



# Introduction

I recently picked up a classic novel, and found it contained an introduction by a very well-known writer. I read it eagerly, before quickly realising that in fact, the condescending tone was putting me off actually starting the book. I was so cross, it almost ruined the enjoyment of it. ‘What’s the point of introductions?!’ I thought to myself. So when I was asked to put finger to button and carve out a few hundred words at the start of a work by, in my opinion, the funniest writer that has ever lived, I almost fled the country in panic. How can anyone be worthy enough to have their words before Pelham Grenville Wodehouse’s? In truth, no one is. But nonetheless, it’s the greatest of honours to be asked to introduce you, dear bookholder, to one of the greatest and silliest stories ever told.

The problem I had with the aforementioned introduction was that it set out to make the reader believe that the novel in question ‘wasn’t for everyone’ and that you had to be of supreme intellect to truly ‘get it’. Well, I thought that was tosh. I consider myself to be of fairly low intellect, and *I* got it. And it was . . . fine. Two out of five. I have always been very keen to say that reading is for everyone. You should never try to put someone *off* reading – you can’t know what they might get out of it. Luckily, this book you’re holding, well, this book is for *everyone*. The only thing you need to bring to the party is a willingness to laugh.

Why me, then? Well, it’s a fair question. As well as blabbering on the radio, I also write books – children’s books. Big, fun,

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daft adventures that have been partly inspired by Wodehouse himself. I love playing with words and worlds, creating new ones and inventing new similes. There's nothing better than conjuring up a new, colourful character that leaps purposefully off the page like a toad who's just remembered he's late for a slug hunt. Wodehouse's books are my favourite things to read, bar anything except maybe the cricket scores. And when England are playing, P. G. still often wins anyway, because England often don't. If you're new to the world of P. G. Wodehouse: I am completely and utterly jealous. You're about to enjoy a brilliantly batty array of characters, the wittiest dialogue and the most inventive wordplay ever. If you're familiar with the series: 'What ho, old bean!' Lovely new cover, isn't it? And isn't the flap jolly! As jolly as a jolly bird!

I read somewhere that Wodehouse used to write each of his sentences ten times to make sure they were absolutely perfect. Pretty astounding when you think about how long that would take. Such dedication to his craft is one of the reasons he's so highly regarded. It's also fairly devastating to us mere mortals, isn't it? I imagine most of us have spent our lives writing sentences that we've barely even re-read once.

But that's how P. G. Wodehouse created comedic and literary perfection. You can tell he enjoyed honing each joke, trying out new phrases and experimenting with language. This is probably the most valuable lesson I've learned reading his books over the years. If you're not having fun making something, how can you expect others to enjoy it?

Wodehouse once said that his primary aim was 'to spread sweetness and light'. Isn't that magical? No other agenda but to make people laugh and give them a good time. It's pure escapism, and that's what I've always loved the most about his stories. They've been with me through school, university,

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family sadness, embarrassing breakups, work stresses, global pandemics and . . . well, you'd be a fool to try and predict what's next. What I *can* predict is that whatever it is, I'll be able to rely on one of his imagined friends to get me out of a funk. Incidentally the Earl of Ickenham, who you'll meet shortly, is one of the best de-funkers going.

My first encounter with Wodehouse was at school, although frustratingly, he was never formally taught. Why *is* he never taught? Strangely, it was a deep-voiced, bespectacled Physics teacher (and Wodehouse fanatic) by the name of Mr Hows who opened the door for me to this literary wonderland. Books I'd experienced in school up until this point had been dealt with very seriously. They must be FULLY annotated. You must look for hidden meaning. Read it and read it and read it again until it's not fun any more. Despite this, when Mr Hows boomed out one day in assembly that he was going to stage a dramatic reading of Jeeves and Wooster, I shyly enquired about it. I loved drama and farting around on stage and it was something I wanted to get better at. I was vaguely aware of the Fry and Laurie TV adaptation, but being fifteen years old and attending a state school in Bishop's Stortford in the early 2000s, I was more concerned with who The Rock was fighting at Wrestlemania than how Bertie was going to avoid marrying Honoria Glossop. (Spoiler alert, he does avoid it. Oh, and The Rock lost to Triple H, if you're interested. A great injustice.) So, I took to the stage to be on the stage, rather than out of a love of P. G.'s comic characters.

All this changed the moment I was cast as Mr Hows's Jeeves. A whole new world of entertainment opened up. I entered a colourful universe of aristocratic buffoonery and public school nonsense that I had previously known nothing about. I found

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it all ridiculous, charming and, most importantly of all, funny. So very funny. Like most of us, I wasn't the most confident teenager and I'm glad of that now. I've found it important to be wary of over-confident fifteen-year-olds. And I hadn't really found my 'thing'. But along came Bertie and Jeeves, and it started to dawn on me that this was it.

As Jeeves, I sauntered across the stage delivering the most perfectly polite and tempered putdowns to my employer, the blundering Bertie Wooster, played delightfully by my mate Bruce. And, as the play went on, I realised the true joy of Wodehouse's words. I wore an old suit of my dad's, gelled my hair down and learned how to walk and talk like the infamous valet. My confidence both in life and onstage rocketed. I loved being in front of an audience, I liked making people laugh. From there, I dived into all things silly. Old Radio 4 comedies like *Round the Horne*, Mel Brooks movies, Monty Python and, of course, the Wodehouse back catalogue. Every time I saw one in a bookshop, I added it to my collection. All of these silly things have a thread running through them. Just be funny and make sure the audience has the best time with you. This message has led me to what I'm doing today, and Mr Hows is the reason I'm writing this now. He was a disciple of Wodehouse, one of the 'Drones', if you will (a little joke for the fans there).

The most wonderful thing about Wodehouse's work is that it's truly funny, in the sense that there's no need to even try and look for deeper meaning. It's fun for the sake of fun, and there really isn't enough of that in the world. No need to overthink it, and certainly no need to annotate it either. Delightfully, I've ended up re-reading them. Lord Ickenham is said to be one of P. G.'s favourite creations. His frenetic, chaotic and mischievous energy ensures the stories he features in bound along gleefully. As a reader, he's a joy to spend time with. Regardless of

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the sticky situation he finds himself in, you always know he'll unstick himself . . . somehow. The real magic is finding out how. Every work by Wodehouse is a 'page-turner', but the presence of Frederick Twistleton, 5th Earl of Ickenham, in any of his stories means you'll not just turn the pages but find yourself polishing off the paragraphs and chomping through the chapters at an alarming rate.

Wodehouse novels offer up the chance to read for pleasure in its purest form, one of the best things you can do for your brain. As Stephen 'Jeeves' Fry once said, 'You don't analyse such sunlit perfection, you just bask in its warmth and splendour.' Warmth and kindness run throughout Wodehouse's work. There's never a suggestion of him wanting to skewer a particular section of society, but he is incredibly playful. Some of the characters he writes may well be flawed, bumbling, wealthy ninnies but I always get the impression that he rather likes them. He finds them fascinating, and he thinks that people are essentially good. Uncle Fred, for example, only ever wants the very best for the mismatched young lovers in the story, no matter how farcical his methods may be. Yes, he enjoys creating mischief, but it's always well intentioned. My favourite type of mischief! The great comic writer Ben Elton said in an interview that P. G. Wodehouse 'loved being alive'. I adore that description. I feel at my most alive when I'm visiting Aunt Dahlia at Brinkley Court, wondering how Jeeves will extricate Bertie from his next scrape or how Uncle Fred will get away with pretending to be three people at once. 'For anyone that's tired of cynicism,' said Elton, 'I recommend a trip to P. G. Wodehouse's world – it will refresh you enormously.'

Right, that's quite enough from me now. Shall I summarise the plot? Explain what you're about to read? Absolutely not.

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No one could do it justice. Pour yourself a snifter of something tasty, loosen your breeches and let it all play out. Expect blustering Bostocks, bonnie babies, a blue Bill, a bouncy Bean, a booming Brabazon-Plank and bountiful busts. Come on then, let's dive head first into Wodehouse's world. Be careful to not get too oiled, though – you don't want to miss a single word. Remember, each sentence was checked ten times for your reading pleasure . . . each deserves your attention. Here come 300 pages of pure joy. If it's laughter you're after, you've picked just the right book. In the words of Uncle Dynamite, Lord Ickenham himself: 'Expect sensational results shortly!'

Greg James, 2023

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# PART ONE

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# I

On the little branch line which starts at Wockley Junction and conveys passengers to Eggmarsh St John, Ashenden Oakshott, Bishop's Ickenham and other small and somnolent hamlets of the south of England the early afternoon train had just begun its leisurely journey.

It was a train whose patrons, sturdy sons of the soil who did not intend to let a railway company trouser more of their money than they could help, had for the most part purchased third-class tickets. But a first-class compartment had been provided for the rich and thriftless, and today it had two occupants, a large youth of open and ingenuous countenance, much sunburned, and a tall, slim, distinguished-looking man some thirty years his senior with a jaunty grey moustache and a bright and enterprising eye, whose air was that of one who has lived to the full every minute of an enjoyable life and intends to go on doing so till further notice. His hat was on the side of his head, and he bore his cigar like a banner.

For some ten minutes after the train had started, the usual decent silence of the travelling Englishman prevailed in the compartment. Then the young man, who had been casting covert glances at his companion, cleared his throat and said, 'Er.'

The elderly gentleman looked up inquiringly. Deepening in colour, for he was of bashful temperament and was already wondering why he had been ass enough to start this, the sunburned youth proceeded.

'I say, excuse me. Aren't you Lord Ickenham?'

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'I am.'

'Fine.'

The elderly gentleman seemed puzzled.

'I'm pretty pleased about it myself,' he admitted. 'But why do you rejoice?'

'Well, if you hadn't been —' said the young man, and paused aghast at the thought of what horrors might not have resulted from the wanton addressing of a perfect stranger. 'What I mean is, I used to know you. Years ago. Sort of. I was a pal of your nephew Pongo, and I came over to your place for tennis sometimes. You once tipped me five bob.'

'That's how the money goes.'

'I don't suppose you remember me. Bill Oakshott.'

'Of course I remember you, my dear fellow,' said Lord Ickenham heartily and quite untruthfully. 'I wish I had a tenner for every time I've said to my wife, "Whatever became of Bill Oakshott?"'

'No, really? Fine. How is Lady Ickenham?'

'Fine.'

'Fine. She once tipped me half a crown.'

'You will generally find women loosen up less lavishly than men. It's something to do with the bone structure of the head. Yes, my dear wife, I am glad to say, continues in the pink. I've just been seeing her off on the boat at Southampton. She is taking a trip to the West Indies.'

'Jamaica?'

'No, she went of her own free will.'

The human tomato digested this for a moment in silence, seemed on the point of saying 'Fine,' then changed his mind, and enquired after Pongo.

'Pongo,' said Lord Ickenham, 'is in terrific form. He bestrides the world like a Colossus. It would not be too much to say that

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Moab is his washpot and over what's-its-name has he cast his shoe. He came into the deuce of a lot of money the other day from a deceased godfather in America, and can now face his tailor without a tremor. He is also engaged to be married.'

'Good.'

'Yes,' said Lord Ickenham, rather startled by this evidence of an unexpectedly wide vocabulary. 'Yes, he seems fairly radiant about it. I myself, I must confess, am less enthusiastic. I don't know if you have noticed it, Bill Oakshott, but nothing in this world ever works out one hundred per cent satisfactorily for all parties. Thus, while A is waving his hat and giving a series of rousing cheers, we see B frowning dubiously. And the same is true of X and Z. Take this romance of Pongo's, for instance. I was hoping that he would marry another girl, a particular protégée of mine whom I have watched grow from a child, and a singularly fascinating child, at that, to a young woman of grace, charm and strength of character who in my opinion has everything. Among other advantages which she possesses is sense enough for two, which, it seems to me, is just the amount the wife of Reginald ("Pongo") Twistleton will require. But it was not to be. However, let us look on the bright side. Shall we?'

'Oh, rather.'

'Fine. Well, looking on the bright side, I haven't met this new girl, but she sounds all right. And of course the great thing is to get the young blighter safely married and settled down, thus avoiding the risk of his coming in one day and laying on the mat something with a platinum head and an Oxford accent which he picked up on the pier at Blackpool. You remember what a pushover he always was for the gentle sex.'

'I haven't seen Pongo since we were kids.'

'Even then he was flitting from flower to flower like a

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willowy butterfly. He was the Don Juan of his dancing class when he wore Little Lord Fauntleroy suits, his heart an open door with “Welcome” on the mat.’

‘He’ll chuck all that sort of thing now.’

‘Let us hope so. But you remember what the fellow said. Can the leopard change his spots, or the Ethiopian his hue? Or is it skin? And talking of Ethiopians,’ said Lord Ickenham, allowing himself to become personal, ‘has someone been cooking you over a slow fire, or did you sit in the sun without your parasol?’

Bill Oakshott grinned sheepishly.

‘I am a bit sunburned, aren’t I? I’ve been in Brazil. I’m on my way home from the boat.’

‘You reside in this neighbourhood?’

‘At Ashenden Manor.’

‘Married?’

‘No. I live with my uncle. Or, rather, he lives with me.’

‘What is the distinction?’

‘Well, what I mean is, Ashenden really belongs to me, but I was only about sixteen when my father died, and my uncle came barging over from Cheltenham and took charge. He dug in, and has been there ever since. Running the whole show. You’d think from the way he goes on,’ said Bill, stirred to unwonted loquacity by the recollection of his wrongs, ‘that he owned the bally place. Well, to give you an instance, he’s pinched the best room in the house for his damned collection of African curios.’

‘Does he collect African curios? God help him.’

‘And that’s not all. Who has the star bedroom? Me? No! Uncle Aylmer. Who collars the morning paper? Me? No! Uncle Aylmer. Who gets the brown egg at breakfast?’

‘Don’t tell me. Let me guess. Uncle Aylmer?’

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‘Yes. Blast him!’

Lord Ickenham stroked his moustache.

‘A certain guarded something in your manner, Bill Oakshott,’ he said, ‘suggests to me that you do not like having your Uncle Aylmer living at Ashenden Manor. Am I correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why not bung him out?’

The truculence faded from Bill Oakshott’s demeanour, leaving in its place embarrassment. He could have answered the question, but to do so would have involved revealing his great love for his uncle’s daughter, Hermione, and agreeable old bird though Lord Ickenham was, he did not feel that he knew him intimately enough.

‘Oh, well,’ he said, and coyly scraped a shoe like a violin case along the floor of the compartment. ‘No, I don’t quite see how I could do that.’

‘There are complications?’

‘Yes. Complications.’

‘I understand.’

It was plain to Lord Ickenham that he had stumbled upon a delicate domestic situation, and he tactfully forbore to probe into it. Picking up his *Times*, he turned to the crossword puzzle, and Bill Oakshott sat gazing out of the window at the passing scenery.

But he did not see the familiar fields and spinneys, only the lovely face of his cousin Hermione. It rose before him like some radiant vision, and soon, he reflected, he would be beholding it not merely with the eye of imagination. Yes, at any moment, now that he was back in England again, he was liable to find himself gazing into her beautiful eyes or, if she happened to be standing sideways, staring at her pure, perfect profile.

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In which event, what would the procedure be? Would he, as before, just gape and shuffle his feet? Or would he, fortified by three months in bracing Brazil, at last be able to shake off his distressing timidity and bring himself to reveal a silent passion which had been functioning uninterruptedly for some nine years?

He hoped so, but at the same time was compelled to recognise the point as a very moot one.

A tap on the knee interrupted his meditations.

'Next stop, Ashenden Oakshott,' Lord Ickenham reminded him.

'Eh? Oh, yes. That's right, so it is.'

'You had better be girding up your loins.'

'Yes,' said Bill, and rose and hauled down his suitcase from the rack. Then, as the train puffed out of the tunnel, he gave a sudden sharp cry and stood staring. As if unable to believe his eyes, he blinked them twice with great rapidity. But they had not deceived him. He still saw what he thought he had seen.

Under normal conditions there is about the station of Ashenden Oakshott little or nothing to rouse the emotions and purge the soul with pity and terror. Once you have seen the stationmaster's whiskers, which are of a Victorian bushiness and give the impression of having been grown under glass, you have drained it of all it has to offer in the way of thrills, unless you are one of those easily excited persons who can find drama in the spectacle of a small porter wrestling with a series of large milk cans. 'Placid' is the word that springs to the lips.

But today all this was changed, and it was obvious at a glance that Ashenden Oakshott was stepping out. From the penny-in-the-slot machine at the far end to the shed where the porter kept his brooms and buckets the platform was dark

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with what practically amounted to a sea of humanity. At least forty persons must have been present.

Two, selected for their muscle and endurance, were holding aloft on poles a streamer on which some loving hand, which had not left itself quite enough room, had inscribed the words:

WELCOME HOME, MR WILLM

and in addition to these the eye noted a Silver Band, some Boy Scouts, a policeman, a clergyman, a mixed assortment of villagers of both sexes, what looked like an Infants' Bible Class (with bouquets) and an impressive personage with a large white moustache, who seemed to be directing the proceedings.

From his post by the window Bill Oakshott continued to stand rigid and open-mouthed, like some character in a fairy story on whom a spell has been cast, and so limpid was his countenance that Lord Ickenham had no difficulty in analysing the situation.

Here, he perceived, was a young man of diffident and retiring disposition, one who shrank from the public eye and quailed at the thought of being conspicuous, and for some reason somebody had organised this stupendous reception for him. That was why he was now looking like a stag at bay.

Publicity was a thing from which Lord Ickenham himself had never been averse. He frankly enjoyed it. If Silver Bands and Boy Scouts had come to welcome him at a station, he would have leaped to meet them with a whoop and a holler, and would have been out taking bows almost before the train had stopped. But it was plain that this young friend of his was differently constituted, and his heart was moved by his distress.

The kindly peer had always been a practical man. He did not, as others might have done, content himself in this crisis with a pitying glance or a silent hand-clasp.

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‘Nip under the seat,’ he advised.

To Bill it seemed like a voice from heaven. It was as if in the hour of deadly peril his guardian angel had suddenly come through with something constructive. He followed the counsel without delay, and presently there was a lurch and a heave and the train resumed its journey.

When he crawled out, dusting his hands, he found his companion regarding him with open admiration.

‘As neat a vanishing act as I have ever witnessed,’ said Lord Ickenham cordially. ‘It was like a performing seal going after a slice of fish. You’ve done this sort of thing before, Bill Oakshott. No? You amaze me. I would have sworn that you had had years of practice on race trains. Well, you certainly baffled them. I don’t think I have ever seen a Silver Band so nonplussed. It was as though a bevy of expectant wolves had overtaken a sleigh and found no Russian peasant aboard, than which I can imagine nothing more sickening. For the wolves, of course.’

Bill Oakshott was still quivering. He gazed gratefully at his benefactor and in broken words thanked him for his inspired counsel.

‘Not at all,’ said Lord Ickenham. ‘My dear fellow, don’t mention it. I am like the chap in Damon Runyan’s story, who always figured that if he could bring a little joy into any life, no matter how, he was doing a wonderful deed. It all comes under the head of spreading sweetness and light, which is my constant aim.’

‘Well, I shall never forget it, never,’ said Bill earnestly. ‘Do you realise that I should have had to make a speech, besides probably kissing all those ghastly children with the flowers?’ He shuddered strongly. ‘Did you see them? About a million of them, each with a posy.’

‘I did, indeed. And the sight confirmed me in my view that

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since the days when you used to play tennis at my place you must have become pretty illustrious. I have knocked about the world long enough to know that infants with bouquets don't turn out for every Tom, Dick and Harry. I myself am a hell of a fellow – a first-class Earl who keeps his carriage – but have infants ever offered me bouquets? What have you been doing, Bill Oakshott, to merit this reception – nay, this Durbar?’

‘I haven't done a thing.’

‘Well, it's all very odd. I suppose it *was* in your honour that the affair was arranged? They would hardly have said “Mr Willm”, if they had meant someone else.’

‘No, that's true.’

‘Have you any suspicions as to the ringleaders?’

‘I suppose my uncle was at the bottom of it.’

‘Was he the impressive citizen with the moustache, who looked like Clemenceau?’

‘Yes. He must have got the thing up.’

‘But why?’

‘I don't know.’

‘Search your memory. Can you think of nothing you have done recently which could have put you in the Silver Band and Boy Scout class?’

‘Well, I went on this expedition up the Amazon.’

‘Oh, you went on an expedition, did you, and up the Amazon, to boot. I didn't realise that. I assumed that you had merely been connected with the Brazil nut industry or something. That might account for it, of course. And why did you commit this rash act? Wanted to get some girl out of your system, I suppose?’

Bill blushed. It had indeed been the seeming hopelessness of his love for his cousin Hermione that had driven him to try a cure which, as he might have foreseen, had proved quite ineffective.

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‘Why, yes. Something of the sort.’

‘In my day we used to go to the Rocky Mountains and shoot grizzlies. What made you choose Brazil?’

‘I happened to see an advertisement in *The Times* about an expedition that was starting off for the Lower Amazon, run by a chap called Major Plank, and I thought it might be a good idea to sign on.’

‘I see. Well, I wish I had known of this before. I could have stuck on a lot of dog on the strength of having met you as a boy. But we shall be at Bishop’s Ickenham in a minute or two, and the question arises, what do you propose to do? Wait for a train back? Or shall I take you to my place and give you a drink and send you home in the car?’

‘Wouldn’t that be a nuisance?’

‘On the contrary. Nothing could suit my book better. That’s settled then. We now come to a matter to which I think we ought to devote some little attention. What story are you going to tell your uncle, to account for your non-appearance at the revels?’

A thoughtful look came into Bill Oakshott’s face. He winced slightly, as if a Brazilian alligator had attached itself to the fleshy part of his leg.

‘I was rather wondering about that,’ he confessed.

‘A good, coherent story will undoubtedly be required. He will be feeling chagrined at your failure to materialise, and he looked a dangerous specimen, the sort of man whose bite spells death. What is he? An all-in wrestler? A chap who kills rats with his teeth?’

‘He used to be Governor of one of those Crown colonies.’

‘Then we must strain every nerve to pacify him. I know these ex-Governors. Tough nuts. You didn’t mention his name, by the way.’

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‘Bostock. Sir Aylmer Bostock.’

‘What? Is that who he is? Well, I’ll be dashed.’

‘You know him?’

‘I have not seen him for more than forty years, but at one time I knew him well. We were at school together.’

‘Oh, really?’

‘Mugsy we used to call him. He was younger than me by some three years, one of those tough, chunky, beetle-browed kids who scowl at their seniors and bully their juniors. I once gave him six of the juiciest with a fives bat in the hope of correcting this latter tendency. Well, the mystery of that civic welcome is now explained. Mugsy is to stand for Parliament shortly, my paper informs me, and no doubt he thought it would give him a leg up. Like me, he hopes to trade on his connection with a man who has extended the bounds of Civilisation.’

‘I didn’t extend the bounds of Civilisation.’

‘Nonsense. I’ll bet you extended them like elastic. But we are getting away from our discussion of what story you are to tell. How would it be to say that the warmth of the day caused you to drop off into a light slumber, and when you woke up blowed if you weren’t at Bishop’s Ickenham?’

‘Fine.’

‘You like it? I don’t think it’s so bad myself. Simple, which is always good. Impossible to disprove, which is better. And with the added advantage of having a historic precedent; the case, if you remember, of the lady who wanted to go to Birmingham and they were taking her on to Crewe. Yes, I fancy it ought to get by. So that was young Mugsy, was it?’ said Lord Ickenham. ‘I must say I’m surprised that he should have finished up as anything so comparatively respectable as Governor of a Crown colony. It just shows you never can tell.’

‘How long did you say it was since you had met him?’

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‘Forty-two years come Lammas Eve. Why?’

‘I was only wondering why you hadn’t run across him. Living so close, I mean.’

‘Well, I’ll tell you, Bill Oakshott. It is my settled policy to steer pretty clear of the neighbours. You have probably noticed yourself that the British Gawd-help-us seems to flourish particularly luxuriantly in the rural districts. My wife tries to drag me to routs and revels from time to time, but I toss my curls at her and refuse to stir. I often think that the ideal life would be to have plenty of tobacco and be cut by the County. And as regards your uncle, I look back across the years at Mugsy, the boy, and I see nothing that encourages me to fraternise with Mugsy, the man.’

‘Something in that.’

‘Not an elfin personality, Mugsy’s. I’m afraid Pongo doesn’t realise what he’s up against in taking on such a father-in-law. It’s his daughter Hermione that he’s gone and got engaged to, and I see a sticky future ahead of the unhappy lad. Ah, here we are,’ said Lord Ickenham, as the train slowed down. ‘Let’s go and get that drink. It’s just possible that we may find Pongo at the old shack. He rang me up this morning, saying he was coming to spend the night. He is about to visit Ashenden Manor, to show the old folks what they’ve got.’

He hopped nimbly on to the platform, prattling gaily, quite unaware that he had to all intents and purposes just struck an estimable young man behind the ear with a sock full of wet sand. The short, quick, gulping grunt, like that of a bulldog kicked in the ribs while eating a mutton chop, which had escaped Bill Oakshott on the cue ‘got engaged to’, he had mistaken for a hiccough.

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## II

The summer afternoon had mellowed into twilight and Bill Oakshott had long since taken his bruised heart off the premises before Pongo Twistleton fetched up at the home of his ancestors. One of those mysterious breakdowns which affect two-seater cars had delayed him on the road. He arrived just in time to dress for dinner, and the hour of eight found him seated opposite his uncle in the oak-panelled dining room, restoring his tissues after a trying day.

Lord Ickenham, delighted to see him, was a gay and effervescent host, but during the meal the presence of a hovering butler made conversation of a really intimate nature impossible, and the talk confined itself to matters of general interest. Pongo spoke of New York, whence he had recently returned from a visit connected with the winding up of his godfather's estate, and Lord Ickenham mentioned that Lady Ickenham was on her way to Trinidad to attend the wedding of the daughter of an old friend. Lord Ickenham alluded to his meeting with Pongo's former crony, Bill Oakshott, and Pongo, though confessing that he remembered Bill only imperfectly – 'Beefy stripling with a pink face, unless I'm thinking of someone else' – said that he looked forward to renewing their old friendship when he hit Ashenden Manor.

They also touched on such topics as the weather, dogs, two-seater cars (their treatment in sickness and in health), the foreign policy of the Government, the chances of Jujube for the Goodwood Cup, and what you would do – this subject arising

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from Pongo's recent literary studies – if you found a dead body in your bath one morning with nothing on but pince-nez and a pair of spats.

It was only when the coffee had been served and the cigars lighted that Lord Ickenham prepared to become more expansive.

'Now we're nice and cosy,' he said contentedly. 'What a relief it always is when the butler pops off. It makes you realise the full meaning of that beautiful line in the hymn book – "Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away." Not that I actually love Coggs. A distant affection, rather, tempered with awe. Well, Pongo, I'm extraordinarily glad you blew in. I was wanting a quiet chat with you about your plans and what not.'

'Ah,' said Pongo.

He spoke reservedly. He was a slender, personable young man with lemon-coloured hair and an attractive face, and on this face a close observer would have noted at the moment an austere, wary look, such as might have appeared on that of St Anthony just before the temptations began. He had a strong suspicion that now that they were alone together, it was going to be necessary for him to be very firm with this uncle of his and to maintain an iron front against his insidious wiles.

Watching the head of the family closely during dinner, he had not failed to detect in his eyes, while he was speaking of his wife's voyage to the West Indies, a lurking gleam such as one might discern in the eye of a small boy who has been left alone in the house and knows where the key of the jam cupboard is. He had seen that gleam before, and it had always heralded trouble of a major kind. Noticeable even as early as the soup course, it had become, as its proprietor puffed at his cigar, more marked than ever, and Pongo waited coldly for him to proceed.

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‘How long are you proposing to inflict yourself on these Bostocks of yours?’

‘About a week.’

‘And after that?’

‘Back to London, I suppose.’

‘Good,’ said Lord Ickenham heartily. ‘That was what I wanted to know. That was what I wished to ascertain. You will return to London. Excellent. I will join you there, and we will have one of our pleasant and instructive afternoons.’

Pongo stiffened. He did not actually say ‘Ha!’ but the exclamation was implicit in the keen glance which he shot across the table. His suspicions had been correct. His wife’s loving surveillance having been temporarily removed, Frederick Altamont Cornwallis, fifth Earl of Ickenham, was planning to be out and about again.

‘You ask me,’ a thoughtful Crumpet had once said in the smoking room of the Drones Club, ‘why it is that at the mention of his Uncle Fred’s name Pongo Twistleton blanches to the core and calls for a couple of quick ones. I will tell you. It is because this uncle is pure dynamite. Every time he is in Pongo’s midst, with the sap running strongly in his veins, he subjects the unfortunate young egg to some soul-testing experience, luring him out into the open and there, right in the public eye, proceeding to step high, wide and plentiful. For though well stricken in years the old blister becomes on these occasions as young as he feels, which seems to be about twenty-two. I don’t know if you happen to know what the word “excesses” means, but those are what he invariably commits, when on the loose. Get Pongo to tell you some time about that day they had together at the dog races.’

It was a critique of which, had he heard it, Lord Ickenham would have been the first to admit the essential justice.

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From boyhood up his had always been a gay and happy disposition, and in the evening of his life he still retained, together with a juvenile waistline, the bright enthusiasms and the fresh, unspoiled mental outlook of a slightly inebriated undergraduate. He had enjoyed a number of exceedingly agreeable outings in his nephew's society in the course of the last few years, and was pleasantly conscious of having stepped on these occasions as high, wide and plentiful as a man could wish, particularly during that day at the dog races. Though there, he had always maintained, a wiser policeman would have been content with a mere reprimand.

'As you are aware, if you were not asleep while I was talking at dinner,' he said, resuming his remarks, 'your aunt has left me for a few weeks and, as you can well imagine, I am suffering agonies. I feel like one of those fellows in the early nineteenth-century poems who used to go about losing dear gazelles. Still—'

'Now listen,' said Pongo.

'Still, in practically every cloud wrack the knowledgeable eye, if it peers closely enough, can detect some sort of a silver lining, however small, and the horror of my predicament is to a certain extent mitigated by the thought that I now become a mobile force again. Your aunt is the dearest woman in the world, and nobody could be fonder of her than I am, but I sometimes find her presence . . . what is the word I want . . . restrictive. She holds, as you know, peculiar views on the subject of my running around loose in London, as she puts it, and this prevents me fulfilling myself. It is a pity. Living in a rural morgue like Bishop's Ickenham all the time, one gets rusty and out of touch with modern thought. I don't suppose these days I could tell you the name of a single chucker-out in the whole of the West End area, and I used to know them all. That is why—'

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‘Now listen.’

‘That is why the fact of her having packed a toothbrush and popped off to Trinidad, though it blots the sunshine from my life, is not an unrelieved tragedy. Existence may have become for me an arid waste, but let us not forget that I can now be up and doing with a heart for any fate. Notify me when you return to London, and I will be with you with my hair in a braid. Bless my soul, how young I’m feeling these days! It must be the weather.’

Pongo knocked the ash off his cigar and took a sip of brandy. There was a cold, stern look on his face.

‘Now listen, Uncle Fred,’ he said, and his voice was like music to the ears of the Recording Angel, who felt that this was going to be good. ‘All that stuff is out.’

‘Out?’

‘Right out. You don’t get me to the dog races again.’

‘I did not specify the dog races. Though they provide an admirable means of studying the soul of the people.’

‘Or on any other frightful binge of yours. Get thou behind me, about sums it up. If you come to see me in London, you will get lunch at my flat and afterwards a good book. Nothing more.’

Lord Ickenham sighed, and was silent for a space. He was musing on the curse of wealth. In the old days, when Pongo had been an impecunious young fellow reading for the Bar and attempting at intervals to get into an uncle’s ribs for an occasional much-needed fiver, nobody could have been a more sympathetic companion along the primrose path. But coming into money seemed to have changed him completely. The old, old story, felt Lord Ickenham.

‘Oh, very well,’ he said. ‘If that is how you feel –’

‘It is,’ Pongo assured him. ‘Make a note of it on your cuff.

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And it's no good saying "Ichabod", because I intend to stick to my position with iron resolution. My standing with Hermione is none too secure as it is – she looks askance at my belonging to the Drones – and the faintest breath of scandal would dish me properly. And most unfortunately she knows all about you.'

'My life is an open book.'

'She has heard what a loony you are, and she seems to think it may be hereditary. "I hope you are not like your uncle," she keeps saying, with a sort of brooding look in her eye.'

'You must have misunderstood her. "I hope you *are* like your uncle," she probably said. Or "Do try, darling, to be more like your uncle."'

'Consequently I shall have to watch my step like a ruddy hawk. Let her get the slightest suspicion into her nut that I am not one hundred per cent steady and serious, and bim will go my chances of putting on the sponge-bag trousers and walking down the aisle with her.'

'Then you would not consider the idea of my coming to Ashenden as your valet, and seeing what innocent fun we could whack out of the deception?'

'My God!'

'Merely a suggestion. And it couldn't be done, anyway. It would involve shaving off my moustache, to which I am greatly attached. When a man has neither chick nor child, he gets very fond of a moustache. So she's that sort of girl, is she?'

'What do you mean, that sort of girl?'

'Noble-minded. High principled. A credit to British womanhood.'

'Oh, rather. Yes, she's terrific. Must be seen to be believed.'

'I look forward to seeing her.'

'I have a photograph here, if you would care to take a

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dekko,' said Pongo, producing one of cabinet size from his breast pocket like a conjurer extracting a rabbit from a top hat.

Lord Ickenham took the photograph, and studied it for some moments.

'A striking face.'

'Don't miss the eyes.'

'I've got 'em.'

'The nose, also.'

'I've got that, too. She looks intelligent.'

'And how. Writes novels.'

'Good God!'

A monstrous suspicion had germinated in Pongo's mind.

'Don't you like her?' he asked incredulously.

'Well, I'll tell you,' said Lord Ickenham, feeling his way carefully. 'I can see she's a remarkable girl, but I wouldn't say she was the wife for you.'

'Why not?'

'In my opinion you will be giving away too much weight. Have you studied these features? That chin is a determined chin. Those eyes are flashing eyes.'

'What's the matter with flashing eyes?'

'Dashed unpleasant things to have about the home. To cope with flashing eyes, you have to be a man of steel and ginger. Are you a man of steel and ginger? No. You're like me, a gentle coffee-caddie.'

'A how much?'

'By a coffee-caddie I mean a man – and there is no higher type – whose instinct it is to carry his wife's breakfast up to her room on a tray each morning and bill and coo with her as she wades into it. And what the coffee-caddie needs is not a female novelist with a firm chin and flashing eyes, but a jolly little soul who, when he bills, will herself bill like billy-o, and

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