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"What-ho, Gussie," I said.

You couldn't have told it from my manner, but I was feeling more than a bit nonplussed. The spectacle before me was enough to nonplus anyone. I mean to say, this Fink-Nottle, as I remembered him, was the sort of shy, shrinking goop who might have been expected to shake like an aspen if invited to so much as a social Saturday afternoon at the vicarage. And yet here he was, if one could credit one's senses, about to take part in a fancy-dress ball, a form of entertainment notoriously a testing experience for the toughest.

And he was attending that fancy-dress ball, mark you—not, like every other well-bred Englishman, as a Pierrot, but as Mephistopheles—this involving, as I need scarcely stress, not only scarlet tights but a pretty frightful false beard.

Rummy, you'll admit. However, one masks one's feelings. I betrayed no vulgar astonishment, but, as I say, what-hoed with civil nonchalance.

He grinned through the fungus—rather sheepishly, I thought.

"Oh, hullo, Bertie."

"Long time since I saw you. Have a spot?"

"No, thanks. I must be off in a minute. I just came round to ask Jeeves how he thought I looked. How do you think I look, Bertie?"

Well, the answer to that, of course, was "perfectly foul". But we Woosters are men of tact and have a nice sense of the obligations of a host. We do not tell old friends beneath our roof-tree that they are an offence to the eyesight. I evaded the question.

"I hear you're in London," I said carelessly.

"Oh, yes."

"Must be years since you came up."

"Oh, yes."

"And now you're off for an evening's pleasure."

He shuddered a bit. He had, I noticed, a hunted air.

"Pleasure!"

"Aren't you looking forward to this rout or revel?"

"Oh, I suppose it'll be all right," he said, in a toneless voice. "Anyway, I ought to be off, I suppose. The thing starts round about eleven. I told my cab to wait... Will you see if it's there, Jeeves?"

"Very good, sir."

There was something of a pause after the door had closed. A certain constraint. I mixed myself a beaker, while Gussie, a glutton for punishment, stared at himself in the mirror. Finally I decided that it would be best to let him know that I was abreast of his affairs. It might be that it would ease his mind to confide in a sympathetic man of experience. I have generally found, with those under the influence, that what they want more than anything is the listening ear.

"Well, Gussie, old leper," I said, "I've been hearing all about you."

"Eh?"

"This little trouble of yours. Jeeves has told me everything."

He didn't seem any too braced. It's always difficult to be sure, of course, when a chap has dug himself in behind a Mephistopheles beard, but I fancy he flushed a trifle.

"I wish Jeeves wouldn't go gassing all over the place. It was supposed to be confidential."

I could not permit this tone.

"Dishing up the dirt to the young master can scarcely be described as gassing all over the place," I said, with a touch of rebuke. "Anyway, there it is. I know all. And I should like to begin," I said, sinking my personal opinion that the female in question was a sloppy pest in my desire to buck and encourage, "by saying that Madeline Bassett is a charming girl. A winner, and just the sort for you."

"You don't know her?"

"Certainly I know her. What beats me is how you ever got in touch. Where did you meet?"

"She was staying at a place near mine in Lincolnshire the week before last."

"Yes, but even so. I didn't know you called on the neighbours."

"I don't. I met her out for a walk with her dog. The dog had got a thorn in its foot, and when she tried to take it out, it snapped at her. So, of course, I had to rally round."

"You extracted the thorn?"

"Yes."

"And fell in love at first sight?"

"Yes."

"Well, dash it, with a thing like that to give you a send-off, why didn't you cash in immediately?"

"I hadn't the nerve."

"What happened?"

"We talked for a bit."

"What about?"

"Oh, birds."

"Birds? What birds?"

"The birds that happened to be hanging round. And the scenery, and all that sort of thing. And she said she was going to London, and asked me to look her up if I was ever there."

"And even after that you didn't so much as press her hand?"

"Of course not."

Well, I mean, it looked as though there was no more to be said. If a chap is such a rabbit that he can't get action when he's handed the thing on a plate, his case would appear to be pretty hopeless. Nevertheless, I reminded myself that this non-starter and I had been at school together. One must make an effort for an old school friend.

"Ah, well," I said, "we must see what can be done. Things may brighten. At any rate, you will be glad to learn that I am behind you in this enterprise. You have Bertram Wooster in your corner, Gussie."

"Thanks, old man. And Jeeves, of course, which is the thing that really matters."

I don't mind admitting that I winced. He meant no harm, I suppose, but I'm bound to say that this tactless speech nettled me not a little. People are always nettling me like that. Giving me to understand, I mean to say, that in their

opinion Bertram Wooster is a mere cipher and that the only member of the household with brains and resources is Jeeves.

It jars on me.

And tonight it jarred on me more than usual, because I was feeling pretty dashed fed with Jeeves. Over that matter of the mess jacket, I mean. True, I had forced him to climb down, quelling him, as described, with the quiet strength of my personality, but I was still a trifle shirty at his having brought the thing up at all. It seemed to me that what Jeeves wanted was the iron hand.

"And what is he doing about it?" I inquired stiffly.

"He's been giving the position of affairs a lot of thought."

"He has, has he?"

"It's on his advice that I'm going to this dance."

"Why?"

"She is going to be there. In fact, it was she who sent me the ticket of invitation.

And Jeeves considered——"

"And why not as a Pierrot?" I said, taking up the point which had struck me before. "Why this break with a grand old tradition?"

"He particularly wanted me to go as Mephistopheles."

I started.

"He did, did he? He specifically recommended that definite costume?"

"Yes."

"Ha!"

"Eh?"

"Nothing. Just 'Ha!'"

And I'll tell you why I said "Ha!" Here was Jeeves making heavy weather about me wearing a perfectly ordinary white mess jacket, a garment not only tout ce qu'il y a de chic, but absolutely de rigueur, and in the same breath, as you might say, inciting Gussie Fink-Nottle to be a blot on the London scene in scarlet tights. Ironical, what? One looks askance at this sort of in-and-out running.

"What has he got against Pierrots?"



"I don't think he objects to Pierrots as Pierrots. But in my case he thought a Pierrot wouldn't be adequate."

"I don't follow that."

"He said that the costume of Pierrot, while pleasing to the eye, lacked the authority of the Mephistopheles costume."

"I still don't get it."

"Well, it's a matter of psychology, he said."

There was a time when a remark like that would have had me snookered. But long association with Jeeves has developed the Wooster vocabulary considerably. Jeeves has always been a whale for the psychology of the individual, and I now follow him like a bloodhound when he snaps it out of the bag.

"Oh, psychology?"

"Yes. Jeeves is a great believer in the moral effect of clothes. He thinks I might be emboldened in a striking costume like this. He said a Pirate Chief would be just as good. In fact, a Pirate Chief was his first suggestion, but I objected to the

boots."

I saw his point. There is enough sadness in life without having fellows like Gussie Fink-Nottle going about in sea boots.

"And are you emboldened?"

"Well, to be absolutely accurate, Bertie, old man, no."

A gust of compassion shook me. After all, though we had lost touch a bit of recent years, this man and I had once thrown inked darts at each other.

"Gussie," I said, "take an old friend's advice, and don't go within a mile of this binge."

"But it's my last chance of seeing her. She's off tomorrow to stay with some people in the country. Besides, you don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"That this idea of Jeeves's won't work. I feel a most frightful chump now, yes, but who can say whether that will not pass off when I get into a mob of other people in fancy dress. I had the same experience as a child, one year during the

Christmas festivities. They dressed me up as a rabbit, and the shame was indescribable. Yet when I got to the party and found myself surrounded by scores of other children, many in costumes even ghastlier than my own, I perked up amazingly, joined freely in the revels, and was able to eat so hearty a supper that I was sick twice in the cab coming home. What I mean is, you can't tell in cold blood."

I weighed this. It was specious, of course.

"And you can't get away from it that, fundamentally, Jeeves's idea is sound. In a striking costume like Mephistopheles, I might quite easily pull off something pretty impressive. Colour does make a difference. Look at newts. During the courting season the male newt is brilliantly coloured. It helps him a lot."

"But you aren't a male newt."

"I wish I were. Do you know how a male newt proposes, Bertie? He just stands in front of the female newt vibrating his tail and bending his body in a semi-circle. I could do that on my head. No, you wouldn't find me grousing if I were a male newt."

"But if you were a male newt, Madeline Bassett wouldn't look at you. Not with the eye of love, I mean."

"She would, if she were a female newt."

"But she isn't a female newt."

"No, but suppose she was."

"Well, if she was, you wouldn't be in love with her."

"Yes, I would, if I were a male newt."

A slight throbbing about the temples told me that this discussion had reached saturation point.

"Well, anyway," I said, "coming down to hard facts and cutting out all this visionary stuff about vibrating tails and what not, the salient point that emerges is that you are booked to appear at a fancy-dress ball. And I tell you out of my riper knowledge of fancy-dress balls, Gussie, that you won't enjoy yourself."

"It isn't a question of enjoying yourself."

"I wouldn't go."

"I must go. I keep telling you she's off to the country tomorrow."

I gave it up.

"So be it," I said. "Have it your own way.... Yes, Jeeves?"

"Mr. Fink-Nottle's cab, sir."

"Ah? The cab, eh?... Your cab, Gussie."

"Oh, the cab? Oh, right. Of course, yes, rather.... Thanks, Jeeves ... Well, so long, Bertie."

And giving me the sort of weak smile Roman gladiators used to give the Emperor before entering the arena, Gussie trickled off. And I turned to Jeeves. The moment had arrived for putting him in his place, and I was all for it.

It was a little difficult to know how to begin, of course. I mean to say, while firmly resolved to tick him off, I didn't want to gash his feelings too deeply. Even when displaying the iron hand, we Woosters like to keep the thing fairly matey.

However, on consideration, I saw that there was nothing to be gained by trying to lead up to it gently. It is never any use beating about the b.

"Jeeves," I said, "may I speak frankly?"

"Certainly, sir."

"What I have to say may wound you."

"Not at all, sir."

"Well, then, I have been having a chat with Mr. Fink-Nottle, and he has been telling me about this Mephistopheles scheme of yours."

"Yes, sir?"

"Now let me get it straight. If I follow your reasoning correctly, you think that, stimulated by being upholstered throughout in scarlet tights, Mr. Fink-Nottle, on encountering the adored object, will vibrate his tail and generally let himself go with a whoop."

"I am of opinion that he will lose much of his normal diffidence, sir."

"I don't agree with you, Jeeves."

"No, sir?"

"No. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, I consider that of all the dashed silly, drivelling ideas I ever heard in my puff this is the most blithering and futile."

It won't work. Not a chance. All you have done is to subject Mr. Fink-Nottle to the nameless horrors of a fancy-dress ball for nothing. And this is not the first time this sort of thing has happened. To be quite candid, Jeeves, I have frequently noticed before now a tendency or disposition on your part to become—what's the word?"

"I could not say, sir."

"Eloquent? No, it's not eloquent. Elusive? No, it's not elusive. It's on the tip of my tongue. Begins with an 'e' and means being a jolly sight too clever."

"Elaborate, sir?"

"That is the exact word I was after. Too elaborate, Jeeves—that is what you are frequently prone to become. Your methods are not simple, not straightforward. You cloud the issue with a lot of fancy stuff that is not of the essence. All that Gussie needs is the elder-brotherly advice of a seasoned man of the world. So what I suggest is that from now onward you leave this case to me."

"Very good, sir."

"You lay off and devote yourself to your duties about the home."

"Very good, sir."

"I shall no doubt think of something quite simple and straightforward yet perfectly effective ere long. I will make a point of seeing Gussie tomorrow."

"Very good, sir."

"Right ho, Jeeves."

But on the morrow all those telegrams started coming in, and I confess that for twenty-four hours I didn't give the poor chap a thought, having problems of my own to contend with.

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