RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Luck of the Bodkins

P.G. Wodehouse

Contents

About the Book

Seize this wonderful chance to embark on a Wodehousian voyage on the luxurious liner S.S. *Atlantic* – in the company of Monty Bodkin, whose passion for Gertrude Butterwick knows no bounds (except those set by the wild-at-heart Hollywood starlet Lotus Blossom and her pet alligator). Also aboard are a movie mogul, the centre-forward for the All-England ladies hockey team and the two Tennyson brothers (one of whom has been mistaken for the late poet laureate and given a fat movie contract …). Also a chatty steward, and a mouse doll in which all manner of things can be hidden. This is Wodehouse afloat – a voyage of pure delight.

About the Author

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (always known as ‘Plum’) wrote more than ninety novels and some three hundred short stories over 73 years. He is widely recognised as the greatest 20th century writer of humour in the English language.

Wodehouse mixed the high culture of his classical education with the popular slang of the suburbs in both England and America, becoming a ‘cartoonist of words’. Drawing on the antics of a near-contemporary world, he placed his Drones, Earls, Ladies (including draconian aunts and eligible girls) and Valets, in a recently vanished society, whose reality is transformed by his remarkable imagination into something timeless and enduring.

Perhaps best known for the escapades of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, Wodehouse also created the world of Blandings Castle, home to Lord Emsworth and his cherished pig, the Empress of Blandings. His stories include gems concerning the irrepressible and disreputable Ukridge; Psmith, the elegant socialist; the ever-so-slightly-unscrupulous Fifth Earl of Ickenham, better known as Uncle Fred; and those related by Mr Mulliner, the charming raconteur of The Angler’s Rest, and the Oldest Member at the Golf Club.

Wodehouse collaborated with a variety of partners on straight plays and worked principally alongside Guy Bolton on providing the lyrics and script for musical comedies with such composers as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. He liked to say that the royalties for ‘Just My Bill’, which Jerome Kern incorporated into Showboat, were enough to keep him in tobacco and whisky for the rest of his life.

In 1936 he was awarded The Mark Twain Medal for ‘having made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the happiness of the world’. He was made a Doctor of Letters by Oxford University in 1939 and in 1975, aged 93, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. He died shortly afterwards, on St Valentine’s Day.

To have created so many characters that require no introduction places him in a very select group of writers, lead by Shakespeare and Dickens.

Also by P.G. Wodehouse

Fiction

Aunts Aren't Gentlemen
The Adventures of Sally
Bachelors Anonymous
Barmy in Wonderland
Big Money
Bill the Conqueror
Blandings Castle and Elsewhere
Carry On, Jeeves
The Clicking of Cuthbert
Cocktail Time
The Code of the Woosters
The Coming of Bill
Company for Henry
A Damsel in Distress
Do Butlers Burgle Banks
Doctor Sally
Eggs, Beans and Crumpets
A Few Quick Ones
French Leave
Frozen Assets
Full Moon
Galahad at Blandings
A Gentleman of Leisure
The Girl in Blue
The Girl on the Boat
The Gold Bat
The Head of Kay's
The Heart of a Goof
Heavy Weather
Hot Water
Ice in the Bedroom
If I Were You

Indiscretions of Archie
The Inimitable Jeeves
Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit
Jeeves in the Offing
Jill the Reckless
Joy in the Morning
Laughing Gas
Leave it to Psmith
The Little Nugget
Lord Emsworth and Others
Louder and Funnier
Love Among the Chickens
The Luck of Bodkins
The Man Upstairs
The Man with Two Left Feet
The Mating Season
Meet Mr Mulliner
Mike and Psmith
Mike at Wrykyn
Money for Nothing
Money in the Bank
Mr Mulliner Speaking
Much Obliged, Jeeves
Mulliner Nights
Not George Washington
Nothing Serious
The Old Reliable
Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin
Piccadilly Jim
Pigs Have Wings
Plum Pie
The Pothunters
A Prefect's Uncle
The Prince and Betty
Psmith, Journalist
Psmith in the City

Quick Service
Right Ho, Jeeves
Ring for Jeeves
Sam me Sudden
Service with a Smile
The Small Bachelor
Something Fishy
Something Fresh
Spring Fever
Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves
Summer Lightning
Summer Moonshine
Sunset at Blandings
The Swoop
Tales of St Austin's
Thank You, Jeeves
Ukridge
Uncle Dynamite
Uncle Fred in the Springtime
Uneasy Money
Very Good, Jeeves
The White Feather
William Tell Told Again
Young Men in Spats

Omnibuses

The World of Blandings
The World of Jeeves
The World of Mr Mulliner
The World of Psmith
The World of Ukridge
The World of Uncle Fred
Wodehouse Nuggets (edited by Richard Usborne)
The World of Wodehouse Clergy
The Hollywood Omnibus

Weekend Wodehouse

Paperback Omnibuses

The Golf Omnibus
The Aunts Omnibus
The Drones Omnibus
The Jeeves Omnibus 1
The Jeeves Omnibus 3

Poems

The Parrot and Other Poems

Autobiographical

Wodehouse on Wodehouse (comprising Bring on the Girls, Over Seventy, Performing Flea)

Letters

Yours, Plum

The Luck of the Bodkins

P.G. Wodehouse

arrow books

CHAPTER 1

INTO THE FACE of the young man who sat on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes there had crept a look of furtive shame, the shifty, hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French. One of the things which Gertrude Butterwick had impressed upon Monty Bodkin when he left for this holiday on the Riviera was that he must be sure to practise his French, and Gertrude's word was law. So now, though he knew that it was going to make his nose tickle, he said:

'Er, garçon.'

'M'sieur?'

'Er, garçon, esker-vous avez un spot de l'encre et une pièce de papier – note-papier, vous savez – et une enveloppe et une plume?'

'Bien, m'sieur.'

The strain was too great. Monty relapsed into his native tongue.

'I want to write a letter,' he said. And having, like all lovers, rather a tendency to share his romance with the world, he would probably have added 'to the sweetest girl on earth,' had not the waiter already bounded off like a retriever, to return a few moments later with the fixings.

'V'là, sir! Zere you are, sir,' said the waiter. He was engaged to a girl in Paris who had told him that when on the Riviera he must be sure to practise his English. 'Eenk – pin – pipper – enveloppe – and a liddle bit of bloddin-pipper.'

'Oh, merci,' said Monty, well pleased at this efficiency. 'Thanks. Right ho.'

'Right ho, m'sieur,' said the waiter.

Left alone, Monty lost no time in spreading paper on the table, taking up the pen and dipping it in the ink. So far, so good. But now, as so often happened when he started to write to the girl he loved, there occurred a stage wait. He paused, wondering how to begin.

It always irked him, this unreadiness of his as a correspondent. He worshipped Gertrude Butterwick as no man had ever worshipped woman before. Closeted with her, his arm about her waist, her head nestling on his shoulder, he could speak of his love eloquently and well. But he always had the most extraordinary difficulty in starting getting the stuff down on paper. He envied fellows like Gertrude's cousin, Ambrose Tennyson. Ambrose was a novelist, and a letter like this would have been pie to him. Ambrose Tennyson would probably have covered his eight sheets and be licking the envelope by now.

However, one thing was certain. Absolutely and without fail he must get something off by to-day's post. Apart from picture postcards, the last occasion on which he had written to Gertrude had been a full week before, when he had sent her that snapshot of himself in bathing costume on the Eden Rock. And girls, he knew, take these things to heart.

Chewing the pen and looking about him for inspiration, he decided to edge into the thing with a description of the scenery.

'Hotel Magnifique,
'Cannes,
'France, A.M.

'MY DARLING OLD EGG,

'I'm writing this on the terrace outside the hotel. It's a lovely day. The sea is blue—'

He stopped, perceiving that he had missed a trick. He tore up the paper and began again:

'Hotel Magnifique,
'Cannes,
'France, A.M.

'MY PRECIOUS DREAM-RABBIT,

‘I’m writing this on the terrace outside the hotel. It’s a lovely day, and how I wish you were with me, because I miss you all the time, and it’s perfectly foul to think that when I get back you will have popped off to America and I shan’t see you for ages. I’m dashed if I know how I shall stick it out.

‘This terrace looks out on the esplanade. The Croisette they call it – I don’t know why. Silly, but there it is. The sea is blue. The sand is yellow. One or two yachts are mucking about. There are a couple of islands over to the left, and over to the right some mountains.’

He stopped once more. This, he felt, was about as much as the scenery was good for in the way of entertainment value. Carry on in the same vein, and he might just as well send her the local guide-book. What was required now was a splash of human interest. That gossipy stuff that girls like. He looked about him again, and again received inspiration.

A fat man, accompanied by a slim girl, had just come out on to the terrace. He knew this fat man by sight and reputation, and he was a personality well worth a paragraph in anybody’s letter. Ivor Llewellyn, President of the Superba-Llewellyn Motion Picture Corporation of Hollywood.

He resumed:

‘There aren’t many people about at this time of day, as most of the lads play tennis in the morning or go off to Antibes to bathe. On the skyline, however, has just appeared a bird you may have heard of – Ivor Llewellyn, the motion picture bloke.

‘At least, if you haven’t heard of him, you’ve seen lots of his pictures. That thing we went to see my last day in London was one of his, the thing called – well, I forget what it was called, but there were gangsters in it and Lotus Blossom was the girl who loved the young reporter.

‘He’s parked himself at a table not far away, and is talking to a female.’

Monty paused again. Rereading what he had written, he found himself wondering if it was the goods, after all.

Gossipy stuff was all very well, but was it quite wise to dig up the dead past like this? That mention of Lotus Blossom . . . on the occasion referred to, he recalled, his open admiration of Miss Blossom had caused Gertrude to look a trifle squiggle-eyed, and it had taken two cups of tea and a plate of fancy cakes at the Ritz to pull her round.

With a slight sigh, he wrote the thing again, keeping in the scenery but omitting the human interest. It then struck him that it would be a graceful act, and one likely to be much appreciated, if he featured her father for a moment. He did not like her father, considering him, indeed, a pig-headed old bohunkus, but there are times when it is politic to sink one's personal prejudices.

'As I sit here in this lovely sunshine, I find myself brooding a good deal on your dear old father. How is he? (Tell him I asked, will you?) I hope he has been having no more trouble with his—'

Monty sat back with a thoughtful frown. He had struck a snag. He wished now that he had left her dear old father alone. For the ailment from which Mr Butterwick suffered was that painful and annoying malady sciatica, and he hadn't the foggiest how to spell it.

2

If Monty Bodkin had been, like his loved one's cousin Ambrose Tennyson, an artist in words, he would probably have supplemented his bald statement that Mr Ivor Llewellyn was talking to a female with the adjective 'earnestly,' or even some such sentence as 'I should imagine upon matters of rather urgent importance, for the dullest eye could discern that the man is deeply moved.'

Nor, in writing thus, would he have erred. The motion picture magnate was, indeed, agitated in the extreme. As he sat there in conference with his wife's sister Mabel, his brow was furrowed, his eyes bulged, and each of his three chins seemed to compete with the others in activity of movement. As for his hands, so briskly did they weave and circle that he looked like a plump Boy Scout signalling items of interest to some colleague across the way.

Mr Llewellyn had never liked his wife's sister Mabel – he thought, though he would have been the first to admit it was a near thing, that he disliked her more than his wife's brother George – but never had she seemed so repulsive to him as now. He could not have gazed at her with a keener distaste if she had been a foreign star putting her terms up.

'What!' he cried.

There had been no premonition to soften the shock. When on the previous day that telegram had come from Grayce, his wife, who was in Paris, informing him that her sister Mabel would be arriving in Cannes on the Blue Train this morning, he had been annoyed, it is true, and had grunted once or twice to show it, but he had had no sense of impending doom. After registering a sturdy resolve that he was darned if he would meet her at the station, he had virtually dismissed the matter from his mind. So unimportant did his wife's sister Mabel's movements seem to him.

Even when she had met him in the lobby of the hotel just now and had asked him to give her five minutes in some quiet spot on a matter of importance he had had no apprehensions, supposing merely that she was about to try to borrow money and that he was about to say he wouldn't give her any.

It was only when she hurled her bombshell, carelessly powdering her (to most people, though not to her brother-in-law) attractive nose the while, that the wretched man became conscious of his position.

‘Listen, Ikey,’ said Mabel Spence, for all the world as if she were talking about the weather or discussing the blue sea and yellow sand which had excited Monty Bodkin’s admiration, ‘we’ve got a job for you. Grayce has bought a peach of a pearl necklace in Paris, and she wants you, when you sail for home next week, to take it along and smuggle it through the Customs.’

‘What!’

‘You heard.’

Ivor Llewellyn’s lower jaw moved slowly downward, as if seeking refuge in his chins. His eyebrows rose. The eyes beneath them widened and seemed to creep forward from their sockets. As President of the Superba-Llewellyn Motion Picture Corporation, he had many a talented and emotional artist on his pay-roll, but not one of them could have registered horror with such unmistakable precision.

‘What, me?’

‘Yes, you.’

‘What, smuggle necklaces through the New York Customs?’

‘Yes.’

It was at this point that Ivor Llewellyn had begun to behave like a Boy Scout. Nor can we fairly blame him. To each man is given his special fear. Some quail before income-tax assessors, others before traffic policemen. Ivor Llewellyn had always had a perfect horror of Customs inspectors. He shrank from the gaze of their fishy eyes. He quivered when they chewed gum at him. When they jerked silent thumbs at his cabin trunk he opened it as if there were a body inside.

‘I won’t do it! She’s crazy.’

‘Why?’

‘Of course she’s crazy. Doesn’t Grayce know that every time an American woman buys jewellery in Paris the bandit who sells it to her notifies the Customs people back home so

that they’re waiting for her with their hatchets when she lands?’

‘That’s why she wants you to take it. They won’t be looking out for you.’

‘Pshaw! Of course they’ll be looking out for me. So I’m to get caught smuggling, am I? I’m to go to jail, am I?’

Mabel Spence replaced her powder-puff.

‘You won’t go to jail. Not,’ she said in the quietly offensive manner which had so often made Mr Llewellyn wish to hit her with a brick, ‘for smuggling Grayce’s necklace, that is. It’s all going to be perfectly simple.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘Sure. Everything’s arranged. Grayce has written to George. He will meet you on the dock.’

‘That,’ said Mr Llewellyn, ‘will be great. That will just make my day.’

‘As you come off the gang-plank, he will slap you on the back.’

Mr Llewellyn started.

‘George will?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your brother George?’

‘Yes.’

‘He will if he wants a good poke in the nose,’ said Mr Llewellyn.

Mabel Spence resumed her remarks, still with that rather trying resemblance in her manner to a nurse endeavouring to reason with a half-witted child.

‘Don’t be so silly, Ikey. Listen. When I bring the necklace on board at Cherbourg, I am going to sew it in your hat. When you go ashore at New York, that is the hat you will be wearing. When George slaps you on the back, it will fall off. George will stoop to pick it up, and his hat will fall off. Then he will give you his hat and take yours and walk off the dock. There’s no risk at all.’

Many men’s eyes would have sparkled brightly at the ingenuity of the scheme which this girl had outlined, but Ivor Llewellyn was a man whose eyes, even under the most favourable conditions, did not sparkle readily. They had been dull and glassy before she spoke, and they were dull and glassy now. If any expression did come into them, it was one of incredulous amazement.

‘You mean to say you’re planning to let your brother George get his hooks on a necklace that’s worth – how much is it worth?’

‘About fifty thousand dollars.’

‘And George is to be let walk off the dock with a fifty thousand dollar necklace in his hat? George?’ said Mr Llewellyn, as if wondering if he could have caught the name correctly. ‘Why, I wouldn’t trust your brother George alone with a kid’s money-box.’

Mabel Spence had no illusions about her flesh and blood. She saw his point. A perfectly sound point. But she remained calm.

‘George won’t steal Grayce’s necklace.’

‘Why not?’

‘He knows Grayce.’

Mr Llewellyn was compelled to recognize the force of her argument. His wife in her professional days had been one of the best-known panther-women on the silent screen. Nobody who had seen her in her famous rôle of Mimi, the female Apache in *When Paris Sleeps,* or who in private life had watched her dismissing a cook could pretend for an instant that she was a good person to steal pearl necklaces from.

‘Grayce would skin him.’

A keen ear might have heard a wistful sigh proceed from Mr Llewellyn’s lips. The idea of someone skinning his brother-in-law George touched a responsive chord in him. He had felt like that ever since his wife had compelled him

to put the other on the Superba-Llewellyn pay-roll at a thousand dollars a week as a production expert.

‘I guess you’re right,’ he said. ‘But I don’t like it. I don’t like it, I tell you, darn it. It’s too risky. How do you know something won’t go wrong? These Customs people have their spies everywhere, and I’ll probably find, when I step ashore with that necklace—’

He did not complete the sentence. He had got thus far when there was an apologetic cough from behind him, and a voice spoke:

‘I say, excuse me, but do you happen to know how to spell “sciatica”?’

3

It was not immediately that Monty Bodkin had decided to apply to Mr Llewellyn for aid in solving the problem that was vexing him. Possibly this was due to a nice social sense which made him shrink from forcing himself upon a stranger, possibly to the fact that some instinct told him that when you ask a motion picture magnate to start spelling things you catch him on his weak spot. Be that as it may, he had first consulted his friend the waiter, and the waiter had proved a broken reed. Beginning by affecting not to believe that there was such a word, he had suddenly uttered a cry, struck his forehead and exclaimed:

‘Ah! La sciatique!’

He had then gone on to make the following perfectly asinine speech:

‘Comme ça, m’sieur. Like zis, boy. Wit’ a ess, wit’ a say, wit’ a ee, wit’ a arr, wit’ a tay, wit’ a ee, wit’ a ku, wit’ a uh, wit’ a ay. V’là! Sciatique.’

Upon which, Monty, who was in no mood for this sort of thing, had very properly motioned him away with a gesture

and gone off to get a second opinion.

His reception, on presenting his little difficulty to this new audience, occasioned him a certain surprise. It would not be too much to say that he was taken aback. He had never been introduced to Mr Llewellyn, and he was aware that many people object to being addressed by strangers, but he could not help feeling a little astonished at the stare of horrified loathing with which the other greeted him as he turned. He had not seen anything like it since the day, years ago, when his Uncle Percy, who collected old china, had come into the drawing-room and found him balancing a Ming vase on his chin.

The female, fortunately, appeared calmer. Monty liked her looks. A small, neat brunette, with nice grey eyes.

'What,' she enquired, 'would that be, once again?'

'I want to spell "sciatica."'

'Well, go on,' said Mabel Spence indulgently.

'But I don't know how to.'

'I see. Well, unless the New Deal has changed it, it ought to be s-c-i-a-t-i-c-a.'

'Do you mind if I write that down?'

'I'd prefer it.'

'. . . -t-i-c-a. Right. Thanks,' said Monty warmly. 'Thanks awfully. I thought as much. That ass of a waiter was pulling my leg. All that rot about "with a ess, with a tay, with a arr," I mean to say. Even I knew there wasn't an "r" in it. Thanks. Thanks frightfully.'

'Not at all. Any other words you are interested in? I could do you "parallelogram" or "metempsychosis," if you wished, and Ikey here is a wizard at anything under two syllables. No? Just as you say.'

She watched him with a kindly eye as he crossed the terrace; then, turning to her brother-in-law, became aware that he was apparently in the throes of an emotional crisis. His eyes were bulging more than ever, and he had produced a handkerchief and was mopping his face with it.

‘Something the matter?’ she asked.

It was not immediately that Mr Llewellyn found speech. When he did, the speech that he found was crisp and to the point.

‘Listen!’ he said hoarsely. ‘It’s off!’

‘What’s off?’

‘That necklace. I’m not going to touch it.’

‘Oh, Ikey, for goodness’ sake!’

‘That’s all right, “Oh, Ikey, for goodness’ sake.” That guy heard what we were saying.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I do.’

‘Well, what of it?’

Mr Llewellyn snorted, but in an undertone, as if the shadow of Monty still brooded over him. He was much shaken.

‘What of it? You forgotten what I told you about these Customs people having their spies everywhere? That bird’s one of them.’

‘Oh, be yourself.’

‘That’s a lot of use, saying “Be myself.”’

‘I admit it’s an awful thing to ask you to be.’

‘Think you’re smart, don’t you?’ said Mr Llewellyn, piqued.

‘I know I’m smart.’

‘Not smart enough to understand the first thing about the way these Customs people work. A hotel like this is just the place where they would plant a spy.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because they know there would be certain to be some damn-fool woman coming along sooner or later shouting out at the top of her voice about smuggling necklaces.’

‘You were the one who was shouting.’

‘I was not.’

‘Oh, well, let it go. What does it matter? That fellow wasn’t a Customs spy.’

‘I tell you he was.’

‘He didn’t look like one.’

‘So you’re so dumb you think a spy looks like a spy, are you? Why, darn it, the first thing he does is to see that he doesn’t look like a spy. He sits up nights, studying. If that guy wasn’t a spy, what was he doing listening in on us? Why was he there?’

‘He wanted to know how to spell “sciatica.”’

‘Pshaw!’

‘Must you say “Pshaw”?’

‘Why wouldn’t I say “Pshaw”?’ demanded Mr Llewellyn, with an obvious sense of grievance. ‘What on earth would a man – at twelve o’clock on a summer morning in the South of France – want to spell “sciatica” for? He saw we had seen him, and he had to say the first thing he could think of. Well, this lets me out. If Grayce imagines after this that I’m going to so much as look at that necklace of hers, she’s got another guess coming. I wouldn’t handle the thing for a million.’

He leaned back in his chair, breathing heavily. His sister-in-law eyed him with disfavour. Mabel Spence was by profession an osteopath with a large clientele among the stars of Beverly Hills, and this made her something of a purist in the matter of physical fitness.

‘The trouble with you, Ikey,’ she said, ‘is that you’re out of condition. You eat too much, and that makes you weigh too much, and that makes you nervous. I’d like to give you a treatment right now.’

Mr Llewellyn came out of his trance.

‘You touch me!’ he said warningly. ‘That time I was weak enough to let Grayce talk me into letting you get your hands on me, you near broke my neck. Never you mind what I eat or what I don’t eat. . . .’

‘There isn’t much you don’t eat.’

‘. . . Never you mind whether I want a treatment or whether I don’t want a treatment. You listen to what I say.

And that is that I’m out of this sequence altogether. I don’t put a finger on that necklace.’

Mabel rose. There seemed to her little use in continuing the discussion.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘use your own judgment. It’s got nothing to do with me, one way or the other. Grayce told me to tell you, and I’ve told you. It’s up to you. You know best how you stand with her. All I say is that I shall be joining the boat at Cherbourg with the thing, and Grayce is all in favour of your easing it through. The way she feels is that it would be sinful wasting money paying it over to the United States Government, because they’ve more than is good for them already and would only spend it. Still, please yourself.’

She moved away, and Ivor Llewellyn, with a pensive frown, for her words had contained much food for thought, put a cigar in his mouth and began to chew it.

4

Monty, meanwhile, ignorant of the storm which his innocent request had caused, was proceeding with his letter. He had got now to the part where he was telling Gertrude how much he loved her, and the stuff was beginning to flow a bit. So intent, indeed, had he become that the voice of the waiter at his elbow made him jump and spray ink.

He turned, annoyed.

‘Well? Que est-il maintenant? Que voulez-vous?’

It was no idle desire for conversation that had brought the waiter to his side. He was holding a blue envelope.

‘Ah,’ said Monty, understanding. ‘Une telegramme pour moi, eh? Tout droit. Donnez le ici.’

To open a French telegram is always a matter of some little time. It is stuck together in unexpected places. During the moments while his fingers were occupied, Monty

chatted pleasantly to his companion about the weather, featuring *le soleil* and the beauty of *le ciel*. Gertrude, he felt, would have wished this. And so carefree was his manner while giving out his views on these phenomena that it came as all the more of a shock to the waiter when that awful cry sprang from his lips.

It was a cry of agony and amazement, the stricken yowl of a man who has been pierced to the heart. It caused the waiter to leap a foot. It made Mr Llewellyn bite his cigar in half. A drinker in the distant bar spilled his Martini.

And well might Montague Bodkin cry out in such a manner. For this telegram, this brief telegram, this curt, cold, casual telegram which had descended upon him out of a blue sky was from the girl he loved.

In fewer words than one would have believed possible and without giving any explanation whatsoever, Gertrude Butterwick had broken their engagement.

CHAPTER 2

ON A PLEASANT, sunny morning, about a week after the events which the historian has just related, a saunterer through Waterloo Station in the city of London, would have noticed a certain bustle and activity in progress on platform number eleven. The boat train for the liner *Atlantic,* sailing from Southampton at noon, was due to leave shortly after nine; and, the hour being now eight-fifty, the platform was crowded with intending voyagers and those who had come to see them off.

Ivor Llewellyn was there, talking to the reporters about Ideals and the Future of the Screen. The members of the All England Ladies' Hockey Team were there, saying good-bye to friends and relations before embarking on their tour of the United States. Ambrose Tennyson, the novelist, was there, asking the bookstall clerk if he had anything by Ambrose Tennyson. Porters were wheeling trucks; small boys with refreshment baskets were trying to persuade passengers that what they needed at nine o'clock in the morning was a slab of milk chocolate and a bath bun; a dog with a collecting-box attached to its back was going the rounds in the hope of making a quick touch in aid of the Railwaymen's Orphanage before it was too late. The scene, in short, presented a gay and animated appearance.

In this, it differed substantially from the young man with the dark circles under his eyes who was propping himself up against a penny-in-the-slot machine. An undertaker, passing at that moment, would have looked at this young man sharply, scenting business. So would a buzzard. It would have seemed incredible to them that life still animated that

limp frame. The Drones Club had given Reggie Tennyson a farewell party on the previous night, and the effects still lingered.

That the vital spark, however, was not quite extinct was proved an instant later. A clear, hearty feminine voice suddenly said: ‘Why, hullo, Reggie!’ about eighteen inches from his left ear, and a sharp spasm shook him from head to foot, as if he had been struck by some blunt instrument. Opening his eyes, which he had closed in order not to be obliged to see Mr Llewellyn – who, even when you were at the peak of your form, was no Taj Mahal – he gradually brought into focus a fine, upstanding girl in heather-mixture tweed and recognized in her his cousin, Gertrude Butterwick. Her charming face was rose-flushed, her hazel eyes shining. She was a delightful picture of radiant health. It made him feel sick to look at her.

‘Well, Reggie, I do call this nice of you.’

‘Eh?’

‘Coming to see me off.’

A wounded, injured expression came into Reggie Tennyson’s ashen face. He felt that his sanity had been impugned. And not without reason. Few young men would care to have it supposed that they had got up at half-past seven in the morning to say good-bye to their cousins.

‘See you off?’

‘Didn’t you come to see me off?’

‘Of course I didn’t come to see you off. I didn’t know you were going anywhere. Where are you going, anyway?’

It was Gertrude’s turn to look injured.

‘Didn’t you know I had been chosen for the England Hockey Team? We’re playing a series of matches in America.’

‘Good God!’ said Reggie, wincing. He was aware, of course, that his cousin was addicted to these excesses, but it was not pleasant to have to hear about them.

A sudden illumination came to Gertrude.

‘Why, how silly of me. You’re sailing, too, aren’t you?’

‘Well, would I be up at a ghastly hour like this, if I wasn’t?’

‘Of course, yes. The family are sending you off to Canada, to work in an office. I remember hearing father talking about it.’

‘He,’ said Reggie coldly, ‘was the spearhead of the movement.’

‘Well, it’s about time. Work is what you want.’

‘Work is not what I want. I hate the thought of it.’

‘You needn’t be so cross.’

‘Yes, I need,’ said Reggie. ‘Crosser, if I could manage it. Work is what I want, forsooth! Of all the silly, drivelling, fat-headed remarks . . .’

‘Don’t be so rude.’

Reggie passed a careworn hand across his forehead.

‘Sorry,’ he said, for the Tennysons did not war upon women, ‘I apologize. The fact is, I’m not quite myself this morning. I have rather a severe headache. I expect you’ve suffered in the same way yourself after a big binge. I overdid it last night in the society of a few club cronies, and this morning, as I say, I have rather a severe headache. It starts somewhere down at the ankles and gets worse all the way up. I say, have you ever noticed a rummy thing? I mean, how a really bad headache affects the eyes?’

‘Yours look like boiled oysters.’

‘It isn’t how they look. It’s what I see with them. I’ve been having – well, I wouldn’t attempt to pronounce the word at a moment like this, but I dare say you know what I mean. Begins with “hal.”’

‘Hallucinations?’

‘That’s right. Seeing chaps who aren’t there.’

‘Don’t drool, Reggie.’

‘I’m not drooling. Just now I opened my eyes – why, one cannot say – and I saw my brother Ambrose. There was no possibility of error. I saw him plainly. Shook me a bit, I don’t

mind confessing. You don’t think it’s a sign that one of us is going to die, do you? If so, I hope it’ll be Ambrose.’

Gertrude laughed. She had a nice, musical laugh. The fact that it sent Reggie tottering back against his penny-in-the-slot machine cannot be regarded as evidence to the contrary. A fly clearing its throat would have had a powerful effect on Reginald Tennyson this morning.

‘You are a chump,’ she said. ‘Ambrose is here.’

‘You aren’t going to tell me,’ said Reggie, stunned, ‘that he’s come to see me off?’

‘Of course not. He’s sailing himself.’

‘Sailing?’

Gertrude regarded him with surprise.

‘Of course. Haven’t you heard?’

‘Heard what?’

‘Ambrose is off to Hollywood.’

‘What!’

‘Yes.’

It hurt Reggie to stare, but he did so.

‘To Hollywood?’

‘Yes.’

‘But what about his job at the Admiralty?’

‘He’s given it up.’

‘Given up his job – his nice, soft, cushy job bringing in a steady so much per annum and a pension at the end of the term of sentence – to go to Hollywood? Well, I’m—’

Words failed Reggie. He could but gurgle. The monstrous unfairness of it all robbed him of speech. For years now, the family, so prone to view him with concern, had been pointing at Ambrose with pride. To Ambrose and himself had been specifically allotted the rôles of the Good Brother and the Bad Brother – the Diligent Apprentice, so to speak, and the Idle Apprentice. ‘If only you could be sensible and steady, like Ambrose!’ had been the family slogan. If he’d heard them say that once, he had heard them say it a

hundred times. ‘Sensible and steady, like Ambrose.’ And all the while the man had been saving this up for them!

Then there came to him a more brotherly and creditable emotion – that of compassion for this poor ass who was heading straight for the soup. Speech returned to him like a tidal wave.

‘He’s cuckoo! The man’s absolutely cuckoo. He hasn’t a notion what he’s letting himself in for. I know all about Hollywood. I saw a lot at one time of a girl who’s in the pictures, and she told me what things were like there. The outsider hasn’t a dog’s chance. The place is simply congested with people trying to break in. Authors especially. They starve in their thousands. They’re dying off like flies all the time. This girl said that if you make a noise like a mutton chop anywhere within a radius of ten miles of Hollywood Boulevard, authors come bounding out of every nook and cranny, howling like wolves. My gosh, that poor boob has dished himself properly. Is it too late for him to ring up the Admiralty blokes and tell them that he was only kidding when he sent in that resignation?’

‘But Ambrose isn’t going there on the chance of finding work. He’s got a contract.’

‘What!’

‘Certainly. You see that fat man standing over there, talking to the reporters. That’s Mr Llewellyn, one of the big picture men. He’s paying Ambrose fifteen hundred dollars a week to write scenarios for him.’

Reggie blinked.

‘I must have fallen into a light doze,’ he said. ‘I dreamed,’ he went on, smiling a little at the quaint conceit, ‘that you told me somebody had offered Ambrose fifteen hundred dollars a week to write scenarios.’

‘Yes, Mr Llewellyn did.’

‘It’s true?’

‘Certainly. I believe the contract actually has to be signed in New York, but it’s all settled.’