He mentioned that he had a matter of importance to discuss with you, but confided no details."

"Oh, well, I expect I shall be seeing him at the club."

"No doubt, sir."

I wasn't what you might call in a fever of impatience. Bingo Little is a chap I was at school with, and we see a lot of each other still. He's the nephew of old Mortimer Little, who retired from business recently with a goodish pile. (You've probably heard of Little's Liniment--It Limbers Up the Legs.) Bingo biffs about London on a pretty comfortable allowance given him by his uncle, and leads on the whole a fairly unclouded life. It wasn't likely that anything which he described as a matter of importance would turn out to be really so frightfully important. I took it that he had discovered some new brand of cigarette which he wanted me to try, or something like that, and didn't spoil my breakfast by worrying.

After breakfast I lit a cigarette and went to the open window to inspect the day. It certainly was one of the best and brightest.

"Jeeves," I said.

"Sir?" said Jeeves. He had been clearing away the breakfast things, but at the sound of the young master's voice cheesed it courteously.

"You were absolutely right about the weather. It is a juicy morning."

"Decidedly, sir."

"Spring and all that."

"Yes, sir."

"In the spring, Jeeves, a livelier iris gleams upon the burnished dove."

"So I have been informed, sir."

"Right ho! Then bring me my whangee, my yellowest shoes, and the old green Homburg. I'm going into the Park to do pastoral dances."

I don't know if you know that sort of feeling you get on these days round about the end of April and the beginning of May, when the sky's a light blue, with cotton-wool clouds, and there's a bit of a breeze blowing from the west? Kind of uplifted feeling. Romantic, if you know what I mean. I'm not much of a ladies' man, but on this particular morning it seemed to me that what I really wanted was some charming girl to buzz up and ask me to save her from assassins or something. So that it was a bit of an anti-climax when I merely ran into young Bingo Little, looking perfectly foul in a crimson satin tie decorated with horseshoes.

"Hallo, Bertie," said Bingo.

"My God, man!" I gargled. "The cravat! The gent's neckwear! Why? For what reason?"

"Oh, the tie?" He blushed. "I--er--I was given it."

He seemed embarrassed, so I dropped the subject. We toddled along a bit, and sat down on a couple of chairs by the Serpentine.

"Jeeves tells me you want to talk to me about something," I said.

"Eh?" said Bingo, with a start. "Oh yes, yes. Yes."

I waited for him to unleash the topic of the day, but he didn't seem to want to get going. Conversation languished. He stared straight ahead of him in a glassy sort of manner.

"I say, Bertie," he said, after a pause of about an hour and a quarter.

"Hallo!"

"Do you like the name Mabel?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"You don't think there's a kind of music in the word, like the wind rustling gently through the tree-tops?"

"No."

He seemed disappointed for a moment; then cheered up.

"Of course, you wouldn't. You always were a fatheaded worm without any soul, weren't you?"

"Just as you say. Who is she? Tell me all."

For I realised now that poor old Bingo was going through it once again. Ever since I have known him--and we were at school together--he has been perpetually falling in love with someone, generally in the spring, which seems to act on him like magic. At school he had the finest collection of actresses' photographs of anyone of his time; and at Oxford his romantic nature was a byword.

"You'd better come along and meet her at lunch," he said, looking at his watch.

"A ripe suggestion," I said. "Where are you meeting her? At the Ritz?"

"Near the Ritz."

He was geographically accurate. About fifty yards east of the Ritz there is one of those blighted tea-and-bun shops you see dotted about all over London, and into this, if you'll believe me, young Bingo dived like a homing rabbit; and before I had time to say a word we were wedged in at a table, on the brink of a silent pool of coffee left there by an early luncher.

I'm bound to say I couldn't quite follow the development of the scenario. Bingo, while not absolutely rolling in the stuff, has always had a fair amount of the ready. Apart from what he got from his uncle, I knew that he had finished up the jumping season well on the right side of the ledger. Why, then, was he lunching the girl at this God-forsaken eatery? It couldn't be because he was hard up.

Just then the waitress arrived. Rather a pretty girl.

"Aren't we going to wait----?" I started to say to Bingo, thinking it somewhat thick that, in addition to asking a girl to lunch with him in a place like this, he should fling himself on the foodstuffs before she turned up, when I caught sight of his face, and stopped.

The man was goggling. His entire map was suffused with a rich blush. He looked like the Soul's Awakening done in pink.

"Hallo, Mabel!" he said, with a sort of gulp.

"Hallo!" said the girl.

"Mabel," said Bingo, "this is Bertie Wooster, a pal of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "Nice morning."

"Fine," I said.

"You see I'm wearing the tie," said Bingo.

"It suits you beautiful," said the girl.

Personally, if anyone had told me that a tie like that suited me, I should have risen and struck them on the mazzard, regardless of their age and sex; but poor old Bingo simply got all flustered with gratification, and smirked in the most gruesome manner.

"Well, what's it going to be to-day?" asked the girl, introducing the business touch into the conversation.

Bingo studied the menu devoutly.

"I'll have a cup of cocoa, cold veal and ham pie, slice of fruit cake, and a macaroon. Same for you, Bertie?"

I gazed at the man, revolted. That he could have been a pal of mine all these years and think me capable of insulting the old turn with this sort of stuff cut me to the quick.

"Or how about a bit of hot steak-pudding, with a sparkling limado to wash it down?" said Bingo.

You know, the way love can change a fellow is really frightful to contemplate. This chappie before me, who spoke in that absolutely careless way of macaroons and limado, was the man I had seen in happier days telling the head-waiter at Claridge's exactly how he wanted the chef to prepare the sole frite au gourmet aux champignons, and saying he would jolly well sling it back if it wasn't just right. Ghastly! Ghastly!

A roll and butter and a small coffee seemed the only things on the list that hadn't been specially prepared by the nastier-minded members of the Borgia family for people they had a particular grudge against, so I chose them, and Mabel hopped it.

"Well?" said Bingo rapturously.

I took it that he wanted my opinion of the female poisoner who had just left us.

"Very nice," I said.

He seemed dissatisfied.

"You don't think she's the most wonderful girl you ever saw?" he said wistfully.

"Oh, absolutely!" I said, to appease the blighter. "Where did you meet her?"

"At a subscription dance at Camberwell."

"What on earth were you doing at a subscription dance at Camberwell?"

"Your man Jeeves asked me if I would buy a couple of tickets. It was in aid of some charity or other."

"Jeeves? I didn't know he went in for that sort of thing."

"Well, I suppose he has to relax a bit every now and then. Anyway, he was there, swinging a dashed efficient shoe. I hadn't meant to go at first, but I turned up for a lark. Oh, Bertie, think what I might have missed!"

"What might you have missed?" I asked, the old lemon being slightly clouded.

"Mabel, you chump. If I hadn't gone I shouldn't have met Mabel."

"Oh, ah!"

At this point Bingo fell into a species of trance, and only came out of it to wrap himself round the pie and macaroon.

"Bertie," he said, "I want your advice."

"Carry on."

"At least, not your advice, because that wouldn't be much good to anybody. I mean, you're a pretty consummate old ass, aren't you? Not that I want to hurt your feelings, of course."

"No, no, I see that."

"What I wish you would do is to put the whole thing to that fellow Jeeves of yours, and see what he suggests. You've often told me that he has helped other pals of yours out of messes. From what you tell me, he's by way of being the brains of the family."

"He's never let me down yet."

"Then put my case to him."

"What case?"

"My problem."

"What problem?"

"Why, you poor fish, my uncle, of course. What do you think my uncle's going to say to all this? If I sprang it on him cold, he'd tie himself in knots on the hearthrug."

"One of these emotional Johnnies, eh?"

"Somehow or other his mind has got to be prepared to receive the news. But how?"

"Ah!"

"That's a lot of help, that 'ah!' You see, I'm pretty well dependent on the old boy. If he cut off my allowance, I should be very much in the soup. So you put the whole binge to Jeeves and see if he can't scare up a happy ending somehow. Tell him my future is in his hands, and that, if the wedding bells ring out, he can rely on me, even unto half my kingdom. Well, call it ten quid. Jeeves would exert himself with ten quid on the horizon, what?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

I wasn't in the least surprised at Bingo wanting to lug Jeeves into his private affairs like this. It was the first thing I would have thought of doing myself if I had been in any hole of any description. As I have frequently had occasion to observe, he is a bird of the ripest intellect, full of bright ideas. If anybody could fix things for poor old Bingo, he could.

I stated the case to him that night after dinner.

"Jeeves."

"Sir?"

"Are you busy just now?"

"No, sir."

"I mean, not doing anything in particular?"

"No, sir. It is my practice at this hour to read some improving book; but, if you desire my services, this can easily be postponed, or, indeed, abandoned altogether."

"Well, I want your advice. It's about Mr. Little."

"Young Mr. Little, sir, or the elder Mr. Little, his uncle, who lives in Pounceby Gardens?"

Jeeves seemed to know everything. Most amazing thing. I'd been pally with Bingo practically all my life, and yet I didn't remember ever having heard that his uncle lived anywhere in particular.

"How did you know he lived in Pounceby Gardens?" I said.

"I am on terms of some intimacy with the elder Mr. Little's cook, sir. In fact, there is an understanding."

I'm bound to say that this gave me a bit of a start. Somehow I'd never thought of Jeeves going in for that sort of thing.

"Do you mean you're engaged?"

"It may be said to amount to that, sir."

"Well, well!"

"She is a remarkably excellent cook, sir," said Jeeves, as though he felt called on to give some explanation. "What was it you wished to ask me about Mr. Little?"

I sprang the details on him.

"And that's how the matter stands, Jeeves," I said. "I think we ought to rally round a trifle and help poor old Bingo put the thing through. Tell me about old Mr. Little. What sort of a chap is he?"

"A somewhat curious character, sir. Since retiring from business he has become a great recluse, and now devotes himself almost entirely to the pleasures of the table."

"Greedy hog, you mean?"

"I would not, perhaps, take the liberty of describing him in precisely those terms, sir. He is what is usually called a gourmet. Very particular about what he eats, and for that reason sets a high value on Miss Watson's services."

"The cook?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it looks to me as though our best plan would be to shoot young Bingo in on him after dinner one night. Melting mood, I mean to say, and all that."

"The difficulty is, sir, that at the moment Mr. Little is on a diet, owing to an attack of gout."

"Things begin to look wobbly."

"No, sir, I fancy that the elder Mr. Little's misfortune may be turned to the younger Mr. Little's advantage. I was speaking only the other day to Mr. Little's valet, and he was telling me that it has become his principal duty to read to Mr. Little in the evenings. If I were in your place, sir, I should send young Mr. Little to read to his uncle."

"Nephew's devotion, you mean? Old man touched by kindly action, what?"

"Partly that, sir. But I would rely more on young Mr. Little's choice of literature."

"That's no good. Jolly old Bingo has a kind face, but when it comes to literature he stops at the Sporting Times."

"That difficulty may be overcome. I would be happy to select books for Mr. Little to read. Perhaps I might explain my idea further?"

"I can't say I quite grasp it yet."

"The method which I advocate is what, I believe, the advertisers call Direct Suggestion, sir, consisting as it does of driving an idea home by constant repetition. You may have had experience of the system?"

"You mean they keep on telling you that some soap or other is the best, and after a bit you come under the influence and charge round the corner and buy a cake?"

"Exactly, sir. The same method was the basis of all the most valuable propaganda during the recent war. I see no reason why it should not be adopted to bring about the desired result with regard to the subject's views on class distinctions. If young Mr. Little were to read day after day to his uncle a series of narratives in which marriage with young persons of an inferior social status was held up as both feasible and admirable, I fancy it would prepare the elder Mr. Little's mind for the reception of the information that his nephew wishes to marry a waitress in a tea-shop."

"Are there any books of that sort nowadays? The only ones I ever see mentioned in the papers are about married couples who find life grey, and can't stick each other at any price."

"Yes, sir, there are a great many, neglected by the reviewers but widely read. You have never encountered 'All for Love,' by Rosie M. Banks?"

"No."

"Nor 'A Red, Red Summer Rose,' by the same author?"

"No."

"I have an aunt, sir, who owns an almost complete set of Rosie M. Banks'. I could easily borrow as many volumes as young Mr. Little might require. They make very light, attractive reading."

"Well, it's worth trying."

"I should certainly recommend the scheme, sir."

"All right, then. Toodle round to your aunt's to-morrow and grab a couple of the fruitiest. We can but have a dash at it."

"Precisely, sir."

* * * * *

Bingo reported three days later that Rosie M. Banks was the goods and beyond a question the stuff to give the troops. Old Little had jibbed somewhat at first at the proposed change of literary diet, he not being much of a lad for fiction and having stuck hitherto exclusively to the heavier monthly reviews; but Bingo had got chapter one of "All for Love" past his guard before he knew what was happening, and after that there was nothing to it. Since then they had finished "A Red, Red Summer Rose," "Madcap Myrtle" and "Only a Factory Girl," and were halfway through "The Courtship of Lord Strathmorlick."

Bingo told me all this in a husky voice over an egg beaten up in sherry. The only blot on the thing from his point of view was that it wasn't doing a bit of good to the old vocal cords, which were beginning to show signs of cracking under the strain. He had been looking his symptoms up in a medical dictionary, and he thought he had got "clergyman's throat." But against this you had to set the fact that he was making an undoubted hit in the right quarter, and also that after the evening's reading he always stayed on to dinner; and, from what he told me, the dinners turned out by old Little's cook had to be tasted to be believed. There were tears in the old blighter's eyes as he got on the subject of the clear soup. I suppose to a fellow who for weeks had been tackling macaroons and limado it must have been like Heaven.

Old Little wasn't able to give any practical assistance at these banquets, but Bingo said that he came to the table and had his whack of arrowroot, and sniffed the dishes, and told stories of entrees he had had in the past, and sketched out scenarios of what he was going to do to the bill of fare in the future, when the doctor put him in shape; so I suppose he enjoyed himself, too, in a way. Anyhow, things seemed to be buzzing along quite satisfactorily, and Bingo said he had got an idea which, he thought, was going to clinch the thing. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he said it was a pippin.

"We make progress, Jeeves," I said.

"That is very satisfactory, sir."

"Mr. Little tells me that when he came to the big scene in 'Only a Factory Girl,' his uncle gulped like a stricken bull-pup."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Where Lord Claude takes the girl in his arms, you know, and says----"

"I am familiar with the passage, sir. It is distinctly moving. It was a great favourite of my aunt's."

"I think we're on the right track."

"It would seem so, sir."

"In fact, this looks like being another of your successes. I've always said, and I always shall say, that for sheer brain, Jeeves, you stand alone. All the other great thinkers of the age are simply in the crowd, watching you go by."

"Thank you very much, sir. I endeavour to give satisfaction."

About a week after this, Bingo blew in with the news that his uncle's gout had ceased to trouble him, and that on the morrow he would be back at the old stand working away with knife and fork as before.

"And, by the way," said Bingo, "he wants you to lunch with him tomorrow."

"Me? Why me? He doesn't know I exist."

"Oh, yes, he does. I've told him about you."

"What have you told him?"

"Oh, various things. Anyhow, he wants to meet you. And take my tip, laddie--you go! I should think lunch to-morrow would be something special."

I don't know why it was, but even then it struck me that there was something dashed odd--almost sinister, if you know what I mean--about young Bingo's manner. The old egg had the air of one who has something up his sleeve.

"There is more in this than meets the eye," I said. "Why should your uncle ask a fellow to lunch whom he's never seen?"

"My dear old fathead, haven't I just said that I've been telling him all about you--that you're my best pal--at school together, and all that sort of thing?"

"But even then--and another thing. Why are you so dashed keen on my going?"

Bingo hesitated for a moment.

"Well, I told you I'd got an idea. This is it. I want you to spring the news on him. I haven't the nerve myself."

"What! I'm hanged if I do!"

"And you call yourself a pal of mine!"

"Yes, I know; but there are limits."

"Bertie," said Bingo reproachfully, "I saved your life once."

"When?"

"Didn't I? It must have been some other fellow, then. Well, anyway, we were boys together and all that. You can't let me down."

"Oh, all right," I said. "But, when you say you haven't nerve enough for any dashed thing in the world, you misjudge yourself. A fellow who----"

"Cheerio!" said young Bingo. "One-thirty to-morrow. Don't be late."

* * * * *

I'm bound to say that the more I contemplated the binge, the less I liked it. It was all very well for Bingo to say that I was slated for a magnificent lunch; but what good is the best possible lunch to a fellow if he is slung out into the street on his ear during the soup course? However, the word of a Wooster is his bond and all that sort of rot, so at one-thirty next day I tottered up the steps of No. 16, Pounceby Gardens, and punched the bell. And half a minute later I was up in the drawing-room, shaking hands with the fattest man I have ever seen in my life.

The motto of the Little family was evidently "variety." Young Bingo is long and thin and hasn't had a superfluous ounce on him since we first met; but the uncle restored the average and a bit over. The hand which grasped mine wrapped it round and enfolded it till I began to wonder if I'd ever get it out without excavating machinery.

"Mr. Wooster, I am gratified--I am proud--I am honoured."

It seemed to me that young Bingo must have boosted me to some purpose.

"Oh, ah!" I said.

He stepped back a bit, still hanging on to the good right hand.

"You are very young to have accomplished so much!"

I couldn't follow the train of thought. The family, especially my Aunt Agatha, who has savaged me incessantly from childhood up, have always rather made a point of the fact that mine is a wasted life, and that, since I won the prize at my first school for the best collection of wild flowers made during the

summer holidays, I haven't done a dam' thing to land me on the nation's scroll of fame. I was wondering if he couldn't have got me mixed up with someone else, when the telephone-bell rang outside in the hall, and the maid came in to say that I was wanted. I buzzed down, and found it was young Bingo.

"Hallo!" said young Bingo. "So you've got there? Good man! I knew I could rely on you. I say, old crumpet, did my uncle seem pleased to see you?"

"Absolutely all over me. I can't make it out."

"Oh, that's all right. I just rang up to explain. The fact is, old man, I know you won't mind, but I told him that you were the author of those books I've been reading to him."

"What!"

"Yes, I said that 'Rosie M. Banks' was your pen-name, and you didn't want it generally known, because you were a modest, retiring sort of chap. He'll listen to you now. Absolutely hang on your words. A brightish idea, what? I doubt if Jeeves in person could have thought up a better one than that. Well, pitch it strong, old lad, and keep steadily before you the fact that I must have my allowance raised. I can't possibly marry on what I've got now. If this film is to end with the slow fade-out on the embrace, at least double is indicated. Well, that's that. Cheerio!"

And he rang off. At that moment the gong sounded, and the genial host came tumbling downstairs like the delivery of a ton of coals.

* * * * *

I always look back to that lunch with a sort of aching regret. It was the lunch of a lifetime, and I wasn't in a fit state to appreciate it. Subconsciously, if you know what I mean, I could see it was pretty special, but I had got the wind up to such a frightful extent over the ghastly situation in which young Bingo had landed me that its deeper meaning never really penetrated. Most of the time I might have been eating sawdust for all the good it did me.

Old Little struck the literary note right from the start.

"My nephew has probably told you that I have been making a close study of your books of late?" he began.

"Yes. He did mention it. How--er--how did you like the bally things?"

He gazed reverently at me.

"Mr. Wooster, I am not ashamed to say that the tears came into my eyes as I listened to them. It amazes me that a man as young as you can have been able to plumb human nature so surely to its depths; to play with so unerring a hand on the quivering heart-strings of your reader; to write novels so true, so human, so moving, so vital!"

"Oh, it's just a knack," I said.

The good old persp. was bedewing my forehead by this time in a pretty lavish manner. I don't know when I've been so rattled.

"Do you find the room a trifle warm?"

"Oh, no, no, rather not. Just right."

"Then it's the pepper. If my cook has a fault--which I am not prepared to admit--it is that she is inclined to stress the pepper a trifle in her made dishes. By the way, do you like her cooking?"

I was so relieved that we had got off the subject of my literary output that I shouted approval in a ringing baritone.

"I am delighted to hear it, Mr. Wooster. I may be prejudiced, but to my mind that woman is a genius."

"Absolutely!" I said.

"She has been with me seven years, and in all that time I have not known her guilty of a single lapse from the highest standard. Except once, in the winter of 1917, when a purist might have condemned a certain mayonnaise of hers as lacking in creaminess. But one must make allowances. There had been several air-raids about that time, and no doubt the poor woman was shaken. But nothing is perfect in this world, Mr. Wooster, and I have had my cross to bear. For seven years I have lived in constant apprehension lest some evilly-disposed person might lure her from my employment. To my certain knowledge she has received offers, lucrative offers, to accept service elsewhere. You may judge of my dismay, Mr. Wooster, when only this morning the bolt fell. She gave notice!"

"Good Lord!"

"Your consternation does credit, if I may say so, to the heart of the author of 'A Red, Red Summer Rose.' But I am thankful to say the worst has not happened. The matter has been adjusted. Jane is not leaving me."

"Good egg!"

"Good egg, indeed--though the expression is not familiar to me. I do not remember having come across it in your books. And, speaking of your books, may I say that what has impressed me about them even more than the moving poignancy of the actual narrative, is your philosophy of life. If there were more men like you, Mr. Wooster, London would be a better place."

This was dead opposite to my Aunt Agatha's philosophy of life, she having always rather given me to understand that it is the presence in it of chappies like me that makes London more or less of a plague spot; but I let it go.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Wooster, that I appreciate your splendid defiance of the outworn fetishes of a purblind social system. I appreciate it! You are big enough to see that rank is but the guinea stamp and that, in the magnificent words of Lord Bletchmore in 'Only a Factory Girl,' 'Be her origin ne'er so humble, a good woman is the equal of the finest lady on earth!'"

I sat up.

"I say! Do you think that?"

"I do, Mr. Wooster. I am ashamed to say that there was a time when I was like other men, a slave to the idiotic convention which we call Class Distinction. But, since I read your books----"

I might have known it. Jeeves had done it again.

"You think it's all right for a chappie in what you might call a certain social position to marry a girl of what you might describe as the lower classes?"

"Most assuredly I do, Mr. Wooster."

I took a deep breath, and slipped him the good news.

"Young Bingo--your nephew, you know--wants to marry a waitress," I said.

"I honour him for it," said old Little.

"You don't object?"

"On the contrary."

I took another deep breath and shifted to the sordid side of the business.

"I hope you won't think I'm butting in, don't you know," I said, "but--er--well, how about it?"

"I fear I do not quite follow you."

"Well, I mean to say, his allowance and all that. The money you're good enough to give him. He was rather hoping that you might see your way to jerking up the total a bit."

Old Little shook his head regretfully.

"I fear that can hardly be managed. You see, a man in my position is compelled to save every penny. I will gladly continue my nephew's existing allowance, but beyond that I cannot go. It would not be fair to my wife."

"What! But you're not married?"

"Not yet. But I propose to enter upon that holy state almost immediately. The lady who for years has cooked so well for me honoured me by accepting my hand this very morning." A cold gleam of triumph came into his eye. "Now let 'em try to get her away from me!" he muttered, defiantly.

* * * * *

"Young Mr. Little has been trying frequently during the afternoon to reach you on the telephone, sir," said Jeeves that night, when I got home.

"I'll bet he has," I said. I had sent poor old Bingo an outline of the situation by messenger-boy shortly after lunch.

"He seemed a trifle agitated."

"I don't wonder. Jeeves," I said, "so brace up and bite the bullet. I'm afraid I've bad news for you.

"That scheme of yours--reading those books to old Mr. Little and all that--has blown out a fuse."

"They did not soften him?"

"They did. That's the whole bally trouble. Jeeves, I'm sorry to say that fiancée of yours--Miss Watson, you know--the cook, you know--well, the long and the short of it is that she's chosen riches instead of honest worth, if you know what I mean."

"Sir?"

"She's handed you the mitten and gone and got engaged to old Mr. Little!"

"Indeed, sir?"

"You don't seem much upset."

"That fact is, sir, I had anticipated some such outcome."

I stared at him. "Then what on earth did you suggest the scheme for?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I was not wholly averse from a severance of my relations with Miss Watson. In fact, I greatly desired it. I respect Miss Watson exceedingly, but I have seen for a long time that we were not suited. Now, the other young person with whom I have an understanding----"

"Great Scott, Jeeves! There isn't another?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long has this been going on?"

"For some weeks, sir. I was greatly attracted by her when I first met her at a subscription dance at Camberwell."

"My sainted aunt! Not----"

Jeeves inclined his head gravely.

"Yes, sir. By an odd coincidence it is the same young person that young Mr. Little--I have placed the cigarettes on the small table. Good night, sir."

Pots O' Money

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Pots_O%27_Money

by P. G. Wodehouse

(Originally Published: 1914)



Owen Bentley was feeling embarrassed. He looked at Mr Sheppherd, and with difficulty restrained himself from standing on one leg and twiddling his fingers. At one period of his career, before the influence of his uncle Henry had placed him in the London and Suburban Bank, Owen had been an actor. On the strength of a batting average of thirty-three point nought seven for Middlesex, he had been engaged by the astute musical-comedy impresario to whom the idea first occurred that, if you have got to have young men to chant 'We are merry and gay, tra-la, for this is Bohemia,' in the Artists' Ball scene, you might just as well have young men whose names are known to the public. He had not been an actor long, for loss of form had put him out of first-class cricket, and the impresario had given his place in the next piece to a googly bowler who had done well in the last Varsity match; but he had been one long enough to experience that sinking sensation which is known as stage-fright. And now, as he began to explain to Mr Sheppherd that he wished for his consent to marry his daughter Audrey, he found himself suffering exactly the same symptoms.

From the very start, from the moment when he revealed the fact that his income, salary and private means included, amounted to less than two hundred pounds, he had realized that this was going to be one of his failures. It was the gruesome Early Victorianness of it all that took the heart out of him. Mr Sheppherd had always reminded him of a heavy father out of a three-volume novel, but, compared with his demeanour as he listened now, his attitude hitherto had been light and whimsical. Until this moment Owen had not imagined that this sort of thing ever happened nowadays outside the comic papers. By the end of the second minute he would not have been surprised to find himself sailing through the air, urged by Mr Sheppherd's boot, his transit indicated by a dotted line and a few stars.

Mr Sheppherd's manner was inclined to bleakness.

'This is most unfortunate,' he said. 'Most unfortunate. I have my daughter's happiness to consider. It is my duty as a father.' He paused. 'You say you have no prospects? I should have supposed that your uncle—? Surely, with his influence—?'

'My uncle shot his bolt when he got me into the bank. That finished him, as far as I'm concerned. I'm not his only nephew, you know. There are about a hundred others, all trailing him like bloodhounds.'

Mr Sheppherd coughed the small cough of disapproval. He was feeling more than a little aggrieved.

He had met Owen for the first time at dinner at the house of his uncle Henry, a man of unquestioned substance, whose habit it was to invite each of his eleven nephews to dinner once a year. But Mr Sheppherd did not know this. For all he knew, Owen was in the habit of hobnobbing with the great man every night. He could not say exactly that it was sharp practice on Owen's part to accept his invitation to call, and, having called, to continue calling long enough to make the present deplorable situation possible; but he felt that it would have been in better taste for the young man to have effaced himself and behaved more like a bank-clerk and less like an heir.

'I am exceedingly sorry for this, Mr Bentley,' he said, 'but you will understand that I cannot—It is, of course, out of the question. It would be best, in the circumstances, I think, if you did not see my daughter again—'

'She's waiting in the passage outside,' said Owen, simply.

'—after today. Good-bye.'

Owen left the room. Audrey was hovering in the neighbourhood of the door. She came quickly up to him, and his spirits rose, as they always did, at the sight of her.

'Well?' she said.

He shook his head.

'No good,' he said.

Audrey considered the problem for a moment, and was rewarded with an idea.

'Shall I go in and cry?'

'It wouldn't be of any use.'

'Tell me what happened.'

'He said I mustn't see you again.'

'He didn't mean it.'

'He thinks he did.'

Audrey reflected.

'We shall simply have to keep writing, then. And we can talk on the telephone. That isn't seeing each other. Has your bank a telephone?'

'Yes. But—'

'That's all right, then. I'll ring you up every day.'

'I wish I could make some money,' said Owen, thoughtfully. 'But I seem to be one of those chaps who can't. Nothing I try comes off. I've never drawn anything except a blank in a sweep. I spent about two pounds on sixpenny postal orders when the Limerick craze was on, and didn't win a thing. Once when I was on tour I worked myself to a shadow, dramatizing a novel. Nothing came of that, either.'

'What novel?'

'A thing called White Roses, by a woman named Edith Butler.'

Audrey looked up quickly.

'I suppose you knew her very well? Were you great friends?'

'I didn't know her at all. I'd never met her. I just happened to buy the thing at a bookstall, and thought it would make a good play. I expect it was pretty bad rot. Anyhow, she never took the trouble to send it back or even to acknowledge receipt.'

'Perhaps she never got it?'

'I registered it.'

'She was a cat,' said Audrey, decidedly. 'I'm glad of it, though. If another woman had helped you make a lot of money, I should have died of jealousy.'

Routine is death to heroism. For the first few days after his parting with Mr Sheppherd, Owen was in heroic mood, full of vaguely dashing schemes, regarding the world as his oyster, and burning to get at it, sword in hand. But routine, with its ledgers and its copying-ink and its customers, fell like a grey cloud athwart his horizon, blotting out rainbow visions of sudden wealth, dramatically won. Day by day the glow faded and hopelessness grew.

If the glow did not entirely fade it was due to Audrey, who more than fulfilled her promise of ringing him up on the telephone. She rang him up at least once, frequently several times, every day, a fact which was noted and commented upon in a harshly critical spirit by the head of his department, a man with no soul and a strong objection to doing his subordinates' work for them.

As a rule, her conversation, though pleasing, was discursive and lacked central motive, but one morning she had genuine news to impart.

'Owen'—her voice was excited—'have you seen the paper today? Then listen. I'll read it out. Are you listening? This is what it says: "The Piccadilly Theatre will reopen shortly with a dramatized version of Miss Edith Butler's popular novel, *White Roses*, prepared by the authoress herself. A strong cast is being engaged, including—" And then a lot of names. What are you going to do about it, Owen?'

'What am I going to do?'

'Don't you see what's happened? That awful woman has stolen your play. She has waited all these years, hoping you would forget. What are you laughing at?'

'I wasn't laughing.'

'Yes, you were. It tickled my ear. I'll ring off if you do it again. You don't believe me. Well, you wait and see if I'm not—'

'Edith Butler's incapable of such a thing.'

There was a slight pause at the other end of the wire.

'I thought you said you didn't know her,' said Audrey, jealously.

'I don't—I don't,' said Owen, hastily. 'But I've read her books. They're simply chunks of superfatted sentiment. She's a sort of literary onion. She compels tears. A woman like that couldn't steal a play if she tried.'

'You can't judge authors from their books. You must go and see the play when it comes on. Then you'll see I'm right. I'm absolutely certain that woman is trying to swindle you. Don't laugh in that horrid way. Very well, I told you I should ring off, and now I'm going to.'

At the beginning of the next month Owen's annual holiday arrived. The authorities of the London and Suburban Bank were no niggards. They recognized that a man is not a machine. They gave their employees ten days in the year in which to tone up their systems for another twelve months' work.

Owen spent his boyhood in the Shropshire village of which his father had been rector, and thither he went when his holiday came round, to the farm of one Dorman. He was glad of the chance to get to Shropshire. There is something about the country there, with its green fields and miniature rivers, that soothes the wounded spirit and forms a pleasant background for sentimental musings.

It was comfortable at the farm. The household consisted of Mr Dorman, an old acquaintance, his ten-year-old son George, and Mr Dorman's mother, an aged lady with a considerable local reputation as a wise woman. Rumour had it that the future held no mysteries for her, and it was known that she could cure warts, bruised fingers, and even the botts by means of spells.

Except for these, Owen had fancied that he was alone in the house. It seemed not, however. There was a primeval piano in his sitting-room, and on the second morning it suited his mood to sit down at this and sing 'Asthore', the fruity pathos of which ballad appealed to him strongly at this time, accompanying himself by an ingenious arrangement in three chords. He had hardly begun, however, when Mr Dorman appeared, somewhat agitated.

'If you don't mind, Mr Owen,' he said. 'I forgot to tell you. There's a lit'ery gent boarding with me in the room above, and he can't bear to be disturbed.'

A muffled stamping from the ceiling bore out his words.

'Writing a book he is,' continued Mr Dorman. 'He caught young George a clip over the ear-'ole yesterday for blowing his trumpet on the stairs. Gave him sixpence afterwards, and said he'd skin him if he ever did it again. So, if you don't mind—'

'Oh, all right,' said Owen. 'Who is he?'

'Gentleman of the name of Prosser.'

Owen could not recollect having come across any work by anyone of that name; but he was not a wide reader; and, whether the man above was a celebrity or not, he was entitled to quiet.

'I never heard of him,' he said, 'but that's no reason why I should disturb him. Let him rip. I'll cut out the musical effects in future.'

The days passed smoothly by. The literary man remained invisible, though occasionally audible, tramping the floor in the frenzy of composition. Nor, until the last day of his visit, did Owen see old Mrs Dorman.

That she was not unaware of his presence in the house, however, was indicated on the last morning. He was smoking an after-breakfast pipe at the open window and waiting for the dog-cart that was to take him to the station, when George, the son of the house, entered.

George stood in the doorway, grinned, and said:

'Farsezjerligranmatellyerforchbythecards?'

'Eh?' said Owen.

The youth repeated the word.

'Once again.'

On the second repetition light began to creep in. A boyhood spent in the place, added to this ten days' stay, had made Owen something of a linguist.

'Father says would I like grandma to do what?'

'Tell yer forch'n by ther cards.'

'Where is she?'

'Backyarnder.'

Owen followed him into the kitchen, where he found Mr Dorman, the farmer, and, seated at the table, fumbling with a pack of cards, an old woman, whom he remembered well.

'Mother wants to tell your fortune,' said Mr Dorman, in a hoarse aside. 'She always will tell visitors' fortunes. She told Mr Prosser's, and he didn't half like it, because she said he'd be engaged in two months and married inside the year. He said wild horses wouldn't make him do it.'

'She can tell me that if she likes. I shan't object.'

'Mother, here's Mr Owen.'

'I seed him fast enough,' said the old woman, briskly. 'Shuffle, an' cut three times.'

She then performed mysterious manoeuvres with the cards.

'I see pots o' money,' announced the sibyl.

'If she says it, it's there right enough,' said her son.

'She means my bonus,' said Owen. 'But that's only ten pounds. And I lose it if I'm late twice more before Christmas.'

'It'll come sure enough.'

'Pots,' said the old woman, and she was still mumbling the encouraging word when Owen left the kitchen and returned to the sitting-room.

He laughed rather ruefully. At that moment he could have found a use for pots o' money.

He walked to the window, and looked out. It was a glorious morning. The heat-mist was dancing over the meadow beyond the brook, and from the farmyard came the liquid charawks of care-free fowls. It seemed wicked to leave these haunts of peace for London on such a day.

An acute melancholy seized him. Absently, he sat down at the piano. The prejudices of literary Mr Prosser had slipped from his mind. Softly at first, then gathering volume as the spirit of the song gripped him, he began to sing 'Asthore'. He became absorbed.

He had just, for the sixth time, won through to 'lyam-ah waiting for-er theeee-yass-thorre,' and was doing some intricate three-chord work preparatory to starting over again, when a loaf of bread whizzed past his ear. It missed him by an inch, and crashed against a plaster statuette of the Infant Samuel on the top of the piano.

It was a standard loaf, containing eighty per cent of semolina, and it practically wiped the Infant Samuel out of existence. At the same moment, at his back, there sounded a loud, wrathful snort.

He spun round. The door was open, and at the other side of the table was standing a large, black-bearded, shirt-sleeved man, in an attitude rather reminiscent of Ajax defying the lightning. His hands trembled. His beard bristled. His eyes gleamed ferociously beneath enormous eyebrows. As Owen turned, he gave tongue in a voice like the discharge of a broadside.

'Stop it!'

Owen's mind, wrenched too suddenly from the dreamy future to the vivid present, was not yet completely under control. He gaped.

'Stop—that—infernal—noise!' roared the man.

He shot through the door, banging it after him, and pounded up the stairs.

Owen was annoyed. The artistic temperament was all very well, but there were limits. It was absurd that obscure authors should behave in this way. Prosser! Who on earth was Prosser? Had anyone ever

heard of him? No! Yet here he was going about the country clipping small boys over the ear-hole, and flinging loaves of bread at bank-clerks as if he were Henry James or Marie Corelli. Owen reproached himself bitterly for his momentary loss of presence of mind. If he had only kept his head, he could have taken a flying shot at the man with the marmalade-pot. It had been within easy reach. Instead of which, he had merely stood and gaped. Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.'

His manly regret was interrupted by the entrance of Mr Dorman with the information that the dog-cart was at the door.

Audrey was out of town when Owen arrived in London, but she returned a week later. The sound of her voice through the telephone did much to cure the restlessness from which he had been suffering since the conclusion of his holiday. But the thought that she was so near yet so inaccessible produced in him a meditative melancholy which enveloped him like a cloud that would not lift. His manner became distraught. He lost weight.

If customers were not vaguely pained by his sad, pale face, it was only because the fierce rush of modern commercial life leaves your business man little leisure for observing pallor in bank-clerks. What did pain them was the gentle dreaminess with which he performed his duties. He was in the Inward Bills Department, one of the features of which was the sudden inrush, towards the end of each afternoon, of hatless, energetic young men with leather bags strapped to their left arms, clamouring for mysterious crackling documents, much fastened with pins. Owen had never quite understood what it was that these young men did want, and now his detached mind refused even more emphatically to grapple with the problem. He distributed the documents at random with the air of a preoccupied monarch scattering largess to the mob, and the subsequent chaos had to be handled by a wrathful head of the department in person.

Man's power of endurance is limited. At the end of the second week the overwrought head appealed passionately for relief, and Owen was removed to the Postage Department, where, when he had leisure from answering Audrey's telephone calls, he entered the addresses of letters in a large book and took them to the post. He was supposed also to stamp them, but a man in love cannot think of everything, and he was apt at times to overlook this formality.

One morning, receiving from one of the bank messengers the usual intimation that a lady wished to speak to him on the telephone, he went to the box and took up the receiver.

'Is that you, Owen? Owen, I went to White Roses last night. Have you been yet?'

'Not yet.'

'Then you must go tonight. Owen, I'm certain you wrote it. It's perfectly lovely. I cried my eyes out. If you don't go tonight, I'll never speak to you again, even on the telephone. Promise.'

'Must I?'

'Yes, you must. Why, suppose it is yours! It may mean a fortune. The stalls were simply packed. I'm going to ring up the theatre now and engage a seat for you, and pay for it myself.'

'No—I say—' protested Owen.

'Yes, I shall. I can't trust you to go if I don't. And I'll ring up early tomorrow to hear all about it. Good-bye.'

Owen left the box somewhat depressed. Life was quite gloomy enough as it was, without going out of one's way to cry one's eyes out over sentimental plays.

His depression was increased by the receipt, on his return to his department, of a message from the manager, stating that he would like to see Mr Bentley in his private room for a moment. Owen never enjoyed these little chats with Authority. Out of office hours, in the circle of his friends, he had no doubt the manager was a delightful and entertaining companion; but in his private room his conversation was less enjoyable.

The manager was seated at his table, thoughtfully regarding the ceiling. His resemblance to a stuffed trout, always striking, was subtly accentuated, and Owen, an expert in these matters, felt that his fears had been well founded—there was trouble in the air. Somebody had been complaining of him, and he was now about, as the phrase went, to be 'run-in'.

A large man, seated with his back to the door, turned as he entered, and Owen recognized the well-remembered features of Mr Prosser, the literary loaf-slinger.

Owen regarded him without resentment. Since returning to London he had taken the trouble of looking up his name in *Who's Who* and had found that he was not so undistinguished as he had supposed. He was, it appeared, a Regius Professor and the author of some half-dozen works on sociology—a record, Owen felt, that almost justified loaf-slinging and earhole clipping in moments of irritation.

The manager started to speak, but the man of letters anticipated him.

'Is this the fool?' he roared. 'Young man, I have no wish to be hard on a congenital idiot who is not responsible for his actions, but I must insist on an explanation. I understand that you are in charge of the correspondence in this office. Well, during the last week you have three times sent unstamped letters to my fiancée, Miss Vera Delane, Woodlands, Southbourne, Hants. What's the matter with you? Do you think she likes paying twopence a time, or what is it?'

Owen's mind leaped back at the words. They recalled something to him.

Then he remembered.

He was conscious of a not unpleasant thrill. He had not known that he was superstitious, but for some reason he had not been able to get those absurd words of Mr Dorman's mother out of his mind. And here was another prediction of hers, equally improbable, fulfilled to the letter.

'Great Scott!' he cried. 'Are you going to be married?'

Mr Prosser and the manager started simultaneously.

'Mrs Dorman said you would be,' said Owen. 'Don't you remember?'

Mr Prosser looked keenly at him.

'Why, I've seen you before,' he said. 'You're the young turnip-headed scallywag at the farm.'

'That's right,' said Owen.

'I've been wanting to meet you again. I thought the whole thing over, and it struck me,' said Mr Prosser, handsomely, 'that I may have seemed a little abrupt at our last meeting.'

'No, no.'

'The fact is, I was in the middle of an infernally difficult passage of my book that morning, and when you began—'

'It was my fault entirely. I quite understand.'

Mr Prosser produced a card-case.

'We must see more of each other,' he said. 'Come and have a bit of dinner some night. Come tonight.'

'I'm very sorry. I have to go to the theatre tonight.'

'Then come and have a bit of supper afterwards. Excellent. Meet me at the Savoy at eleven-fifteen. I'm glad I didn't hit you with that loaf. Abruptness has been my failing through life. My father was just the same. Eleven-fifteen at the Savoy, then.'

The manager, who had been listening with some restlessness to the conversation, now intervened. He was a man with a sense of fitness of things, and he objected to having his private room made the scene of what appeared to be a reunion of old college chums. He hinted as much.

'Ha! Prrumph!' he observed, disapprovingly. 'Er—Mr Bentley, that is all. You may return to your work—ah'mmm! Kindly be more careful another time in stamping the letters.'

'Yes, by Jove,' said Mr Prosser, suddenly reminded of his wrongs, 'that's right. Exercise a little ordinary care, you ivory-skulled young son of a gun. Do you think Miss Delane is made of twopences? Keep an eye on him,' he urged the manager. 'These young fellows nowadays want someone standing over them with a knout all the time. Be more careful another time, young man. Eleven-fifteen, remember. Make a note of it, or you'll go forgetting that.'

The seat Audrey had bought for him at the Piccadilly Theatre proved to be in the centre of the sixth row of stalls—practically a death-trap. Whatever his sufferings might be, escape was impossible. He was securely wedged in.

The cheaper parts of the house were sparsely occupied, but the stalls were full. Owen, disapproving of the whole business, refused to buy a programme, and settled himself in his seat prepared for the worst. He had a vivid recollection of *White Roses*, the novel, and he did not anticipate any keen enjoyment from it in its dramatized form. He had long ceased to be a member of that large public for which Miss Edith Butler catered. The sentimental adventures of governesses in ducal houses—the heroine of *White Roses* was a governess—no longer contented his soul.

There is always a curiously dream-like atmosphere about a play founded on a book. One seems to have seen it all before. During the whole of the first act Owen attributed to this his feeling of familiarity with what was going on on the stage. At the beginning of the second act he found himself anticipating events. But it was not till the third act that the truth sank in.

The third was the only act in which, in his dramatization, he had taken any real liberties with the text of the novel. But in this act he had introduced a character who did not appear in the novel—a creature of his own imagination. And now, with bulging eyes, he observed this creature emerge from the wings, and heard him utter lines which he now clearly remembered having written.

Audrey had been right! Serpent Edith Butler had stolen his play.

His mind, during the remainder of the play, was active. By the time the final curtain fell and he passed out into the open air he had perceived some of the difficulties of the case. To prove oneself the author of an original play is hard, but not impossible. Friends to whom one had sketched the plot may come forward as witnesses. One may have preserved rough notes. But a dramatization of a novel is another matter. All dramatizations of any given novel must necessarily be very much alike.

He started to walk along Piccadilly, and had reached Hyde Park Corner before he recollected that he had an engagement to take supper with Mr Prosser at the Savoy Hotel. He hailed a cab.

'You're late,' boomed the author of sociological treatises, as he appeared. 'You're infernally late. I suppose, in your woollen-headed way, you forgot all about it. Come along. We'll just have time for an olive and a glass of something before they turn the lights out.'

Owen was still thinking deeply as he began his supper. Surely there was some way by which he could prove his claims. What had he done with the original manuscript? He remembered now. He had burnt it. It had seemed mere useless litter then. Probably, he felt bitterly, the woman Butler had counted on this.

Mr Prosser concluded an animated conversation with a waiter on the subject of the wines of France, leaned forward, and, having helped himself briskly to anchovies, began to talk. He talked loudly and rapidly. Owen, his thoughts far away, hardly listened.

Presently the waiter returned with the selected brand. He filled Owen's glass, and Owen drank, and felt better. Finding his glass magically full once more, he emptied it again. And then suddenly he found himself looking across the table at his Host, and feeling a sense of absolute conviction that this was the one man of all others whom he would have selected as a confidant. How kindly, though somewhat misty, his face was! How soothing, if a little indistinct, his voice!

'Prosser,' he said, 'you are a man of the world, and I should like your advice. What would you do in a case like this? I go to a theatre to see a play, and what do I find?'

He paused, and eyed his host impressively.

'What's that tune they're playing?' said Mr Prosser. 'You hear it everywhere. One of these Viennese things, I suppose.'

Owen was annoyed. He began to doubt whether, after all, Mr Prosser's virtues as a confidant were not more apparent than real.

'I find, by Jove,' he continued, 'that I wrote the thing myself.'

'It's not a patch on *The Merry Widow*,' said Mr Prosser.

Owen thumped the table.

'I tell you I find I wrote the thing myself.'

'What thing?'

'This play I'm telling you about. This *White Roses* thing.'

He found that he had at last got his host's ear. Mr Prosser seemed genuinely interested.

'What do you mean?'

Owen plunged on with his story. He started from its dim beginning, from the days when he had bought the novel on his journey from Bath to Cheltenham. He described his methods of work, his registering of the package, his suspense, his growing resignation. He sketched the progress of his life. He spoke of Audrey and gave a crisp character-sketch of Mr Sheppherd. He took his hearer right up to the moment when the truth had come home to him.

Towards the end of his narrative the lights went out, and he finished his story in the hotel courtyard. In the cool air he felt revived. The outlines of Mr Prosser became sharp and distinct again.

The sociologist listened admirably. He appeared absorbed, and did not interrupt once.

'What makes you so certain that this was your version?' he asked, as they passed into the Strand.

Owen told him of the creature of his imagination in Act III.

'But you have lost your manuscript?'

'Yes; I burnt it.'

'Just what one might have expected you to do,' said Mr Prosser, unkindly. 'Young man, I begin to believe that there may be something in this. You haven't got a ghost of a proof that would hold water in a court of law, of course; but still, I'm inclined to believe you. For one thing, you haven't the intelligence to invent such a story.'

Owen thanked him.

'In fact, if you can answer me one question I shall be satisfied.'

It seemed to Owen that Mr Prosser was tending to get a little above himself. As an intelligent listener he had been of service, but that appeared to be no reason why he should constitute himself a sort of judge and master of the ceremonies.

'That's very good of you,' he said; 'but will Edith Butler be satisfied? That's more to the point.'

'I am Edith Butler,' said Mr Prosser.

Owen stopped. 'You?'

'You need not babble it from the house-tops. You are the only person besides my agent who knows it, and I wouldn't have told you if I could have helped it. It isn't a thing I want known. Great Scott, man, don't goggle at me like a fish! Haven't you heard of pseudonyms before?'

'Yes, but—'

'Well, never mind. Take it from me that I am Edith Butler. Now listen to me. That manuscript reached me when I was in the country. There was no name on it. That in itself points strongly to the fact that you were its author. It was precisely the chuckle-headed sort of thing you would have done, to put no name on the thing.'

'I enclosed a letter, anyhow.'

'There was a letter enclosed. I opened the parcel out of doors. There was a fresh breeze blowing at the time. It caught the letter, and that was the last I saw of it. I had read as far as "Dear Madam". But one thing I do remember about it, and that was that it was sent from some hotel in Cheltenham, and I could remember it if I heard it. Now, then?'

'I can tell it you. It was Wilbraham's. I was stopping there.'

'You pass,' said Mr Prosser. 'It was Wilbraham's.'

Owen's heart gave a jump. For a moment he walked on air.

'Then do you mean to say that it's all right—that you believe—'

'I do,' said Mr Prosser. 'By the way,' he said, 'the notice of White Roses went up last night.'

Owen's heart turned to lead.

'But—but—' he stammered. 'But tonight the house was packed.'

'It was. Packed with paper. All the merry dead-heads in London were there. It has been the worst failure this season. And, by George,' he cried, with sudden vehemence, 'serve 'em right. If I told them once it would fail in England, I told them a hundred times. The London public won't stand that sort of blithering twaddle.'

Owen stopped and looked round. A cab was standing across the road. He signalled to it. He felt incapable of walking home. No physical blow could have unmanned him more completely than this hideous disappointment just when, by a miracle, everything seemed to be running his way.

'Sooner ride than walk,' said Mr Prosser, pushing his head through the open window. 'Laziness—slackness—that's the curse of the modern young man. Where shall I tell him to drive to?'

Owen mentioned his address. It struck him that he had not thanked his host for his hospitality.

'It was awfully good of you to give me supper, Mr Prosser,' he said. 'I've enjoyed it tremendously.'

'Come again,' said Mr Prosser. 'I'm afraid you're disappointed about the play?'

Owen forced a smile.

'Oh, no, that's all right,' he said. 'It can't be helped.'

Mr Prosser half turned, then thrust his head through the window again.

'I knew there was something I had forgotten to say,' he said. 'I ought to have told you that the play was produced in America before it came to London. It ran two seasons in New York and one in Chicago, and there are three companies playing it still on the road. Here's my card. Come round and see me tomorrow. I can't tell you the actual figures off-hand, but you'll be all right. You'll have pots o' money.'

The Man, The Maid, and the Miasma

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Man,_The_Maid,_and_the_Miasma

by P. G. Wodehouse

(Originally Published: 1914)

Although this story is concerned principally with the Man and the Maid, the Miasma pervades it to such an extent that I feel justified in putting his name on the bills. Webster's Dictionary gives the meaning of the word 'miasma' as 'an infection floating in the air; a deadly exhalation'; and, in the opinion of Mr Robert Ferguson, his late employer, that description, though perhaps a little too flattering, on the whole summed up Master Roland Bean pretty satisfactorily. Until the previous day he had served Mr Ferguson in the capacity of office-boy; but there was that about Master Bean which made it practically impossible for anyone to employ him for long. A syndicate of Galahad, Parsifal, and Marcus Aurelius might have done it, but to an ordinary erring man, conscious of things done which should not have been done, and other things equally numerous left undone, he was too oppressive. One conscience is enough for any man. The employer of Master Bean had to cringe before two. Nobody can last long against an office-boy whose eyes shine with quiet, respectful reproof through gold-rimmed spectacles, whose manner is that of a middle-aged saint, and who obviously knows all the Plod and Punctuality books by heart and orders his life by their precepts. Master Bean was a walking edition of Stepping-Stones to Success, Millionaires who Have Never Smoked, and Young Man, Get up Early. Galahad, Parsifal, and Marcus Aurelius, as I say, might have remained tranquil in his presence, but Robert Ferguson found the contract too large. After one month he had braced himself up and sacked the Punctual Plodder.

Yet now he was sitting in his office, long after the last clerk had left, long after the hour at which he himself was wont to leave, his mind full of his late employee.

Was this remorse? Was he longing for the touch of the vanished hand, the gleam of the departed spectacles? He was not. His mind was full of Master Bean because Master Bean was waiting for him in the outer office; and he lingered on at his desk, after the day's work was done, for the same reason. Word had been brought to him earlier in the evening, that Master Roland Bean would like to see him. The answer to that was easy: 'Tell him I'm busy.' Master Bean's admirably dignified reply was that he understood how great was the pressure of Mr Ferguson's work, and that he would wait till he was at liberty. Liberty! Talk of the liberty of the treed possum, but do not use the word in connexion with a man bottled up in an office, with Roland Bean guarding the only exit.

Mr Ferguson kicked the waste-paper basket savagely. The unfairness of the thing hurt him. A sacked office-boy ought to stay sacked. He had no business to come popping up again like Banquo's ghost. It was not playing the game.

The reader may wonder what was the trouble—why Mr Ferguson could not stalk out and brusquely dispose of his foe; but then the reader has not employed Master Bean for a month. Mr Ferguson had, and his nerve had broken.

A slight cough penetrated the door between the two offices. Mr Ferguson rose and grabbed his hat. Perhaps a sudden rush—he shot out with the tense concentration of one moving towards the refreshment-room at a station where the train stops three minutes.

'Good evening, sir!' was the watcher's view-hallo.

'Ah, Bean,' said Mr Ferguson, flitting rapidly, 'you still here? I thought you had gone. I'm afraid I cannot stop now. Some other time—'

He was almost through.

'I fear, sir, that you will be unable to get out,' said Master Bean, sympathetically. 'The building is locked up.'

Men who have been hit by bullets say the first sensation is merely a sort of dull shock. So it was with Mr Ferguson. He stopped in his tracks and stared.

'The porter closes the door at seven o'clock punctually, sir. It is now nearly twenty minutes after the hour.'

Mr Ferguson's brain was still in the numbed stage.

'Closes the door?' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Then how are we to get out?'

'I fear we cannot get out, sir.'

Mr Ferguson digested this.

'I am no longer in your employment, sir,' said Master Bean, respectfully, 'but I hope that in the circumstances you will permit me to remain here during the night.'

'During the night!'

'It would enable me to sleep more comfortably than on the stairs.'

'But we can't stop here all night,' said Mr Ferguson, feebly.

He had anticipated an unpleasant five minutes in Master Bean's company. Imagination boggled at the thought of an unpleasant thirteen hours. He collapsed into a chair.

'I called,' said Master Bean, shelving the trivial subject of the prospective vigil, 'in the hope that I might persuade you, sir, to reconsider your decision in regard to my dismissal. I can assure you, sir, that I am extremely anxious to give satisfaction. If you would take me back and inform me how I have fallen short, I would endeavour to improve, I—'

'We can't stop here all night,' interrupted Mr Ferguson, bounding from his chair and beginning to pace the floor.

'Without presumption, sir, I feel that if you were to give me another chance I should work to your satisfaction. I should endeavour—'

Mr Ferguson stared at him in dumb horror. He had a momentary vision of a sleepless night spent in listening to a nicely-polished speech for the defence. He was seized with a mad desire for flight. He could not leave the building, but he must get away somewhere and think.

He dashed from the room and raced up the dark stairs. And as he arrived at the next floor his eye was caught by a thin pencil of light which proceeded from a door on the left.

No shipwrecked mariner on a desert island could have welcomed the appearance of a sail with greater enthusiasm. He bounded at the door. He knew to whom the room belonged. It was the office of one Blaythwayt; and Blaythwayt was not only an acquaintance, but a sportsman. Quite possibly there might be a pack of cards on Blaythwayt's person to help pass the long hours. And if not, at least he would be company and his office a refuge. He flung open the door without going through the formality of knocking. Etiquette is not for the marooned.

'I say, Blaythwayt—' he began, and stopped abruptly.

The only occupant of the room was a girl.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, 'I thought—'

He stopped again. His eyes, dazzled with the light, had not seen clearly. They did so now.

'You!' he cried.

The girl looked at him, first with surprise, then with a cool hostility. There was a long pause. Eighteen months had passed since they had parted, and conversation does not flow easily after eighteen months of silence, especially if the nature of the parting has been bitter and stormy.

He was the first to speak.

'What are you doing here?' he said.

'I thought my doings had ceased to interest you,' she said. 'I am Mr Blaythwayt's secretary, I have been here a fortnight. I have wondered if we should meet. I used to see you sometimes in the street.'

'I never saw you.'

'No?' she said indifferently.

He ran his hand through his hair in a dazed way.

'Do you know we are locked in?' he said.

He had expected wild surprise and dismay. She merely clicked her tongue in an annoyed manner.

'Again!' she said. 'What a nuisance! I was locked in only a week ago.'

He looked at her with unwilling respect, the respect of the novice for the veteran. She was nothing to him now, of course. She had passed out of his life. But he could not help remembering that long ago—eighteen months ago—what he had admired most in her had been this same spirit, this game refusal to be disturbed by Fate's blows. It braced him up.

He sat down and looked curiously at her.

'So you left the stage?' he said.

'I thought we agreed when we parted not to speak to one another,' said she, coldly.

'Did we? I thought it was only to meet as strangers.'

'It's the same thing.'

'Is it? I often talk to strangers.'

'What a bore they must think you!' she said, hiding one-eighth of a yawn with the tips of two fingers. 'I suppose,' she went on, with faint interest, 'you talk to them in trains when they are trying to read their paper?'

'I don't force my conversation on anyone.'

'Don't you?' she said, raising her eyebrows in sweet surprise. 'Only your company—is that it?'

'Are you alluding to the present occasion?'

'Well, you have an office of your own in this building, I believe.'

'I have.'

'Then why—'

'I am at perfect liberty,' he said, with dignity, 'to sit in my friend Blaythwayt's office if I choose. I wish to see Mr Blaythwayt.'

'On business?'

He proved that she had established no corner in raised eyebrows.

'I fear,' he said, 'that I cannot discuss my affairs with Mr Blaythwayt's employees. I must see him personally.'

'Mr Blaythwayt is not here.'

'I will wait.'

'He will not be here for thirteen hours.'

'I'll wait.'

'Very well,' she burst out; 'you have brought it on yourself. You've only yourself to blame. If you had been good and had gone back to your office, I would have brought you down some cake and cocoa.'

'Cake and cocoa!' said he, superciliously.

'Yes, cake and cocoa,' she snapped. 'It's all very well for you to turn up your nose at them now, but wait. You've thirteen hours of this in front of you. I know what it is. Last time I had to spend the night here I couldn't get to sleep for hours, and when I did I dreamed that I was chasing chocolate eclairs round and round Trafalgar Square. And I never caught them either. Long before the night was finished I would have given anything for even a dry biscuit. I made up my mind I'd always keep something here in case I ever got locked in again—yes, smile. You'd better while you can.'

He was smiling, but wanly. Nobody but a professional fasting man could have looked unmoved into the Inferno she had pictured. Then he rallied.

'Cake!' he said, scornfully.

She nodded grimly.

'Cocoa!'

Again that nod, ineffably sinister.

'I'm afraid I don't care for either,' he said.

'If you will excuse me,' she said, indifferently, 'I have a little work that I must finish.'

She turned to her desk, leaving him to his thoughts. They were not exhilarating. He had maintained a brave front, but inwardly he quailed. Reared in the country, he had developed at an early age a fine, healthy appetite. Once, soon after his arrival in London, he had allowed a dangerous fanatic to persuade him that the secret of health was to go without breakfast.

His lunch that day had cost him eight shillings, and only decent shame had kept the figure as low as that. He knew perfectly well that long ere the dawn of day his whole soul would be crying out for cake, squealing frantically for cocoa. Would it not be better to—no, a thousand times no! Death, but not surrender. His self-respect was at stake. Looking back, he saw that his entire relations with this girl had been a series of battles of will. So far, though he had certainly not won, he had not been defeated. He must not be defeated now.

He crossed his legs and sang a gay air under his breath.

'If you wouldn't mind,' said the girl, looking up.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your groaning interrupts my work.'

'I was not groaning. I was singing.'

'Oh, I'm sorry!'

'Not at all.'

Eight bars rest.

Mr Ferguson, deprived of the solace of song, filled in the time by gazing at the toiler's back-hair. It set in motion a train of thought—an express train bound for the Land of Yesterday. It recalled days in the woods, evenings on the lawn. It recalled sunshine—storm. Plenty of storm. Minor tempests that burst from a clear sky, apparently without cause, and the great final tornado. There had been cause enough for that. Why was it, mused Mr Ferguson, that every girl in every country town in every county of England who had ever recited 'Curfew shall not ring tonight' well enough to escape lynching at the hands of a rustic audience was seized with the desire to come to London and go on the stage?

He sighed.

'Please don't snort,' said a cold voice, from behind the back-hair.

There was a train-wreck in the Land of Yesterday. Mr Ferguson, the only survivor, limped back into the Present.

The Present had little charm, but at least it was better than the cakeless Future. He fixed his thoughts on it. He wondered how Master Bean was passing the time. Probably doing deep-breathing exercises, or reading a pocket Aristotle. The girl pushed back her chair and rose.

She went to a small cupboard in the corner of the room, and from it produced in instalments all that goes to make cake and cocoa. She did not speak. Presently, filling Space, there sprang into being an Odour; and as it reached him Mr Ferguson stiffened in his chair, bracing himself as for a fight to the death. It was more than an odour. It was the soul of the cocoa singing to him. His fingers gripped the arms of the chair. This was the test.

The girl separated a section of cake from the parent body. She caught his eye.

'You had better go,' she said. 'If you go now it's just possible that I may—but I forgot, you don't like cocoa.'

'No,' said he, resolutely, 'I don't.'

She seemed now in the mood for conversation.

'I wonder why you came up here at all,' she said.

'There's no reason why you shouldn't know. I came up here because my late office-boy is downstairs.'

'Why should that send you up?'

'You've never met him or you wouldn't ask. Have you ever had to face someone who is simply incarnate Saintliness and Disapproval, who—'

'Are you forgetting that I was engaged to you for several weeks?'

He was too startled to be hurt. The idea of himself as a Roland Bean was too new to be assimilated immediately. It called for meditation.

'Was I like that?' he said at last, almost humbly.

'You know you were. Oh, I'm not thinking only about your views on the stage! It was everything. Whatever I did you were there to disapprove like a—like a—like an aunt,' she concluded triumphantly. 'You were too good for anything. If only you would, just once, have done something wrong. I think I'd have—But you couldn't. You're simply perfect.'

A man will remain cool and composed under many charges. Hint that his tastes are criminal, and he will shrug his shoulders. But accuse him of goodness, and you rouse the lion.

Mr Ferguson's brow darkened.

'As a matter of fact,' he said, haughtily, 'I was to have had supper with a chorus-girl this very night.'

'How very appalling!' said she, languidly.

She sipped her cocoa.

'I suppose you consider that very terrible?' she said.

'For a beginner.'

She crumbled her cake. Suddenly she looked up.

'Who is she?' she demanded, fiercely.

'I beg your pardon?' he said, coming out of a pleasant reverie.

'Who is this girl?'

'She—er—her name—her name is Marie—Marie Templeton.'

She seemed to think for a moment.

'That dear old lady?' she said. 'I know her quite well.'

'What!'

'"Mother" we used to call her. Have you met her son?'

'Her son?'

'A rather nice-looking man. He plays heavy parts on tour. He's married and has two of the sweetest children. Their grandmother is devoted to them. Hasn't she ever mentioned them to you?'

She poured herself out another cup of cocoa. Conversation again languished.

'I suppose you're very fond of her?' she said at length.

'I'm devoted to her.' He paused. 'Dear little thing!' he added.

She rose and moved to the door. There was a nasty gleam in her eyes.

'You aren't going?' he said.

'I shall be back in a moment. I'm just going to bring your poor little office-boy up here. He must be missing you.'

He sprang up, but she had gone. Leaning over the banisters, he heard a door open below, then a short conversation, and finally footsteps climbing the stairs.

It was pitch dark on the landing. He stepped aside, and they passed without seeing him. Master Bean was discoursing easily on cocoa, the processes whereby it was manufactured, and the remarkable distances which natives of Mexico had covered with it as their only food. The door opened, flooding the landing with light, and Mr Ferguson, stepping from ambush, began to descend the stairs.

The girl came to the banisters.

'Mr Ferguson!'

He stopped.

'Did you want me?' he asked.

'Are you going back to your office?'

'I am. I hope you will enjoy Bean's society. He has a fund of useful information on all subjects.'

He went on. After a while she returned to the room and closed the door.

Mr Ferguson went into his office and sat down.

* * * * *

There was once a person of the name of Simeon Stylites, who took up a position on top of a pillar and stayed there, having no other engagements, for thirty years. Mr Ferguson, who had read Tennyson's poem on the subject, had until tonight looked upon this as a pretty good thing. Reading the lines:

...thrice ten years,

Thrice multiplied by superhuman pangs,

In hunger and in thirsts, fevers and colds,

In coughs, aches, stitches, ulcerous throes, and cramps, ...

Patient on this tall pillar I have borne.

Rain, wind, frost, heat, hail, damp, and sleet, and snow,

he had gathered roughly, as it were, that Simeon had not been comfortable. He had pitied him. But now, sitting in his office-chair, he began to wonder what the man had made such a fuss about. He suspected him of having had a touch of the white feather in him. It was not as if he had not had food. He talked about 'hungers and thirsts', but he must have had something to eat, or he could not have stayed the course. Very likely, if the truth were known, there was somebody below who passed him up regular supplies of cake and cocoa.

He began to look on Simeon as an overrated amateur.

Sleep refused to come to him. It got as far as his feet, but no farther. He rose and stamped to restore the circulation.

It was at this point that he definitely condemned Simeon Stylites as a sybaritic fraud.

If this were one of those realistic Zolaesque stories I would describe the crick in the back that—but let us hurry on.

It was about six hours later—he had no watch, but the numbers of aches, stitches, not to mention cramps, that he had experienced could not possibly have been condensed into a shorter period—that his manly spirit snapped. Let us not judge him too harshly. The girl upstairs had broken his heart, ruined his life, and practically compared him to Roland Bean, and his pride should have built up an impassable wall between them, but—she had cake and cocoa. In similar circumstances King Arthur would have grovelled before Guinevere.

He rushed to the door and tore it open. There was a startled exclamation from the darkness outside.

'I hope I didn't disturb you,' said a meek voice.

Mr Ferguson did not answer. His twitching nostrils were drinking in a familiar aroma.

'Were you asleep? May I come in? I've brought you some cake and cocoa.'

He took the rich gifts from her in silence. There are moments in a man's life too sacred for words. The wonder of the thing had struck him dumb. An instant before and he had had but a desperate hope of winning these priceless things from her at the cost of all his dignity and self-respect. He had been prepared to secure them through a shower of biting taunts, a blizzard of razor-like 'I told you so's'. Yet here he was, draining the cup, and still able to hold his head up, look the world in the face, and call himself a man.

His keen eye detected a crumb on his coat-sleeve. This retrieved and consumed, he turned to her, seeking explanation.

She was changed. The battle-gleam had faded from her eyes. She seemed scared and subdued. Her manner was of one craving comfort and protection. 'That awful boy!' she breathed.

'Bean?' said Mr Ferguson, picking a crumb off the carpet.

'He's frightful.'

'I thought you might get a little tired of him! What has he been doing?'

'Talking. I feel battered. He's like one of those awful encyclopedias that give you a sort of dull leaden feeling in your head directly you open them. Do you know how many tons of water go over Niagara Falls every year?'

'No.'

'He does.'

'I told you he had a fund of useful information. The Purpose and Tenacity books insist on it. That's how you Catch your Employer's Eye. One morning the boss suddenly wants to know how many horsehair sofas there are in Brixton, the number of pins that would reach from London Bridge to Waterloo. You tell him, and he takes you into partnership. Later you become a millionaire. But I haven't thanked you for the cocoa. It was fine.'

He waited for the retort, but it did not come. A pleased wonderment filled him. Could these things really be thus?

'And it isn't only what he says,' she went on. 'I know what you mean about him now. It's his accusing manner.'

'I've tried to analyse that manner. I believe it's the spectacles.'

'It's frightful when he looks at you; you think of all the wrong things you have ever done or ever wanted to do.'

'Does he have that effect on you?' he said, excitedly. 'Why, that exactly describes what I feel.'

The affinities looked at one another.

She was the first to speak.

'We always did think alike on most things, didn't we?' she said.

'Of course we did.'

He shifted his chair forward.

'It was all my fault,' he said. 'I mean, what happened.'

'It wasn't. It—'

'Yes, it was. I want to tell you something. I don't know if it will make any difference now, but I should like you to know it. It's this. I've altered a good deal since I came to London. For the better, I think. I'm a pretty poor sort of specimen still, but at least I don't imagine I can measure life with a foot-rule. I don't judge the world any longer by the standards of a country town. London has knocked some of the corners off me. I don't think you would find me the Bean type any longer. I don't disapprove of other people much now. Not as a habit. I find I have enough to do keeping myself up to the mark.'

'I want to tell you something, too,' she said. 'I expect it's too late, but never mind. I want you to hear it. I've altered, too, since I came to London. I used to think the Universe had been invented just to look on and wave its hat while I did great things. London has put a large piece of cold ice against my head, and the swelling has gone down. I'm not the girl with ambitions any longer. I just want to keep employed, and not have too bad a time when the day's work is over.'

He came across to where she sat.

'We said we would meet as strangers, and we do. We never have known each other. Don't you think we had better get acquainted?' he said.

There was a respectful tap at the door.

'Come in?' snapped Mr Ferguson. 'Well?' Behind the gold-rimmed spectacles of Master Bean there shone a softer look than usual, a look rather complacent than disapproving.

'I must apologize, sir, for intruding upon you. I am no longer in your employment, but I do hope that in the circumstances you will forgive my entering your private office. Thinking over our situation just now an idea came to me by means of which I fancy we might be enabled to leave the building.'

'What!'

'It occurred to me, sir, that by telephoning to the nearest police-station—'

'Good heavens!' cried Mr Ferguson.

Two minutes later he replaced the receiver.

'It's all right,' he said. 'I've made them understand the trouble. They're bringing a ladder. I wonder what the time is? It must be about four in the morning.'

Master Bean produced a Waterbury watch.

'The time, sir, is almost exactly half past ten.'

'Half past ten! We must have been here longer than three hours. Your watch is wrong.'

'No, sir, I am very careful to keep it exactly right. I do not wish to run any risk of being unpunctual.'

'Half past ten!' cried Mr Ferguson. 'Why, we're in heaps of time to look in at the Savoy for supper. This is great. I'll phone them to keep a table.'

'Supper! I thought—'

She stopped.

'What's that? Thought what?'

'Hadn't you an engagement for supper?'

He stared at her.

'Whatever gave you that idea? Of course not.'

'I thought you said you were taking Miss Templeton—'

'Miss Temp—Oh!' His face cleared. 'Oh, there isn't such a person. I invented her. I had to when you accused me of being like our friend the Miasma. Legitimate self-defence.'

'I do not wish to interrupt you, sir, when you are busy,' said Master Bean, 'but—'

'Come and see me tomorrow morning,' said Mr Ferguson.

* * * * *

'Bob,' said the girl, as the first threatening mutters from the orchestra heralded an imminent storm of melody, 'when that boy comes tomorrow, what are going to do?'

'Call up the police.'

'No, but you must do something. We shouldn't have been here if it hadn't been for him.'

'That's true!' He pondered. 'I've got it; I'll get him a job with Raikes and Courtenay.'

'Why Raikes and Courtenay?'

'Because I have a pull with them. But principally,' said Mr Ferguson, with a devilish grin, 'because they live in Edinburgh, which, as you are doubtless aware, is a long, long way from London.'

He bent across the table.

'Isn't this like old times?' he said. 'Do you remember the first time I ever ki—'

Just then the orchestra broke out.