
E. F. BENSON
DODO WONDERS

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

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DODO DE SENECTUTE

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Dodo was so much interested in what she had herself been saying, that having just lit one cigarette, she lit another at it, and now contemplated the two with a dazed expression. She was talking to Edith Arbuthnot, who had just returned from a musical tour in Germany, where she had conducted a dozen concerts consisting entirely of her own music with flaring success. She had been urged by her agent to give half a dozen more, the glory of which, he guaranteed, would completely eclipse that of the first series, but instead she had come back to England. She did not quite know why she had done so: her husband Bertie had sent the most cordial message to say that he and their daughter Madge were getting on quite excellently without her—indeed that seemed rather unduly stressed—but ... here she was. The statement of this, to be enlarged on no doubt later, had violently switched the talk on to a discussion on free will.

Edith, it may be remarked, had arrived at her house in town only to find that her husband and daughter had already gone away for Whitsuntide, and being unable to support the idea of a Sunday alone in London, had sent off a telegram to Dodo, whom she knew to be at Winston, announcing her advent, and had arrived before it. On the other hand, her luggage had not arrived at all, and for the

present she was dressed in a tea-gown of Dodo's, and a pair of Lord Chesterford's tennis-shoes which fitted her perfectly.

"I wonder," said Dodo. "We talk glibly about free will and we haven't the slightest conception what we really mean by it. Look at these two cigarettes! I am going to throw one away in a moment, and smoke the other, but there is no earthly reason why I should throw this away rather than that, or that than this: they are both precisely alike. I think I can do as I choose, but I can't. Whatever I shall do, has been written in the Book of Fate; something comes in—I don't know what it is—which will direct my choice. I say to myself, 'I choose to smoke cigarette A and throw away cigarette B,' but all the time it has been already determined. So in order to score off the Book of Fate, I say that I will do precisely the opposite, and do it. Upon which Fate points with its horny finger to its dreadful book, and there it has all been written down since the beginning of the world if not before. Don't let us talk about free will any more, for it makes one's brain turn round like a Dancing Dervish, but continue to nurse our illusion on the subject. You could have stayed in Germany, but you chose not to. There!"

Edith had not nearly finished telling Dodo about these concerts, in fact, she had barely begun, when the uncomfortable doctrine of free will usurped Dodo's attention and wonder.

"The first concert, as I think I told you, was at Leipsic," she said. "It was really colossal. You don't know what an artistic triumph means to an artist."

"No, dear; tell me," said Dodo, still looking at her cigarettes.

"Then you must allow me to speak. It was crammed, of course, and the air was thick with jealousy and hostility. They hated me and my music, and everything about me, because I was English. Only, they couldn't keep away. They had to come in order to hate me keenly at close quarters. I'm beginning to think that is rather characteristic of the Germans; they are far the most intense nation there is. First I played——"

"I thought you conducted," said Dodo.

"Yes; we call that playing. That is the usual term. First I played the 'Dodo' symphony. I composed one movement of it here, I remember—the scherzo. Well, at the end of the first movement, about three people clapped their hands once, and there was dead silence again. At the end of the second there was a roar. They couldn't help it. Then they recollected themselves again, having forgotten for a moment how much they hated me, and the roar stopped like turning a tap off. You could have heard a pin drop."

"Did it?" asked Dodo.

"No: I dropped my baton, which sounded like a clap of thunder. Then came the scherzo, and from that moment they were Balaams. They had come to curse and they were obliged to bless. What happened to their free will then?"

"Yes, I know about Balaam," said Dodo, "he comes in the Bible. Darling, how delicious for you. I see quite well what you mean by an artistic triumph: it's to make people delight in you in spite of themselves. I've often done it."

Dodo had resolved the other problem of free will that concerned the cigarettes by smoking them alternately. It

seemed very unlikely that Fate had thought of that. They were both finished now, and she got up to pour out tea.

"If I could envy anybody," she said, "which I am absolutely incapable of doing, I should envy you, Edith. You have always gone on doing all your life precisely what you meant to do. You've got a strong character, as strong as this tea, which has been standing. But all my remarkable feats have been those which I didn't mean to do. They just came along and got done. I always meant to marry Jack, but I didn't do it until I had married two other people first. Sugar? That's how I go on, you know, doing things on the spur of the moment, and trusting that they will come right afterwards, because I haven't really meant them at all. And yet, 'orrible to relate, by degrees, by degrees as the years go on, we paint the pictures of ourselves which are the only authentic ones, since we have painted every bit of them ourselves. Everything I do adds another touch to mine, and at the end I shall get glanders or cancer or thrush, and just the moment before I die I shall take the brush for the last time and paint on it 'Dodo fecit.' Oh, my dear, what will the angels think of it, and what will our aspirations and our aims and our struggles think of it? We've gone on aspiring and perspiring and admiring and conspiring, and then it's all over. Strawberries! They're the first I've seen this year; let us eat them up before Jack comes. Sometimes I wish I was a canary or any other silly thing that doesn't think and try and fail. All the same, I shouldn't really like to be a bird. Imagine having black eyes like buttons, and a horny mouth with no teeth, and scaly legs. Groundsel, too! I would sooner be a cannibal than eat groundsel. And I couldn't possibly live in a

cage; nor could I endure anybody throwing a piece of green baize over me when he thought I had talked enough. Fancy, if you could ring the bell now this moment, and say to the footman, 'Bring me her ladyship's baize!' It would take away all spontaneousness from my conversation. I should be afraid of saying anything for fear of being baized, and every one would think I was getting old and anæmic. I won't be a canary after all!"

Edith shouted with laughter.

"A mind like yours is such a relief after living with orderly German minds for a month," she said. "You always were a holiday. But why these morbid imaginings!"

"I'm sure I don't know. I think it's the effect of seeing you again after a long interval, and hearing you mention the time when you composed that scherzo. It's so long ago, and we were so young, and so exactly like what we are now. Does it ever strike you that we are growing up? Slowly, but surely, darling, we are growing up. I'm fifty-five: at least, I'm really only fifty-four, but I add one year to my age instead of taking off two, like most people, so that when the next birthday comes, I'm already used to being it, if you follow me, and so there's no shock."

"Shock? I adore getting older," said Edith. "It will be glorious being eighty. I wish I hadn't got to wait so long. Every year adds to one's perceptions and one's wisdom."

Dodo considered this.

"Yes, I daresay it is so up to a point," she said, "though I seem to have seen women of eighty whose relations tell me that darling granny has preserved all her faculties, and is particularly bright this morning. Then the door opens and in

comes darling granny in her bath-chair, with her head shaking a little with palsy, and what I should call deaf and blind and crippled. My name is shouted at her, and she grins and picks at her shawl. Oh, my dear! But I daresay she is quite happy, which is what matters most, and it isn't that which I'm afraid of in getting old!"

"But you're not afraid of dying?" asked Edith incredulously.

"Good gracious, no. I'm never afraid of certainties; I'm only afraid of contingencies like missing a train. What I am afraid of in getting old is continuing to feel hopelessly young. I look in vain for signs that I realise I'm fifty-five. I tell myself I'm fifty-five——"

"Four," said Edith; "I'm six."

"And that I was young last century and not this century," continued Dodo without pause. "We're both Victorians, Edith, and all sorts of people have reigned since then. But I don't feel Victorian. I like the fox-trot, and going in an aeroplane, and modern pictures which look equally delicious upside down, and modern poetry which doesn't scan or rhyme or mean anything, and sitting up all night. And yet all the time I'm a grandmother, and even that doesn't make any impression on me. Nadine's got three children, you know, and look at Nadine herself. She's thirty, the darling, and she's stately—the person who sees everybody in the Park walking briskly and looking lovely, always says that Nadine is stately. I read his remarks in the paper for that reason, and cut that piece out and sent to Nadine. But am I a proper mother for a stately daughter? That dreadful

thought occurs to Nadine sometimes, I am sure. Would you guess I had a stately daughter?"

It certainly would have seemed a very wild conjecture. Dodo had preserved up to the eminently respectable age of which she felt so unworthy, the aspect as well as the inward vitality of youth, and thus never did she appear to be attempting to be young, when she clearly was not. She was still slender and brisk in movement, her black hair was quite untouched with grey, the fine oval of her face was still firm and unwrinkled, and her eyes, still dancing with the fire that might have been expected only to smoulder nowadays, were perfectly capable of fulfilling their purposes unaided. She had made an attempt a few years ago to wear large tortoise-shell spectacles, and that dismal failure occurred to her now.

"I have tried to meet old age halfway," she said, "but old age won't come and meet me! I can't really see the old hag on the road even yet. Do you remember my spectacles? That was a serious expedition in search of middle-age, but it did no good. I always forgot where they were, and sat down on them with faint fatal crunches. Then Jack didn't like them; he said he would never have married me if he had known I was going to get old so soon, and he always hid them when he found them lying about, and he gave me an ear-trumpet for a birthday present. David used to like them; that was the only purpose they served. He used to squeal with delight if he got hold of them, and run away and come back dressed up like Mummie."

"I am lost without spectacles," said Edith.

"But I'm not; it was my spectacles that were always lost. And then I like rainbows and conjuring-tricks and putting pennies on the line for the train to go over, and bare feet and chocolates. I do like them; there's no use in pretending that I don't. Besides, David would find me out in no time. It would be a poor pretence not to be excited when we have put our pennies on the line, and hear the Great Northern Express whistle as it passes through Winston on the way to our pennies. That's why it rushes all the way from London to Edinburgh, to go over our pennies. And we've got a new plan: you would never guess. We gum the pennies on the line and so they can't jump off, but all the wheels go over them, and they get hot and flat like pancakes. I like it! I like it!" cried Dodo.

Edith had finished tea, and was waiting, rather severely, for a pause.

"But that's not all of you, Dodo," she said; "there is a piece of you that's not a child. I want to talk to that."

Dodo nodded at her.

"Yes, I know it's there," she said, "and we shall come to it in time. Of course, if I only thought about pennies on the line and conjuring tricks I should be in my second childhood, and well on the way to preserving all my faculties like the poor things in the bath-chairs. You see, David is mixed up so tremendously in these games: I don't suppose I should go down to the line five minutes before the six o'clock express passed through and put pennies there if it wasn't for him. I was forty-five when he was born, so you must make allowances for me. You don't know what that means any more than I know what artistic triumphs mean. Oh, I forgot: I

did know that. David's away, did I tell you? He went away to-day to pay a round of visits with his nurse. He is going to visit the dentist first and then the bootmaker, and then he's 'going on' to stay with Nadine for the night. That's the round, and he comes back to-morrow, thank God. Where were we when you got severe? Oh, I know. You said there was a piece of me which wasn't entirely absurd, and you wanted to talk to that. But it's ever so difficult to disentangle one piece of you from all the rest."

"Drawers!" said Edith relentlessly. "You must have drawers in your mind with handles and locks. You can unlock one, if you want what's inside it, and pull it out by its handle. When you've finished, push it back and lock it again. That certainly is one of the things we ought to have learned by this time. I have, but I don't think you have. All your drawers are open simultaneously, Dodo. That's a great mistake, for you go dabbing about in them all, instead of being occupied with one. You don't concentrate!"

She suddenly relented.

"Oh, Dodo, go on!" she said. "I'm having a delicious holiday. You always appear to talk utter nonsense, but it suits me so admirably. I often think your activity is a fearful waste of energy, like a fall in a salmon-river which might have been making electricity instead of running away. And then quite suddenly there appears a large fat salmon leaping in the middle of it all, all shiny and fresh from the sea. Don't let us concentrate: let's have all the drawers open and turn out everything on to the floor. I don't grow old any more than you do inside, in spite of my raddled, kippered face, and bones sticking out like hat-pegs. I am

just as keen as ever, and just as confident that I'm going to make Bach and Brahms and Beethoven turn in their graves. I hear there was a slight subsidence the other day over the grave of one of them: it was probably my last concert in Berlin that was the real cause of it. But I've kept young because all my life I have pursued one thing with grim persistence, and always known I was going to catch it. I haven't had time to grow old, let alone growing middle-aged, which is so much more tragic!"

"Oh, middle-age is rapidly growing extinct," said Dodo, "and we needn't be afraid of catching it nowadays. When we were young, people of our age were middle-aged. They wouldn't drain life to the dregs and then chuck the goblet away and be old. They kept a little wine in it still and sipped it on special occasions. They lay down after lunch and took dinner-pills to preserve their fading energies. Now, we don't do that; as long as we have an ounce of energy left we use it, as long as there is a drop of wine left we drink it. The moment I cease to be drunk with any spoonfuls of youth that remain to me," said she with great emphasis, "I shall be a total abstainer. As long as the sun is up it shall be day, but as soon as it sets it shall be night. There shall be no long-drawn sunsets and disgusting after-glows with me. When I've finished I shall go 'pop,' and get into my bath-chair till I'm wheeled away into the family-vault. And all the time at the back of my atrophied brain will be the knowledge of what a lovely time I have had. That's my plan, anyhow."

Dodo had got quite serious and absently dipped the last two or three strawberries into her tea-cup, imagining apparently that it contained cream.

"You're different," she said; "you can achieve definite projections of yourself in music; you can still create, and as long as anybody creates she is not old. Stretching out: that's what youth means. I daresay you will write some new tunes and go to play them in Heligoland in the autumn. That's your anchor to youth, your power of creation. I've got no anchor of that kind; I've only got some fish-hooks, so to speak, consisting of my sympathy with what is young, and my love of what is new. But when you blame me for having all my drawers open, there I disagree. It is having all my drawers open that stands between me and the bath-chair. But, my dear, what pitfalls there are for us to avoid, if we are to steer clear of being terrible, grizzly kittens."

"Such as?" asked Edith.

"The most obvious is one so many sprightly old things like us fall into, namely, that of attaching some young man to their hoary old selves. There's nothing that makes a woman look so old as to drag about some doped boy, and there's nothing that actually ages her so quickly. I never fell into that mistake, and I'm not going to begin now. It is so easy to make a boy think you are marvellous: it's such a cheap success, like spending the season at some second-rate watering-place. No more flirting for us, darling! Of course every girl should be a flirt: it is her business to attract as many young men as possible, and then she chooses one and goes for him for all she's worth. That is Nature's way: look at the queen-bee."

"Where?" said Edith, not quite following.

"Anywhere," continued Dodo, not troubling to explain. "And then again every right-minded boy is in love with

several girls at once, and he chooses one and the rest either go into a decline or marry somebody else, usually the latter. But then contrast that nice, clean way of doing things with the mature, greasy barmaids of our age, smirking over the counter at the boys, and, as I said, doping them. What hags! How easy to be a hag! I adore boys, but I won't be a hag."

Dodo broke off suddenly from these remarkable reflections, and adjusted her hat before the looking-glass.

"They are older than the rocks they sit among, as Mr. Pater said," she remarked. "Let us go out, as Jack doesn't seem to be coming. His tennis-shoes fit you beautifully and so does my tea-gown. Do you know, it happens to be ten minutes to six, so that if we walk down across the fields, on to the railway-cutting, we shall get there in time for the express. One may as well go there as anywhere else. Besides, David put the gum-bottle and our pennies inside the piano, and thought it would be lovely if I gummed them down to-night, as if he was here. That's really unselfish: if I was away and David here, I should like him not to put any pennies down till I came home. But David takes after Jack. Come on!"

The roses round the house were in full glory of June, but the hay-fields down which they skirted their way were more to Dodo's mind. She had two selves, so Jack told her, the town-self which delighted in crowds and theatres and dances and sniffed the reek of fresh asphalt and hot pavement with relish, and the country self which preferred the wild-rose in the hedge and the ox-eyed daisies and buttercups that climbed upwards through the growing grasses to the smooth lawn and the garden-bed. She carried

David's gum-bottle and the pennies, already razor-edged from having been flattened out under train-wheels, and ecstatically gummed them to the rails.

"And now we sit and wait as close as we dare," she said. "Waiting, really is the best part. I don't think you agree. I think you like achievement better than expectation."

"Every artist does," said Edith. "I hated going to Germany, not because I thought there was any chance of my not scoring a howling success, but because I had to wait to get there. When I want a thing I want it now, so as to get on to the next thing."

"That's greedy," remarked Dodo.

"Not nearly so greedy as teasing yourself with expectation. The glory of going on! as St. Paul said."

"And the satisfaction of standing still. I said that."

"But great people don't stand still, nor do great nations," said Edith. "Look at Germany! How I adore the German spirit in spite of their hatred of us. That great, relentless, magnificent machine, that never stops and is never careless. I can't think why I was so glad to get away. I had a feeling that there was something brewing there. There was a sort of tense calm, as before a thunderstorm——"

The train swept round the corner and passed them with a roar and rattle, towering high above them, a glory of efficiency, stirring and bewildering. But for once Dodo paid no attention to it.

"Darling, there has been a lull before the storm ever since I can remember," she said, "but the storm never breaks. I wonder if the millennium has really come years ago, and we haven't noticed it. How dreadful for the

millennium to be a complete fiasco! Oh, there's Jack going down to the river with his fishing-rod. Whistle on your fingers and catch his attention. I want to show him your tennis-shoes. Now, the fisherman is the real instance of the type that lives on expectation. Jack goes and fishes for hours at a time in a state of rapt bliss, because he thinks he is just going to catch something. He hasn't heard: I suppose he thought it was only the express."

"I want to fish too," said Edith. "I adore fishing because I do catch something, and then I go on and catch something else. Besides nobody ever fished in a tea-gown before."

"Very well. We'll go back and get another rod for you. Gracious me! I've forgotten the pennies and the gum-bottle. David would never forgive me, however hard he tried. Go on about Germany."

"But you don't believe what I say," said Edith. "Something is going to happen, and I hate the idea. You see, Germany has always been my mother: the whole joy of my life, which is music, comes from her, but this time she suddenly seemed like some dreadful old step-mother instead. I suppose that was why I came back. I wasn't comfortable there. I have always felt utterly at home there before, but this time I didn't. Shall I go back and give some more concerts after all?"

"Yes, darling, do: just as you are. I'll send your luggage back after you. Personally I rather like the German type of man. When I talk to one I feel as if I was talking to a large alligator, bald and horny, which puts on a great, long smile and watches you with its wicked little eyes. It would eat you up if it could get at you, and it smiles in order to encourage

you to jump over the railings and go and pat it. Jack had a German agent here, you know, a quite terribly efficient alligator who never forgot anything. He always went to church and sang in the choir. He left quite suddenly the other day."

"Why?" asked Edith.

"I don't know; he went back to Germany."

Edith came back from her fishing a little after dinner-time rosy with triumph and the heat of the evening, and with her arms covered with midge-bites. Dodo had dressed already, and thought she had never seen quite so amazing a spectacle as Edith presented as she came up the terrace, with a soaked and ruined tea-gown trailing behind her, and Jack's tennis-shoes making large wet marks on the paving-stones.

"Six beauties," she said, displaying her laden landing-net, "and I missed another which must have been a three-pounder. Oh, and your tea-gown! I pinned it up round my knees with the greatest care, but it came undone, and, well—there it is. But I hear my luggage has come, and do let us have some of these trout for dinner. I have enjoyed myself so immensely. Don't wait for me: I must have a bath!"

Jack who had come in a quarter of an hour before, and had not yet seen Edith, came out of the drawing-room window at this moment. He sat down on the step, and went off into helpless laughter....

Edith appeared at dinner simultaneously with the broiled trout. She had a garish order pinned rather crookedly on to her dress.

"Darling, what's that swank?" asked Dodo instantly.

"Bavarian Order of Music and Chivalry," she said. "The King gave it me at Munich. It has never been given to a woman before. There's a troubadour one side, and Richard Wagner on the other."

"I don't believe he would have been so chivalrous if he had seen you as Jack did just before dinner. Jack, would your chivalry have triumphed? Your tennis-shoes, my tea-gown, and Edith in the middle."

"What! My tennis-shoes?" asked Jack.

"Dodo, you should have broken it to him," said Edith with deep reproach.

"I didn't dare to. It might have made him stop laughing, and suppressed laughter is as dangerous as suppressed measles when you get on in life. There's another thing about your Germans. I thought of it while I was dressing. They only laugh at German jokes."

"There is one in *Faust*," said Jack with an air of scrupulous fairness. "At least there is believed to be: commentators differ. But when *Faust* is given in Germany, the whole theatre rocks with laughter at the proper point."

Edith rose to this with the eagerness of the trout she had caught.

"The humour of a nation doesn't depend on the number of jokes in its sublimest tragedy," she said. "Let us judge English humour by the funny things in *Hamlet*."

Dodo gave a commiserating sigh.

"That wasn't a very good choice," she said. "There are the grave-diggers, and there's Polonius all over the place.

The most serious people see humour in Polonius. Why didn't you say Milton? Now it's too late."

Jack suddenly laughed.

"I beg your pardon," said he; "I wasn't thinking about Milton at all, but a vision of Dodo's tea-gown appeared to me, as I last saw it. Yes. Take Milton, Edith. Dodo can't give you a joke out of Milton because she has never read him. Don't interrupt, Dodo. Or take Dante. Ask me for a joke in Dante, and you win all down the line. Take Julius Cæsar: take any great creature you like. What you really want to point out is that great authors are seldom humorous. I agree: one up to you. Take a trout—I didn't catch any."

Edith did precisely as she was told.

"I hate arguing," she said. "Dodo insisted on arguing about middle-age all the afternoon. In the intervals she talked about putting pennies on the line. She said it was enormous fun, but she forgot all about them when she had put them there."

"Don't tell David, Jack," said Dodo, aside. "All right. Dodo's got middle-age on her mind. She bought some spectacles once."

"My dear, we've had all that," said Dodo. "What we really want to know is how you are to get gracefully old, while you continue to feel young. We're wanting not to be middle-aged in the interval. There is no use in cutting off pleasures, while they please you, because that makes you not old but sour, and who wants to be sour? What a poor ambition! It really is rather an interesting question for us three, who are between fifty-four and sixty, and who don't feel like it. Jack, you're really the oldest of us, and more really you're the youngest."

"I doubt that," said Edith loudly.

"This is German scepticism then. Jack is much more like a boy than you are like a girl."

"I never was like a girl," said Edith. "Ask Bertie, ask anybody. I was always mature and feverish. Dodo was always calculating, and her calculations were interrupted by impulse. Jack was always the devout lover. The troubadour on my medal is extremely like him."

Jack passed his hand over his forehead.

"What are we talking about?" he said.

"Getting old, darling," said Dodo.

"So we are. But the fact is, you know, that we're getting old all the time, but we don't notice it till some shock comes. That crystallises things. What is fluid in you takes shape."

Dodo got up.

"So we've got to wait for a shock," she said. "Is that all you can suggest? Anyhow, I shall hold your hand if a shock comes. What sort of a shock would be good for me, do you think? I know what would be good for Edith, and that would be that she suddenly found that she couldn't help writing music that was practically indistinguishable from the *Messiah*."

"And that," said Edith, "is blasphemy."

Jack caught on.

"Hush, Dodo," he said, "an inspired, a sacred work to all true musicians."

Edith glanced wildly round.

"I shall go mad," she said, "if there is any more of this delicious English humour. Handel! Me and Handel! How dare

you? Brutes!"

CHAPTER II

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HIGHNESS

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Unlike most women Dodo much preferred to breakfast downstairs in a large dining-room, facing the window, rather than mumble a private tray in bed. Jack, in consequence, was allowed to be as grumpy as he pleased at this meal, for Dodo's sense of fairness told her that if she was so unfeminine as to feel cheerful and sociable at half-past nine in the morning, she must not expect her husband to be so unmasculine as to resemble her.

"Crumbs get into my bed," she had said to Edith the evening before, when, the morning venue was debated, "and my egg tastes of blankets. And I hate bed when I wake: I feel bright and brisk and fresh, which is very trying for other people. Jack breakfasts downstairs, too, though if you asked him to breakfast in your bedroom, I daresay he would come."

"I hate seeing anybody till eleven," said Edith, "and many people then."

"Very well, Jack, as usual, will be cross to me, which is an excellent plan, because I don't mind, and he works off his morning temper. Don't come down to protect me: it's quite unnecessary."

This was really equivalent to an invitation to be absent, and as it coincided with Edith's inclination, the hour of half-past nine found Dodo reading her letters, and Jack, fortified