

I.

WEDNESDAY

I was idling away the pre-cocktail ennui, flicking cards into the coal scuttle, when in butted Jeeves with the quenching tray.

'Your whisky and soda, sir,' he murmured, placing a perfectly judged tumbler at my elbow.

I thanked him with a nod, sinking with ease the six of hearts. 'Be it ever so humble, Jeeves.'

'Sir?'

'There's no place like home.'

'As I am led to believe, sir.'

'I mean, Monte Carlo is all well and good.'

'Sir.'

'But there's only so much baccarat a man can play.'

'Sir.'

'So many promenades he can toe along the front.'

'Sir.'

'So many snails he can winkle out with one of those contraptions.'

'*Pinces à escargots*, sir?'

'Before, one morning, he takes a long, hard look in the mirror and asks: I wonder how Mayfair is muddling along without me?'

'I see, sir.'

'After a while, abroad is always so dashed *abroad*, what?'

'It does have that quality, sir.'

'Thank you for your postcard, by-the-by.' I indicated a seaside panorama mantelpieced between the snuff-boxes. 'I trust the gods smiled down on you in Herne Bay?'

'They did, sir.'

'Could you see the breeze and taste the sun?'

'I could, sir.'

'Did the shrimps jump eagerly into your net, with lemon wedges clamped between their tiny teeth?'

'Almost, sir.'

'Well,' I said, accidentally consigning a joker to the log-basket, 'you seem suffused with joy, jollity, and song, and eager to bop life squarely on the conk.'

'You are too kind, sir.'

'Supper in an hour, would you say?'

I flicked the nine of diamonds, which ricocheted alarmingly off a lampshade. To my amazement, Jeeves snapped the errant card from out of thin air, and then coughed very slightly.

'Concerning supper, sir ...' His answer was a question.

'I'm always concerned about supper. Wouldn't trust a chap who wasn't.'

'I wonder, sir, if I might absent myself this evening?'

I have to admit this rather put a damper on my mood of domestic tranquillity. Master and manservant had just been reunited after a fortnight's dislocation across the Channel, and now welcome's red carpet was being rolled up from under my travel-weary dogs.

‘Really, Jeeves? On my first night back?’

‘Sadly, sir.’

‘I thought tomorrow was your evening for cribbage and gin?’

‘It is, sir, and I must apologise for the belated nature of my entreaty, but I have only just received a telegram from Lord MacAuslan urgently requesting an interview.’

‘So that was the knuckle at the knock?’

‘It was, sir.’

‘Hang on a sec – Lord MacAuslan? Am I dreaming, or didn’t you used to valet for him?’

‘I did, sir, some years ago, prior to his lordship’s departure for Berlin.’

‘I say, Jeeves, I’m not sure I like the sound of this. I mean, lord or no lord, you don’t go snaking another gentleman’s personal gentleman just because you’re sick of German sausage.’

‘Quite so, sir. However, I infer from the content of the telegram that re-employment is not his lordship’s motive. And, if you will permit me, I have no desire to return to Lord MacAuslan’s service.’

‘Too much tartan?’

‘Yes, sir. And I felt his lordship’s fondness for the music and dance of the Scottish Highlands was perhaps a little vigorous for the domestic setting.’

‘So what gives?’

‘Without further information, sir, I would not like to hazard a guess.’

Disappointed though I was, it would have been unreasonably petty to confine the man to barracks merely to peel the spuds for

my supper. We Woosters are capable of more than ‘the frivolous work of polished idleness’ – despite what many an aunt has accused, more often than not in writing.

‘Very well, Jeeves. But inform Lord MacAuslan that he owes me a snifter.’

‘I am most grateful, sir. In anticipation of a favourable response, I took the liberty of laying out some cold game pie, and have iced a split of the ’99.’

‘Champagne, eh?’

‘Yes, sir. I thought it might prove a benison.’

‘Bung it back in the icebox, Jeeves. I’ll biff off to the club and scare up some supper there.’

‘Very good, sir,’ he said, replacing the nine of diamonds into the ivory card case with a pleasingly agile flourish.

It was a ravenous Wooster who stepped out that warm summer’s evening, strolling up Hay Hill and down Dover Street towards the Drones. So it came as something of a blow to find the club’s windows tightly shuttered and its oak firmly sported. I knocked to no avail, when it struck me – the place must still be padlocked for its annual wash and brush-up.

I try whenever possible to escape these weeks of sorrow and lamentation by booking a foreign jaunt to coincide with the fortnight that the Drones Club ceases to buzz. This summer it appeared, for reasons inexplicable, I had undershot my target by several days. Was it, I wondered, a leap year? Expocketing my club diary I found the following annotation:

*During the summer closure, members may obtain
reciprocal hospitality at the Athenaeum.*

The heart sank.

It is custom and practice for London's finer clubs to stagger their summer holidays, alternately admitting members from cousin establishments so that the denizens of clubdom can always drink port in a storm. Bitter experience over many years, however, had taught most club secretaries that reciprocity with the Drones is precisely the specimen of good deed that never goes unpunished.

One memorable August, expatriated Dronesmen took umbrage at the less-than-generous measures dispensed by the barmen of The In & Out club on Piccadilly. They extracted their revenge one moonless night, dismantling a two-seater Rover Nine owned by the president, lowering each part into the basement through an unlocked cellar hatch, and rebuilding the vehicle atop the green baize of the billiard table. By way of nailing their thesis to the door, they topped up the car's petrol tank with *crème de menthe*.

This year, it seemed, the Drones had been spike-bozzled by every club of note, and we were left seeking alms from the Athenaeum – the Club of Last Resort.

With a resigned sigh I set the compass south, crossed Piccadilly, and descended St James's Street – dawdling briefly to window-shop the shoes in Lobb, the hats in Lock, and some dusty burgundy in Berry Bros. Tipping the trilby to the guardsmen outside St James's Palace, I perambulated along Pall Mall

to the corner of Waterloo Place where, opposite Edward VII's newish statue, loomed the Athenaeum's hulking cream edifice.

'Good evening, sir,' an elderly doorman intoned. 'Are you the guest of a member?'

'Actually, I'm a reciprocal, in exile from the Drones, here to see about some supper.'

'Your name, sir?'

'Wooster-comma-Bertram.'

He ran a quill down to the 'W's and then, with a look I've heard described as 'old-fashioned', gestured wearily across an expanse of chequerboard marble towards the coat-racks.

Hatless, gloveless, caneless, and thirsty, I made my way to the bar, only to be met by a sepulchral chill and the forlorn glance of two dog-collared sky pilots nursing a single schooner of sherry.

The barman was languidly polishing a silver tankard with the calculated malice of an Australian leg-spinner.

'Salutations, barkeep! How's business?'

'Business, sir, is slow,' he replied, menacingly. 'Business is often slow.'

'Nobody in from the Drones?'

His insolent eyes traversed the almost empty room. 'I can't see any, sir, can you?'

A wise king once observed that the saddest words in the English language are 'Shall we go straight through to dinner?'

And so it was, with unslaked melancholy, that I turned on my heel and ankled across the hall to the coffee room.

I was accosted at the threshold by the maître d', who was equipped with one of those accents so madly French you feel sure they are working it for a bet.

'*Bonsoir*, monsieur.' He bowed low from the waist. 'Will monsieur be dining alone?'

Behind him stood table after table of dark-suited singletons. In front of each man was a low, metal music-stand that splayed open the spine of some or other book. The diners stared down at their texts as if blinkered, forking mouthfuls as they read and only occasionally missing their mouths and spearing their cheeks. Of amusement, bonhomie, repartee – nothing was doing. The mournful tableau was animated intermittently by tongue-moistened fingers turning sun-faded pages.

'What about the club table?' I enquired.

My host glanced ruefully towards 'Temperance Corner', where three men were eating in slow communal silence, while a fourth slumped napping like a dormouse.

I craned my neck around the corner. 'I don't suppose there's anyone in from the Drones?' The desperation in my voice was, I fear, not well disguised.

At this, the maître d' perked up. 'Ah! Monsieur should 'ave said. This way, if you please!'

He guided me energetically past a brace of bishops towards the far wall, where a brass handle projected from the painted wood panelling.

‘We find that many of our *réciproques* prefer a livelier *ambiance*, monsieur,’ and, with that, he flung open the hidden door with a theatrical swagger.

There was a terrible roar of voices combining, perhaps, the innocent enthusiasm of the Last Night of the Proms with the bloodthirsty vim of a Light Brigade charge.

Some primitive instinct, doubtless acquired from a wily forebear at the Battle of Crécy, prompted me to duck – thereby narrowly avoiding a bread roll hurled with practised accuracy at the Wooster bonce. Every eye turned to follow this well-buttered missile as it arced upwards in a graceful parabola, paused for a second at the crust’s crest, and descended into the main dining-room towards a military gent with a walrus moustache.

The moment of impact was spectacular. The roll landed bang on the bullseye of a bowl of vichyssoise, creating a tidal splash that comprehensively bespattered the old boy’s arms, chest, neck, and face.

The silent room fell silenter still. Even the Drones mob was struck dumb.

And then there was a delicate but distantly audible ‘plonk’ as the military man’s monocle fell into his claret.

Normal service was soon restored by the unmistakable yodel of Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright – ‘Oh, I say, that one had jam on it!’ – followed by the deafening whistles and hoots that characterise Dronesmen at the trough.

Concluding that discretion was the better p. of v., I slid into the private room, closed the door behind me, and braced myself to accept the poggled abuse of my fellow Eggs, Beans, and Crumpets.

Before I sat, though, I hailed a hovering steward. 'I say, might you pop out to the old campaigner who was inadvertently drenched by my friend, and suggest that the Drones Club settles his bill? It's the least we can do.'

'Certainly, sir. I am sure Colonel Stroud-Pringle will be grateful.'

A quick perusal of the panelled room confirmed what I already feared: the last available seat was at the head of the table. This was far from cheering, since Drones tradition dictates that the presiding chair of the 'club table' should only ever be taken by the Youngest Member. Should an old hand sit in this sacred spot through absent-mindedness or inebriation, or because it is the only unoccupied pew, an immediate forfeit is imposed. Depending on the whim of the members present, transgressors can be 'Wined' – obliged to present a case of champagne – or 'Dined' – compelled to eat some horrendous admixture of condiments.

Only a few months back, Pongo Twistleton began speaking in tongues after being obliged to ingest a half-pint beaker filled with mustard, Tabasco, Patum Peperium, and an intensely venomous bloater paste.

Fortunately, the chaps that night were thirstier for champagne than they were hungry for punishment. And so, to the chant of 'Wine him! Wine him!', I summoned some magnums of fizz for the mob, and the saddle of lamb for myself.

The stuffier gentlemen's clubs frown upon members swapping seats during meals – it confuses the staff, and results in some unsuspecting teetotal vegetarian finding his quarterly account jammed with charges for club claret and rump steak. At the Drones, however, members play 'club table musical chairs' by 'cutting in' – as at a dance. The *de jure* procedure is to catch the eye of another member and make a scissoring sign with your fingers. The *de facto* method is to lob cubes of sugar at him until he relents. By the end of most meals, the Drones Club communal table is in a Mad-Hatterish state of confusion.

It was by the more graceful scissoring technique that, at the smoking stage of supper, Montague Montgomery cut in to sit next to me. He was bearing two glasses of Madeira and, so it seemed, the weight of the world.

'What-ho, Bertie. How do we find you?'

'Moister than an oyster, Monty.'

'That's splendid,' he sighed. 'Very splendid. Splendid indeed.' He sipped his wine sheepishly. 'Splendid.'

I'd seen this ovine look before, and steeled myself to take the hardest of lines. 'Moolah or matrimony, Monty?'

'A bit of both, as it happens.'

'How much, when, and for whom?'

'Two thousand pounds—'

I spluttered.

'As soon as poss ...' he paused '... for Florence Craye.'

My splutter collapsed into full-blown asphyxiation.

I appreciate that not everyone will have tracked the travails of Bertram Wilberforce Wooster in fastidious detail. Even one's

most loyal readers must occasionally tuck back the bookmark and protest that enough, for the time being, is jolly well enough. Yet I like to think the name Florence Craye is sufficiently infamous for foghorns to sound up and down the coastline, warning all shipping of hazardous breakers ahead.

Lady Florence, daughter of Percy Craye, Earl of Worplesdon, is, as the punchline goes, a 'curate's egg'. Tall, blonde, and unquestionably willowy, she has a profile that, if not a thousand ships, certainly propelled a punt or two down the Cherwell. Behind these superficial charms, however, lurks a mind like a steel trap.

To girls like Florence, you see, chaps are projects. Whereas angelic souls are content to let sleeping Dronesmen laze, Florentine Furies demand they beg, roll over, and perform all manner of demeaning tricks. When it comes to romance, as I can attest, their *modus operandi* is: 'Find a feller you really like, and change him.'

So, if you see a dashing blade groaning under a weight of dusty books, or staggering from an especially Teutonic opera with a pounding museum headache, it's a racing cert that Florence, or one of her ilk, has dispatched him on a mandatory course of self-improvement.

Sadly, this made Monty an ideal candidate for her attention, since even his boonest companions could not deny that here was a man in dire need of intellectual refurbishment. It's not that he isn't tall, rugged, and gallant. It's just that he's not the brainiest dog in the shop, and seems quite content to remain so.

Monty took advantage of my pulmonary incapacity to press his case. 'Florence has stolen my heart, Bertie, and I am powerless to resist.'