

Plum Punch: Life at Home

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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Etext by Dagny and
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MR. PUNCH'S SPECTRAL ANALYSES

XI. The Thin End of the Wedge

"I beg you," said the Headless Man with some agitation, "not to dream of doing such a thing. Of course, if you think that I am unequal to the work " he added rather stiffly.

"My *dear* Sir," I replied, "not at all. Not at all. What a notion! I am sure there is not a spectre on the list who could do it half so well, and what the Haunted Mill would be without you I don't care to think."

"Then why wish to employ another ghost?"

"I thought you would like a companion. It must be lonely for you here when I am away."

"I miss you, of course, as who would not?" replied the Headless Man in his charming way. "But I prefer solitude to the company of another ghost. Take my advice, Mr. WUDDUS. Dismiss the idea of increasing your establishment."

The trouble was this. My old friend Lord SANGAZURE, finding it necessary, owing to the expenses connected with the marriage of his eldest daughter, to retrench, had resolved to dismiss one of his staff of spectres, a luminous boy of excellent character and obliging disposition. Wishing to procure him a comfortable home in exchange for the luxury of Sangazure Towers he had written to me, suggesting that I should enrol him as a member of my household. "You must want a ghost," he had said, having evidently forgotten that I already employed a Headless Man.

I felt a delicacy in adding to my establishment without the approval of the Headless Man, so I had told him of Lord SANGAZURE'S proposal, which, as I have shown, he had unhesitatingly condemned.

"Dismiss the idea," he said again. "I have a great respect and I may say liking for you, Mr. WUDDUS" (here he brushed away the not unmanly tear), "and I should not care to see you suffer the same fate as Mr. MOSENSTEIN."

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"What was that?" I inquired; "I don't think I ever heard that story."

"Ah, then I will tell it to you. You will find it extremely relevant to the case in point. This Mr. MOSENSTEIN was a 'pig in clover,' who, by dint of rigging the market, had risen from comparatively decent obscurity to the possession of several millions of pounds. His first act was to ensure himself a sufficiency of congenial society by settling in Park Lane, his second to look for a good house in the country. He hit upon Blenkinsop Manor, the seat of Lord BLENKINSOP, an amiable old gentleman who, through a tendency on the part of his sons to marry music-hall artistes instead of American heiresses, had been reduced to a genteel poverty. Lord BLENKINSOP closed with his munificent offer, and Mr. MOSENSTEIN took possession. Of course, as you will doubtless have foreseen, he had trouble from the outset with the resident ghost. The latter, I have heard, gave notice five times in the first week, and it was only the entreaties of Mr. MOSENSTEIN, couched in passionate Yiddish, and the tears of Mrs. MOSENSTEIN, that induced him to stop on and give them one more trial. It was a fatal move on the part of the new owner. The spectre became a tyrant. He insisted on having a suite of apartments reserved for him, dismissed several of the servants, examined every list of guests, and claimed the right to veto those of whom he disapproved. In fact, Mosenstein Manor, as it had been re-named, became a sort of lodging-house in which the MOSENSTEINS were the lodgers. It was only the fear of losing their ghost that prevented the newcomers from rebelling. So things went on, until one day Mr. MOSENSTEIN, retiring to his study for a last cigar before going to bed, found the best chair already occupied. The occupant was a spectre. He was sitting in front of the fire, reading the *Spectral News*. He looked up as Mr. MOSENSTEIN entered, but resumed his reading without a word. The lord of the Manor smoked his cigar in the billiard-room.

"'A friend of mine,' explained the resident ghost, on being questioned next day. 'He has come to stop for a few days. I trust he does not intrude? If so ' He paused, and looked so much as if he were going to give notice again that Mr. MOSENSTEIN hastened to say that he was charmed to put up any friend of his, and hoped he would stop as long as he liked. Which, I may say, he did. He is still there. It was the thin edge of the wedge. During the next fortnight six other spectres arrived, and each time Mr. MOSENSTEIN was forced to give in and assure them that they were welcome. Soon there was quite a spectral house-party at the Manor. And it was not long before the human occupants of the house began to feel the pinch of the boot. Mr. MOSENSTEIN was not allowed to go into his study, because the ghost there hated to be disturbed. He could not use the billiard-room because two gentlemen who had killed one another there in the reign of HENRY THE SIXTH wanted the table for their nightly three rounds with the broadsword. All the best bedrooms had to be given up, and even the terrace was occupied. And, not wishing to lose his original ghost, Mr. MOSENSTEIN had to put up with it all.

"To cut a long story short, when he visits Mosenstein Manor now, he stays at the Lodge; and I see in the *Spectral News* this week that even that is about to be taken as a bijou residence for the Countess of BLENKINSOP, who poisoned herself there in the days of the Commonwealth. So now you see the danger of having more than one ghost. One spectre," concluded the Headless Man, sententiously, "is an indispensable adjunct to domestic bliss. Two are a nuisance. Half-a-dozen spell Misery."

And, settling his head comfortably under his arm, he vanished. I went downstairs, and wrote to Lord SANGAZURE informing him with regret that I had no vacancy.

THE FIRST PAYING GUEST (A Legend)

[An attempt is here made to avoid classical pedantry, and to express the facts of antiquity in homely language suited to the needs of future generations of undergraduates, when Greek has ceased to be a compulsory subject.]

ION SMITHIOS the ratepayer arose from his early Grecian couch one lovely morning in April, B.C. 1004, feeling at peace with gods and men. In the first place, Troy had fallen on the previous day after a ten years' siege, and he reflected with satisfaction that he had been one of the first to suggest the employment of guile in order to reduce

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the city. Under the signature of "INDIGNANT ARGIVE" he had written to the *Argos Argus*, the popular half-obol paper of the country, exposing the futility of frontal attacks. Then, again, he had worked off all arrears in the matter of sacrifices, and what a comfort *that* was! In short, as he went for his morning constitutional through the hall he felt that all nature smiled. Two minutes later his pleasure was entirely spoiled by the sight of a suppliant on the hearth.

The criminal law of Greece was at that time in a very imperfect state. Briefly the rules relating to murder and other offences were as follows. If A. killed B., then it became the duty of B.'s nearest relative, C., to kill A. The State declined to interfere in what it considered a purely personal affair. It was C.'s business, and he must manage it as he thought best. A.'s next move was to fly to the nearest hearth, and then the thing might be considered in Chancery. The Law was very strict on the subject of hearths. Once on a hearth a fugitive could neither be injured nor evicted.

"Morning," said the suppliant brightly, as ION SMITHIOS appeared.

The ratepayer frowned.

"To what am I indebted?" he said.

"The fact is," replied his visitor, "in strict confidence I'm a god. Er in fact, Zeus. I know I don't look like it, but this a disguise. I am doing my celebrated imitation of the young man of the period. The fact is, I hope it won't annoy you or upset your plans in any way, but I love your youngest daughter with all the warmth of a noble nature. The charms of the lovely Stupid of me! Can't recall the name at the moment."

"I'm not surprised. I have no daughter."

"No, no, of course not," said the suppliant. "Stupid joke of mine. But I see you have a feeling heart. *You* won't be hard on a fellow. What's really happened is that last night being Troy night, and me rather celebrating it, don't you know, somehow or other purely by accident I cut a man's head off. His brother chased me for three miles across difficult country, and well, here I am, don't you know. What?"

"Well," said the ratepayer, "I wish it to be clearly understood that I in no way approve or sympathise. But "

"Do you know," interrupted the suppliant, "this cross-country running makes you awfully peckish. You couldn't hurry breakfast along and tell me the rest afterwards, I suppose?"

From that day he became a regular member of the household. He turned out to be an unpleasant young man, and he did not scruple to find fault with the ratepayer's domestic arrangements. Once they offered him cold mutton. He turned pale, and insisted on a devilled kidney.

But at last ION SMITHIOS hit on an idea.

The first the suppliant knew of it was when his breakfast was not brought to him at the usual time.

"Where's my breakfast?" he thundered.

"Where, indeed?" said ION SMITHIOS, appearing from the adjoining room, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"If," said the suppliant hastily, "that breakfast is not ready in five seconds, there will be trouble."

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"And now listen to me," said the ratepayer. "I have been looking up the law about suppliants, and it says the householder may not turn them out. There is nothing about feeding them. You take my meaning? If you like that hearth, by all means stay there. But you will pay from this moment for every meal you take, and also for attendance. Not to mention extras, and lest we forget fuel, lights, and washing. So now."

"I'll go this minute. I give you notice. I won't stay a moment longer."

ION SMITHIOS coughed.

"As I was coming through the garden just now," he said, "I met a pleasant young fellow with a very large spear. He seemed to be waiting for someone. I shouldn't be half surprised, do you know, if that was your man. The brother, you know."

The suppliant's jaw fell.

A week later it fell again. That was when SMITHIOS presented the first bill ever made out for a Paying Guest.

THE SOCIAL REFORMERS

The scene is the billiard-room of a country-house belonging to a hostess whose name appears in the "Society Column" with sickening regularity. In chairs round the fire are seated our old friends, FREDDIE, BOBBIE, and CLAUDE. FREDDIE and CLAUDE are smoking. BOBBIE IS READING aloud M. POL DE LEON'S article in the "World" on the virtues of the Smart Set.

Bobbie. Knew it was all rot Father VAUGHAN, you know, and all that. Here's feller crackin' us up all round. Listen to this. "The work of the Smart Set has been that of slowly filing from the wrists of English social life the fetters of the vulgar and pompous social ideas of an earlier period."

Claude. Talking of wrists, by the way, how's yours, FREDDIE?

Freddie. Top-hole, thanks. Took it out of the sling this morning. Be able to use it in a day or two.

Bobbie. Let's see, was it tobagganing downstairs or the soccer in the drawing-room?

Freddie. Soccer. Young IVOR barged me over on to a table-full of china. Tried to save the blessed thing, and came down on my hand. Sprained it badly.

Claude. Tell you what it is, that feller oughtn't to be allowed to play in a drawing-room. He charges like a pro.

Bobbie. His way of "filing the fetters," I suppose.

Freddie. All very well, but when it comes to a thirteen-stone feller putting his shoulder into your ribs and shoving, I'm all for "the vulgar and pompous social ideas of an earlier period."

Claude (meditatively). Rum those days must have been! I don't see how they filled in the evenings then.

Freddie. No booby-traps, what?

Claude. My word, we've taught 'em a lot. We're what d'you call 'em? pioneers.

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Bobbie. Reformers.

Freddie. Martyrs, sometimes. Don't forget my wrist.

Bobbie (taking up his paper again). Chap goes on. Says we've made a stand against "the stupid conventions of an unreal respectability."

[The door opens silently, and a Mysterious Hand flings a paper bag, which hits CLAUDE and bursts, covering him with flour.]

Claude (with emotion). Here, I say! I mean Hang it!

Bobbie (approvingly). Good shot that, for a girl.

Freddie. Now, a few years ago I shouldn't wonder if a feller mightn't have cut up rough at a little thing like that.

Claude. But, I say, look here!

Bobbie (shocked). Don't tell us *you're* going to get stuffy! You aren't in favour of "the stupid conventions of an unreal respectability," surely?

Freddie (judicially). Besides it was probably that DE BATTLEAXE girl. And you know you did throw your soup at her at dinner last night.

Claude (slightly mollified). Oh, well

Bobbie. That's right. Stout fellow. Now, let's see, where was I? "Unreal respectability." Oh, yes

Freddie. One second. Where are the cigars? Make a long arm, CLAUDE. Thanks.

[The application of matches to the cigars causes three sharp and simultaneous explosions. The reformers look at one another from under singed eyebrows. Faint and silvery laughter filters through the door.]

All. Rather smart, what?

Bobbie (dauntlessly resuming his reading). "The Smart Set have demonstrated that it is the best form to be natural and entirely unaffected."

Freddie (fingering his face in a gingerly manner). All the same, I wish the demonstrations weren't so confoundedly painful.

Claude (swallowing a mouthful of scorched flour). Same here.

(Scene closes)