Three Men and a Maid

By P. G. WODEHOUSE

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.
—16—

She pushed the curtains apart with a rattle and, at the same moment, from the direction of the door there came a low but distinct gasp which made her resolute heart jump and flutter. It was too dark to see anything distinctly, but, in the instant before it turned and fled, she caught sight of a shadowy male figure, and knew that her worst fears had been realized. The figure was too tall to be Eustace, and Eustace, she knew, was the only man in the house. Male figures, therefore, that went flitting about Windles, must be the figures of burglars.

Mrs. Hignett, bold woman though she was, stood for an instant spellbound, and for one moment of not unpardonable panic, tried to tell herself that she had been mistaken. Almost immediately, however, there came from the direction of the hall a dull chunky sound as though something soft had been kicked, followed by a low gurgle and the noise of staggering feet. Unless he was dancing a pas seul out of sheer lightness of heart, the nocturnal visitor must have tripped over something.

The latter theory was the correct one. Montagu Webster was a man who at many a subscription ball had shaken a wicked dancing-pump, and nothing in the proper circumstances pleased him better than to exercise the skill which had become his as the result of twelve private lessons at half-a-crown a visit; but he recognized the truth of the scriptural adage that there is a time for dancing, and that this was not it. His only desire when, stealing into the drawing room he had been confronted through the curtains by a female figure, was to get back to his bedroom undetected. He supposed that one of the feminine members of the house party must have been taking a stroll in the grounds, and he did not wish to stay and be compelled to make laborious explanations of his presence there in the dark. He decided to postpone the knocking on the cupboard door, which had been the signal arranged between himself and Sam, until a more suitable occasion. In the meantime he bounded silently out into the hall, and instantaneously tripped over the portly form of Smith, the bulldog, who, roused from a light sleep to the knowledge that something was going on, and being a dog who always liked to be in the center of the maelstrom of events, had waddled out to investigate.

By the time Mrs. Hignett had pulled herself together sufficiently to feel brave enough to venture into the hall, Webster's presence of mind and Smith's gregariousness had combined to restore that part of the house to its normal nocturnal condition of emptiness. Webster's stagger had carried him almost up to the green baize door leading to the servants' staircase, and he proceeded to pass through it without checking his momentum, closely followed by Smith, who, now convinced that interesting events were in progress which might possibly culminate in cake, had abandoned the idea of sleep and meant to see the thing through. He gamboled in Webster's wake up the stairs and along the passage leading to the latter's room, and only paused when the door was brusquely shut in his face. Upon which he sat down to think the thing over. He was in no hurry. The night was before him, promising, as far as he could judge from the way it had opened, excellent entertainment.

Mrs. Hignett had listened fearfully to the uncouth noises from the hall. The burglars—she had now discovered that there were at least two of them—appeared to be actually romping. The situation had grown beyond her handling. If this troupe of terpsichorean marauders was to be dislodged she must have assistance. It was man's work. She made a brave dash through the hall, mercifully unmolested: found the stairs: raced up them: and fell through the doorway of her son Eustace's bedroom like a spent Marathon runner staggering past the winning-post.

Episode Two.

In the moment which elapsed before either of the two could calm their agitated brains to speech, Eustace became aware, as never before, of the truth of that well-known line, "Peace, perfect Peace, with loved ones far away!"

"Eustace!"

Mrs. Hugnett gasped, hand on heart.

"Eustace, there are men in the house!"

This fact was just the one which Eustace had been wondering how to break to her.

"I know," he said uneasily.

"You know!" Mrs. Hignett stared. "Did you hear them!"

"Hear them?" said Eustace, puzzled.

"The drawing room window was left open, and there are two burglars in the hall."

"Oh, I say, no! That's rather rotten!" said Eustace.

"I saw and heard them. Come with me and arrest them."

"But I can't. I've sprained my ankle."

"Sprained your ankle? How very inconvenient! When did you do that?"

"This morning."

"How did it happen?"

Eustace hesitated.

"I was jumping."

"Jumping! But—oh!" Mrs. Hignett's sentence trailed off into a suppressed shriek, as the door opened.

Immediately following on Eustace's accident, Jane Hubbard had constituted herself his nurse. It was she who had bound up his injured ankle in a manner which the doctor on his arrival had admitted himself unable to improve upon. She had sat with him through the long afternoon. And now, fearing lest a return of the pain might render him sleepless, she had come to bring him a selection of books to see him through the night.

Jane Hubbard was a girl who by nature and training was well adapted to bear shocks. She accepted the advent of Mrs. Hignett without visible astonishment, though inwardly she was wondering who the visitor might be.

"Good evening," she said placidly.

Mrs. Hignett, having rallied from her moment of weakness, glared at the new arrival dumbly. She could not place Jane. She had the air of a nurse, and yet she wore no uniform.

"Who are you?" she asked stiffly.

"Who are you?" countered Jane.

"I," said Mrs. Hignett portentously, "am the owner of this house, and I should be glad to know what you are doing in it. I am Mrs. Horace Hignett."

A charming smile spread itself over Jane's finely cut face.

"I'm so glad to meet you," she said. "I have heard so much about you."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Hignett. "And now I should like to hear a little about you."

"I've read all your books," said Jane. "I think they're wonderful."

In spite of herself, in spite of a feeling that this young woman was straying from the point, Mrs. Hignett could not check a slight influx of amiability. She was an authoress who received a good deal of incense from admirers, but she could always do with a bit more. Besides, most of the incense came by mail. Living a quiet and retired life in the country, it was rarely that she got it handed to her face to face. She melted quite perceptibly. She did not cease to look like a basilisk, but she began to look like a basilisk who has had a good lunch.

"My favorite," said Jane, who for a week had been sitting daily in a chair in the drawing room adjoining the table on which the authoress' complete works were assembled, "is 'The Spreading Light.' I do like 'The Spreading Light'!"

"It was written some years ago," said Mrs. Hignett with something approaching cordiality, "and I have since revised some of the views I state in it, but I still consider it quite a good textbook."

"Of course, I can see that 'What of the Morrow?' is more profound," said Jane. "But I read 'The Spreading Light' first, and of course that makes a difference.

"I can quite see that it would," agreed Mrs. Hignett. "One's first step across the threshold of a new mind, one's first glimpse . . ."

"Yes, it makes you feel . . ."

"Like some watcher of the skies," said Mrs. Hignett, "when a new planet swims into his ken, or like . . ."

"Yes, doesn't it!" said Jane.

Eustace, who had been listening to the conversation with every muscle tense, in much the same mental attitude as that of a peaceful citizen in a Wild West saloon who holds himself in readiness to dive under a table directly the shooting begins, began to relax. What he had shrinkingly anticipated would be the biggest thing since the Dempsey-Carpentier fight seemed to be turning into a pleasant social and literary evening not unlike what he imagined a meeting of old Vassar alumnae must be. For the first time since his mother had come into the room he indulged in the luxury of a deep breath.

"But what are you doing here?" asked Mrs. Hignett, returning almost reluctantly to the main issue.

Eustace perceived that he had breathed too soon. In an unobtrusive way he subsided into the bed and pulled the sheets over his head, following the excellent tactics of the great duke of Wellington in his Peninsular campaign. "When in doubt," the duke used to say, "retire and dig yourself in."

"I'm nursing dear Eustace," said Jane.

Mrs. Hignett quivered, and cast an eye on the hump in the bedclothes which represented dear Eustace. A cold fear had come upon her.

"'Dear Eustace'!" she repeated mechanically.

"We're engaged," said Jane. "We got engaged this morning. That's how he sprained his ankle. When I accepted him, he tried to jump a holly bush."

"Engaged! Eustace, is this true?"

"Yes," said a muffled voice from the interior of the bed.

"And poor Eustace is so worried," continued Jane, "about the house." She went on quickly. "He doesn't want to deprive you of it, because he knows what it means to you. So he is hoping—we are both hoping—that you will accept it as a present when we are married. We really shan't want it, you know. We are going to live in London. So you will take it, won't you—to please us?"

We all of us, even the greatest of us, have our moments of weakness. Let us then not express any surprise at the sudden collapse of one of the world's greatest female thinkers. As the meaning of this speech smote on Mrs. Horace Hignett's understanding, she sank weeping into a chair. The ever-present fear that had haunted her had been exorcised. Windles was hers in perpetuity. The relief was too great. She sat in her chair and gulped: and Eustace, greatly encouraged, emerged slowly from the bedclothes like a worm after a thunderstorm.

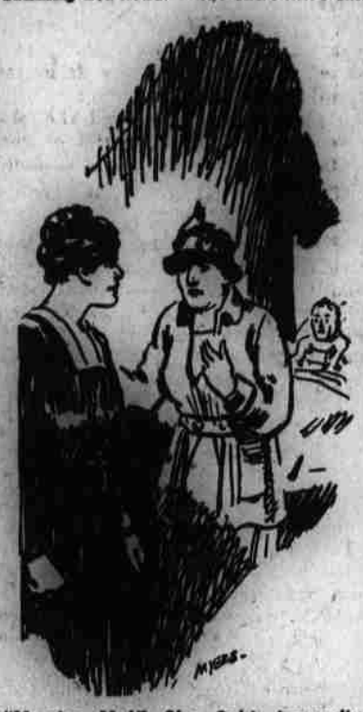
How long this poignant scene would have lasted, one cannot say. It is a pity that it was cut short, for I should have liked to dwell upon it. But at this moment, from the regions downstairs, there suddenly burst upon the silent night such a whirlwind of sound as effectually dissipated the tense emotion in the room. Somebody had touched off the orchestrion in the drawing room, and that willing instrument had begun again in the middle of a bar at the point where it had been switched off. Its wailing lament for the passing of summer filled the whole house.

"That's too bad!" said Jane, a little annoyed. "At this time of night!"

"It's the burglars!" quavered Mrs. Hignett. In the stress of recent events she had completely forgotten the existence of those enemies of society. "They were dancing in the hall when I arrived, and now they're playing the orchestrion!"

"Light-hearted chaps!" said Eustace, admiring the sang-froid of the criminal world. "Full of spirits!"

"This won't do," said Jane Hubbard, shaking her head. "We can't have this



"Murder Me!" She Said Amusedly, "I'd Like to Catch Them at It!"

sort of thing. I'll go and fetch my gun."

"They'll murder you, dear!" panted Mrs. Hignett, clinging to her arm.

Jane Hubbard laughed.

"Murder me!" she said, amusedly. "I'd like to catch them at it!"

Mrs. Hignett stood staring at the door as Jane closed it safely behind her.

"Eustace," she said solemnly, "that is a wonderful girl!"

"Yes! She once killed a panther—or a puma, I forget which—with a hatpin!" said Eustace with enthusiasm.

"I could wish you no better wife!" said Mrs. Hignett.

She broke off with a sharp wail. . . . Out in the passage something like a battery of artillery had roared.

The door opened and Jane Hubbard appeared, slipping a fresh cartridge into the elephant-gun.

"One of them was popping about outside here," she announced. "I took a shot at him, but I'm afraid I missed. The visibility was bad. At any rate he went away."

In this last statement she was perfectly accurate. Bream Mortimer, who had been aroused by the orchestrion and who had come out to see what was the matter, had gone away at the rate of fifty miles an hour. He had been creeping down the passage when he found himself suddenly confronted by a dim figure which, without a word, had attempted to slay him with an enormous gun. The shot had whistled past his ears and gone singing down the corridor. This was enough for Bream. He had returned to his room in three strides, and was now under the bed. The burglars might take everything in the house and welcome, so that they did not molest his privacy. That was the way Bream looked at it. And very sensible of him, too, I consider.

"We'd better go downstairs," said Jane. "Bring a candle. Not you, Eustace, darling. Don't you stir out of bed!"

"I won't," said Eustace obediently.

Episode Three.

Of all the leisured pursuits, there are few less attractive to the thinking man than sitting in a dark cupboard waiting for a house party to go to bed: and Sam, who had established himself in the one behind the piano at a quarter to eight, soon began to feel as if he had been there for an eternity. He could dimly remember a previous existence in which he had not been sitting in his present position, but it seemed so long ago that it was shadowy and unreal to him. The ordeal of spending the evening in this retreat had not appeared formidable when he had contemplated it that afternoon in the lane: but, now that he was actually undergoing it, it was extraordinary how many disadvantages it had.

Cupboards, as a class, are badly ventilated, and this one seemed to contain no air at all: and the warmth of the night, combined with the cupboard's natural stuffiness, had soon begun to reduce Sam to a condition of pulp. He seemed to himself to be sagging like an ice-cream in front of a fire. The darkness, too, weighed upon him. He was abominably thirsty. Also he wanted to smoke. In addition to this, the small of his back tickled, and he more than suspected the cupboard of harboring mice. Not once nor twice but many hundred times he wished that the ingenious Webster had thought of something simpler.

His was a position which would have suited one of those Indian mystics who sit perfectly still for twenty years, contemplating the Infinite; but it reduced Sam to an almost imbecile state of boredom. He tried counting sheep. He tried going over his past life in his mind from the earliest moment he could recollect, and thought he had never encountered a duller series of episodes. He found a temporary solace by playing a succession of mental golf games over all the courses he could remember, and he was just teeing up for the sixteenth at Muirfield, after playing Hoylake, St. Andrews, Westward Ho, Hanger Hill, Mud-Surrey, Walton Heath, Garden City, and the Engineers' club at Roslyn, L. I., when the light ceased to shine through the crack under the door, and he awoke with a sense of dull incredulity to the realization that the occupants of the drawing room had called it a day and that his vigil was over.

But was it? Once more alert, Sam became cautious. True, the light seemed to be off, but did that mean anything in a country house, where people had the habit of going and strolling about the garden at all hours? Probably they were still popping about all over the place. At any rate, it was not worth risking coming out of his lair. He remembered that Webster had promised to come and knock an all-clear signal on the door. It would be safer to wait for that.

But the moments went by, and there was no knock. Sam began to grow impatient. The last few minutes of waiting in a cupboard are always the hardest. Time seemed to stretch out again interminably. Once he thought he heard footsteps, but that led to nothing. Eventually, having strained his ears and finding everything still, he decided to take a chance. He fished in his pocket for the key, cautiously unlocked the door, opened it by slow inches, and peered out.

The room was in blackness. The house was still. All was well. With the feeling of a life-prisoner emerging from the Bastille, he began to crawl stiffly forward: and it was just then that the first of the disturbing events occurred which were to make this night memorable to him. Something like a rattlesnake suddenly went off with a whirr, and his head, jerking up, collided with the piano. It was only the cuckoo clock, which now, having cleared its throat as was its custom before striking, proceeded to cuck eleven times in rapid succession before subsiding with another rattle: but to Sam it sounded like the end of the world.

He sat in the darkness, massaging his bruised skull. His hours of imprisonment in the cupboard had had a bad effect on his nervous system, and he vacillated between tears of weakness and a militant desire to get at the cuckoo clock with a hatchet. He felt that it had done it on purpose and was now chuckling to itself in fancied security. For quite a minute he raged silently, and any cuckoo clock which had strayed within his reach would have had a bad time of it. Then his attention was diverted.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Naturally.

It is difficult to take a good moving picture of a lion. He becomes temperamental as soon as he discovers he is to appear on the screen.

The Cure.

"It would soon put the bootleggers out of business." "What would?" "The refusal of the law-abiding citizens to buy liquor from them."

Ancients Believed Man's Glory Was His Beard

There was a deep-rooted belief among the ancient peoples of the East that a man's glory was his beard. Compulsory shaving and the close-cropping of hair were signs of degradation. This is borne out by Assyrian sculptures, which always show kings with beards and long hair and slaves with close-cropped hair and clean-shaven faces.

The Egyptians, however, had different ideas. They considered that hair was a source of dirt and shaved both face and head. Their slaves and servants were compelled to do the same.

The early Greeks and Romans shaved off their beards because they gave the enemy a good hold in hand-to-hand fighting! It is recorded that Alexander the Great ordered his soldiers to shave for this reason.

It was the custom among Romans to shave off the beard at the age of twenty-one and present it as an offering to the household gods. A beard was grown after that age only as a sign of mourning.—London Tit-Bits.

The complexion of a woman's thoughts may be due to the way her face is made up.

African Ruler Devises Language of His Own

A few years ago Njoya, king of Foumban, in the Cameroons, became jealous of the particularly good set of secret languages of neighboring tribes, and invented from French, English and German words a code tongue of his own which is reserved for the exclusive use of the "cabinet" and upper administrative officials.

The interesting feature of this state language, which was discovered and studied by a Frenchman, Lieutenant Clapot, is that, instead of meaning their usual equivalent, the European words have entirely different code significations. "La mission," for instance, means "to see," and "franc" means "the king." "Ordnung" means "we," "savant" means "an egg," "lemon" means "a hill," "left" means "which," and "English" means "a head."—Manchester Guardian.

Largest Waves

From a series of observations made of waves of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans by a French naval officer, it was found that the largest waves occurred in the Indian ocean, where thirty different waves averaged 29 feet, the largest being 37 feet.