

## ‘Expelliarmus, Jeeves!’

‘Good morning, Jeeves!’

‘Good afternoon, sir’.

This, I confess, surprised me. In fact, I don’t mind admitting that I brooded on it pretty tersely, as the old retainer deposited the breakfast tray, drew the curtains, and ushered in the fecund day. I’ve never been one of those chaps who rises with the lark – or, for that matter, the quills upon the fretful porpentine – but it is rare that I miss the stumps by quite so wide a margin.

On this occasion, however, I could plead a degree of mitigation. I had presided at a small dinner at the Drones the night before, to mark Freddie Widgeon’s engagement, and when Bertie Wooster hosts a party, it is a ticklish question whether the conversation or the wine flows more lavishly. The Wooster motto is not so much ‘carriages at midnight’ as ‘hearses at dawn’, and the upshot was that I was feeling distinctly green about the gills. I’m not as young as I was – not that anyone is, of course – and it seemed to me that if the old engine needed a bit longer in the garage to cool off, that was a reasonable concession to age and experience.

I was making good progress with the eggs and b., trying to ignore a gentle throbbing behind the temples, when I became aware of a bell ringing and a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing off-stage. Moments later a gentle cough, like a sheep with a blade of grass in its throat, announced that Jeeves had shimmered back into the presence.

I hadn’t heard him come in, of course, but then with Jeeves one never does. Every other manservant I’ve had has clumped around the place like a rhinoceros at dancing class, but Jeeves simply materialises, like one of those Indian chappies who disassembles the parts in Delhi and pops up moments later in Madras. Very occasionally, if he’s carrying a laundry basket or some such, I’ve fancied that I’ve heard a faint ‘pop’; but most of the time, cats could take his correspondence course.

I waved a fork graciously.

‘Yes, Jeeves?’

‘There is a gentleman in the lobby, sir, who wishes to see you’.

I am rarely at my best in the first flush of day, and rather wilted under this torrent of new ideas.

‘A gentleman, Jeeves? In the lobby? What does he want?’

‘He wants to see you, sir’.

‘Then give him a photograph and tell him to go away’.

Jeeves coughed again.

‘He was most insistent that he speak to you’.

‘Was he indeed?’ I furrowed the brow and speared another piece of bacon. ‘Does this blighted fellow have a name?’

‘Lord Voldemort, sir’.

For a second time this morning, I furrowed the b.

‘Lord who?’

‘Voldemort, sir’.

‘Don’t think I know him. Is it an old family?’

‘I could not say, sir. It is possible that he is one of the Voldemorts of Kent, but from his appearance I fancy that he may be one of Mr. Harold Macmillan’s life peerages. Shall I show him in?’

I inclined the bean, and moments later Jeeves shovelled our guest through the door.

He was a queer-looking cove – Voldemort, that is, not Jeeves. For where Jeeves was smartly packaged in the standard outer-casing of the gentleman’s personal gentleman – that is to say, reading from north to south, black necktie, white shirt, waistcoat, trousers of deepest grey and shoes from which

a fastidious cat might have enjoyed a spot of lunch – Lord V was swathed from head to toe in a rather dingy black robe. Chuck in a complexion like a squeezed lemon, two eyes with red slits for pupils, and a large snake draped around his shoulders, and you will be somewhere near the image impressing itself upon the Wooster retina. If this was indeed one of the Voldemorts of Kent, then the fruit basket of England had been letting things slide.

Nonetheless, one tries to be civil, so I set my breakfast tray to one side and issued a hearty pip-pip.

‘What ho, what ho, what ho! How can I be of assistance?’

‘*Potter!*’, he hissed back. Absolutely hissed. I wouldn’t have said it was possible myself, but – as events were to prove – the ability to hiss without a sibilant was among the least of this extraordinary man’s accomplishments. ‘*Where is Potter?*’

I goggled. The man appeared deranged.

‘Potter? Don’t think I know him. What do you want him for?’

‘I want to *kill* him’, he replied, which was a more straightforward answer than such enquiries usually elicit. His eyes glowed malodorously – if that’s the word – and it was clear even to my befuddled intellect that a painful reunion lay ahead.

‘I say’, I said, with a sudden gleam of inspiration. ‘You’re not thinking of old Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright, are you?’ Over the years, many of my acquaintances had expressed an interest in Catsmeat’s imminent demise, but a flash of green light and a scorch-mark on the bedspread indicated that, no, our guest was not thinking of Catsmeat.

‘Then I’m afraid Potters are not in my repertoire’, I confessed. ‘Crayes, Fink-Nottles, Stokers, and Stinker-Pinkers – or is that Stinkers-Pinker? – fall readily within my compass. With due notice, I can supply Widgeons, Travers and Littles. But Potters? There, alas, I fail you’.

At this, the blighter whipped out some kind of twiglet from his robe and waved it furiously in my direction.

‘*Crucio!*’

Nothing seemed to happen, so he tried again a couple of times. I looked at Jeeves in bemusement.

‘What’s he doing, Jeeves?’

‘I fancy, sir, that his lordship is subjecting you to intolerable pain’.

I arched a greying eyebrow and poked a fork at my kipper.

‘I see. Well perhaps you could inform his lordship that my nervous system doesn’t clock on until after my second cup of tea. Until such moment, his efforts are but chaff in the breeze. Would you show him out, Jeeves?’

There was an interval of several minutes before Jeeves returned, as our guest proved somewhat reluctant to depart. While Jeeves exhibited the smack of firm government, I buttered a slice of toast and mulled over the passage of events. I was none the wiser when Jeeves re-entered with the teapot.

‘Jeeves’, I said. ‘I am perplexed’.

‘Indeed, sir. Like St. Paul, you see through a glass darkly’.

As I may have mentioned in the past, I once won a prize for Scripture Knowledge, so the reference was familiar to me.

‘Quite so, Jeeves. Our visitor speaks in riddles. Who is the mysterious Potter? Why is Lord V so anxious to meet him? Above all – for here, Jeeves, we put our finger on the nub of the problem – why the dickens did he come to *me* for directions?’

Jeeves gazed for a moment into the middle distance, like a sheep arranging its notes.

‘I fancy, sir, that he was expecting to find Mr Potter in your apartment’.

‘Why on earth would he think that?’

‘Because, sir, Mr Potter is currently hiding under your bed. If you would care to peep under the valance, you will find the young gentleman there now, accompanied by Mr Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger’.

I peeped as instructed, resurfacing moments later an older and wiser man.

‘Deep waters, Jeeves’.

‘Indeed, sir’.

I shall pass lightly over the distasteful scene that followed, as a bevy of teenagers disgorged itself from beneath my bed. We Woosters are a hospitable crew – *‘mea casa, tua casa’* and all that – but I don’t mind admitting that the whole thing gave me the pip. These pimply youths presumably had beds of their own, and it seemed to me that they would have shown a surer grasp of the social niceties had they remained in them. I resolved to be rather terse with Jeeves, once the coast had cleared.

While I brooded in this manner, my guests were extricating themselves from the furniture. First out was the Potter gargoyle, a non-descript child with NHS specs and some kind of smut on his forehead. The Weasley kid – a dashing redhead, who was evidently the leader of the group – seemed more promising, though he promptly tripped on the hot water bottle and sent the breakfast things cascading across the floor. Bringing up the rear was La Granger, whose expression betrayed more clearly than words her vocation to the noble calling of Aunt.

‘The carpet under your bed needs hoovering’, she announced, picking cobwebs out of her school uniform.

‘So do you’, I replied, rather cleverly. We might have continued in this vein for some time, but, before she could respond, the fireplace exploded. The electric heater flew across the room and embedded itself in the wall above my bed, while a bedraggled figure in tartan robes staggered out of the chimney place.

‘Professor McGonagall!’ chorused the children.

‘Aunt Minerva!’ I gasped.

At that moment, something fell on my head and the lights went out. Really, I thought, as darkness descended. If it’s not one thing, it’s another.

It transpired that a piece of the fireplace had detached itself from the wall behind me and landed on the old occiput, plunging me once more into the dreamless. Jeeves rallied around with wet flannels and one of his trademark ‘pick-me-ups’, and within minutes I was back in mental circulation, weighing up as scaly a scene as I can ever remember.

Not that I wasn’t pleased to see the aged ancestor. Unlike my Aunt Agatha, who feasts on broken bottles and sacrifices chickens at the full moon, I had always thought of Aunt Minnie as one of the better eggs in the family henhouse. In her younger days, she had been rather the black sheep of the family, having developed some unusual hobbies as a child and taken to practising them at the dinner table. My grandparents, not unnaturally, had taken a dim view of watching the crockery sprint across the tablecloth or the turkey rise majestically from the serving dish, and when she began turning into a cat and clawing at the furniture, their patience was exhausted. So they packed her off to some kind of boarding school in Scotland, where she was now a teacher. When I was doing my own stretch at Eton, she had been a generous source of chocolate frogs, with picture cards that moved when you looked at them. I suppose it was all done with mirrors, but those frogs brightened many a long evening in the old Borstal.

So, as I say, I was pleased to see the old relic, and was preparing to issue a very hearty pip-pip when I noticed that the feeling did not appear to be mutual. On the contrary, as she picked pieces of plaster out of her hair, the old ancestor appeared to be distinctly steamed up.

‘Bertie, you *tiresome* young man’, she began. ‘How often have I told you not to block your fireplace?’

I rather took umbrage at this. It was years since coal fires had been permitted in Berkeley Mansions, and I was dashed if I was going to shiver through the winter months, on the off-chance that an eccentric Aunt might choose that particular mode of ingress. Like most civilised people, I kept a hole in the wall specifically for the purpose of receiving visitors. It was called a door, and it seemed to me that the sooner this aunt departed through it, bearing her infant chain-gang behind her, the better.

Naturally, I didn’t say any of this; chiefly because the aged relative was still speaking. Show me a river in full flood, and I will show you an aunt addressing a long-suffering nephew.

‘I have a task for you, Bertie. I need you to steal a cow-creamers’.

I gaped.

‘A *what*?’

‘A cow-creamers. You know the kind of thing: one of those milk-jug contraptions, shaped like a cow, with the tail curled over to form a handle. From what Dahlia tells me, it won’t be the first time’.

I inclined the bean. It was true that I had once lived in arcady, liberating a particularly ugly specimen from the home of Sir Watkyn Bassett JP. I still wake occasionally, during the small hours of the night, in a cold sweat at the scenes that had followed; and since they had involved a policeman stationed beneath my window and the very real prospect of a stretch in prison, I was not eager to repeat the experience. It seemed to me that an Aunt in possession of a salary, a wand and, one hoped, a rudimentary conscience of some kind could procure a cow-creamers in more orthodox fashion, without imperilling the liberty of a much-loved nephew.

Before I could say so, however, I became aware of a commotion to my right. Jeeves, to my astonishment, was positively radiating excitement – which is to say, his right eyebrow had raised a quarter of an inch, while the faintest shadow of a smile flickered on his lips. By Jeeves’s standards, this was Bacchanalian stuff.

‘Would you be referring, ma’am, to the Cow Creamers of Clarissa Clerksfoot?’

The effect was electric. The Granger excrescence audibly gasped, the Weasley child tripped over a chair, while the Potter kid simply looked vacant. Aunt Minne’s eyes narrowed and her grip tightened on her wand.

‘How could you possibly know that, Jeeves?’

‘In my youth, ma’am, I was a page boy at a girls school in France. It enjoyed what was euphemistically described as a “friendly rivalry” with Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the young ladies were kind enough to share with me a little of the school’s history’.

‘I assume you’re talking about Beauxbatons’, said Aunt Minnie; ‘though I don’t know what you mean by “euphemistically”. Relations have always seemed pretty friendly to me’.

‘Quite so, ma’am’, said Jeeves. ‘But only Hogwarts would imagine it to be a rivalry’.

There was a noise like a tyre bursting from somewhere inside the aged relative, but Jeeves was still in full flow.

‘Clarissa Clerksfoot’, he explained, ‘was one of the five founders of Hogwarts’.

‘Nonsense’, interjected Hermione, positively bristling with aunt-like disapproval. ‘There were only four founders. I’ve read about them in *Hogwarts: A History*’.

Jeeves smiled benevolently. ‘A most mendacious text, miss. The *fifth* founder has been quietly removed from the historical record – as Professor McGonagall could no doubt confirm?’

She nodded, and signalled for Jeeves to continue.

‘When Hogwarts was founded, sir, an elaborate scheme of “sorting” was devised, allocating students to particular houses, according to their special abilities. The brave would go to Gryffindor. The scholars to Ravenclaw. The kind and gentle to Hufflepuff; and the sly and cunning to Slytherin. Those who excelled in the arts of administration would go to Clerksfoot, there to learn the mysteries of bureaucracy and academic management’.

‘Then why have I never heard of it?’ asked La Granger, looking personally affronted at this lacuna – if that’s the word – in her knowledge.

‘Over time, miss, divisions emerged between the founders. The administrators were becoming too powerful. The other houses could not function without them, and Clarissa Clerksfoot’s reach soon extended into every part of the school. The other houses might have been subjugated altogether, had they not risen up and broken her power. Clerksfoot House was dissolved – its members redistributed to less favoured houses – and Clarissa herself disappeared, to a fate unknown. Yet before her final defeat, it is said that she recorded the accumulated knowledge of her house in a silver cow-creamer. The object has been lost for centuries; but were it ever to be found, the secrets it contains could destroy Hogwarts for ever’.

My attention, I confess, had wandered during this speech. I was never much of a lad for history, and I was dashed if I could see what any of this had to do with me. Aunt Minnie, by contrast, had been drinking in every word; and she now took up the tale.

‘The cow-creamer has recently reappeared, Bertie, and last week it was sold to a private collector. The buyer was a dark wizard by the name of Lucius Malfoy, and it is only a matter of time before He Who Must Not Be Named finds a way to unlock its secrets. Once he does, Hogwarts will fall’.

‘We were going to steal it ourselves’, broke in Ron – the resourceful redhead – ‘but... well ...’

‘But’, continued Aunt Minnie, ‘the dark lord has somehow discovered that they are here. So *you*, Bertie, must go to Malfoy Manor in their place’.

I laughed lightly, and shook a trace of dust from my spotless cuffs. It didn’t take a penetrating mind like mine to detect the flaw in this plan. I had never met this Malfoy cove, and it seemed hardly likely, after our encounter this afternoon, that Lord Voldemort would invite me to stay. I put this to the Aged R.

To my surprise, she seemed a little uncertain how to proceed. Ever tactful, Jeeves took up the tale.

‘It appears, sir, that his lordship is contemplating matrimony. He is currently much under the influence of a widowed lady, with whom he shares a number of interests. A Mrs Spencer-Gregson’.

‘Aunt *Agatha*?’

I reeled, and would doubtless have fallen had I not already been lying down. For the first time, I felt a grudging respect for my recent visitor. Aunt Agatha – or Mrs Spencer-Gregson, as she is known to that portion of the population fortunate enough to have avoided a blood link – is hot stuff by anyone’s standards. Her first husband had wisely retired to an early grave, and anyone thinking of following him to the crease would know they had been in a fight.

‘Agatha and He Who Must Not Be Named’, said Aunt Minnie, ‘are currently staying at the Manor. We have arranged to implant an idea in her head – no easy task at the best of times – that she should invite you to stay. So long as you are under her protection, no Death Eater will dare touch you. All you have to do is to find the cow-creamer, bring it outside the gates, and we’ll whisk you to safety. Nothing could be simpler’.

Well, I mean to say, what? The whole thing was absurd. Pure mashed potato. Anyone who thought I was going to sally into a nest of dark wizards, armed only with my natural wit and a certain debonair charm, needed their head examined – preferably with heavy machinery. As a rule, we Woosters are very *parfait* gentle knights: when the fairer sex calls, we haste to serve. But beneath the mild exterior, we are

men of fire and determination, and when we plant our feet in the ground, no power on earth can move us. Folding my arms with a quiet dignity, I prepared to brave the aged relative.

‘I refuse’, I replied.

So naturally, an hour or two later Jeeves and I were beetling through the countryside in the old two-seater, carrying our bats to one of the stickiest wickets I have ever encountered.

It’s a curious thing, but some of the grisliest episodes in an otherwise blameless life have unfolded in the sort of locations that would give Greta Garbo a run for her money: places, as Jeeves once put it, ‘where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile’. A hell-hole like Totleigh Towers, for example, or Deverill Hall may have positively seethed with fiends, aunts and would-be dictators, but the trappings were as pretty as a picture.

Malfoy Manor was not such a place. Or if it was, it was one of those Jackson Pollock jobbies, where the artist goes into some kind of seizure and sprays the paint around at random. The lawns were black and charred; dead animals were impaled upon the railings; and giant spiders roamed the perimeter in search of fresh meat. Things did not improve on the inside. My room seemed to have been designed by an undertaker with a taste for the theatrical. The bed was shaped like a coffin, the dressing table doubled as a guillotine, and the waste-paper basket appeared to have been hollowed out from a severed human head. The only book in the place was a natural history of some kind, by a man called Newt Scamander, which I resolved to buy for Gussie Fink-Nottle at his next birthday.

Even the mirror in the bathroom seemed to be under some kind of enchantment. Like the poet Webster, it showed ‘the skull beneath the skin’, which is a nasty shock when you’re trying to shave. Jeeves had procured me some wizarding robes, so I dressed for dinner and made my way reluctantly to the great hall.

Dinner was, if anything, scallier still. The browsing and sluicing was of the highest quality – the Malfoys kept a good table – but both the company and the setting left much to be desired. In addition to the Malfoy couple and He Who Must Not Be Named, the line-up was completed by a gaggle of Death Eaters called Crabbe and Goyle, their cat Steve, and a surly young witch called Vulgaria LeStrange, to whom I would probably, under other circumstances, have found myself engaged. A corpse of some kind was floating above the table, which I thought in poor taste, while the snake who had accompanied Lord V earlier in the day slithered ominously around the assembled company.

One space, however, remained empty. Before I could instigate inquiries, a gong sounded, an elderly house elf appeared, and, in a voice cracking with terror, invited us to be upstanding for ‘She Who Must Not Be Named’. Into the room swept Aunt Agatha, or Lady Voldemort as she was shortly to become. Herself, not a picture.

Said Aunt was an imposing figure at the best of times. I have often felt that, when she was rolling along the production line, they had intended to make two aunts of normal size, only for some error in the paperwork to produce this one, super-sized variant. As a physical specimen, she could scarcely have been more imposing had she exposed herself to gamma rays and hulked out at the dinner table. Even Lord V seemed to shrink before her, though the love light in his eyes told of a dark wizard who had bought it big.

What drew the eye on this occasion was not so much her frame as the packaging in which it was wrapped. She was wearing a quite extraordinary garment – woven, I was later informed, out of the skins of dead house-elves, and decorated with snakes and spiders that skittered and slithered across her

billowing form. As the furniture braced for impact, she sent a look of adoration skidding across the table to her paramour.

‘You see I’m wearing the dress, Voldo’, she purred, in a voice that made the cutlery rattle.

The Dark Lord flushed, his nostrils inflating like a pair of love-struck bullfrogs.

‘And you have never looked more lovely, my little arachnid’.

If anyone had said such a thing to me, I would have socked them in the gizzard, regardless of age or sex. But this amorous Aunt positively rippled with pleasure, sending an unlucky lizard, which had been forging a path across her décolletage, plunging to a watery grave in the soup tureen.

‘She Who Must Be Named’, his lordship told the assembled company, ‘is descended from the very purest magical blood. She shall be dressed like an Evil Queen’.

This was news to me. As far as I was aware, the Wooster bloodline was about as pure as a muddy puddle at closing time, but I suppose all successful relationships require a degree of artistic licence. Buttoning the lip, I focused my attention on the roasted spider on my plate.

His lordship, regrettably, had other ideas. So far, his attitude towards me had been marked by a distinct air of menace. Every time he looked at me, Voldemort’s hand twitched menacingly towards his wand, only for a glance from Aunt Agatha to send it scuttling back again. Yet all of a sudden, he appeared positively matey.

‘Mr Wooster’, he whined, his high-pitched voice wheedling like a child’s. ‘Your aunt tells me that you, too, are of pure blood. What message have you for our company?’

Eight pairs of eyes – or twelve, if you count the arachnid – swivelled attentively in my direction. Oddly enough, it put me in mind of a rather grisly scene at my private school, many years earlier, when I had been inveigled into a small part in some amateur dramatics. It was some kind of Shakespeare number, and I had a longish speech of the “shall I or shan’t I?” variety, though I daresay he put it more elegantly. I sweated blood over that speech, training in front of the mirror in the boys’ bathroom, but somehow, when I stepped onto the stage and turned to face the audience, I couldn’t remember a word. I stood there for what felt like weeks, opening and closing my mouth like a fish that has been parted from its loved ones, until a copy of the text came skidding across the stage from the wings. A similar sensation gripped me now, made worse by the knowledge that Aunt Agatha was inflating like a weather balloon at the end of the table.

Just as all hope seemed lost, I remembered a story Freddie Widgeon had told at the Drones the previous evening. Dashed amusing, I thought it, and if ever a lightening of the mood was in order it was surely at that benighted dinner table. Taking my courage in both hands, as I’ve heard Jeeves put it, I plunged in.

‘Well I do know a rather funny story, don’t you know? Stop me if you’ve heard this one before’, I began, ‘but there was an Englishman, an Iri-’

‘Which Englishman?’ asked Malfoy.

‘Oh, no one in particular. Just a generic English chappy, don’t you know? Anyway, there was an Englishman, an Iri-’ This time it was the nasal whine of Lord Voldemort that broke in.

‘Did he die painfully? I like stories where people die’.

‘Er, well, that’s rather the point. You see, there was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman, and –’

‘Do *they* die?’ Voldemort was fingering his wand ominously.

‘Well, that’s the thing, don’t you know? There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman, and they were sentenced to death by a firing squad’.

‘Did they suffer? Did they feed their corpses to the spiders?’

‘Well, the Englishman had a rather brainy idea, don’t you know. Just as they were about to shoot, he pointed over their shoulders, looked panicked, and shouted “*locusts!*” And while they were all looking behind them, he got away’.

Voldemort’s eyes were glowing. ‘But the snakes got him? There must have been snakes keeping guard?’

‘Alas, no. But the Scotsman was out next, and he thought it was a rather jolly wheeze. So just as they were about to fire, he cried “*flood!*”, and while they were putting their wellies on he escaped into the trees’.

Aunt Agatha was giving me a look of molten lava – if looks could kill, her paramour’s taste for violent death would have been amply accommodated. There seemed no option, however, but to plough on.

‘Since the Englishman and the Scotsman had both got away, the Irishman thought he’d try the same thing. So when they raised their guns, he pointed behind them and shouted “*fire!*”’

Silence rolled across the table like a thunderclap. I daresay Freddie told it better, but there was no getting away from the fact that I had laid an egg. Voldemort’s hand was twitching in the direction of his wand.

‘Did he die?’ he whined, almost pleadingly.

‘Er, yes, I rather think he did’.

‘And the Englishman and the Scotsman?’

Thinking desperately, I decided to improvise.

‘They were captured and tortured until they died of their injuries’.

The change of mood was palpable. Voldemort’s fingers moved away from his wand, the company seemed to relax, and even Aunt Agatha produced something within nodding distance of a smile.

‘There you are, Voldo darling – a happy ending’.

‘Quite so, oh horcrux of my heart’.

The attempt at conversation had left me with a headache – one of those that starts in your kneecaps and works upwards. So I excused myself after dessert (a rather too literal take on ‘Death by Chocolate’, involving quite heroic levels of sacrifice by the kitchen staff) and retired to my chambers. I was clutching a stiff drink in one hand and kneading my temples with the other when Jeeves appeared at my side.

‘Jeeves’, I said, ‘this is a bit thick, what?’

‘Sir?’

‘Who was that bimbo you were telling me about recently, who was having the dickens of a time and taking it rather to heart?’

‘Possibly you are thinking, sir, of the poet Whitman, who would “Sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame”. He spoke, sir, of hearing “secret convulsive sobs from young men, at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds done”’.

I shook the bean.

‘No, Jeeves. Balls of paper came into it, if I remember correctly’.

‘Would you be reaching, sir, for the line: “I’m a crumpled up piece of paper, lying here, ’cause I remember it all too well”?’

‘That’s the baby. The poet Whitman?’

‘No, sir. The poet Swift’.

‘Well if you ever meet him, shake him warmly by the hand from me. The one thing on which I am determined is that we should not spend an hour longer in this gothic horror than is strictly necessary. I’m going to take a crack at that cow-creamer this evening’.



I don't know if you've ever noticed, but one benefit of the kind of beastly experience I had been through this evening was that it nerves you for other beastly experiences – so long as there's some kind of end in sight. I remember, years ago, Aunt Agatha inflicted her ghastly child, Thomas, on me for a day, while she went shopping in Oxford Street. He was about two years old at the time, and, like all toddlers, lived a rich emotional life. By the time she came to collect him, I would cheerfully have wrestled a dragon so long as either death or solitude were the likely reward. If stealing a cow-creamer was the only way to get out of the Malfoy menagerie, then a little light burglary seemed a small price to pay.

I put this to Jeeves, and he nodded sagely.

'You feel, sir, that "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly"'?

'I do indeed, Jeeves. But what beats me is how I'm supposed to do it at all. Presumably the thing is under lock and key?'

'No, sir. I have been making inquiries among the house elves, and am assured that the object is on open display in the silver room. The Malfoys have a history of executing intruders and sending their reanimated bodies to wreak vengeance in the village. The strategy exerts a powerful deterrent effect, and the prospect of a burglarious entry is thought to be slight'.

'Quite so, Jeeves. What self-respecting crook would bust this joint, when Castle Dracula or CCHQ are at their disposal? We are to conclude, then, that if one were to saunter in during the small hours, the room would be unprotected?'

'Not wholly, sir. A member of the household stands guard at all times. I understand that, this evening, Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle will be sharing the watch'.

I pursed the brow and furrowed the lips – or the other way round, as the case may have been.

'This complicates matters, Jeeves. I have encountered the said C and G. Neither would win a place at the ancient universities, but their arms bulge in all the right places. What do you suggest?'

'I propose, sir, the use of a simple magical enchantment: the "expelliarmus" charm. If I may, sir?'

Taking my glass, Jeeves fished out what I had taken to be a cocktail stirrer, but turned out to be a wand of some kind. He waved it experimentally, sending a shower of coloured stars across the bedspread.

'I took the liberty, sir, of purchasing a cheap travel-wand at the service-station. Eight-and-a-half inches, balsa wood, with a core of cat hair. One holds it like so'.

I gripped the thing as instructed, and felt a warm glow in my arm and upper body. Possibly just the cocktail, of course.

'The expelliarmus charm, sir, is commonly miscategorised as a duelling spell. In fact, its origins are medicinal. It was devised in the fifteenth century as a treatment for constipation, though it seems to have been widely felt that the cure was worse than the disease. The spell fell out of use for some centuries, only to be revived for duelling purposes by the legendary wizard and combatant Alacritus Trisme-'

I waved a hand impatiently, accidentally scattering more coloured stars from the end of the cocktail stick. The room was beginning to look like something out of Rainbow Bright.

'Tell me another time, Jeeves. For now – how do we cast this blighted enchantment?'

It took several long hours to master, but by practising on the toilet brush in the bathroom I picked up the rudiments. By midnight, the brush was springing out of its holder like a soiled ballerina. Fortified with another brandy, I stepped noiselessly into the corridor.

Over the years, I have spent more time than I would like wandering by night through the stately homes of England, and the ticklish bit is to avoid colliding with the various suits of armour, grandfather clocks and ornamental cabinets left lying around by their thoughtless owners. Malfoy Manor, to its credit, posed few such challenges. The corridors were lit by an unnatural, ghoulisish glow, radiating from the pools of ectoplasm dripping from the ceilings, while the suits of armour were too busy clanking around under their own steam to pose much of an obstacle. Aside from the odd ghost, all of whom seemed to

have met some grisly end, we met no one on the way and soon found ourselves crouching behind a stuffed troll of some kind, looking westwards towards our goal.

As predicted, Crabbe was planted outside the door, clutching a semi-automatic wand in one hand, while the other foraged for snacks in his nasal cavities. Raising my wand, I prepared to speak the enchantment – only for a gentle cough to interrupt the midnight air.

‘If I may be so bold, sir, might I suggest aiming a little lower? Our purpose is physiological, rather than pugilistic’.

The second bit rather passed me by, but I lowered the wand to bowel-level.

‘*Expelliarmus!*’

The effect was everything one could have hoped for. One moment Crabbe was standing at ease, enjoying some light refreshment; the next, he had dropped his wand with a clatter and was clutching both hands to his buttocks, where a nasty stain was spreading. Had he been a radio, one might have said that he had switched rather suddenly from receiving to transmitting. As I had witnessed at the dinner table, Crabbe was a man who liked his stomach full; and with a low moan and a face like beetroot, he tottered off towards the bathroom.

Unfortunately, this took him in our direction.

‘Jeeves!’ I hissed. ‘He’s coming this way. How do I reverse the spell?’

‘Perhaps you would allow me, sir?’ Jeeves took the wand. ‘*Reverso*, sir’.

If the first spell had taken Crabbe by surprise, the second lit him up like the Blackpool Tower. Crabbe may have liked a full stomach, but he clearly had firm views on the appropriate point of entry. Snapping upright, he performed a strange kind of waltz, turned deathly pale, and passed out on the floor. I tiptoed over the remains.

‘Wait here, Jeeves, in case he comes round. I’ll pop in and procure the cow-creamer’.

Malfoy’s collection was rich and rare, and another man – my Uncle Tom, for instance – might have rather lingered over the trefoils and cuirasses. But I’ve never seen the attraction myself, and I was anxious to be gone before Crabbe’s internal organs rearranged themselves and he turned his attention to mine. The cow-creamer stood on a plinth in the middle of the room, and it was the work of a moment to shove the thing in the pocket of my dressing-gown and head back to the door.

That, at least, was my intention. The rummy thing was, it didn’t seem to be there anymore. I distinctly remembered passing through a door on the way in, but the room now appeared to be one solid mass of wall – and it was giving off an ominous green hue. I gave an experimental prod with my wand, only for some kind of electric shock to propel me backwards across the floor. And before I could gather up the parts and try again, a high-pitched laugh revealed that I was No Longer Alone.

As many a burglar must have discovered, it’s hard to know quite what to say when someone finds you with your fingers in the till. It’s harder still, when faced with the most powerful dark wizard that ever lived. Another man – Sean Connery, for example – would doubtless have found the *mot juste*, producing some witty remark to lighten the mood. I’m afraid that I simply gaped, and backed up towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch part of the collection.

‘*Wooster!*’ hissed Lord V – this time, enjoying the sibilant to the full. ‘I might have known. Slithering around like a snake in the grass, pocketing my magical treasures’.

I was interested to learn that this was what snakes did, and on a different occasion might have gone rather deeply into the matter of their pockets. But he was pointing his wand directly at my chest, and that serpent of his was gliding towards me across the Elizabethan cabinet.

‘Did you think I would leave the protection of this room to an imbecile like Crabbe? I have placed upon the cow-creamer a spell of my own invention. Dumbledore himself could not lift it. Anyone who

touches that cow-creamer can leave this room by one means only: by defeating me in a magical duel. Raise your wand, Mr Wooster – and prepare to die’.

There was a flash, and a cabinet next to me exploded. Drawing on reflexes honed in years of dodging bread-rolls at the Drones, I flung myself from one display case to another. Fortunately, Lord V appeared to have the thoroughly rotten aim of most villains; but as one cabinet after another erupted into flames, it was clear that I was only delaying the inevitable. Resolved to sell my life dearly, I gripped my wand and prepared to spring – only for a gentle cough, like a sheep with a blade of grass in its throat, to draw me back. Somehow, Jeeves had appeared at my side.

As usual, I hadn’t heard him arrive and was at a loss to know how he had done it – not least in the strange absence of a door. But there he was, his head positively bulging at the back and eyes aglow with the light of intelligence.

‘Could I be of assistance, sir?’

I shook the bean.

‘I don’t think so, Jeeves – not unless you know a good undertaker. Get out of here and save yourself’.

Another cabinet shattered.

‘If I may make a suggestion, sir?’ He swatted away a spell with a silver tea-tray. ‘The art of duelling is governed by a binding code, which even the most powerful wizard fears to break. Under its strictures, a wizard may invoke “the Right of Replacement”, nominating a champion to fight on his or her behalf’.

‘Whom do you suggest?’ I enquired, ducking as more silver shrapnel ripped across the room. ‘Tommy Cooper? Sooty? I think Errol Flynn may have lost a yard of pace’.

‘I would be happy to volunteer, sir. During my time as a page-boy, the young ladies at Beauxbatons were kind enough to teach me the rudiments of magical combat. I feel confident of success’.

The sensitive reader will no doubt be drawing in their breath and tutting vigorously at this point. ‘Hardly cricket, Wooster’, they will be saying; ‘sending your manservant to die in your place. Is this pukka? It is *preux*? Would Sir Roger de Wooster have done such a thing, at the field of Agincourt? Would Gary Lineker?’

But I have never had cause to regret placing my affairs in Jeeves’s hands, so I passed over the wand and wished him godspeed. Adjusting his bowler hat, Jeeves rose to his feet and flicked away a killing curse that had ricocheted off a silver salver.

‘Pardon me for intruding, your lordship, but Mr Wooster has invoked the Right of Replacement. I would be most grateful if you would direct any further acts of magical violence towards me’.

If I were Tolkien or one of those bearded Johnnies, I suppose I would throw in a few hundred pages of description here, and call it “The Battle of the Silver Sitting Room”, or some such. But I’ve never had much of a knack for description, and it all just feels so unnecessary. When Jeeves tells you he can do magic, you don’t waste time wondering if he’s any good at it. You just call up the appropriate ambulance and cut to the happy ending, where the boy gets the girl – or the cow-creamer, as the case may be – and rides off into the sunset.

To give his lordship credit, he put up a very honourable performance. He blasted off hexes like some kind of hellish garden sprinkler; by the time he had finished, there was barely a stick of furniture in the place. Jeeves simply waited courteously until he had cheesed it, before blasting him into the middle of next week. (Wednesday afternoon, he told me later, since it was a half-day at the major public schools). Once Jeeves had dismantled the protective spells and dispatched a gaggle of furious Death Eaters, we left the room, arranged with a house elf for our luggage to be sent on, and headed out towards the garage to collect the two-seater.

I was about to climb into the driver's seat when, to my surprise, Jeeves gripped my arm. Dashed familiar, I thought. With his other hand, he took hold of the car door, then span lightly on his heel. And moments later, we were standing – car and all – on the pavement outside Berkeley Mansions, with only the lightest of 'popping' noises to mark our arrival. So *that* was how he did it.

Once inside, installed in an armchair and supplied by Jeeves with a refreshing brandy, I fished out the cow-creamer for a gander. It was, of course, a hideous thing. Quite apart from its aesthetic horror, it was hard to believe that such a tiny object could cause so much trouble – though I daresay the Duke of Wellington thought the same about Napoleon. I tried to open it, but the hinges appeared to have been sealed in place.

'Any thoughts, Jeeves? How does one store information in a gargoyle like this?'

'I fancy, sir, that it operates rather in the fashion of a real cow. One feeds it information – magically, of course – and it stores it somewhere in the gut, until such time as it can be persuaded to release it'.

'In the gut, eh?' I was struck by an idea. 'Jeeves! Does that mean - ?'

'I believe it does, sir. A simple medicinal charm should compel it to disgorge the contents, rather in the manner of the unfortunate Mr Crabbe'.

'And what happens to it then?'

'In the absence of anyone to collect the emissions, sir, they would simply drift away and be lost. Reassembling them would be all but impossible'.

I tugged the cocktail stick from my back pocket, where it had been quietly singeing a hole.

'So we can make this thing safe from Lord V and his mouldy crew?'

'Quite so, sir'.

I gripped the wand, pointed it at the cow's nether-regions, and prepared to speak.

'Then *expelliarmus*, Jeeves!'

'*Expelliarmus*, sir'.

Robert Saunders, 2020

[With apologies to J.K. Rowling, P.G. Wodehouse and anyone of literary taste or discernment.]