

THREE MEN AND A MAID



by P.G. Wodehouse

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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"HE'S YOU!"

Mrs. Horace Hignett, world-famous writer on theology, author of "The Spreading Light," etc., etc., arrives in New York on a lecturing tour. Eustace, her son, is with her. Wilhelmina, her daughter, is in his, so her life is largely devoted to keeping him unmarried. Enter her nephew, Sam, son of Sir Mal-laby Marlowe, the eminent London lawyer. It is arranged that Sam and Eustace shall sail to-gather on the Atlantic the next day. Enter Bream Mortimer, American, son of a friend of an insufferable American named Bennett, who has been pestering Mrs. Hignett to lease Windles. Bream informs her that Wilhelmina Bennett is waiting for Eustace at the Little Church Round the Corner. Bream himself is in love with Wilhelmina. Mrs. Hignett marches off to Eustace's room. The scene shifts to the Atlantic at her pier. Sam, heading for the gangplank, meets a glorious, red-headed girl, with whom he instantly falls in love, though her dog bites him. Eustace appears, heart-broken. It appears that his mother had "pinched his trousers" and de-layed the money whereupon Wilhelmina had declared the wed-ding off. Sam is pushed over-board, has a desperate struggle in the water with another swim-mer and rejoins the Atlantic at quarantine. The red-headed girl is Wilhelmina Bennett—"Billie." She tells Sam she is a hero and in-troduces Bream, Eustace, a poor sailor, keeps to his berth. He doesn't know Billie is on board. Sam makes warm love. He pro-poses and is accepted.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

She traced a pattern on the deck with her shoe.

"I'm afraid of myself. You see, once before—and it was not so very long ago—I thought I had met my ideal, but . . ."

Sam laughed heartily.

"Are you worrying about that absurd business of poor old Eustace Hignett?"

She started violently.

"You know!"

"Of course! He told me himself."

"Do you know him? Where did you meet him?"

"I've known him all my life. He's my cousin. As a matter of fact, we are sharing a stateroom on board now."

"Eustace is on board! Oh, this is awful! What shall I do when I meet him?"

"Oh, pass it off with a light laugh and a genial quip. Just say: 'Oh, here you are!' or something. You know the sort of thing."

"It will be terrible."

"Not a bit of it. Why should you feel embarrassed? He must have realized by now that you acted in the only possible way. It was absurd his ever expecting you to marry him. I mean to say, just look at it dispassionately . . . Eustace . . . poor old Eustace . . . and you! The Princess and the Swineherd!"

"Does Mr. Hignett keep pigs?" she asked, surprised.

"I mean that poor old Eustace is so far below you, darling, that, with the most charitable intentions, one can only look on his asking you to marry him in the light of a record exhibition of pure nerve. A dear, good fellow, of course, but hopeless where the sterner realities of life are concerned. A man who can't even stop a dog-fight! In a world which is practically one seething mass of fighting dogs, how could you trust yourself to such a one? Nobody is fonder of Eustace Hignett than I am, but . . . well, I mean to say!"

"I see what you mean. He really wasn't my ideal."

"Not by a mile."

She mused, her chin in her hand.

"Of course, he was quite a dear in a lot of ways."

"Oh, a splendid chap," said Sam tolerantly.

"Have you ever heard him sing? I think what first attracted me to him was his beautiful voice. He really sings extraordinarily well."

A slight but definite spasm of jealousy afflicted Sam. He had no objection to praising poor old Eustace within decent limits, but the conversation seemed to him to be confining itself too exclusively to one subject.

"Yes?" he said. "Oh, yes, I've heard him sing. Not lately. He does drawing-room ballads and all that sort of thing still, I suppose?"

"Have you ever heard him sing 'My love is like a glowing tulip that is an old-world garden grows'?"

"I have not had that advantage," replied Sam stiffly. "But anyone can sing a drawing-room ballad. Now something funny, something that will make people laugh, something that really needs putting across."

"That's a different thing altogether."

"Do you sing that sort of thing?"

"People have been good enough to say that I sing that sort of thing,"

must certainly do something at the ship's concert tomorrow! The idea of your trying to hide your light under a bushel! I will tell Bream to count on you. He is an excellent accompanist. He can accompany you."

"Yes, but . . . well, I don't know," said Sam doubtfully. He could not help remembering that the last time he had sung in public had been at a supper at school, seven years before, and that on that occasion somebody whom it was a lasting grief to him that he had been unable to identify had thrown a pat of butter at him.

"Of course you must sing," said Billie. "I'll tell Bream when I go down to lunch. What will you sing?"

"Well—er—"

"Well, I'm sure it will be wonderful whatever it is. You are so wonderful in every way. You remind me of one of the heroes of old!"

Sam's discomposure vanished. In the first place, this was much more the sort of conversation which he felt the situation indicated. In the second place he had remembered that there was no need for him to sing at all. He could do that imitation of Frank Tinney which had been such a hit at the Trinity smoker. He was on safe ground there. He knew he was good. He clasped the girl to him and kissed her sixteen times.

Suddenly, as he released her, the cloud came back into her face.

"My angel," he asked solicitously, "what's the matter?"

"I was thinking of father," she said. The glowing splendor of the morning took on a touch of chill for Sam.

"Father!" he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I see what you mean! He will think that we have been a little precipitate, eh? He will require a little time in order to learn to love me, you think?"

"He is sure to be pretty angry at first," agreed Billie. "You see I know he has always hoped that I would marry Bream."

"Bream! Bream Mortimer! What a silly thing to hope!"

"Well, you see, I told you that Mr. Mortimer was father's best friend. They are both over in England now, and are trying to get a house in the country for the summer which we can all share. I rather think the idea is to bring me and Bream closer together."

"How the deuce could that fellow be brought any closer to you? He's like a burr as it is."

"Well, that was the idea, I'm sure. Of course I could never look at Bream now."

"I hate looking at him myself," said Sam feelingly.

A group of afflicted persons, bent upon playing with long sticks and bits of wood, now invaded the upper deck. Their weak-minded cries filled the air. Sam and the girl rose.

"Touching on your father once more," he said as they made their way below, "is he a very formidable sort of man?"

"He can be a dear. But he's rather quick-tempered. You must be very ingratiating."

"I will practice it in front of the glass every morning for the rest of the voyage," said Sam.

He went down to the stateroom in a mixed mood of elation and apprehension. He was engaged to the most wonderful girl in the world, but over the horizon loomed the menacing figure of Father. He wished he could induce Billie to allow him to waive the formality of thawing Father. Eustace Hignett had apparently been able to do so. But that experience had presumably engendered a certain caution in her. The Hignett fiasco had spoiled her for runaway marriages. Well, if it had to be done, it must be done, and that was all there was to it.

CHAPTER V

"Good G—d!" cried Eustace Hignett.

He stared at the figure which loomed above him in the fading light which came through the porthole of the stateroom. The hour was seventhirty and he had just woken from a troubled doze, full of strange nightmares, and for the moment he thought that he must still be dreaming, for the figure before him could have walked straight into any nightmare and no questions asked. Then suddenly he became aware that it was his cousin, Samuel Marlowe. As in the historic case of father in the pigsty, he could tell him by his hat. But why was he looking like that? Was it simply some trick of the uncertain light, or was his face really black and had his mouth suddenly grown to six times its normal size and become a vivid crimson?

Sam turned. He had been looking at himself in the mirror with a satisfaction which, to the casual observer, his appearance would not have seemed to justify. Hignett had not been suffering from a delusion. His cousin's face was black; and even as he turned, he gave it a dab with a piece of burnt cork and made it blacker,

"Hullo! You awake?" he said and switched on the light.

Eustace Hignett shied like a startled horse. His friend's profile, seen dimly, had been disconcerting enough. Full face, he was a revolting object. Nothing that Eustace Hignett had encountered in his recent dreams—and they had included such unusual fauna as elephants in top hats and running shorts—had affected him so profoundly. Sam's appearance smote him like a blow. It seemed to take him straight into a different and dreadful world.

"What . . . what . . . what . . . ?" he gurgled.

Sam squinted at himself in the glass and added a touch of black to his nose.

"How do I look?"

Eustace Hignett began to fear that his cousin's reason must have become unseated. He could not conceive of any really sane man, looking like that, being anxious to be told how he looked.

"Are my lips red enough? It's for the ship's concert, you know. It starts in half an hour, though I believe I'm not on till the second part. Speaking as a friend, would you put a touch more black round the ears, or are they all right?"

Curiously replaced apprehension in Hignett's mind.

"What on earth are you doing performing at the ship's concert?"

"Oh, they roped me in. It got about somehow that I was a valuable man and they wouldn't take no." Sam deepened the color of his ears. "As a matter of fact," he said casually, "my fiancée made rather a point of my doing something."

A sharp yell from the lower berth proclaimed the fact that the significance of the remark had not been lost on Eustace.

"Your fiancée?"

"The girl I'm engaged to. Didn't I tell you about that? Yes, I'm engaged."

Eustace sighed heavily.

"I feared the worst. Tell me, who is she?"

"Didn't I tell you her name?"

"No."

"Curious! I must have forgotten." He hummed an airy strain as he blackened the tip of his nose. "It's rather a curious coincidence, really. Her name is Bennett."

"She may be a relation."

"That's true. Of course, girls do have relations."

"What is her first name?"

"That is another rather remarkable thing. It's Wilhelmina."

"Wilhelmina!"

"Of course, there must be hundreds of girls in the world called Wilhelmina Bennett, but still it is a coincidence."

"What color is her hair?" demanded Eustace Hignett in a hollow voice.

"Her hair! What color is it?"

"Her hair? Now, let me see. You ask me what color is her hair. Well, you might call it auburn . . . or russet . . . or you might call it Titian."

"Never mind what you might call it. Is it red?"

"Red? Why, yes. That is a very good description of it. Now that you put it to me like that, it is red."

"Has she a trick of grabbing at you suddenly when she gets excited, like a kitten with a ball of wool?"

"Yes. Yes, she has."

Eustace Hignett uttered a sharp cry.

"Sam," he said, "can you bear a shock?"

"I'll have a dash at it."

"Brace up!"

"The girl you are engaged to is the same girl who promised to marry me."

"Well, well!" said Sam.

There was a silence.

"Aawfully sorry, of course, and all that," said Sam.

"Don't apologize to me!" said Eustace. "My poor old chap, my only feeling toward you is one of the purest and profoundest pity." He reached out and pressed Sam's hand. "I regard you as a toad beneath the barrow!"

"Well, I suppose that's one way of offering congratulations and cheery good wishes."

"And on top of that," went on Eustace, deeply moved, "you have got to sing at the ship's concert."

"Why shouldn't I sing at the ship's concert?"

"My dear old man, you have many worthy qualities, but you must know that you can't sing. You can't sing for nuts! I don't want to discourage you, but long ago as it is, you can't have forgotten what an ass you made of yourself at that supper at school."



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Seeing you up against it like this, I regret that I threw a lump of butter at you on that occasion, though at the time it seemed the only course to pursue."

Sam started.

"Was it you who threw that bit of butter?"

"It was."

"I wish I'd known! You silly chump, you ruined my collar."

"Ah, well, it's seven years ago. You would have had to send it to the wash anyhow by this time. But don't let us brood on the past. Let us put our heads together and think how we can get you out of this terrible situation."

"I don't want to get out of it. I confidently expect to be the hit of the evening."

"The hit of the evening! You! Singing!"

"I'm not going to sing. I'm going to do that imitation of Frank Tinney which I did at the Trinity smoker. You haven't forgotten that? You were at the piano taking the part of the conductor of the orchestra. What a riot it was—we were! I say, Eustace, old man, I suppose you don't feel well enough to come up now and take your old part? You could do it without a rehearsal. You remember how it went. 'Hullo, Ernest! 'Hullo, Frank! Why not come along?'"

"The only piano I will ever sit at will be one firmly fixed on a flour that does not heave and wobble under me."

"Nonsense! The boat's as steady as a rock now. The sea's like a mill-pond."

"Nevertheless, thanking you for the suggestion, no!"

"Oh, well, then I shall have to get on as best I can with that fellow Mortimer. We've been rehearsing all the afternoon and he seems to have the hang of the thing. But he won't be really right. He has no pep, no vim. Still, if you won't . . . well, I think I'll be getting along to his stateroom. I told him I would look in for a last rehearsal."

The door closed behind Sam, and Eustace Hignett, lying on his back, gave himself up to melancholy meditation. He was deeply disturbed by his cousin's sad story. He knew what it meant being engaged to Wilhelmina Bennett. It was like being taken aloft in a balloon and dropped with a thud on the rocks.

His reflections were broken by the abrupt opening of the door. Marlowe rushed in. Eustace peered anxiously out of his berth. There was too much cork on his cousin's face to allow of any real registering of emotion, but he could tell from his manner that all was not well.

"What's the matter?"

Sam sank on the lounge.

"The bounder has quit!"

"The bounder? What bounder?"

"There is only one! Bream Mortimer, curse him! There may be others whom thoughtless critics rank as bounders, but he is the only man really deserving of the title. He refuses to appear! He has walked out on the act! He has left me flat! I went into his stateroom just now, as arranged, and the man was lying on his bunk, groaning."

"I thought you said the sea was like a mill-pond."

"It wasn't that! He's perfectly fit. But it seems that the silly ass took it into his head to propose to Billie just before dinner—apparently he's loved her for years in a silent, self-effacing way—and of course she told him that she was engaged to me, and the thing upset him to such an extent that he says the idea of sitting down at a piano and helping me give an imitation of Frank Tinney revolts him. He says he intends to spend the evening in bed, reading Schopenhauer. I hope it chokes him."

"But this is splendid! This lets you out."

"What do you mean? Lets me out?"

"Why, now you won't be able to appear. Oh, you will be thankful for this in years to come."

"Won't I appear! Won't I dashed well appear! Do you think I'm going to disappoint that dear girl when she is relying on me? I would rather die!"

"But you can't appear without a pianist."

"I've got a pianist."

"You have?"

"Yes. A little undersized shrimp of a fellow with a green face and ears like water-wings."

"I don't think I know him."

"Yes, you do. He's you!"

"Me!"

"Yes, you. You are going to sit at the piano tonight."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it's impossible. I gave you my views on the subject just now."

"You've altered them."

"I haven't."

"Well, you soon will, and I'll tell you why. If you don't get up out of that d-d berth you've been roosting in all your life, I'm going to ring for J. B. Midgeley and I'm going to tell him to bring me a bit of dinner in here and I'm going to eat it before your eyes."

"Darling, it was like you to ask me to meet you here."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Origin of "Dumdum." The hollow-nosed "dumdum" bullets got their name from the place where they were manufactured. Dumdum is a town in British India, in the division of Bengal. It was the headquarters of the Bengal artillery in the early eighties. At the Hague conference the use of the bullets was forbidden by international agreement.

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