

P. G. WODEHOUSE

**AUNTS AREN'T
GENTLEMEN**

A JEEVES & BERTIE STORY



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P. G. Wodehouse

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The author of almost a hundred books and the creator of Jeeves, Blandings Castle, Psmith, Ukridge, Uncle Fred and Mr Mulliner, P.G.

Wodehouse was born in 1881 and educated at Dulwich College.

After two years with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank he became a full-time writer contributing to a variety of periodicals including *Punch* and the *Globe*. He married in 1914. As well as his novels and short stories, he wrote lyrics for musical comedies with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern and at one time had five musicals running simultaneously on Broadway. His time in Hollywood also provided much source material for fiction.

At the age of 93, in the New Year's Honours List of 1975, he received a long-overdue knighthood only to die on St Valentine's Day some 45 days later.

Some of the P.G. Wodehouse titles to be published by Arrow in 2008

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Thank You, Jeeves

Right Ho, Jeeves

The Code of the Woosters

Joy in the Morning

The Mating Season

Ring for Jeeves

Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit

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Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves

Much Obligated, Jeeves

Aunts Aren't Gentlemen

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Service with a Smile

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Big Money



P. G. WODEHOUSE

Aunts Aren't

Gentlemen

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Aunts Aren't
Gentlemen

CHAPTER ONE

My attention was drawn to the spots on my chest when I was in my bath, singing, if I remember rightly, the Toreador song from the opera *Carmen*. They were pink in colour, rather like the first faint flush of dawn, and I viewed them with concern. I am not a fussy man, but I do object to being freckled like a pard, as I once heard Jeeves describe it, a pard, I take it, being something in the order of one of those dogs beginning with d.

'Jeeves,' I said at the breakfast table, 'I've got spots on my chest.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Pink.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'I don't like them.'

'A very understandable prejudice, sir. Might I enquire if they itch?'

'Sort of.'

'I would not advocate scratching them.'

'I disagree with you. You have to take a firm line with spots.'

Remember what the poet said.'

'Sir?'

'The poet Ogden Nash. The poem he wrote defending the practice of scratching. Who was Barbara Frietchie, Jeeves?'

'A lady of some prominence in the American war between the States, sir.'

'A woman of strong character? One you could rely on?'

'So I have always understood, sir.'

'Well, here's what the poet Nash wrote. "I'm greatly attached to Barbara Frietchie. I'll bet she scratched when she was itchy." But I shall not be content with scratching. I shall place myself in the hands of a competent doctor.'

'A very prudent decision, sir.'

The trouble was that, except for measles when I was just starting out, I've always been so fit that I didn't know any doctors. Then I remembered that my American pal, Tipton Plimsoll, with whom I had been dining last night to celebrate his betrothal to Veronica, only daughter of Colonel and Lady Hermione Wedge of Blandings Castle, Shropshire, had mentioned one who had once done him a bit of good. I went to the telephone to get his name and address.

Tipton did not answer my ring immediately, and when he did it was to reproach me for waking him at daybreak. But after he had got this off his chest and I had turned the conversation to mine he was most helpful. It was with the information I wanted that I returned to Jeeves.

'I've just been talking to Mr Plimsoll, Jeeves, and everything is straight now. He bids me lose no time in establishing contact with a medico of the name of E. Jimpson Murgatroyd. He says if I want a sunny practitioner who will prod me in the ribs with his stethoscope and tell me an anecdote about two Irishmen named Pat and Mike and then another about two Scotsmen named Mac and Sandy, E.'

Jimpson is not my man, but if what I'm after is someone to cure my spots, he unquestionably is, as he knows his spots from A to Z and spots, he unquestionably is, as he knows his spots from A to Z and has been treating them since he was so high. It seems that Tipton had the same trouble not long ago and Murgatroyd fixed him up in no time. So while I am getting out of these clothes in something more spectacular will you give him a buzz and make an appointment.'

When I had doffed the sweater and flannels in which I had breakfasted, Jeeves informed me that E. Jimpson could see me at eleven, and I thanked him and asked him to tell the garage to send the car.

round at ten-forty-five.

~~'Somewhat earlier than that, sir,' he said, 'if I might make the suggestion. The traffic. Would not be better to take a cab?'~~

'No, and I'll tell you why. After I've seen the doc, I thought I might drive down to Brighton and get a spot of sea air. I don't suppose the traffic will be any worse than usual, will it?'

'I fear so, sir. A protest march is taking place this morning.'

'What, again? They seem to have them every hour on the hour these days, don't they?'

'They are certainly not infrequent, sir.'

'Any idea what they're protesting about?'

'I could not say, sir. It might be one thing or it might be another. Men are suspicious, prone to discontent. Subjects still loathe the present Government.'

'The poet Nash?'

'No, sir. The poet Herrick.'

'Pretty bitter.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I wonder what they had done to him to stir him up like that. Probably fined him five quid for failing to abate a smoky chimney.'

'As to that I have no information, sir.'

Seated in the old sports model some minutes later and driving to keep my tryst with E. Jimpson Murgatroyd, I was feeling singularly light-hearted for a man with spots on his chest. It was a beautiful morning, and it wouldn't have taken much to make me sing Tra-la as I bowled along. Then I came abaft of the protest march and found myself becalmed. I leaned back and sat observing the proceedings with a kindly eye.

CHAPTER TWO

Whatever these bimbos were protesting about, it was obviously something they were taking heart rather. By the time I had got into their midst not a few of them had decided that animal cries were insufficient to meet the case and were saying it with bottles and brickbats, and the police who were present in considerable numbers seemed not to be liking it much. It must be rotten being policeman on these occasions. Anyone who has got a bottle can throw it at you, but if you throw back, the yell of police brutality goes up and there are editorials in the papers next day.

But the mildest cop can stand only so much, and it seemed to me, for I am pretty shrewd in the matters, that in about another shake of a duck's tail hell's foundations would be starting to quiver. I hoped nobody would scratch my paint.

Leading the procession, I saw with surprise, was a girl I knew. In fact, I had once asked her to marry me. Her name was Vanessa Cook, and I had met her at a cocktail party, and such was her radiant beauty that it was only a couple of minutes after I had brought her a martini and one of those little sausages on sticks that I was saying to myself, 'Bertram, this is a good thing. Push it along.'

And in due season I suggested a merger. But apparently I was not the type, and no business resulted.

This naturally jarred the Wooster soul a good deal at the moment, but reviewing the dead past now I could see that my guardian angel had been on the job all right and had known what was good for me.

I mean, radiant beauty is all very well, but it isn't everything. What sort of a married life would I have had with the little woman perpetually going on protest marches and expecting me to be at her side throwing bottles at the constabulary? It made me shudder to think what I might have let myself in for if I had been a shade more fascinating. Taught me a lesson, that did – viz. never to lose faith in your guardian angel because these guardian angels are no fools.

Vanessa Cook was accompanied by a beefy bloke without a hat in whom I recognized another old acquaintance, O. J. (Orlo) Porter to wit, who had been on the same staircase with me at Oxford. Except for borrowing an occasional cup of sugar from one another and hulloing when we met on the stairs we had never been really close, he being a prominent figure at the Union, where I was told he made fiery far-to-the-left speeches, while I was more the sort that is content just to exist beautifully.

Nor did we get together in our hours of recreation, for his idea of a good time was to go off with a pair of binoculars and watch birds, a thing that has never appealed to me. I can't see any percentage in it. If I meet a bird, I wave a friendly hand at it, to let it know that I wish it well, but I don't want to crouch behind a bush observing its habits.

So, as I say, Orlo Porter was in no sense a buddy of mine, but we had always got on all right and I still saw him every now and then.

Everybody at Oxford had predicted a pretty hot political future for him, but it hadn't got started yet. He was now in the employment of the London and Home Counties Insurance Company and earned the daily b. by talking poor saps – I was one of them – into taking out policies for larger amounts than they would have preferred.

Making fiery far-to-the-left speeches naturally fits a man for selling insurance, enabling him to find the *mot juste* and enlarging the vocabulary. I for one had been corn before his sickle, as the expression is.

The bottle-throwing had now reached the height of its fever and I was becoming more than ever nervous about my paint, when all of a sudden there occurred an incident which took my mind off the

sudden there occurred an incident which took my mind off that subject. The door of the car opened and what the papers call a well-nourished body, male, leaped in and took a seat beside me.

Gave me a bit of a start, I don't mind admitting, the Woosters not being accustomed to this sort of thing so soon after breakfast. I was about to ask to what I was indebted for the honour of this visit when I saw that what I had drawn was Orlo Porter and I divined that after the front of the procession had passed from my view he must have said or done something which London's police force could not overlook, making instant flight a must. His whole demeanour was that of the hart that pants for cooling streams when heated in the chase.

Well, you don't get cooling streams in the middle of the metropolis, but there was something I could do to give his morale a shot in the arm. I directed his attention to the Drones Club scarf lying on the seat, at the same time handing him my hat. He put them on, and the rude disguise proved effective. Various rozzers came along, but they were looking for a man without a hat and he was definitely hatted, so they passed us by. Of course, I was bareheaded, but one look at me was enough to tell them that this polished boulevardier could not possibly be the dubious character they were after. And a few minutes later the crowd had melted.

'Drive on, Wooster,' said Orlo. 'Get a move on, blast you.'

He spoke irritably, and I remembered that he had always been an irritable chap, as who would not have been, having to go through life with a name like Orlo, and peddling insurance when he had hoped to electrify the House of Commons with his molten eloquence. I took no umbrage, accordingly, for umbrage is the thing you take when people start ordering you about, making allowances for his state of mind. I drove on, and he said 'Phew' and removed a bead of persp. from the brow.

I hardly knew what to do for the best. He was still panting like a hart, and some fellows who pant like harts enjoy telling you all about it, while others prefer a tactful silence. I decided to take my chance.

'Spot of trouble?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Often the way during these protest marches. What happened?'

'I socked a cop.'

I could see why he was a bit emotional. Socking cops is a thing that should be done sparingly, if at all. I resumed the quiz.

'Any particular reason? Or did it just seem a good idea at the time?'

He gnashed a tooth or two. He was a red-headed chap, and my experience of the red-headed sort is that you can always expect high blood pressure from them in times of stress. The first Queen Elizabeth had red hair, and look what she did to Mary Queen of Scots.

'He was arresting the woman I love.'

I could understand how this might well have annoyed him. I have loved a fair number of women in my time, though it always seems to wear off after a while, and I should probably have drained the bitter cup a bit if I had seen any of them pinched by the police.

'What had she done?'

'She was heading the procession with me and shouting a good deal as always happens on these occasions when the emotions of a generous girl are stirred. He told her to stop shouting. She said there was a free country and she was entitled to shout as much as she pleased. He said not if she was shouting the sort of things she was shouting, and she called him a Cossack and socked him. Then he arrested her, and I socked him.'

A pang of pity for the stricken officer passed through me. Orlo, as I have said, was well-nourished, and Vanessa was one of those large girls who pack a hefty punch. A cop socked by both of them would have entertained no doubt as to his having been in a fight.

But this was not what was occupying my thoughts. At the words 'she was heading the procession with me' I had started visibly. It seemed to me that, coupled with that 'woman I love' stuff, they could mean only one thing.

'Good Lord,' I said. 'Is Vanessa Cook the woman you love?'

'She is.'

'Nice girl,' I said, for there is never any harm in giving the old salve.

'And, of course, radiant-beauty-wise in the top ten.'

A moment later I was regretting that I had pitched it so strong, for the effect on Orlo was more unpleasant. His eyes bulged, at the same time flashing, as if he were on the verge of making a fiercer far-to-the-left speech.

'You know her?' he said, and his voice was low and guttural, like that of a bulldog which has attempted to swallow a chump chop and only got it down half-way.

I saw that I would do well to watch my step, for it was evident that what I have heard Jeeves call the green-eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on was beginning to feel the rush of lightning beneath its keel. You never know what may happen when the g.-e.

m. takes over.

m. takes over.

'Slightly,' I said. 'Very slightly. We just met for a moment at some cocktail party or other.'

'That was all?'

'That was all.'

'You were not – how shall I put it? – in any sense intimate?'

'No, no. Simply on Good-morning-good-morning-lovely-morning- is-it-not terms if I happened to run into her in the street.'

'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

I had said the right thing. He went off the boil, and when he next spoke, it was without bulldog and chump chop effects.

'You call her a nice girl. That puts in a nutshell my own opinion of her.'

'And she, I imagine, thinks highly of you?'

'Correct.'

'You're engaged, possibly?'

'Yes.'

'Many happy returns.'

'But we can't get married because of her father.'

'He objects?'

'Strongly.'

'But surely you don't have to have Father's consent in these enlightened days?'

A look of pain came into his face and he writhed like an electric fan.

It was plain that my words had touched a sore s.

'You do if he is trustee for your money and you don't make enough at your job to marry on. My Uncle Joe left me enough to get married to twenty girls. He was Vanessa's father's partner in one of those big provision businesses. But I can't touch it because he made old Cook my trustee, and Cook refuses to part.'

'Why?'

'He disapproves of my political views. He says he has no intention of encouraging any damned Communists.'

I think at this juncture I may have looked askance at him a bit. I hadn't realized that that was wh

he was, and it rather shocked me, because I'm not any too keen on Communists. However, he was my guest, so to speak, so I merely said that that must have been unpleasant, and he said Yes, very unpleasant, adding that only Cook's grey hairs had saved him from getting plugged in the eye, which shows that it's not such a bad thing to let your hair go grey.

'And in addition to disliking my political views he considers that I have led Vanessa astray. He has heard about her going on these protest marches, and he considers me responsible. But for me, he says, she would never have done such a thing, and that if she ever made herself conspicuous and got her name in the papers, she would come straight home and stay there. He has a big house in the country with a stable of racehorses, as he can well afford to after country with a stable of racehorses as he can well afford to after his years of grinding the faces of the widow and the orphan.'

I could have corrected him here, pointing out that you don't grind people's faces by selling the pressed beef and potato chips at a lower price than they would be charged elsewhere, but, as I say, he was my guest, so I refrained. I was conscious of a passing thought that Vanessa Cook would not be remaining long in London now that she had developed this habit of socking policemen, but I did not share this with Orlo Porter, not wishing to rub salt into the wound.

'But let's not talk about it any more,' he said, closing the subject with a bang. 'You can drop me anywhere round here. Thanks for the ride.'

'Don't mention it.'

'Where are you going?'

'Harley Street, to see a doctor. I've got spots on my chest.'

The effect of this disclosure was rather remarkable. A keen go-getter look came into his face, and I could seem that Orlo Porter the lover had been put in storage for the time being, his place taken by Orlo Porter the zealous employee of the London and Home Counties Insurance Company.

'Spots?' he said.

'Pink,' I said.

'Pink spots,' he said. 'That's serious. You'd better take out a policy with me.'

I reminded him that I had already done so. He shook his head.

'Yes, yes, yes, but that was only for accidents. What you must have now is a life policy, and more fortunately,' he said, drawing papers from his pocket like a conjuror taking rabbits from a hat, 'I happen to have one on me. Sign here, Wooster,' he said, this time producing a fountain pen.

And such was his magnetism that I signed there. He registered approval.

'You have done the wise thing, Wooster. Whatever the doctor may tell you when you see him, however brief your span of life, it will be a comfort to you to know that your widow and the little ones are provided for. Drop me here, Wooster.'

I dropped him, and drove on to Harley Street.

CHAPTER THREE

In spite of being held up by the protest march I was a bit early for my appointment, and was informed on arrival that the medicine man was tied up for the moment with another gentleman. I took a seat and was flitting idly through the pages of an *Illustrated London News* of the previous December when the door of E. Jimpson Murgatroyd's private lair opened and there emerged an elderly character with one of those square, empire-building faces, much tanned as if he was accustomed to sitting out the sun without his parasol. Seeing me, he drank me in for a while and then said 'Hullo', and conceivably my emotion when I recognized him as Major Plank the explorer and Rugby football aficionado, whom I had last seen at his house in Gloucestershire when he was accusing me of trying to get five quid out of him under false pretences. A groundless charge, I need scarcely say, self being as pure as the driven snow, if not purer, but things had got a bit difficult and the betting was that they would become difficult now. I sat waiting for him to denounce me and was wondering what the harvest would be when he spoke, to my astonishment, in the most bonhomous way, as if we were old buddies.

'We've met before. I never forget a face. Isn't your name Allen or Allenby or Alexander or something?'

'Wooster,' I said, relieved to the core. I had been anticipating a painful scene. He clicked his tongue. 'I could have sworn it was something beginning with Al. It's this malaria of mine. Picked it up in Equatorial Africa, and it affects my memory. So you've changed your name, have you? Secret enemies after you?'

'No, no secret enemies.'

'That's generally why one changes one's name. I had to change mine that time I shot the chief of the 'Mgombis. In self-defence, of course, but that made no difference to his widows and surviving relatives who were looking for me. If they had caught me, they would have roasted me alive over a slow fire, which is a thing one always wants to avoid. But I baffled them. Plank was the man they were trying to contact, and it never occurred to them that somebody called George Bernard Shaw could be the chap they were after.'

They are not very bright in those parts. Well, Wooster, how have you been since we last met? Pretty bobbish?'

'Oh, fine, thanks, except that I've got spots on my chest.'

'Spots? That's bad. How many?'

I said I had not actually taken a census, but there were quite a few, and he shook his head gravely.

'Might be bubonic plague or possibly sprue or schistosomiasis. One of my native bearers got spots on his chest, and we buried him before sundown. Had to. Delicate fellows, these native bearers, though you wouldn't think so to look at them. Catch everything that's going around – sprue, bubonic plague, schistosomiasis, jungle fever, colds in the head – the lot. Well, Wooster, it's been nice seeing you again. I would ask you to lunch, but I have a train to catch. I'm off to the country.'

He left me, as you may imagine, in something of a twitter. Bertram Wooster, as is well known, is intrepid and it takes a lot to scare the pants off him. But his talk of native bearers who had to be buried before sundown had caused me not a little anxiety. Nor did the first sight of E. Jimpson Murgatroyd do anything to put me at my ease.

Tipton had warned me that he was a gloomy old buster, and a gloomy old buster was what he proved to be. He had sad, brooding eyes and long whiskers, and his resemblance to a frog which had been looking on the dark side since it was a slip of a tadpole sent my spirits right down into the basement.

However, as so often happens when you get to know a fellow better, he turned out to be not near

as pessimistic a Gawd-help-us as he appeared to be at first sight. By the time he had weighed me and tied that rubber thing round my biceps and felt my pulse and tapped me all over like a whiskered woodpecker he had quite brightened up and words of good cheer were pouring out of him like ginger beer from a bottle.

'I don't think you have much to worry about,' he said.

'You don't?' I said, considerably bucked up. 'Then it isn't sprue or schistosomiasis?'

'Of course it is not. What gave you the idea it might be?'

'Major Plank said it might. The chap who was in here before me.'

'You shouldn't listen to people, especially Plank. We were at school together. Barmy Plank was used to call him. No, the spots are of no importance. They will disappear in a few days.'

'Well, that's a relief,' I said, and he said he was glad I was pleased.

'But,' he added.

This chipped a bit off my *joie de vivre*.

'But what?'

He was looking like a minor prophet about to rebuke the sins of the people – it was the whiskered that did it mostly, though the eyebrows helped. I forgot to mention that he had bushy eyebrows – and that helped. I forgot to mention that he had bushy eyebrows – and I could see that this was where I got the bad news.

'Mr Wooster,' he said, 'you are a typical young man about town.'

'Oh, thanks,' I responded, for it sounded like a compliment, and one always likes to say the civil thing.

'And like all young men of your type you pay no attention to your health. You drink too much.'

'Only at times of special revelry. Last night, for instance, I was helping a pal to celebrate the happy conclusion of love's young dream, and it may be that I became a mite polluted, but that rarely happens. One Martini Wooster, some people call me.'

He paid no attention to my frank manly statement, but carried on regardless.

'You smoke too much. You stay up too late at night. You don't get enough exercise. At your age you ought to be playing Rugby football for the old boys of your school.'

'I didn't go to a Rugger school.'

'Where did you go?'

'Eton.'

'Oh,' he said, and he said it as if he didn't think much of Eton. 'Well, there you are. You do all the things I have said.'

You abuse your health in a hundred ways. Total collapse may come at any moment.'

'At any moment?' I quavered.

'At any moment?' I quavered.

'At any moment. Unless –'

'Unless?' Now, I felt, he was talking.

'Unless you give up this unwholesome London life. Go to the country. Breathe pure air. Go to bed early. And get plenty of exercise. If you do not do this, I cannot answer for the consequences.'

He had shaken me. When a doctor, even if whiskered, tells you he cannot answer for the consequences, that's strong stuff. But I was not dismayed, because I had spotted a way of following his advice without anguish. Bertram Wooster is like that. He thinks on his feet.

'Would it be all right,' I asked, 'if I went to stay with my aunt in Worcestershire?'

He weighed the question, scratching his nose with his stethoscope.

He had been doing this at intervals during our get-together, being evidently one of the scratchers like Barbara Frietchie. The poet Nash would have taken to him.

'I see no objection to your staying with your aunt, provided the conditions are right. Whereabouts in Worcestershire does she live?'

'Near a town called Market Snodsbury.'

'Is the air pure there?'

'Excursion trains are run for people to breathe it.'

'Your life would be quiet?'

'Practically unconscious.'

'No late hours?'

'None. The early dinner, the restful spell with a good book or the crossword puzzle and so to bed.'

'Then by all means do as you suggest.'

'Splendid. I'll ring her up right away.'

The aunt to whom I alluded was my good and deserving Aunt Dahlia, not to be confused with my Aunt Agatha who eats broken bottles and is strongly suspected of turning into a werewolf at the time of the full moon. Aunt Dahlia is as good a sort as ever said

'Tally Ho' to a fox, which she frequently did in her younger days when out with the Quorn of Pytchley. If she ever turned into a werewolf, it would be one of those jolly breezy werewolves whom it is a pleasure to know.

It was very satisfactory that he had given me the green light without probing further, for an extended quiz might have revealed that Aunt Dahlia has a French cook who defies competition, and I need scarcely explain that the first thing a doctor does when you tell him you are going to a house where there's a French cook is to put you on a diet.

'Then that's that,' I said, all buck and joviality. 'Many thanks for your sympathetic co-operation. Lovely weather we are having, are we not? Good morning, good morning, good morning.'

And I slipped him a purse of gold and went off to phone Aunt Dahlia.

I had given up all idea of driving to Brighton for lunch. I had stern work before me – viz. cadging an invitation from this aunt, sometimes a tricky task. In her darker moods, when some domestic upheaval is troubling her, she has been known to ask me if I have a home of my own and, if I have, why the hell I don't stay in it.

I got her after the delays inseparable from telephoning a remote hamlet like Market Snodsbury where the operators are recruited exclusively from the Worcestershire branch of the Jukes family.

'Hullo, aged relative,' I began, as suavely as I could manage.

'Hullo to you, you young blot on Western civilization,' she responded in the ringing tones with which she had once rebuked hounds for taking time off to chase rabbits. 'What's on your mind, if any? Talk quick, because I'm packing.'

I didn't like the sound of this.

'Packing?' I said. 'Are you going somewhere?'

'Yes, to Somerset, to stay with friends of mine, the Briscoes.'

'Oh, curses.'

'Why?'

'I was hoping I might come to you for a short visit.'

'Well, sucks to you, young Bertie, you can't. Unless you'd like to rally round and keep Tom's company.'

I h'm-ed at this. I am very fond of Uncle Tom, but the idea of being cooped up alone with him in his cabin didn't appeal to me. He collects old silver and is apt to hold you with a glittering eye and take your head off about sconces and foliations and gadroon borders, and my interest in these is what you might call tepid. 'No,' I said.

'Thanks for the kind invitation, but I think I'll take a cottage somewhere.'

Her next words showed that she had failed to grasp the gist.

~~'What is all this?' she queried. 'I don't get it. Why have you got to go anywhere? Are you on the run from the police?'~~

~~'Doctor's orders.'~~

~~'What are you talking about? You've always been as fit as ten fiddles.'~~

~~'Until this morning, when spots appeared on my chest.'~~

~~'Spots?'~~

~~'Pink.'~~

~~'Probably leprosy.'~~

~~'The doc thinks not. His view is that they are caused by my being a typical young man about town who doesn't go to bed early enough.'~~

~~He says I must leg it to the country and breathe pure air, so I shall need a cottage.'~~

~~'With honeysuckle climbing over the door and old Mister Moon peeping in through the window.'~~

~~'That sort of thing. Any idea how one sets about getting a cottage of that description?'~~

~~'I'll find you one. Jimmy Briscoe has dozens. And Maiden Eggesford, where he lives, is not far from the popular seaside resort of Bridmouth-on-Sea, notorious for its invigorating air. Corpses from Bridmouth-on-Sea leap from their biers and dance round the maypole.'~~

~~'Sounds good.'~~

~~'Sounds good.'~~

~~'I'll drop you a line when I've got the cottage. You'll like Maiden Eggesford. Jimmy has a racing stable, and there's a big meeting coming on soon at Bridmouth; so you'll have not only pure air but entertainment. One of Jimmy's horses is running, and most of the wise money is on it, though there is a school of thought that maintains that danger is to be expected from a horse belonging to a Mr Cooper. And now for heaven's sake get off the wire. I'm busy.'~~

~~So far, I said to myself as I put back the receiver, so glad I would have preferred, of course, to be going to the aged relative's home, where Anatole her superb chef dished up his mouth-waterers, but with the Woosters can rough it, and life in a country cottage with the aged relative.~~

~~just around the corner would be a very different thing from a country cottage without her to come through with conversation calculated to instruct, elevate and amuse.~~

~~All that remained now was to break the news to Jeeves, and I rather shrank from the prospect.~~

~~You see, we had practically settled on a visit to New York, and I knew he was looking forward to it. I don't know what he does in New York, but whatever it is it's something he gets a big kick out of and disappointment, I feared, would be inevitable.~~

~~'Jeeves,' I said when I had returned to the Wooster GHQ, 'I'm afraid I have bad news.'~~

~~'Indeed, sir? I am sorry to hear that.'~~

~~One of his eyebrows had risen about an eighth of an inch, and I knew he was deeply stirred because I had rarely seen him raise an eyebrow more than a sixteenth of an inch. He had, of course, leaped to the conclusion that I was about to tell him that the medicine man had given me three months to live, or possibly two.~~

~~medicine man had given me three months to live, or possibly two.~~

~~'Mr Murgatroyd's diagnosis was not encouraging?'~~

~~I hastened to relieve his apprehensions.~~

~~'Yes, as a matter of fact it was. Most encouraging. He said the spots *qua* spots . . . Is it *qua*?'~~

~~'Perfectly correct, sir.'~~

~~'His verdict was that the spots *qua* spots didn't amount to a row of beans and could be disregarded. They will pass by me like the idle wind which I respect not.'~~

~~'Extremely gratifying, sir.'~~

'Extremely, as you say. But pause before you go out and dance in the streets, because there's more to come. It was to this that I was alluding when I said I had bad news. I've got to withdraw to the country and lead a quiet life. He says if I don't, he cannot answer for the consequences. So I'm afraid New York is off.'

It must have been a severe blow, but he bore it with the easy nonchalance of a Red Indian at the stake. Not a cry escaped him, merely an 'Indeed, sir?', and I tried to point out the bright side.

'It's a disappointment for you, but it's probably an excellent thing.'

Everybody in New York is getting mugged these days or shot by youths, and being mugged and shot by youths doesn't do a fellow any good. We shall avoid all that sort of thing at Maiden Eggesford.'

'Sir?'

'Down in Somerset. Aunt Dahlia is visiting friends there and is going to get me a cottage. It's near Bridmouth-on-Sea. Have you ever been to Bridmouth?'

'Frequently, sir, in my boyhood, and I know Maiden Eggesford well.'

An aunt of mine lives there.'

'And an aunt of mine is going there. What a coincidence.'

I spoke blithely, for this obviously made everything hotsytotsy. He had probably been looking on the beetling off to the country as going into the wilderness, and the ecstasy of finding that the first thing he would set eyes on would be a loved aunt must have been terrific.

So that was that. And having got the bad news broken, I felt at liberty to turn the conversation on other topics, and I thought he would be interested in hearing about my encounter with Plank.

'I got a shock at the doc's, Jeeves.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Do you remember Major Plank?'

'The name seems vaguely familiar, sir, but only vaguely.'

'Throw the mind back. The explorer bloke who accused me of trying to chisel him out of five quid and was going to call the police, and you came along and said you were Inspector Witherspoon of Scotland Yard and that I was a notorious crook whom you had been after for ages, and I was known as an Alpine foe because I always wore an Alpine hat. And you took me away.'

'Ah, yes, sir, I remember now.'

'I ran into him this morning. He remembered my face, but nothing more except that he said I knew my name began with Al.'

'A most unnerving experience, sir.'

'Yes, it rattled me more than somewhat. It's a great relief to think that I shall never see him again.'

'I can readily understand your feelings, sir.'

In due course Aunt Dahlia rang to say that she had got a cottage for me and to let her know what day I would be arriving.

And so began what I suppose my biographers will refer to as The Maiden Eggesford Horror – possibly The Curious Case Of The Cat Which Kept Popping Up When Least Expected.

CHAPTER FOUR

I left for Maiden Eggesford a couple of days later in the old two-seater. Jeeves had gone on ahead with the luggage and would be there to greet me on my arrival, no doubt all braced and refreshed from communing with his aunt.

It was in jocund mood that I set forth. There were rather more astigmatic loonies sharing the road with me than I could have wished, but that did nothing to diminish my euphoria, as I have heard called. The weather couldn't have been better, blue skies and sunshine all over the place, and to put the frosting on the cake E. Jimpson Murgatroyd had been one hundred per cent right about the spots. The car had completely disappeared, leaving not a wrack behind, and the skin on my chest was back to its normal alabaster.

I reached journey's end at about the hour of the evening cocktail and got my first glimpse of the rural haven which was to be the Wooster home for I didn't know how long.

Well, I had had a sort of idea that there would be what they call subtle but well-marked differences between Maiden Eggesford and such resorts as Paris and Monte Carlo, and a glance told me I had not erred. It was one of those villages where there isn't much to do except walk down the main street and look at the Jubilee watering-trough and then walk up the main street and look at the Jubilee watering-trough from the other side. E. Jimpson Murgatroyd would have been all for it. 'Oh boy,' I could hear him saying, 'this is the stuff to give the typical young man about town.' The air, as far as I could tell from the first few puffs, seemed about as pure as could be expected, and I looked forward to a healthy and invigorating stay.

The only thing wrong with the place was that it appeared to be haunted, for as I alighted from the car I distinctly saw the phantasmic wraith of Major Plank. It was coming out of the local inn, the Goose and Grasshopper, and as I gazed at it with bulging eyes it vanished round a corner, leaving me, I need scarcely say, in something of a twitter. I am not, as I mentioned earlier, a fussy man, but nobody likes to have spectres horsing around, and for a while my jocund mood became a bit blue about the edges.

I speedily pulled myself together. 'Twas but a momentary illusion, I said to myself. I reasoned the thing out. If Plank had come to a sticky end since I had seen him last and had started on a haunting career, I said to myself, why should he be haunting Maiden Eggesford when the whole of equatorial Africa was open to him? He would be much happier scaring the daylights out of natives whom he had cause to dislike – the widows and surviving relatives of the late chief of the 'Mgombis, for instance.

Fortified by these reflections, I went into the cottage.

A glance told me it was all right. I think it must have been built for an artist or somebody like that, for it had all the modern cons including electric light and the telephone, being in fact more desirable bijou residence than a cottage.

Jeeves was there, and he brought me a much-needed refresher –

in deference to E. Jimpson Murgatroyd a dry ginger ale. Sipping it, I decided to confide in him for in spite of the clarity with which I had reasoned with myself I was still not altogether convinced that what I had seen had not been a phantom. True, it had looked solid enough, but I believe the best ghosts often do.

'Most extraordinary thing, Jeeves,' I said, 'I could have sworn I saw Major Plank coming out of the pub just now.'

'No doubt you did, sir. Major Plank would be quite likely to come to the village. He is the guest of Mr Cook of Eggesford Court.'

You could have knocked me down with a cheese straw.

'You mean he's *here*'?

'Yes, sir.'

I was astounded. When he had told me he was off to the country, I had naturally assumed that he meant he was returning to his home in Gloucestershire. Not, of course, that there's any reason why someone who lives in Gloucestershire shouldn't visit Somerset. Aunt Dahlia lives in Worcestershire and she was visiting Somerset. You have to look at these things from every angle.

Nevertheless, I was perturbed.

'I'm not sure I like this, Jeeves.'

'No, sir?'

'He may remember what our last meeting was all about.'

'It should not be difficult to avoid him, sir.'

'Something in that. Still, what you say has given me a shock.

Plank is the last person I want in my neighbourhood. I think, as my nervous system has rather taken the knock, we might discard this ginger ale and substitute for it a dry martini.'

'Very good, sir.'

'Murgatroyd will never know.'

'Precisely, sir.'

And so, having breathed considerable quantities of pure air and taken a couple of refreshing looks at the Jubilee watering-trough, to bed early, as recommended by E. Jimpson Murgatroyd.

The result of this following of doctor's orders was sensational. Say what you might about his whiskers and his habit of looking as if he had been attending the funeral of a dear friend, E. Jimpson knew his job. After about ten hours of restful sleep I sprang from between the sheets, leaped to the bathroom, dressed with a song on my lips and headed for the breakfast table like a two-year-old. I had cleaned up the eggs and b., and got the toast and marmalade down the hatch to the last crumb with all the enthusiasm of a tiger of the jungle tucking into its ration of coolie, and was smoking a soothing cigarette, when the telephone rang and Aunt Dahlia's voice came booming over the wire.

'Hullo, old ancestor,' I said, and it was a treat to hear me, so full of ginger and loving kindness was my diction. 'A very hearty good morning to you, aged relative.'

'You've got here, have you?'

'In person.'

'So you're still alive. The spots didn't turn out to be fatal.'

'They've entirely disappeared,' I assured her. 'Gone with the wind.'

'That's good. I wouldn't have liked introducing a piebald nephew to the Briscoes, and they wanted you to come to lunch today.'

'Vastly civil of them.'

'Have you a clean collar?'

'Several, with immaculate shirts attached.'

'Don't wear that Drones Club tie.'

'Certainly not,' I agreed. If the Drones Club tie has a fault, it is a little on the loud side and should not be sprung suddenly on nervous people and invalids, and I had no means of knowing if Mrs Briscoe was one of these. 'What time is the binge?'

'One-thirty.'

'Expect me then with my hair in a braid.'

The invitation showed a neighbourly spirit which I applauded, and I said as much to Jeeves.

'They sound good eggs, these Briscoes.'

'I believe they give uniform satisfaction, sir.'

'Aunt Dahlia didn't say where they lived.'

'At Eggesford Hall, sir.'

~~'How does one get there?'~~

'One proceeds up the main street of the village to the high road, where one turns to the left. You cannot miss the house. It is large and stands in extensive grounds. It is a walk of about a mile and a half, if you were intending to walk.'

'I think I'd better. Murgatroyd would advise it. You, I take it, in my absence will go and hobnob with your aunt. Have you seen her yet?'

'No, sir. I learn from the lady behind the bar of the Goose and Grasshopper, where I looked in on the night of my arrival, that she has gone to Liverpool for her annual holiday.'

Liverpool, egad! Sometimes one feels that aunts live for pleasure alone.

I made an early start. If these Briscoes were courting my society, I wanted to give them as much of it as possible.

Reaching the high road, where Jeeves had told me to turn to the left, I thought I had better make sure. He had spoken confidently, but it is always well to get a second opinion. And by jove I found that he had goofed. I accosted a passing centenarian – everybody in Maiden Eggesford seemed to be about a hundred and fifty, no doubt owing to the pure air – and asked which way I turned for Eggesford Court, and he said to the right. It just showed how even Jeeves can be mistaken.

On one point, however, he had been correct. A large house, he had said, standing in extensive grounds, and I had been walking what must have been a mile and a half when I came in sight of just such a residence, standing in grounds such as he had described. There were gates opening on a long drive, and I was starting to walk up this, when it occurred to me that I could save time by cutting across country, because the house I could see through the trees was a good deal to the north-northeast. They make these drives winding so as to impress visitors. Bless my soul, the visitor says, this drive must be three-quarters of a mile long; shows how rich the chap is.

Whether I was singing or not I can't remember – more probably whistling – but be that as it may, I made good progress, and I had just come abreast of what looked like stables when there appeared from nowhere a cat.

from nowhere a cat.

It was a cat of rather individual appearance, being black in its general colour scheme but with splashes of white about the ribs and also on the tip of its nose. I chirruped and twiddled my fingers, which is my custom on these occasions, and it advanced with its tail up and rubbed its nose against my leg in a manner that indicated clearly that in Bertram Wooster it was convinced that it had found a kindred soul and one of the boys.

Nor had its intuition led it astray. One of the first poems I ever learned – I don't know who wrote it, probably Shakespeare – ran: I love little pussy; her coat is so warm;

And if I don't hurt her, she'll do me no harm; and that is how I have been all my life. Ask any cat with whom I have had dealings what sort of a chap I am cat-wise, and it will tell you that I am a thoroughly good egg in whom complete confidence can safely be placed.

Cats who know me well, like Aunt Dahlia's Augustus, will probably allude to my skill in scratching them behind the ear.

I scratched this one behind the ear, and it received the attention with obvious gratification, purring like the rumble of distant thunder.

Cordial relations having now been established, I was proceeding to what you might call Phase Two – viz. picking it up in my arms in order to tickle its stomach – when the welkin was split by a stentorian 'Hi'.

There are many ways of saying 'Hi'. In America it is a pleasant form of greeting, often employed

as a substitute for 'Good morning'. Two friends meet. One of them says 'Hi, Bill.' The other replies 'Hi, George.' Then Bill says 'Is this hot enough for you?', and George says that what he minds is not the heat but the humidity, and they go on their way.

But this 'Hi' was something very different. I believe the sort of untamed savages Major Planchette mixes with do not go into battle shouting 'Hi', but if they did the sound would be just like the uncouth roar which had nearly shattered my eardrums. Turning, I perceived a red-faced little half-portuguese brandishing a hunting crop I didn't much like the look of. I have never been fond of hunting crops since at an early age I was chased for a mile across difficult country by an uncle armed with one, who had found me smoking one of his cigars.

In frosty weather I can still feel the old wounds.

But now I wasn't really perturbed. This, I took it, was the Colonel Briscoe who had asked me to lunch, and though at the moment he had the air of one who would be glad to dissect me with a blunt knife, better conditions would be bound to prevail as soon as I mentioned my name. I mean, you don't ask a fellow to lunch and start assaulting and battering him as soon as he clocks in.

I mentioned it, accordingly, rather surprised by his size, for I had thought they made colonels somewhat larger. Still, I suppose they come in all sizes, like potatoes or, for the matter of that, girls.

Vanessa Cook, for instance, was definitely on the substantial side, whereas others who had turned me down from time to time were practically midgets.

'Wooster, Bertram,' I said, tapping my chest.

I had anticipated an instant cooling of the baser passions, possibly a joyful cry and a 'How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?'

accompanied by a sunny smile of welcome, but nothing of the sort occurred. He continued to effervesce, his face now a rather pretty purple. He continued to effervesce, his face now a rather pretty purple.

'What are you doing with that cat?' he demanded hoarsely.

I preserved a dignified calm. I didn't like his tone, but then one often doesn't like people's tones.

'Merely passing the time of day,' I replied with a suavity that became me well.

'You were making away with it.'

'Making a what?'

'Stealing it.'

I drew myself up to my full height, and I shouldn't be surprised if my eyes didn't flash. I have been accused of a good many things in my time, notably by my Aunt Agatha, but never of stealing cats, and the charge gave deep offence to the Wooster pride. Heated words were on the tip of my tongue, but I kept the min status quo, as the expression is. After all, the man was my host.

With an effort to soothe, I said:

'You wrong me, Colonel. I wouldn't dream such a thing.'

'Yes you would, yes you would, yes you would. And don't call me Colonel.'

It was hardly an encouraging start, but I tried again.

'Nice day.'

'Damn the day.'

'Crops coming on nicely?'

'Curse the crops.'

'How's my aunt?'

'How the devil should I know how your aunt is?'

I thought this odd. When you've got an aunt staying with you, you ought to be able to supply enquirers with a bulletin, if only a sketchy one, of her state of health. I began to wonder if the little shrimp I was chatting with wasn't a bit fuzzy in the upper storey. Certainly, as far as the conversation

had gone at present, he would have aroused the professional interest of any qualified brain specialist.

~~But I didn't give up. We Woosters don't. I tried another tack altogether.~~

'It was awfully kind of you to ask me to lunch,' I said.

I don't say he actually frothed at the mouth. There was no question, however, that my words had displeased him:

'Ask you to lunch? Ask you to *lunch*? I wouldn't ask you to lunch –'

I think he was about to add 'with a ten-foot pole', but at this moment from off-stage there came the sound of a robust tenor voice singing what sounded like the song hit from some equatorial African musical comedy, and the next moment Major Plank appeared, and the scales fell from my eyes. Plank being on the premises meant that this wasn't the Briscoe residence by a damn sight. By losing faith in Jeeves and turning to the right on reaching the high road, instead of to the left as he had told me to, I had come to the wrong house.

For an instant I felt like blaming the centenarian, but we Woosters are fair minded and remembered that I had asked him the way to Eggesford Court, which this joint presumably was, and you say Court when you mean Hall, there's bound to be confusion.

'Good Lord,' I said, suffused with embarrassment, 'aren't you Colonel Briscoe?'

He didn't deign to answer that one, and Plank started talking.

'Why, hullo, Wooster,' he said. 'Who would ever have thought of seeing you here? I didn't know you knew Cook.'

'Do you know him?' said the purple chap, evidently stunned by the idea that I could have a respectable acquaintance.

'Of course I know him. Met him at my place in Gloucestershire, though under what circumstances I've forgotten. It'll come back, but at the moment all I know is that he has changed his name. It used to be something beginning with Al, and now it's Wooster. I suppose the original name was something ghastly which he couldn't stand any longer. I knew a man at the United Explorers who changed his name from Buggins to Westmacote-Trevelyan. I thought it very sensible of him, but it didn't do him much good, poor chap, because he had scarcely got used to signing his IOUs Gilbert Westmacote-Trevelyan when he was torn asunder by a lion. Still, that's the way it goes. How did you come out with the doctor, Wooster? Was it bubonic plague?'

I said No, not bubonic plague, and he said he was glad to hear it, because bubonic plague was a joke, ask anyone.

'You staying in these parts?'

'No, I have a cottage in the village.'

'Pity. You could have come here. Been company for Vanessa. But you'll join us at lunch?' said Plank, who seemed to think that a guest you'll join us at lunch?' said Plank, who seemed to think that a guest is entitled to issue invitations to his host's house, which any good etiquette book would have told him is not the case.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm lunching at Eggesford Hall with the Briscoes.'

This caused Cook, who had been silent for some time, probably having trouble with his vocal cords, to snort visibly.

'I knew it! I was right! I knew you were Briscoe's hireling!'

'What are you talking about, Cook?' asked Plank, not abreast.

'Never mind what I'm talking about. I know what I'm talking about.'

'This man is in the pay of Briscoe, and he came here to steal my cat.'

'Why would he steal your cat?'

'You know why he would steal my cat. You know as well as I do that Briscoe stops at nothing. Look at this man. Look at his face. Guilt written all over it. I caught him with the cat in his arms. Ho

him there, Plank, while I go and telephone the police.'

~~And so saying he legged it.~~

I confess to being a little uneasy when I heard him tell Plank to hold me, because I had had some experience of Plank's methods of holding people. I believe I mentioned earlier that at our previous meeting he had proposed to detain me with the assistance of his Zulu knob-kerrie, and he had in his hand now a stout stick, which, if it wasn't a Zulu knob-kerrie, was unquestionably the next best thing.

Fortunately he was in a friendly mood.

'You mustn't mind Cook, Wooster. He's upset. He's been having a spot of domestic trouble. That's why he asked me to come and stay.'

He thought I might have advice to offer. He allowed his daughter Vanessa to go to London to study Art at the Slade, if that's the name of the place, and she got in with the wrong crowd, got pinched by the police and so on and so forth, upon which Cook did the heavy father and jerked her home and told her she had got to stay there till she learned a bit of sense. She doesn't like it, poor girl, but I tell her she's lucky not to be in equatorial Africa, because there if a daughter blots her copybook, her father chops her head off and buries her in the back garden. Well, I hate to see you go, Wooster, but I think you had better be off. I don't say Cook will be back with a shotgun, but you never know. I'll leave, if I were you.' His advice struck me as good. I took it.

CHAPTER FIVE

I headed for the cottage, where I had left the car. By the time I got there I should have done three miles of foot-slogging and I proposed to give the leg muscles a bit of time off, and if E. Jimpson Murgatroyd didn't like it, let him eat cake.

I was particularly anxious to get together with Jeeves and hear what he had to say about the strange experience through which I had just passed, as strange an e. as had come my way in what you might call a month of Sundays.

I could make nothing of the attitude Cook had taken up. Plank's theory that his asperity had been due to the fact that Vanessa had got into the wrong crowd in London seemed to me pure apple sauce. I mean, if your daughter picks her social circle unwisely and starts clobbering the police, you don't necessarily accuse the first person you meet of stealing cats. The two things don't go together.

'Jeeves,' I said, reaching the finish line and sinking into an armchair,
'answer what I am about to ask you frankly. You have known me a good time.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have had every opportunity of studying my psychology.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, would you say I was a fellow who stole cats?'

'No, sir.'

His ready response pleased me not a little. No hesitation, no humming and hawing, just 'No, sir'.

'Exactly what I expected you to say. Just what anyone at the Drones or elsewhere would say. And yet cat-stealing is what I have been accused of.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'By a scarlet-faced blighter named Cook.'

And forthwith, if that's the expression, I told him about my strange e., passing lightly over my not having trusted his directions on reaching the high road. He listened attentively, and when I had finished came as near to smiling as he ever does. That is to say, a muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched slightly as if some flying object such as a mosquito had settled there momentarily.

'I think I can explain, sir.'

It seemed incredible. I felt like Doctor Watson hearing Sherlock Holmes talking about the one hundred and forty-seven varieties of tobacco ash and the time it takes parsley to settle in the butter dish.

'This is astounding, Jeeves,' I said. 'Professor Moriarty wouldn't have lasted a minute with you. You really mean the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle have come together and fallen into their place?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You know all?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Amazing!'

'Elementary, sir. I found the habitues of the Goose and Grasshopper a ready source of information.'

'Oh, you asked the boys in the back room?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And what did they tell you?'

'It appears that bad blood exists between Mr Cook and Colonel Briscoe.'

'They don't like each other, you mean?'

'Precisely, sir.'

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