

The makings were neatly laid out on a side-table, and to pour into a glass an inch or so of the raw spirit and shoosh some soda-water on top of it was with me the work of a moment. This done, I retired to an arm-chair and put my feet up, sipping the mixture with carefree enjoyment, rather like Caesar having one in his tent the day he overcame the Nervii.

As I let the mind dwell on what must even now be taking place in that peaceful garden, I felt bucked and uplifted. Though never for an instant faltering in my opinion that Augustus Fink-Nottle was Nature's final word in cloth-headed guffins, I liked the man, wished him well, and could not have felt more deeply involved in the success of his wooing if I, and not he, had been under the ether.

The thought that by this time he might quite easily have completed the preliminary pourparlers and be deep in an informal discussion of honeymoon plans was very pleasant to me.

Of course, considering the sort of girl Madeline Bassett was—stars and rabbits and all that, I mean—you might say that a sober sadness would have been more fitting. But in these matters you have got to realize that tastes differ. The impulse of right-thinking men might be to run a mile when they saw the Bassett, but for some reason she appealed to the deeps in Gussie, so that was that.

I had reached this point in my meditations, when I was aroused by the sound of the door opening. Somebody came in and started moving like a leopard toward the side-table and, lowering the feet, I perceived that it was Tuppy Glossop.

The sight of him gave me a momentary twinge of remorse, reminding me, as it did, that in the excitement of getting Gussie fixed up I had rather forgotten about this other client. It is often that way when you're trying to run two cases at once.

However, Gussie now being off my mind, I was prepared to devote my whole attention to the Glossop problem.

I had been much pleased by the way he had carried out the task assigned him at the dinner-table. No easy one, I can assure you, for the browsing and sluicing had been of the highest quality, and there had been one dish in particular—I allude to the nonnettes de poulet Agnès Sorel—which might well have broken down the most iron resolution. But he had passed it up like a professional fasting man, and I was proud of him.

"Oh, hullo, Tuppy," I said, "I wanted to see you."

He turned, snifter in hand, and it was easy to see that his privations had tried him sorely. He was looking like a wolf on the steppes of Russia which has seen its peasant shin up a high tree.

"Yes?" he said, rather unpleasantly. "Well, here I am."

"Well?"

"How do you mean——well?"

"Make your report."

"What report?"

"Have you nothing to tell me about Angela?"

"Only that she's a blister."

I was concerned.

"Hasn't she come clustering round you yet?"

"She has not."

"Very odd."

"Why odd?"

"She must have noted your lack of appetite."

He barked raspily, as if he were having trouble with the tonsils of the soul.

"Lack of appetite! I'm as hollow as the Grand Canyon."

"Courage, Tuppy! Think of Gandhi."

"What about Gandhi?"

"He hasn't had a square meal for years."

"Nor have I. Or I could swear I hadn't. Gandhi, my left foot."

I saw that it might be best to let the Gandhi motif slide. I went back to where we had started.

"She's probably looking for you now."

"Who is? Angela?"

"Yes. She must have noticed your supreme sacrifice."

"I don't suppose she noticed it at all, the little fathead. I'll bet it didn't register in any way whatsoever."

"Come, Tuppy," I urged, "this is morbid. Don't take this gloomy view. She must at least have spotted that you refused those nonnettes de poulet Agnès Sorel. It was a sensational renunciation and stuck out like a sore thumb. And the cèpes à la Rossini——"

A hoarse cry broke from his twisted lips:

"Will you stop it, Bertie! Do you think I am made of marble? Isn't it bad enough to have sat watching one of Anatole's supremest dinners flit by, course after course, without having you making a song about it? Don't remind me of those nonnettes. I can't stand it."

I endeavoured to hearten and console.

"Be brave, Tuppy. Fix your thoughts on that cold steak-and-kidney pie in the larder. As the Good Book says, it cometh in the morning."

"Yes, in the morning. And it's now about half-past nine at night. You would bring that pie up, wouldn't you? Just when I was trying to keep my mind off it."

I saw what he meant. Hours must pass before he could dig into that pie. I dropped the subject, and we sat for a pretty good time in silence. Then he rose and began to pace the room in an overwrought sort of way, like a zoo lion who has heard the dinner-gong go and is hoping the keeper won't forget him in the general distribution. I averted my gaze tactfully, but I could hear him kicking chairs and things. It was plain that the man's soul was in travail and his blood pressure high.

Presently he returned to his seat, and I saw that he was looking at me intently. There was that about his demeanour that led me to think that he had something to communicate.

Nor was I wrong. He tapped me significantly on the knee and spoke:

"Bertie."

"Hullo?"

"Shall I tell you something?"

"Certainly, old bird," I said cordially. "I was just beginning to feel that the scene could do with a bit more dialogue."

"This business of Angela and me."

"Yes?"

"I've been putting in a lot of solid thinking about it."

"Oh, yes?"

"I have analysed the situation pitilessly, and one thing stands out as clear as dammit. There has been dirty work afoot."

"I don't get you."

"All right. Let me review the facts. Up to the time she went to Cannes Angela loved me. She was all over me. I was the blue-eyed boy in every sense of the term. You'll admit that?"

"Indisputably."

"And directly she came back we had this bust-up."

"Quite."

"About nothing."

"Oh, dash it, old man, nothing? You were a bit tactless, what, about her shark."

"I was frank and candid about her shark. And that's my point. Do you seriously believe that a trifling disagreement about sharks would make a girl hand a man his hat, if her heart were really his?"

"Certainly."

It beats me why he couldn't see it. But then poor old Tuppy has never been very hot on the finer shades. He's one of those large, tough, football-playing blokes who lack the more delicate sensibilities, as I've heard Jeeves call them. Excellent at blocking a punt or walking across an opponent's face in cleated boots, but not so good when it comes to understanding the highly-strung female temperament. It simply wouldn't occur to him that a girl might be prepared to give up her life's happiness rather than waive her shark.

"Rot! It was just a pretext."

"What was?"

"This shark business. She wanted to get rid of me, and grabbed at the first excuse."

"No, no."

"I tell you she did."

"But what on earth would she want to get rid of you for?"

"Exactly. That's the very question I asked myself. And here's the answer: Because she has fallen in love with somebody else. It sticks out a mile. There's no other possible solution. She goes to Cannes all for me, she comes back all off me. Obviously during those two months, she must have transferred her affections to some foul blister she met out there."

"No, no."

"Don't keep saying 'No, no'. She must have done. Well, I'll tell you one thing, and you can take this as official. If ever I find this slimy, slithery snake in the grass, he had better make all the necessary arrangements at his favourite nursing-home without delay, because I am going to be very rough with him. I propose, if and when found, to take him by his beastly neck, shake him till he froths, and pull him inside out and make him swallow himself."

With which words he biffed off; and I, having given him a minute or two to get out of the way, rose and made for the drawing-room. The tendency of females to roost in drawing-rooms after dinner being well marked, I expected to find Angela there. It was my intention to have a word with Angela.

To Tuppy's theory that some insinuating bird had stolen the girl's heart from him at Cannes I had given, as I have indicated, little credence, considering it the mere unbalanced apple sauce of a bereaved man. It was, of course, the shark, and nothing but the shark, that had caused love's young dream to go temporarily off the boil, and I was convinced that a word or two with the cousin at this juncture would set everything right.

For, frankly, I thought it incredible that a girl of her natural sweetness and tender-heartedness should not have been moved to her foundations by what she had seen at dinner that night. Even Seppings, Aunt Dahlia's butler, a cold, unemotional man, had gasped and practically reeled when Tuppy waved aside those nonnettes de poulet Agnès Sorel, while the footman, standing by with the potatoes, had stared like one seeing a vision. I simply refused to consider the possibility of the significance of the thing having been lost on a nice girl like Angela. I fully expected to find her in the drawing-room with her heart bleeding freely, all ripe for an immediate reconciliation.

In the drawing-room, however, when I entered, only Aunt Dahlia met the eye. It seemed to me that she gave me rather a jaundiced look as I hove in sight, but this, having so recently beheld Tuppy in his agony, I attributed to the fact that she, like him, had been going light on the menu. You can't expect an empty aunt to beam like a full aunt.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she said.

Well, it was, of course.

"Where's Angela?" I asked.

"Gone to bed."

"Already?"

"She said she had a headache."

"H'm."

I wasn't so sure that I liked the sound of that so much. A girl who has observed the sundered lover sensationally off his feed does not go to bed with headaches if love has been reborn in her heart. She sticks around and gives him the swift, remorseful glance from beneath the drooping eyelashes and generally endeavours to convey to him that, if he wants to get together across a round table and try to find a formula, she is all for it too. Yes, I am bound to say I found that going-to-bed stuff a bit disquieting.

"Gone to bed, eh?" I murmured musingly.

"What did you want her for?"

"I thought she might like a stroll and a chat."

"Are you going for a stroll?" said Aunt Dahlia, with a sudden show of interest.

"Where?"

"Oh, hither and thither."

"Then I wonder if you would mind doing something for me."

"Give it a name."

"It won't take you long. You know that path that runs past the greenhouses into the kitchen garden. If you go along it, you come to a pond."

"That's right."

"Well, will you get a good, stout piece of rope or cord and go down that path till you come to the pond——"

"To the pond. Right."

"—and look about you till you find a nice, heavy stone. Or a fairly large brick would do."

"I see," I said, though I didn't, being still fogged. "Stone or brick. Yes. And then?"

"Then," said the relative, "I want you, like a good boy, to fasten the rope to the brick and tie it around your damned neck and jump into the pond and drown yourself. In a few days I will send and have you fished up and buried because I shall need to dance on your grave."

I was more fogged than ever. And not only fogged—wounded and resentful. I remember reading a book where a girl "suddenly fled from the room, afraid to stay for fear dreadful things would come tumbling from her lips; determined that she would not remain another day in this house to be insulted and misunderstood." I felt much about the same.

Then I reminded myself that one has got to make allowances for a woman with only about half a spoonful of soup inside her, and I checked the red-hot crack that rose to the lips.

"What," I said gently, "is this all about? You seem pipped with Bertram."

"Pipped!"

"Noticeably pipped. Why this ill-concealed animus?"

A sudden flame shot from her eyes, singeing my hair.

"Who was the ass, who was the chump, who was the dithering idiot who talked me, against my better judgment, into going without my dinner? I might have guessed——"

I saw that I had divined correctly the cause of her strange mood.

"It's all right. Aunt Dahlia. I know just how you're feeling. A bit on the hollow side, what? But the agony will pass. If I were you, I'd sneak down and raid the larder after the household have gone to bed. I am told there's a pretty good steak-and-kidney pie there which will repay inspection. Have faith, Aunt Dahlia," I urged. "Pretty soon Uncle Tom will be along, full of sympathy and anxious inquiries."

"Will he? Do you know where he is now?"

"I haven't seen him."

"He is in the study with his face buried in his hands, muttering about civilization and melting pots."

"Eh? Why?"

"Because it has just been my painful duty to inform him that Anatole has given notice."

I own that I reeled.

"What?"

"Given notice. As the result of that drivelling scheme of yours. What did you expect a sensitive, temperamental French cook to do, if you went about urging everybody to refuse all food? I hear that when the first two courses came back to the kitchen practically untouched, his feelings were so hurt that he cried like a child. And when the rest of the dinner followed, he came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a studied and calculated insult, and decided to hand in his portfolio."

"Golly!"

"You may well say 'Golly!' Anatole, God's gift to the gastric juices, gone like the dew off the petal of a rose, all through your idiocy. Perhaps you understand now why I want you to go and jump in that pond. I might have known that some hideous disaster would strike this house like a thunderbolt if once you wriggled your way into it and started trying to be clever."

Harsh words, of course, as from aunt to nephew, but I bore her no resentment.

No doubt, if you looked at it from a certain angle, Bertram might be considered to have made something of a floater.

"I am sorry."

"What's the good of being sorry?"

"I acted for what I deemed the best."

"Another time try acting for the worst. Then we may possibly escape with a mere flesh wound."

"Uncle Tom's not feeling too bucked about it all, you say?"

"He's groaning like a lost soul. And any chance I ever had of getting that money out of him has gone."

I stroked the chin thoughtfully. There was, I had to admit, reason in what she said. None knew better than I how terrible a blow the passing of Anatole would be to Uncle Tom.

I have stated earlier in this chronicle that this curious object of the seashore with whom Aunt Dahlia has linked her lot is a bloke who habitually looks like a pterodactyl that has suffered, and the reason he does so is that all those years he spent in making millions in the Far East put his digestion on the blink, and the only cook that has ever been discovered capable of pushing food into him without starting something like Old Home Week in Moscow under the third waistcoat button is this uniquely gifted Anatole. Deprived of Anatole's services, all he was likely to give the wife of his b. was a dirty look. Yes, unquestionably, things seemed to have struck a somewhat rocky patch, and I must admit that I found myself, at moment of going to press, a little destitute of constructive ideas.

Confident, however, that these would come ere long, I kept the stiff upper lip.

"Bad," I conceded. "Quite bad, beyond a doubt. Certainly a nasty jar for one and all. But have no fear, Aunt Dahlia, I will fix everything."

I have alluded earlier to the difficulty of staggering when you're sitting down, showing that it is a feat of which I, personally, am not capable. Aunt Dahlia, to my amazement, now did it apparently without an effort. She was well wedged into a deep arm-chair, but, nevertheless, she staggered like billy-o. A sort of spasm of horror and apprehension contorted her face.

"If you dare to try any more of your lunatic schemes——"

I saw that it would be fruitless to try to reason with her. Quite plainly, she was not in the vein. Contenting myself, accordingly, with a gesture of loving sympathy, I left the room. Whether she did or did not throw a handsomely bound volume of the Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, at me, I am not in a position to say. I had seen it lying on the table beside her, and as I closed the door I remember receiving the impression that some blunt instrument had crashed against the woodwork, but I was feeling too pre-occupied to note and observe.

I blame myself for not having taken into consideration the possible effects of a sudden abstinence on the part of virtually the whole strength of the company on one of Anatole's impulsive Provençal temperament. These Gauls, I should have remembered, can't take it. Their tendency to fly off the handle at the slightest provocation is well known. No doubt the man had put his whole soul into those nonnettes de poulet, and to see them come homing back to him must have gashed him like a knife.

However, spilt milk blows nobody any good, and it is useless to dwell upon it. The task now confronting Bertram was to put matters right, and I was pacing the lawn, pondering to this end, when I suddenly heard a groan so lost-soulful that I thought it must have proceeded from Uncle Tom, escaped from captivity and come to groan in the garden.

Looking about me, however, I could discern no uncles. Puzzled, I was about to resume my meditations, when the sound came again. And peering into the

shadows I observed a dim form seated on one of the rustic benches which so liberally dotted this pleasance and another dim form standing beside same. A second and more penetrating glance and I had assembled the facts.

These dim forms were, in the order named, Gussie Fink-Nottle and Jeeves. And what Gussie was doing, groaning all over the place like this, was more than I could understand.

Because, I mean to say, there was no possibility of error. He wasn't singing. As I approached, he gave an encore, and it was beyond question a groan. Moreover, I could now see him clearly, and his whole aspect was definitely sand-bagged.

"Good evening, sir," said Jeeves. "Mr. Fink-Nottle is not feeling well."

Nor was I. Gussie had begun to make a low, bubbling noise, and I could no longer disguise it from myself that something must have gone seriously wrong with the works. I mean, I know marriage is a pretty solemn business and the realization that he is in for it frequently churns a chap up a bit, but I had never come across a case of a newly-engaged man taking it on the chin so completely as this.

Gussie looked up. His eye was dull. He clutched the thatch.

"Goodbye, Bertie," he said, rising.

I seemed to spot an error.

"You mean 'Hullo,' don't you?"

"No, I don't. I mean goodbye. I'm off."

"Off where?"

"To the kitchen garden. To drown myself."

"Don't be an ass."

"I'm not an ass.... Am I an ass, Jeeves?"

"Possibly a little injudicious, sir."

"Drowning myself, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"You think, on the whole, not drown myself?"

"I should not advocate it, sir."

"Very well, Jeeves. I accept your ruling. After all, it would be unpleasant for Mrs. Travers to find a swollen body floating in her pond."

"Yes, sir."

"And she has been very kind to me."

"Yes, sir."

"And you have been very kind to me, Jeeves."

"Thank you, sir."

"So have you, Bertie. Very kind. Everybody has been very kind to me. Very, very kind. Very kind indeed. I have no complaints to make. All right, I'll go for a walk instead."

I followed him with bulging eyes as he tottered off into the dark.

"Jeeves," I said, and I am free to admit that in my emotion I bleated like a lamb drawing itself to the attention of the parent sheep, "what the dickens is all this?"

"Mr. Fink-Nottle is not quite himself, sir. He has passed through a trying experience."

I endeavoured to put together a brief synopsis of previous events.

"I left him out here with Miss Bassett."

"Yes, sir."

"I had softened her up."

"Yes, sir."

"He knew exactly what he had to do. I had coached him thoroughly in lines and business."

"Yes, sir. So Mr. Fink-Nottle informed me."

"Well, then——"

"I regret to say, sir, that there was a slight hitch."

"You mean, something went wrong?"

"Yes, sir."

I could not fathom. The brain seemed to be tottering on its throne.

"But how could anything go wrong? She loves him, Jeeves."

"Indeed, sir?"

"She definitely told me so. All he had to do was propose."

"Yes sir."

"Well, didn't he?"

"No, sir."

"Then what the dickens did he talk about?"

"Newts, sir."

"Newts?"

"Yes, sir."

"Newts?"

"Yes, sir."

"But why did he want to talk about newts?"

"He did not want to talk about newts, sir. As I gather from Mr. Fink-Nottle, nothing could have been more alien to his plans."

I simply couldn't grasp the trend.

"But you can't force a man to talk about newts."

"Mr. Fink-Nottle was the victim of a sudden unfortunate spasm of nervousness, sir. Upon finding himself alone with the young lady, he admits to having lost his morale. In such circumstances, gentlemen frequently talk at random, saying the first thing that chances to enter their heads. This, in Mr. Fink-Nottle's case, would seem to have been the newt, its treatment in sickness and in health."

The scales fell from my eyes. I understood. I had had the same sort of thing happen to me in moments of crisis. I remember once detaining a dentist with the drill at one of my lower bicuspid and holding him up for nearly ten minutes with a story about a Scotchman, an Irishman, and a Jew. Purely automatic. The more he tried to jab, the more I said "Hoots, mon," "Begorra," and "Oy, oy". When one loses one's nerve, one simply babbles.

I could put myself in Gussie's place. I could envisage the scene. There he and the Bassett were, alone together in the evening stillness. No doubt, as I had advised, he had shot the works about sunsets and fairy princesses, and so forth, and then had arrived at the point where he had to say that bit about having something to say to her. At this, I take it, she lowered her eyes and said, "Oh, yes?"

He then, I should imagine, said it was something very important; to which her response would, one assumes, have been something on the lines of "Really?" or "Indeed?" or possibly just the sharp intake of the breath. And then their eyes met, just as mine met the dentist's, and something suddenly seemed to catch him in the pit of the stomach and everything went black and he heard his voice starting to drool about newts. Yes, I could follow the psychology.

Nevertheless, I found myself blaming Gussie. On discovering that he was stressing the newt note in this manner, he ought, of course, to have tuned out, even if it had meant sitting there saying nothing. No matter how much of a twitter he was in, he should have had sense enough to see that he was throwing a spanner into the works. No girl, when she has been led to expect that a man is about to pour forth his soul in a fervour of passion, likes to find him suddenly shelving the whole topic in favour of an address on aquatic Salamandridae.

"Bad, Jeeves."

"Yes, sir."

"And how long did this nuisance continue?"

"For some not inconsiderable time, I gather, sir. According to Mr. Fink-Nottle, he supplied Miss Bassett with very full and complete information not only with respect to the common newt, but also the crested and palmated varieties. He described to her how newts, during the breeding season, live in the water, subsisting upon tadpoles, insect larvae, and crustaceans; how, later, they make their way to the land and eat slugs and worms; and how the newly born newt has three pairs of long, plumlike, external gills. And he was just observing that newts differ from salamanders in the shape of the tail, which is compressed, and that a marked sexual dimorphism prevails in most species, when the young lady rose and said that she thought she would go back to the house."

"And then——"

"She went, sir."

I stood musing. More and more, it was beginning to be borne in upon me what a particularly difficult chap Gussie was to help. He seemed to so marked an extent to lack snap and finish. With infinite toil, you manoeuvred him into a position where all he had to do was charge ahead, and he didn't charge ahead, but went off sideways, missing the objective completely.

"Difficult, Jeeves."

"Yes, sir."

In happier circs., of course, I would have canvassed his views on the matter. But after what had occurred in connection with that mess-jacket, my lips were sealed.

"Well, I must think it over."

"Yes, sir."

"Burnish the brain a bit and endeavour to find the way out."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, good night, Jeeves."

"Good night, sir."

He shimmered off, leaving a pensive Bertram Wooster standing motionless in the shadows. It seemed to me that it was hard to know what to do for the best.
