

How different it all would have been, I could not but reflect, if this girl had been the sort of girl one chirruped cheerily to over the telephone and takes for spins in the old two-seater. In that case, I would simply have said, "Listen," and she would have said, "What?" and I would have said, "You know Gussie Fink-Nottle," and she would have said, "Yes," and I would have said, "He loves you," and she would have said either, "What, that mutt? Well, thank heaven for one good laugh today," or else, in more passionate vein, "Hot dog! Tell me more."

I mean to say, in either event the whole thing over and done with in under a minute.

But with the Bassett something less snappy and a good deal more glutinous was obviously indicated. What with all this daylight-saving stuff, we had hit the great open spaces at a moment when twilight had not yet begun to cheese it in favour of the shades of night. There was a fag-end of sunset still functioning. Stars were beginning to peep out, bats were fooling round, the garden was full of the aroma of those nifty white flowers which only start to put in their heavy work at the end of the day—in short, the glimmering landscape was fading on the sight and all the air held a solemn stillness, and it was plain that this was having the worst effect on her. Her eyes were enlarged, and her whole map a good deal too suggestive of the soul's awakening for comfort.

Her aspect was that of a girl who was expecting something fairly fruity from Bertram.

In these circs., conversation inevitably flagged a bit. I am never at my best when the situation seems to call for a certain soupiness, and I've heard other members of the Drones say the same thing about themselves. I remember Pongo Twistleton telling me that he was out in a gondola with a girl by moonlight once, and the only time he spoke was to tell her that old story about the chap who was so good at swimming that they made him a traffic cop in Venice.

Fell rather flat, he assured me, and it wasn't much later when the girl said she thought it was getting a little chilly and how about pushing back to the hotel.

So now, as I say, the talk rather hung fire. It had been all very well for me to promise Gussie that I would cut loose to this girl about aching hearts, but you want a cue for that sort of thing. And when, toddling along, we reached the edge of the lake and she finally spoke, conceive my chagrin when I discovered that what she was talking about was stars.

Not a bit of good to me.

"Oh, look," she said. She was a confirmed Oh-looker. I had noticed this at Cannes, where she had drawn my attention in this manner on various occasions to such diverse objects as a French actress, a Provençal filling station, the sunset

over the Estorels, Michael Arlen, a man selling coloured spectacles, the deep velvet blue of the Mediterranean, and the late mayor of New York in a striped one-piece bathing suit. "Oh, look at that sweet little star up there all by itself."

I saw the one she meant, a little chap operating in a detached sort of way above a spinney.

"Yes," I said.

"I wonder if it feels lonely."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so."

"A fairy must have been crying."

"Eh?"

"Don't you remember? 'Every time a fairy sheds a tear, a wee bit star is born in the Milky Way.' Have you ever thought that, Mr. Wooster?"

I never had. Most improbable, I considered, and it didn't seem to me to check up with her statement that the stars were God's daisy chain. I mean, you can't have it both ways.

However, I was in no mood to dissect and criticize. I saw that I had been wrong in supposing that the stars were not germane to the issue. Quite a decent cue they had provided, and I leaped on it Promptly: "Talking of shedding tears——"

But she was now on the subject of rabbits, several of which were messing about in the park to our right.

"Oh, look. The little bunnies!"

"Talking of shedding tears——"

"Don't you love this time of the evening, Mr. Wooster, when the sun has gone to bed and all the bunnies come out to have their little suppers? When I was a child, I used to think that rabbits were gnomes, and that if I held my breath and stayed quite still, I should see the fairy queen."

Indicating with a reserved gesture that this was just the sort of loony thing I should have expected her to think as a child, I returned to the point.

"Talking of shedding tears," I said firmly, "it may interest you to know that there is an aching heart in Brinkley Court."

This held her. She cheated the rabbit theme. Her face, which had been aglow with what I supposed was a pretty animation, clouded. She unshipped a sigh that sounded like the wind going out of a rubber duck.

"Ah, yes. Life is very sad, isn't it?"

"It is for some people. This aching heart, for instance."

"Those wistful eyes of hers! Drenched irises. And they used to dance like elves of delight. And all through a foolish misunderstanding about a shark. What a tragedy misunderstandings are. That pretty romance broken and over just because Mr. Glossop would insist that it was a flatfish."

I saw that she had got the wires crossed.

"I'm not talking about Angela."

"But her heart is aching."

"I know it's aching. But so is somebody else's."

She looked at me, perplexed.

"Somebody else? Mr. Glossop's, you mean?"

"No, I don't."

"Mrs. Travers's?"

The exquisite code of politeness of the Woosters prevented me clipping her one on the ear-hole, but I would have given a shilling to be able to do it. There seemed to me something deliberately fat-headed in the way she persisted in missing the gist.

"No, not Aunt Dahlia's, either."

"I'm sure she is dreadfully upset."

"Quite. But this heart I'm talking about isn't aching because of Tuppy's row with Angela. It's aching for a different reason altogether. I mean to say—dash it, you know why hearts ache!"

She seemed to shimmy a bit. Her voice, when she spoke, was whispery: "You mean—for love?"

"Absolutely. Right on the bull's-eye. For love."

"Oh, Mr. Wooster!"

"I take it you believe in love at first sight?"

"I do, indeed."

"Well, that's what happened to this aching heart. It fell in love at first sight, and ever since it's been eating itself out, as I believe the expression is."

There was a silence. She had turned away and was watching a duck out on the lake. It was tucking into weeds, a thing I've never been able to understand anyone wanting to do. Though I suppose, if you face it squarely, they're no worse than spinach. She stood drinking it in for a bit, and then it suddenly stood on its head and disappeared, and this seemed to break the spell.

"Oh, Mr. Wooster!" she said again, and from the tone of her voice, I could see that I had got her going.

"For you, I mean to say," I proceeded, starting to put in the fancy touches. I dare say you have noticed on these occasions that the difficulty is to plant the main idea, to get the general outline of the thing well fixed. The rest is mere detail work. I don't say I became glib at this juncture, but I certainly became a dashed glibber than I had been.

"It's having the dickens of a time. Can't eat, can't sleep—all for love of you. And what makes it all so particularly rotten is that it—this aching heart—can't bring

itself up to the scratch and tell you the position of affairs, because your profile has gone and given it cold feet. Just as it is about to speak, it catches sight of you sideways, and words fail it. Silly, of course, but there it is."

I heard her give a gulp, and I saw that her eyes had become moistish. Drenched irises, if you care to put it that way.

"Lend you a handkerchief?"

"No, thank you. I'm quite all right."

It was more than I could say for myself. My efforts had left me weak. I don't know if you suffer in the same way, but with me the act of talking anything in the nature of real mashed potatoes always induces a sort of prickly sensation and a hideous feeling of shame, together with a marked starting of the pores.

I remember at my Aunt Agatha's place in Hertfordshire once being put on the spot and forced to enact the role of King Edward III saying goodbye to that girl of his, Fair Rosamund, at some sort of pageant in aid of the Distressed Daughters of the Clergy. It involved some rather warmish medieval dialogue, I recall, racy of the days when they called a spade a spade, and by the time the whistle blew, I'll bet no Daughter of the Clergy was half as distressed as I was. Not a dry stitch.

My reaction now was very similar. It was a highly liquid Bertram who, hearing his vis-à-vis give a couple of hiccups and start to speak bent an attentive ear.

"Please don't say any more, Mr. Wooster."

Well, I wasn't going to, of course.

"I understand."

I was glad to hear this.

"Yes, I understand. I won't be so silly as to pretend not to know what you mean. I suspected this at Cannes, when you used to stand and stare at me without speaking a word, but with whole volumes in your eyes."

If Angela's shark had bitten me in the leg, I couldn't have leaped more convulsively. So tensely had I been concentrating on Gussie's interests that it hadn't so much as crossed my mind that another and an unfortunate construction could be placed on those words of mine. The persp., already bedewing my brow, became a regular Niagara.

My whole fate hung upon a woman's word. I mean to say, I couldn't back out. If a girl thinks a man is proposing to her, and on that understanding books him up, he can't explain to her that she has got hold of entirely the wrong end of the stick

and that he hadn't the smallest intention of suggesting anything of the kind. He must simply let it ride. And the thought of being engaged to a girl who talked openly about fairies being born because stars blew their noses, or whatever it was, frankly appalled me.

She was carrying on with her remarks, and as I listened I clenched my fists till I shouldn't wonder if the knuckles didn't stand out white under the strain. It seemed as if she would never get to the nub.

"Yes, all through those days at Cannes I could see what you were trying to say. A girl always knows. And then you followed me down here, and there was that same dumb, yearning look in your eyes when we met this evening. And then you were so insistent that I should come out and walk with you in the twilight. And now you stammer out those halting words. No, this does not come as a surprise. But I am sorry——"

The word was like one of Jeeves's pick-me-ups. Just as if a glassful of meat sauce, red pepper, and the yolk of an egg—though, as I say, I am convinced that these are not the sole ingredients—had been shot into me, I expanded like some lovely flower blossoming in the sunshine. It was all right, after all. My guardian angel had not been asleep at the switch.

"—but I am afraid it is impossible."

She paused.

"Impossible," she repeated.

I had been so busy feeling saved from the scaffold that I didn't get on to it for a moment that an early reply was desired.

"Oh, right ho," I said hastily.

"I'm sorry."

"Quite all right."

"Sorrier than I can say."

"Don't give it another thought."

"We can still be friends."

"Oh, rather."

"Then shall we just say no more about it; keep what has happened as a tender little secret between ourselves?"

"Absolutely."

"We will. Like something lovely and fragrant laid away in lavender."

"In lavender—right."

There was a longish pause. She was gazing at me in a divinely pitying sort of way, much as if I had been a snail she had happened accidentally to bring her short French vamp down on, and I longed to tell her that it was all right, and that Bertram, so far from being the victim of despair, had never felt fizzier in his life. But, of course, one can't do that sort of thing. I simply said nothing, and stood there looking brave.

"I wish I could," she murmured.

"Could?" I said, for my attention had been wandering.

"Feel towards you as you would like me to feel."

"Oh, ah."

"But I can't. I'm sorry."

"Absolutely O.K. Faults on both sides, no doubt."

"Because I am fond of you, Mr.—no, I think I must call you Bertie. May I?"

"Oh, rather."

"Because we are real friends."

"Quite."

"I do like you, Bertie. And if things were different—I wonder——"

"Eh?"

"After all, we are real friends.... We have this common memory.... You have a right to know.... I don't want you to think——Life is such a muddle, isn't it?"

To many men, no doubt, these broken utterances would have appeared mere drooling and would have been dismissed as such. But the Woosters are quicker-witted than the ordinary and can read between the lines. I suddenly divined what it was that she was trying to get off the chest.

"You mean there's someone else?"

She nodded.

"You're in love with some other bloke?"

She nodded.

"Engaged, what?"

This time she shook the pumpkin.

"No, not engaged."

Well, that was something, of course. Nevertheless, from the way she spoke, it certainly looked as if poor old Gussie might as well scratch his name off the entry list, and I didn't at all like the prospect of having to break the bad news to him. I had studied the man closely, and it was my conviction that this would about be his finish.

Gussie, you see, wasn't like some of my pals—the name of Bingo Little is one that springs to the lips—who, if turned down by a girl, would simply say, "Well, bung-oh!" and toddle off quite happily to find another. He was so manifestly a bird who, having failed to score in the first chukker, would turn the thing up and spend the rest of his life brooding over his newts and growing long grey whiskers, like one of those chaps you read about in novels, who live in the great white house you can

just see over there through the trees and shut themselves off from the world and have pained faces.

"I'm afraid he doesn't care for me in that way. At least, he has said nothing. You understand that I am only telling you this because——"

"Oh, rather."

"It's odd that you should have asked me if I believed in love at first sight." She half closed her eyes. "'Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?'" she said in a rummy voice that brought back to me—I don't know why—the picture of my Aunt Agatha, as Boadicea, reciting at that pageant I was speaking of. "It's a silly little story. I was staying with some friends in the country, and I had gone for a walk with my dog, and the poor wee mite got a nasty thorn in his little foot and I didn't know what to do. And then suddenly this man came along——"

Harking back once again to that pageant, in sketching out for you my emotions on that occasion, I showed you only the darker side of the picture. There was, I should now mention, a splendid aftermath when, having climbed out of my suit of chain mail and sneaked off to the local pub, I entered the saloon bar and requested mine host to start pouring. A moment later, a tankard of their special home-brewed was in my hand, and the ecstasy of that first gollup is still green in my memory. The recollection of the agony through which I had passed was just what was needed to make it perfect.

It was the same now. When I realized, listening to her words, that she must be referring to Gussie—I mean to say, there couldn't have been a whole platoon of men taking thorns out of her dog that day; the animal wasn't a pin-cushion—and became aware that Gussie, who an instant before had, to all appearances, gone so far back in the betting as not to be worth a quotation, was the big winner after all, a positive thrill permeated the frame and there escaped my lips a "Wow!" so crisp and hearty that the Bassett leaped a liberal inch and a half from terra firma.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

I waved a jaunty hand.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing. Just remembered there's a letter I have to write tonight without fail. If you don't mind, I think I'll be going in. Here," I said, "comes Gussie Fink-Nottle. He will look after you."

And, as I spoke, Gussie came sidling out from behind a tree.

I passed away and left them to it. As regards these two, everything was beyond a question absolutely in order. All Gussie had to do was keep his head down and not press. Already, I felt, as I legged it back to the house, the happy ending must have begun to function. I mean to say, when you leave a girl and a man, each of whom has admitted in set terms that she and he loves him and her, in close

juxtaposition in the twilight, there doesn't seem much more to do but start pricing fish slices.

Something attempted, something done, seemed to me to have earned two-penn'orth of wassail in the smoking-room.

I proceeded thither.
