

I.

MONDAY

'Jeeves!' I hollered, springing through the timber of 3A Berkeley Mansions.

'Good evening, sir,' my man replied, emerging, as is his habit, from out of the jungle mists.

'We've cracked it!'

'Sir?'

'The crossword!'

'Very good, sir.'

'The *Times* crossword!'

'I was not aware the *Sporting Times* carried a crossword, sir.'

'*The Times*, Jeeves.'

'I see, sir.' He paused. 'When you say "we", sir?'

'We means me – plus the massed ranks of the membership committee. I don't think I've seen that rabble so intently focused since we disguised Bingo Little as a postman to steal Graydon Hogg's mail.'

'I recall that episode keenly, sir.'

We both stared down at the carpet in sombre reflection.

'Anyway, I've spent a long and arduous luncheon deciphering this.' I lifted the paper aloft.

He looked surprised. 'The entire crossword, sir?'

‘Heavens no! Just Fourteen Down.’

‘LOOT, sir?’

‘You’ve done it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The whole bally box?’

‘Naturally, sir. I find it an engaging way to pass the time while your eggs are boiling, or your bath is running. Whichever is the shorter.’

‘And you *memorise* them?’

‘That would imply too active an effort, sir, though I tend to recall them for a week or so.’

This all seemed highly unlikely, even for one with so capacious a hat size, and so I unfolded the paper and put him to the test.

‘Seven Down: *Death before a hundred is dry enough.*’

‘DEMI-SEC, sir.’

‘DEMISECSIR? Doesn’t fit – doesn’t even make sense.’

‘Forgive me, sir. DEMI ... SEC ... sir.’

‘Eh?’

‘DEMISE – meaning *death* – before C – the Roman numeral for *a hundred* – giving DEMI-SEC – which is *dry enough.*’

‘Like the champagne! Clever. All right, let’s see. Twenty-three Across: *Exhaling very, very loudly during exercise.*’

‘PFFFT, sir.’

‘It’s no use *pf*ing, Jeeves, that’s what it says here!’

‘Forgive me, sir, you misapprehend. The answer is P-F-F-F-T.’

‘How on earth do you fathom that?’

It was, according to Jeeves, embarrassingly simple: the musical term for *very, very loudly* is *fortississimo* – the abbreviation of

which is *fff*— and this occurs *during*— that is to say, in the middle of — *exercise* — as represented by the abbreviation for physical training — *P.T.*

‘Is P-F-F-F-T even a word?’

‘A degree of latitude is commonly permitted with onomatopoeia, sir.’

‘Is it now? What about Thirty-one Down: *Short dash to attempt admission.* Five letters.’

‘Well, sir—’

‘Hold your ponies! I’m determined to unriddle this Sphinx alone. But can you ensure they start delivering a second copy of *The Times*?’

‘Very good, sir.’ He brushed an invisible mote of dust from his sleeve. ‘Incidentally, sir, the decorators are here.’

I groaned.

For several months Jeeves had been vexing me to upspiff my bedroom as part of an elaborate scheme of improvements to the rooms I call home. He is firmly of the opinion that the smell of fresh paint should never be far from one’s nostrils, that carpeting should be as lush as forest moss, and that sofas should be chucked away after each and every sitting. I have, in more jaundiced moods, wondered if he’s taking backhanders from the furniture department of Harrods.

‘Is this vital, Jeeves? Might we not let sleeping rooms lie?’

‘I could not recommend further delay, sir. The paintwork has seen better days, and the brocade is pilling most distressingly.’

He handed me the card of an outfit called Dicks & Rudge, and I followed him to my boudoir where two overalled painters were busy with measuring tapes, discordantly whistling ‘Sonny Boy’ like kettles competing to boil.

‘Permit me to introduce, sir, Mr Fred Dicks and Mr Charles Rudge.’

Charlie wiped and extended his hand. ‘Afternoon, chief. Nice gaff you’ve got ’ere.’

‘I should coco,’ nodded Fred. ‘Very choice.’

‘How long is this all going to take?’ I said a little stiffly, irked that my inner sanctum was so densely populated.

‘That depends, chief. Were you wanting paper or paint?’

‘Paper.’

Charlie in-drew his breath with practised concern. ‘Room this size?’ He turned to Fred, and together they launched into the effortless cross-talk of Palladium patter acts.

‘Furniture out ...’

‘Dust sheets up ...’

‘Strip back ...’

‘Rub down ...’

‘Sugar water ...’

‘Lining paper ...’

‘Cornice and skirting ...’

‘Sockets and switches ...’

‘Make good ...’

‘Furniture back ...’

Charlie shook his head. ‘The thing is, guv, how long is your proverbial piece of string?’

Jeeves was having none of this transparently mercenary flim-flam. ‘I estimate four days, sir. At the very limit.’

‘Yeah,’ conceded Fred, folding like a cheap tent, ‘sounds doable.’

Calculating I could easily decamp to the Drones for such a spell with only minimal hardship, I nodded my grudging consent. ‘Do you have any samples I might see?’

They did: six large pattern-books, ordered by colour and design, which had been carefully arranged on my bed.

Jeeves stepped forward. ‘I have taken the liberty, sir, of inserting bookmarks at several suitable choices. All are appropriate for a room of this size and luminosity, and all would happily complement the existing furnishings.’

I flicked through Jeeves’s suggestions without much joy:

Sarcoline Cartouche

Zinnober Diaper

Malachite Spandril

Jessamy Half-drop

‘Is it just me, or do these all sound like unfortunate medical conditions?’

Fred and Charlie sniggered.

‘Of those marked,’ said Jeeves crisply, ‘I especially commend the *Periwinkle Chevron*, which, if you will permit me, sir, combines delicacy with elegance.’

I studied said pattern.

‘It’s a little . . . *dull*.’

‘Should a bedroom be the locus of tumult, sir?’

Fred and Charlie laughed out loud.

‘Furthermore, sir,’ Jeeves rose above the cheap seats, ‘the *Periwinkle Chevron* is really most soothing.’

There are chaps who defer to their domestics in every respect – from soft furnishings to selection of spouse – and while I usually resist such timid submission, I have, on rare occasions, yielded to Jeeves’s whim on certain sartorial matters. Readers may recall footling contretemps concerning Etonian spats, Alpine hats, plus fours, a white mess-jacket with brass buttons, a cheerful pink necktie, a sprightly check suit, some soft-fronted evening shirts, and a pair of jazzy slippers in the tartan of Clan Wallace.

But if a line is to be drawn between master and servant, it is surely to be drawn at the threshold of one’s personal, private bedroom.

‘Are there any *other* patterns?’ I enquired.

Charlie and Fred looked first at Jeeves, then at each other, and finally at me, before shrewdly concluding that I was the one with the chequebook and pen.

‘Funny you should ask, boss.’ Charlie withdrew from his satchel the sample book he’d clearly been instructed to conceal. ‘There is this.’

Flicking through its pages, it was obvious why Jeeves had disapproved: pattern after pattern of sporting glory and Corinthian

prowess – from schoolboy rugby and village cricket to country-house tennis and college croquet.

And then my eye fell on a gold-plated fizzer.

‘This is more like it!’ I held up a hunting scene replete with foxes, hounds, and horsemen in pink. ‘What think you, Jeeves?’

‘I think, sir, it would suit the saloon bar of a rural public house.’

‘*Au Cointreau*. It is spirited and chipper, and will cheer me every morn.’

‘If I might be permitted to disagree, sir, the *Periwinkle*—’

I’m afraid to say I rather gave Jeeves the squelch.

‘No! My mind is made up. I should like to order,’ I glanced down at the title of my hunting design, ‘*Jorrocks’s Jaunts and Jollities*.’

‘Okey-doke.’ Charlie flipped open his notebook. ‘But it’s going to nudge up the price. Whole lot of extra sweat getting them ’orses, dogs, and foxes straight – ’specially round the wainscot.’

‘So be it: worth every penny.’

There was an uneasy silence.

‘Right,’ said Fred, ‘let’s have a cuppa tea.’

To say you could have cut the domestic atmos. with a knife is putting it a touch strong, but the air was certainly thick with the fog of grievance. Jeeves is accustomed to getting his way in matters of taste and propriety, and is inclined to sulk like a thwarted dachshund on the rare occasions he’s vetoed. But this was my

bedroom, dammit, and mine were the eyes that would close each night and open each dawn to the godawful banality of his *Periwinkle Chevron*.

To put it another way: I decided to dine at the Drones.

* * *

‘Can’t keep away, Mr Wooster?’ Bashford grinned as I drifted back into the lobby and flicked the old Homburg onto a moose horn.

‘So it would seem, Bashers. What news on the Rialto?’

‘Actually, sir, Mr Fink-Nottle was asking after you. He’s gone up to the bar.’

‘Gussie, Gussie, Gussie,’ I sang to myself while striding to the oasis, ‘a guinea to a gooseberry the booby’s in a pickle.’

‘Bertie, I’m in a pickle.’

‘What-ho, Gussie. I had a sort of feeling you might be.’

‘Let me tell you about it—’

‘Might a man before the firing squad be granted a final swig?’

‘Of course, sorry. Have what I’m having.’

‘Barley-water? I don’t think so!’

Gussie Fink-Nottle’s aversion to alcohol was so notorious that many Dronesmen had taken to calling him, with affection, Drink-Nottle. And, frankly, this was no bad thing, for even a sniff of the barmaid’s apron, as they say in the lower sort of

taverns, rendered the man comprehensively doolally. Devotees of my reminiscences may recall the shockingly inebriate prize-day speech he unleashed on the unsuspecting scholars of Market Snodsbury Grammar School – where *many* unfortunate things were said, including a number of criminal slanders against your present correspondent.

‘Barley-water!’ Gussie scoffed. ‘How little you know me. This is a Parisian Blonde – and she’s *tremendously* rich in vitamins.’

‘Since when do you imbibe?’

‘Since Emerald gave me the elbow.’

I leaned across the mahogany to summon from McGarry his swiftest dry Martini – for *this* was newflash stuff.

The last time I’d seen Augustus Fink-Nottle he was sailing off into the purple vapours with a spirited lass by the name of Emerald Stoker. Despite more than a passing resemblance to a befreckled Pekinese, there was much to commend Miss Stoker as a permanent romantic fixture, not least her dab-handed skill in the culinary dept. I was a spectator when she and Gussie had clicked over one of her ambrosial steak-and-kidney puds, and, within the drop of a fork, there had been talk of elopement, talk of America, and talk of special licences from the Archbish. of C.

But now there was talk of elbows, and I was entirely agog.

‘What transpired, Gussie? Don’t tell me Emerald caught vegetarianism?’

‘Worse: she caught *Taricha* anaphylaxis.’

This, as he explained at wearisome length, is a perilous allergy to the toxins exuded by certain species of newt. But to know Gussie for more than a second is to know that even the mildest aversion to the family *Salamandridae* would render any potential suitor utterly out of bounds. So crazed is Gussie for these semi-aquatic blisters, I've long suspected his loathing of liquor was more truly a loyalty to water. And just as dog owners grow to resemble their pets, it pains me to report that the same holds true for obsessive fanciers of newts.

'No wife of mine will have *Taricha* anaphylaxis!' Gussie declared, taking delivery of his second, or possibly third, Parisian Blonde.

'So, in point of fact, Gussie, *you* gave *her* the elbow?'

'Not at all! I didn't *ask* her to become anaphylactic.'

I was musing on how much zippier was Gussie off the wagon, rather than at its reins, when a cry of strangulated anguish rang out.

'What's the hullabaloo, McGarry? Don't tell me we're missing Boot-Finding?'

'No, sir, that's this Sunday. I think what you heard is the investment committee.'

I turned to Gussie in stupefaction. 'We have an *investment* committee?'

'Oh, yes. It's chaired by Fittleworth.'

Every so often, life presents a dilemma upon which the manuals of etiquette are woefully silent, and this was a snorter: whether it demonstrates better breeding to choke oneself into a frothy stupor or to expectorate one's dry Martini across four foot of well-polished bar, and six-foot-two of well-regarded barman.

Being in semi-polite company, and having nothing but esteem for McGarry, I opted for the former, and thus it was some time before I'd amassed sufficient O₂ to gasp out the word: 'Boko?'

The committee was meeting (drinking) in an alcove around the corner. Boko Fittleworth was indeed in the chair, flanked by Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps, Stilton Cheesewright, and Bimbash Kidd.

They were clearly drunk – drunker than even the pre-prandial hour might suggest – and they displayed the waterlogged demeanour of gamblers drowning their sorrows.

'Is this the investment committee I see before me?' I gave a formal bow.

'It is,' said Stilton, with whom relations have often been a tinge unpasteurised.

'I'd no idea you existed.'

'That's because we run the club's finances with the silent efficiency of a Silver Ghost.'

'It didn't sound very silent just now.'

Boko wagged his finger in my approximate direction. 'Our mandate, Bertie, is long-term capital growth underpinned by portfolio diversification.' (The fiscal probity of this statement was enfeebled somewhat by hiccoughs punctuating each word.)

Further interrogation revealed that Boko's idea of 'portfolio diversification' involved hedging a number of hefty equine bets with wagers on Wimbledon, Henley, the Eton–Harrow match, and Freddie Bullivant's performance in the inter-club snooker.

To be fair, this was not as recklessly madcap a plan as it might seem – for although in day-to-day life Boko is essentially innumerate, freezing like a startled fawn when asked to split a cab fare, he has an inexplicable ability to judge form and calculate the most complex of odds.

‘So how are we doing?’ I asked.

‘Fair to middling. Cambridge won the Boat Race, no surprise there, but we made a killing on the length. Goodwood was bad-wood, on account of the mud, but we had a lucky Trooping the Colour, and a fabulous Crufts, so I’d say we’re up to par.’

‘Sorry, *how* does one bet on Trooping the Colour?’

‘How many soldiers faint, and when.’

‘But,’ interrupted Stilton, waving an official piece of paper awash with red ink, ‘we have a more pressing problem.’

The letter in Stilton’s paw was from the Commissioners of His Majesty’s Inland Revenue, who’d adjudicated, most unsportingly, that the investment committee had erred in declaring gambling losses as a deductible business expense. Since this had been club policy for generations, more than half a century of back tax and compounded fines were now due.

‘How deep is the hole?’ I asked.

‘A hundred grand,’ said Boko, morosely.

‘Ye gods and little fishes! So much for plucking the goose.’

Between you and me, though, I was less surprised than I let on. The Drones is a noble institution, of course, but as any nerve specialist will tell you: institutions should seldom be run by their inmates. That the club’s financial cogs were being oiled by

spanners like Boko and Stilton helped explain the recent spate of bureaucratic incompetences. Only a fortnight earlier, for example, every member (and member of staff) had been given a gratis case of absinthe after the wine committee ‘came over funny’ during a buying spree in Paris.

‘When do we have to cough up?’ I asked.

‘A week today.’

‘They shall not pass,’ roared Gussie, fuelled by the Dutch courage of his Parisian Blondes. ‘We must appeal!’

Boko sighed. ‘This *is* the appeal.’

‘And what if we can’t raise the splosh?’

‘They seize the clubhouse. And with no clubhouse ...’ Boko dropped his hands in despair.

‘So what’s the plan?’

‘I’m glad you ask. I’ve just put it to a formal committee vote, and the next order of business is to get seriously – and when I say seriously, I mean *truly* and *comprehensively* – pontooned.’

Knowing there’d soon be no further sense to be had from this mob, Gussie and I retreated to the dining-room and sat at the Cowards’ Table – so called because two wide columns shield it from prying eyes and flying rolls.

‘Listen, Gussie, I’m sorry to hear about Emerald.’

‘Who?’

‘Emerald Stoker? Your until-very-recently betrothed. The one with whom you’re pickled?’

‘Oh, don’t mind about her,’ he said, casting a thirsty eye down the wine list. ‘She’s ancient history. The pickle I’m in concerns Vonka.’

‘Vonka?’

‘Vonka the *peacherino*. We’re engaged!’

‘Of course you are,’ I sighed. ‘Let’s hear the tale of the tape.’

Gussie’s new belle went by the unlikely name of Veronica ‘Vonka’ Pinke and she possessed all the bells and whistles one would expect of the contemporary heart-throb: hair ‘like autumnal chestnuts’, eyes that ‘sparkled like sapphires’, a nose which ‘tilted at the tip’, a smile – well, you get the pic.

‘I suppose there’s a snag?’ I asked, for there’s often a snag with Gussie Fink-Nottle, and always a snag with peacherinos.

‘Two, actually: Evadne and Lancelot.’

‘Eh?’

‘Her Ma and Pa.’

This sounded like one large, amalgamated snag, but Gussie informed me otherwise.

Lancelot Pinke, he said, represented a very conventional type of snag: doggedly protective of his only daughter, with a feline suspicion of any and all suitors. Such sentiments are only to be expected, and usually prove no great hazard to the well-polished Dronesman – not that Gussie is polished *per se*, but he can usually be trusted to use the right fork and not wash his feet in the soup.

Evadne Pinke, however, was an entirely more dubious kettle of fish, for in addition to being kind, doting, and soppily maternal, she was – and I quote – ‘fundamentally zig-zag in the steeple’.

Every decision the woman made was guided by a hectic swarm of spiritual piffle, and her checklist of superstitions included black cats, pavement cracks, whistling sailors, red beards, the colour purple, the sound of thunder, twins and triplets, new shoes, loose threads, frosted glass, and chipped buttons. She once refused to leave a restaurant until she had spotted a *second* magpie – a vigil that dragged on for nine expensive days.

‘So, to up-sum: Pater is bad and Mater is mad, and you need to snake-charm both.’

‘And I need your help.’

‘Mine?’

‘You’re good with parents.’

‘*Am* I?’

‘You’re better than me.’

This was undeniable.

‘So, you’ll come up to Cambridge to plead my case?’

‘Cambridge? Why Cambridge? Who said anything about Cambridge?’

‘That’s where I met her. That’s where she lives. That’s where I work.’

‘First Monty and now you!’ I shook my head. ‘When did this mania for honest toil infest the Drones?’

‘In my case, ever since my allowance was stopped.’

Gussie explained that his parents had warmly approved of the Emerald alliance (presumably because it meant his imminent departure for the New World), and had taken such a dim view of him calling things off that they had cancelled his quarterly cheques.

‘But before I introduce Vonka to my people, I need her people to play ball.’

I was still stuck on him having a job.

‘What on earth, Gussie, are you qualified to do?’

‘I teach.’

‘Ha!’

‘At a crammer’s called Pinke’s Academy.’

‘Wait ... *Pinke’s* Academy? As in Vonka Pinke, Lancelot Pinke, and the loony Evadne Pinke?’

‘That’s right,’ he beamed. ‘I’ve fallen in love with the boss’s daughter.’

‘You’ve fallen into a Victorian melodrama is what you’ve done.’ I buttered myself another roll. ‘And anyway, what on earth are you qualified to teach?’

‘Almost nothing! But it turns out you only need to be a page ahead of ’em in the textbook. These are hardly ambitious students; if they were, they wouldn’t be sweating at Pinke’s. In fact, they rather remind me of us, when we were their age.’

‘Sounds gruesome.’

‘Most of them aren’t so bad, though one is a stinker of the first water. More importantly, though: can I count on your help? Term starts on Wednesday, and we should strike while the what-not is hot.’

It occurred to me that a jaunt up to Cambridge would get me out of the house while Dicks & Rudge were wallpapering my bedroom – though I had rather been looking forward to a week of clubbable indolence, and the chance to work on my darts.

‘Let me sleep on it, Gussie. But it might, I suppose, be amusing.’

‘At-a-boy!’

I swirled the heeltaps of my claret. ‘You know, Bingo Little used to tutor.’

‘He told me.’

‘You should ask him for some tips.’

‘I did.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Don’t.’

I arrived home well after midnight to find, propped against my porcelain bust of W. G. Grace, a telegram:

WILL K-C AND A-H MEET 9-D
TOMORROW 10:30 A.M. ALBANY

This was obviously a summons I couldn’t refuse, and I rather regretted allowing Gussie to order the second brace of brandies.