

## CHAPTER 1

I marmaladed a slice of toast with something of a flourish, and I don't suppose I have ever come much closer to saying 'Tra-la-la' as I did the lathering, for I was feeling in mid-season form this morning. God, as I once heard Jeeves put it, was in His Heaven and all was right with the world. (He added, I remember, some guff about larks and snails, but that is a side issue and need not detain us.)

It is no secret in the circles in which he moves that Bertram Wooster, though as glamorous as one could wish when night has fallen and the revels get under way, is seldom a ball of fire at the breakfast table. Confronted with the eggs and b., he tends to pick cautiously at them, as if afraid they may leap from the plate and snap at him. Listless, about sums it up. Not much bounce to the ounce.

But today vastly different conditions had prevailed. All had been verve, if that's the word I want, and animation. Well, when I tell you that after sailing through a couple of sausages like a tiger of the jungle tucking into its luncheon coolie I was now, as indicated, about to tackle the toast and marmalade, I fancy I need say no more.

The reason for this improved outlook on the proteins and carbohydrates is not far to seek. Jeeves was back, earning his

weekly envelope once more at the old stand. Her butler having come down with an ailment of some sort, my Aunt Dahlia, my good and deserving aunt, had borrowed him for a house-party she was throwing at Brinkley Court, her Worcestershire residence, and he had been away for more than a week. Jeeves, of course, is a gentleman's gentleman, not a butler, but if the call comes, he can buttle with the best of them. It's in the blood. His Uncle Charlie is a butler, and no doubt he has picked up many a hint on technique from him.

He came in a little later to remove the debris, and I asked him if he had had a good time at Brinkley.

'Extremely pleasant, thank you, sir.'

'More than I had in your absence. I felt like a child of tender years deprived of its Nannie. If you don't mind me calling you a Nannie.'

'Not at all, sir.'

Though, as a matter of fact, I was giving myself a slight edge, putting it that way. My Aunt Agatha, the one who eats broken bottles and turns into a werewolf at the time of the full moon, generally refers to Jeeves as my keeper.

'Yes, I missed you sorely, and had no heart for whooping it up with the lads at the Drones. From sport to sport they... how does that gag go?'

'Sir?'

'I heard you pull it once with reference to Freddie Widgeon, when one of his girls had given him the bird. Something about hurrying.'

'Ah yes, sir. From sport to sport they hurry me, to stifle my regret -'

'And when they win a smile from me, they think that I forget. That was it. Not your own, by any chance?'

'No, sir. An old English drawing-room ballad.'

'Oh? Well, that's how it was with me. But tell me all about Brinkley. How was Aunt Dahlia?'

'Mrs Travers appeared to be in her customary robust health, sir.'

'And how did the party go off?'

'Reasonably satisfactorily, sir.'

'Only reasonably?'

'The demeanour of Mr Travers cast something of a gloom on the proceedings. He was low-spirited.'

'He always is when Aunt Dahlia fills the house with guests. I've known even a single foreign substance in the woodwork to make him drain the bitter cup.'

'Very true, sir, but on this occasion I think his despondency was due principally to the presence of Sir Watkyn Bassett.'

'You don't mean that old crumb was there?' I said, Great-Scott-ing, for I knew that if there is one man for whose insides my Uncle Tom has the most vivid distaste, it is this Bassett. 'You astound me, Jeeves.'

'I, too, must confess to a certain surprise at seeing the gentleman at Brinkley Court, but no doubt Mrs Travers felt it incumbent upon her to return his hospitality. You will recollect that Sir Watkyn recently entertained Mrs Travers and yourself at Totleigh Towers.'

I winced. Intending, I presumed, merely to refresh my memory, he had touched an exposed nerve. There was some cold coffee left in the pot, and I took a sip to restore my equanimity.

'The word "entertained" is not well chosen, Jeeves. If locking a fellow in his bedroom, as near as a toucher with gyves upon his wrists, and stationing the local police force on the lawn below to ensure that he doesn't nip out of the window at the end of a

knotted sheet is your idea of entertaining, it isn't mine, not by a jugful.'

I don't know how well up you are in the Wooster archives, but if you have dipped into them to any extent, you will probably recall the sinister affair of Sir Watkyn Bassett and my visit to his Gloucestershire home. He and my Uncle Tom are rival collectors of what are known as *objets d'art*, and on one occasion he pinched a silver cow-creamer, as the revolting things are called, from the relation by marriage, and Aunt Dahlia and self went to Totleigh to pinch it back, an enterprise which, though crowned with success, as the expression is, so nearly landed me in the jug that when reminded of that house of horror I still quiver like an aspen, if aspens are the things I'm thinking of.

'Do you ever have nightmares, Jeeves?' I asked, having got through with my bit of wincing.

'Not frequently, sir.'

'Nor me. But when I do, the set-up is always the same. I am back at Totleigh Towers with Sir W. Bassett, his daughter Madeline, Roderick Spode, Stiffy Byng, Gussie Fink-Nottle and the dog Bartholomew, all doing their stuff, and I wake, if you will pardon the expression so soon after breakfast, sweating at every pore. Those were the times that . . . what, Jeeves?'

'Tried men's souls, sir.'

'They certainly did – in spades. Sir Watkyn Bassett, eh?' I said thoughtfully. 'No wonder Uncle Tom mourned and would not be comforted. In his position I'd have been low-spirited myself. Who else were among those present?'

'Miss Bassett, sir, Miss Byng, Miss Byng's dog and Mr Fink-Nottle.'

'Gosh! Practically the whole Totleigh Towers gang. Not Spode?'

'No, sir. Apparently no invitation had been extended to his lordship.'

'His what?'

'Mr Spode, if you recall, recently succeeded to the title of Lord Sidcup.'

'So he did. I'd forgotten. But Sidcup or no Sidcup, to me he will always be Spode. There's a bad guy, Jeeves.'

'Certainly a somewhat forceful personality, sir.'

'I wouldn't want him in my orbit again.'

'I can readily understand it, sir.'

'Nor would I willingly foregather with Sir Watkyn Bassett, Madeline Bassett, Stiffy Byng and Bartholomew. I don't mind Gussie. He looks like a fish and keeps newts in a glass tank in his bedroom, but one condones that sort of thing in an old school-fellow, just as one condones in an old Oxford friend such as the Rev. H. P. Pinker the habit of tripping over his feet and upsetting things. How was Gussie? Pretty bobbish?'

'No, sir. Mr Fink-Nottle, too, seemed to me low-spirited.'

'Perhaps one of his newts had got tonsillitis or something.'

'It is conceivable, sir.'

'You've never kept newts, have you?'

'No, sir.'

'Nor have I. Nor, to the best of my knowledge, have Einstein, Jack Dempsey and the Archbishop of Canterbury, to name but three others. Yet Gussie revels in their society and is never happier than when curled up with them. It takes all sorts to make a world, Jeeves.'

'It does, indeed, sir. Will you be lunching in?'

'No, I've a date at the Ritz,' I said, and went off to climb into the outer crust of the English gentleman.

As I dressed, my thoughts returned to the Bassetts, and I was still wondering why on earth Aunt Dahlia had allowed the pure air of Brinkley Court to be polluted by Sir Watkyn and associates, when the telephone rang and I went into the hall to answer it.

‘Bertie?’

‘Oh, hullo, Aunt Dahlia.’

There had been no mistaking that loved voice. As always when we converse on the telephone, it had nearly fractured my ear-drum. This aunt was at one time a prominent figure in hunting circles, and when in the saddle, so I’m told, could make herself heard not only in the field or meadow where she happened to be, but in several adjoining counties. Retired now from active fox-chivvying, she still tends to address a nephew in the tone of voice previously reserved for rebuking hounds for taking time off to chase rabbits.

‘So you’re up and about, are you?’ she boomed. ‘I thought you’d be in bed, snoring your head off.’

‘It is a little unusual for me to be in circulation at this hour,’ I agreed, ‘but I rose today with the lark and, I think, the snail. Jeeves!’

‘Sir?’

‘Didn’t you tell me once that snails were early risers?’

‘Yes, sir. The poet Browning in his *Pippa Passes*, having established that the hour is seven a.m., goes on to say, “The lark’s on the wing, the snail’s on the thorn.”’

‘Thank you, Jeeves. I was right, Aunt Dahlia. When I slid from between the sheets, the lark was on the wing, the snail on the thorn.’

‘What the devil are you babbling about?’

‘Don’t ask me, ask the poet Browning. I was merely apprising you that I was up betimes. I thought it was the least I could do to celebrate Jeeves’s return.’

‘He got back all right, did he?’

‘Looking bronzed and fit.’

‘He was in rare form here. Bassett was terrifically impressed.’

I was glad to have this opportunity of solving the puzzle which had been perplexing me.

‘Now there,’ I said, ‘you have touched on something I’d very much like to have information *re*. What on earth made you invite Pop Bassett to Brinkley?’

‘I did it for the wife and kiddies.’

I eh-what-ed. ‘You wouldn’t care to amplify that?’ I said. ‘It got past me to some extent.’

‘For Tom’s sake, I mean,’ she replied with a hearty laugh that rocked me to my foundations. ‘Tom’s been feeling rather low of late because of what he calls iniquitous taxation. You know how he hates to give up.’

I did, indeed. If Uncle Tom had his way, the Revenue authorities wouldn’t get so much as a glimpse of his money.

‘Well, I thought having to fraternize with Bassett would take his mind off it – show him that there are worse things in this world than income tax. Our doctor here gave me the idea. He was telling me about a thing called Hodgkin’s Disease that you cure by giving the patient arsenic. The principle’s the same. That Bassett really is the limit. When I see you, I’ll tell you the story of the black amber statuette. It’s a thing he’s just bought for his collection. He was showing it to Tom when he was here, gloating over it. Tom suffered agonies, poor old buzzard.’

‘Jeeves told me he was low-spirited.’

‘So would you be, if you were a collector and another collector you particularly disliked had got hold of a thing you’d have given your eye-teeth to have in your own collection.’

‘I see what you mean,’ I said, marvelling, as I had often done before, that Uncle Tom could attach so much value to objects which I personally would have preferred not to be found dead in a ditch with. The cow-creamer I mentioned earlier was one of them, being a milk jug shaped like a cow, of all ghastly ideas. I have always maintained fearlessly that the spiritual home of all these fellows who collect things is a padded cell in a loony bin.

‘It gave Tom the worst attack of indigestion he’s had since he was last lured into eating lobster. And talking of indigestion, I’m coming up to London for the day the day after tomorrow and shall require you to give me lunch.’

I assured her that that should be attended to, and after the exchange of a few more civilities she rang off.

‘That was Aunt Dahlia, Jeeves,’ I said, coming away from the machine.

‘Yes, sir, I fancied I recognized Mrs Travers’s voice.’

‘She wants me to give her lunch the day after tomorrow. I think we’d better have it here. She’s not keen on restaurant cooking.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘What’s this black amber statuette thing she was talking about?’

‘It is a somewhat long story, sir.’

‘Then don’t tell me now. If I don’t rush, I shall be late for my date.’

I reached for the umbrella and hat, and was heading for the open spaces, when I heard Jeeves give that soft cough of his and, turning, saw that a shadow was about to fall on what had been a



day of joyous reunion. In the eye which he was fixing on me I detected the aunt-like gleam which always means that he disapproves of something, and when he said in a soupy tone of voice, 'Pardon me, sir, but are you proposing to enter the Ritz Hotel in that hat?' I knew that the time had come when Bertram must show that iron resolution of his which has been so widely publicized.

In the matter of head-joy Jeeves is not in tune with modern progressive thought, his attitude being best described, perhaps, as hidebound, and right from the start I had been asking myself what his reaction would be to the blue Alpine hat with the pink feather in it which I had purchased in his absence. Now I knew. I could see at a g. that he wanted no piece of it.

I, on the other hand, was all for this Alpine lid. I was prepared to concede that it would have been more suitable for rural wear, but against this had to be set the fact that it unquestionably lent a *diablerie* to my appearance, and mine is an appearance that needs all the *diablerie* it can get. In my voice, therefore, as I replied, there was a touch of steel.

'Yes, Jeeves, that, in a nutshell, is what I am proposing to do. Don't you like this hat?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, I do,' I replied rather cleverly, and went out with it tilted just that merest shade over the left eye which makes all the difference.