

It has been well said of Bertram Wooster that, while no one views his flesh and blood with a keener and more remorselessly critical eye, he is nevertheless a man who delights in giving credit where credit is due. And if you have followed these memoirs of mine with the proper care, you will be aware that I have frequently had occasion to emphasise the fact that Aunt Dahlia is all right.

She is the one, if you remember, who married old Tom Travers en secondes noces, as I believe the expression is, the year Bluebottle won the Cambridgeshire, and once induced me to write an article on What the Well-Dressed Man is Wearing for that paper she runs—Milady's Boudoir. She is a large, genial soul, with whom it is a pleasure to hob-nob. In her spiritual make-up there is none of that subtle gosh-awfulness which renders such an exhibit as, say, my Aunt Agatha the curse of the Home Counties and a menace to one and all. I have the highest esteem for Aunt Dahlia, and have never wavered in my cordial appreciation of her humanity, sporting qualities and general good-eggishness.

This being so, you may conceive of my astonishment at finding her at my bedside at such an hour. I mean to say, I've stayed at her place many a time and oft, and she knows my habits. She is well aware that until I have had my cup of tea in the morning, I do not receive. This crashing in at a moment when she knew that solitude and repose were of the essence was scarcely, I could not but feel, the good old form.

Besides, what business had she being in London at all? That was what I asked myself. When a conscientious housewife has returned to her home after an absence of seven weeks, one does not expect her to start racing off again the day after her arrival. One feels that she ought to be sticking round, ministering to her husband, conferring with the cook, feeding the cat, combing and brushing the Pomeranian—in a word, staying put. I was more than a little bleary-eyed, but I endeavoured, as far as the fact that my eyelids were more or less glued together would permit, to give her an austere and censorious look.

She didn't seem to get it.

"Wake up, Bertie, you old ass!" she cried, in a voice that hit me between the eyebrows and went out at the back of my head.

If Aunt Dahlia has a fault, it is that she is apt to address a vis-à-vis as if he were somebody half a mile away whom she had observed riding over hounds. A throwback, no doubt, to the time when she counted the day lost that was not spent in chivvying some unfortunate fox over the countryside.

I gave her another of the austere and censorious, and this time it registered. All the effect it had, however, was to cause her to descend to personalities.

"Don't blink at me in that obscene way," she said. "I wonder, Bertie," she proceeded, gazing at me as I should imagine Gussie would have gazed at some

newt that was not up to sample, "if you have the faintest conception how perfectly loathsome you look? A cross between an orgy scene in the movies and some low form of pond life. I suppose you were out on the tiles last night?"

"I attended a social function, yes," I said coldly. "Pongo Twistleton's birthday party. I couldn't let Pongo down. Noblesse oblige."

"Well, get up and dress."

I felt I could not have heard her aright.

"Get up and dress?"

"Yes."

I turned on the pillow with a little moan, and at this juncture Jeeves entered with the vital oolong. I clutched at it like a drowning man at a straw hat. A deep sip or two, and I felt—I won't say restored, because a birthday party like Pongo Twistleton's isn't a thing you get restored after with a mere mouthful of tea, but sufficiently the old Bertram to be able to bend the mind on this awful thing which had come upon me.

And the more I bent same, the less could I grasp the trend of the scenario.

"What is this, Aunt Dahlia?" I inquired.

"It looks to me like tea," was her response. "But you know best. You're drinking it."

If I hadn't been afraid of spilling the healing brew, I have little doubt that I should have given an impatient gesture. I know I felt like it.

"Not the contents of this cup. All this. Your barging in and telling me to get up and dress, and all that rot."

"I've barged in, as you call it, because my telegrams seemed to produce no effect. And I told you to get up and dress because I want you to get up and dress. I've come to take you back with me. I like your crust, wiring that you would come next year or whenever it was. You're coming now. I've got a job for you."

"But I don't want a job."

"What you want, my lad, and what you're going to get are two very different things. There is man's work for you to do at Brinkley Court. Be ready to the last button in twenty minutes."

"But I can't possibly be ready to any buttons in twenty minutes. I'm feeling awful."

She seemed to consider.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose it's only humane to give you a day or two to recover. All right, then, I shall expect you on the thirtieth at the latest."

"But, dash it, what is all this? How do you mean, a job? Why a job? What sort of a job?"

"I'll tell you if you'll only stop talking for a minute. It's quite an easy, pleasant job. You will enjoy it. Have you ever heard of Market Snodsbury Grammar School?"

"Never."

"It's a grammar school at Market Snodsbury."

I told her a little frigidly that I had divined as much.

"Well, how was I to know that a man with a mind like yours would grasp it so quickly?" she protested. "All right, then. Market Snodsbury Grammar School is, as you have guessed, the grammar school at Market Snodsbury. I'm one of the governors."

"You mean one of the governesses."

"I don't mean one of the governesses. Listen, ass. There was a board of governors at Eton, wasn't there? Very well. So there is at Market Snodsbury Grammar School, and I'm a member of it. And they left the arrangements for the summer prize-giving to me. This prize-giving takes place on the last—or thirty-first—day of this month. Have you got that clear?"

I took another oz. of the life-saving and inclined my head. Even after a Pongo Twistleton birthday party, I was capable of grasping simple facts like these.

"I follow you, yes. I see the point you are trying to make, certainly. Market ... Snodsbury ... Grammar School ... Board of governors ... Prize-giving.... Quite. But what's it got to do with me?"

"You're going to give away the prizes."

I goggled. Her words did not appear to make sense. They seemed the mere aimless vapouring of an aunt who has been sitting out in the sun without a hat.

"Me?"

"You."

I goggled again.

"You don't mean me?"

"I mean you in person."

I goggled a third time.

"You're pulling my leg."

"I am not pulling your leg. Nothing would induce me to touch your beastly leg. The vicar was to have officiated, but when I got home I found a letter from him saying that he had strained a fetlock and must scratch his nomination. You can imagine the state I was in. I telephoned all over the place. Nobody would take it on. And then suddenly I thought of you."

I decided to check all this rot at the outset. Nobody is more eager to oblige deserving aunts than Bertram Wooster, but there are limits, and sharply defined limits, at that.

"So you think I'm going to strew prizes at this bally Dotheboys Hall of yours?"

"I do."

"And make a speech?"

"Exactly."

I laughed derisively.

"For goodness' sake, don't start gargling now. This is serious."

"I was laughing."

"Oh, were you? Well, I'm glad to see you taking it in this merry spirit."

"Derisively," I explained. "I won't do it. That's final. I simply will not do it."

"You will do it, young Bertie, or never darken my doors again. And you know what that means. No more of Anatole's dinners for you."

A strong shudder shook me. She was alluding to her chef, that superb artist. A monarch of his profession, unsurpassed—nay, unequalled—at dishing up the raw material so that it melted in the mouth of the ultimate consumer, Anatole had always been a magnet that drew me to Brinkley Court with my tongue hanging out. Many of my happiest moments had been those which I had spent champing this great man's roasts and ragouts, and the prospect of being barred from digging into them in the future was a numbing one.

"No, I say, dash it!"

"I thought that would rattle you. Greedy young pig."

"Greedy young pigs have nothing to do with it," I said with a touch of hauteur.

"One is not a greedy young pig because one appreciates the cooking of a genius."

"Well, I will say I like it myself," conceded the relative. "But not another bite of it do you get, if you refuse to do this simple, easy, pleasant job. No, not so much as another sniff. So put that in your twelve-inch cigarette-holder and smoke it."

I began to feel like some wild thing caught in a snare.

"But why do you want me? I mean, what am I? Ask yourself that."

"I often have."

"I mean to say, I'm not the type. You have to have some terrific nib to give away prizes. I seem to remember, when I was at school, it was generally a prime minister or somebody."

"Ah, but that was at Eton. At Market Snodsbury we aren't nearly so choosy. Anybody in spats impresses us."

"Why don't you get Uncle Tom?"

"Uncle Tom!"

"Well, why not? He's got spats."

"Bertie," she said, "I will tell you why not Uncle Tom. You remember me losing all that money at baccarat at Cannes? Well, very shortly I shall have to sidle up to Tom and break the news to him. If, right after that, I ask him to put on lavender gloves and a topper and distribute the prizes at Market Snodsbury Grammar School, there will be a divorce in the family. He would pin a note to the pincushion and be off like a rabbit. No, my lad, you're for it, so you may as well make the best of it."

"But, Aunt Dahlia, listen to reason. I assure you, you've got hold of the wrong man. I'm hopeless at a game like that. Ask Jeeves about the time I got lugged in to address a girls' school. I made the most colossal ass of myself."

"And I confidently anticipate that you will make an equally colossal ass of yourself on the thirty-first of this month. That's why I want you. The way I look at it is that, as the thing is bound to be a frost, anyway, one may as well get a hearty laugh out of it. I shall enjoy seeing you distribute those prizes, Bertie. Well, I won't keep you, as, no doubt, you want to do your Swedish exercises. I shall expect you in a day or two."

And with these heartless words she beetled off, leaving me a prey to the gloomiest emotions. What with the natural reaction after Pongo's party and this stunning blow, it is not too much to say that the soul was seared.

And I was still writhing in the depths, when the door opened and Jeeves appeared.

"Mr. Fink-Nottle to see you, sir," he announced.
