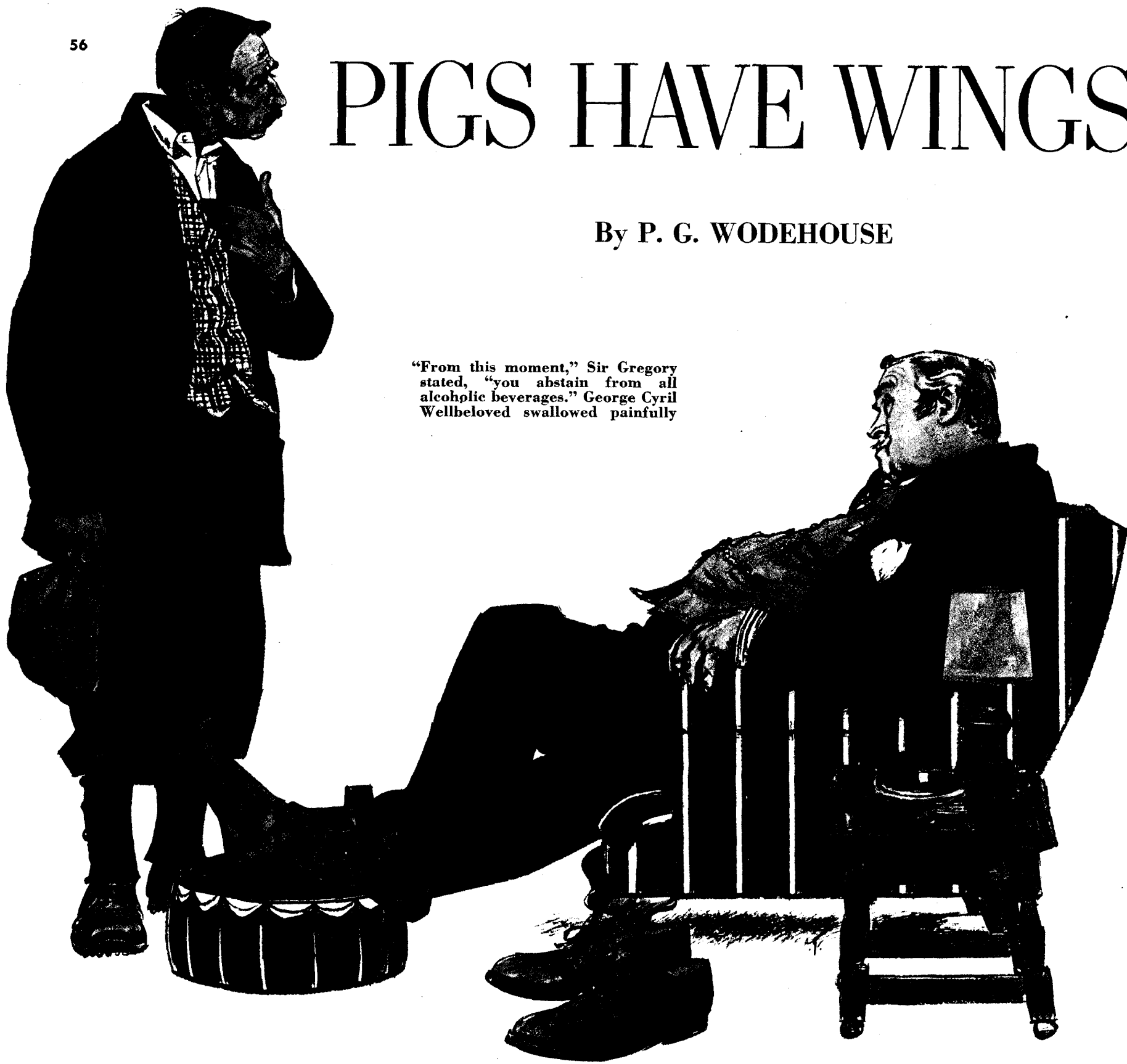


PIGS HAVE WINGS

By P. G. WODEHOUSE

"From this moment," Sir Gregory stated, "you abstain from all alcoholic beverages." George Cyril Wellbeloved swallowed painfully



The Story: Things were definitely amiss around Blandings Castle. CLARENCE, ninth Earl of Emsworth, had set his heart on having his famous pig, Empress of Blandings, win for a third time the top prize in the Fat Pigs class at the coming Shropshire Agricultural Show.

Vague about everything else, Clarence was nonetheless aware that the Empress' chances had been immeasurably lessened by the machinations of his neighbor, SIR GREGORY PARSLOE. Parsloe, already owner of one rival pig, had gone to the scurvy length of importing a porker, Queen of Matchingham, whose massive dimensions gravely imperiled the Empress' hopes.

Nor was only the Empress' honor at stake. GALAHAD THREEPWOOD, Clarence's brother, and SEBASTIAN BEACH, his butler, had wagered their all on her winning. The general agitation was increased by the fact that LADY CONSTANCE, Galahad's sister, had insisted on hiring as the pig's nursemaid one MONICA SIMMONS, whose incompetence for her sacred task was demonstrated by her habit of referring to her charge as "the piggy-wiggly."

Galahad was further disturbed by his knowledge that young love was not running its true course. PENNY DONALDSON, their beautiful young American guest, confided in him that, in spite of the attentions of the rich LORD VOSPER, her heart belonged to JERRY VAIL, a penniless writer of murder mysteries. Her millionaire father, Penny said, loathed impecunious suitors, and unless Jerry could get hold of two thousand pounds to invest in a health resort and so make his fortune, their romance was doomed. In order to see Jerry away from the watchful Lady Constance, Penny confided, she had had to resort to inventing a friend of her father's with whom she would dine in London, a fictitious Mrs. Bunbury.

It must be noted that the love life of Sir Gregory Parsloe also left much to be desired. Engaged to marry the athletic GLORIA SALT, he had recently been informed by her that unless he went on a diet the wedding bells would not ring. Bowed down by the horrid burden of exercise and dieting, he was hardly in proper form for a threatening encounter with Galahad. Any plot of Parsloe's against the Empress, Galahad warned, would be met with ruthless reprisals against the Queen.

II

LADY CONSTANCE was dipping her aristocratic nose in her teacup as Galahad Threepwood approached the table. At the sound of his footsteps, she looked up.

"Oh, it's you," she said, and her tone made it abundantly clear that no sudden gush of affection had caused her to alter the opinion she had so long held that this brother of hers was a blot on the Blandings scene. "I thought it was Sir Gregory. Have you seen Sir Gregory?"

"The man Parsloe? Yes. He has just slunk off."

"What do you mean, slunk off? If you are referring to the fact that Sir Gregory was limping, he has a blister on his foot. There was something I was going to tell him. I must wait and telephone when he gets home."

Gally screwed his monocle more firmly into his eye. "I wish to talk to you, Constance," he said. "To talk to you very seriously about this Simmons disaster, this incompetent ex-Rodean hockey-knocker whom you have foisted upon Clarence in the capacity of pig-girl. Clarence and I have been discussing it, and we are in complete agreement

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In one day, the Blandings crowd had uncovered two dastardly attempts to nobble the Empress. What they needed, said Gally, was someone equipped with the criminal mind—and he knew just the girl

that Simmons must be given the old heave ho. Good God, are you prepared to stand before the bar of world opinion as the woman who, by butting in with your bally Simmons, jeopardized the Empress' chance of performing the unheard-of feat of winning the Fat Pigs medal for the third year in succession? A pigman, and the finest pigman money can procure, must place his hand upon the tiller in her stead. No argument, Constance. This is final."

IT IS always a chilling thing to be threatened. Sir Gregory Parsloe, as he limped back to Matchingham Hall, was conscious of a distinct chill down the spine. His encounter with Gally had shaken him. He was not an imaginative man, but a man did not have to be very imaginative to read into Gally's words the threat of unilateral action against the Queen of Matchingham. True, the fellow had spoken of "reprisals," as though to imply that hostilities would not be initiated by the Blandings Castle gang, but Sir Gregory's mental retort to this was "Reprisals, my left eyeball." The Galahad Threepwood type of man does not wait politely for the enemy to make the first move. He acts, and acts swiftly and without warning.

Consequently, Sir Gregory wasted no time. Arriving at Matchingham Hall, sinking into an armchair and taking off his shoes, he instantly rang the bell and told his butler to inform George Cyril Wellbeloved, his pigman, that his presence was desired for a conference. And in due season a rich smell of pig came floating in, closely followed by George Cyril in person.

George Cyril Wellbeloved was a long, lean, reddish-haired man with a mouth like a halibut's and a broken nose acquired during a political discussion at the Emsworth Arms. But when you are engaging a pigman, Sir Gregory felt, you don't want a sort of male Miss America, you want someone who knows about pigs. And what George Cyril Wellbeloved did not know about pigs could have been written on one of Maudie Montrose's picture post cards.

In terse, nervous English, Sir Gregory related the substance of his interview with Gally, stressing the bit about poisoned potatoes, and George Cyril listened with a gravity which became him well.

"So there you are," said Sir Gregory, having completed his tale. "What do you make of it?"

George Cyril Wellbeloved was a man who went in for a certain verbal polish in his conversation. "To speak expleasantly, sir," he said, "I think the old means to do the dirty on us."

(It would perhaps have been more fitting had Sir Gregory at this point said, "Come, come, my man, be more careful with your language," but the noun expressed so exactly what he himself was thinking of the Honorable Galahad Threepwood that he could not bring himself to chide and rebuke. As a matter of fact, though — is admittedly strong stuff, he had gone even further than his companion, labeling Gally in his mind as a **** and a !!!!!)

"Precisely what I think myself," he agreed. "From now on, Wellbeloved, ceaseless vigilance. We cannot afford to relax for an instant."

"No, sir. The Hun is at the gate."

"The what's where?"

"The Hun, sir. At the gate, sir. Or, putting it another way," said George Cyril Wellbeloved, who had attended Sunday school in Market Blandings as a boy, "see the troops of Midian prowl and prowl around."

Sir Gregory thought this over. "Yes. Yes, I see what you mean. Troops of Midian, yes. Nasty fellers. You did say Midian?"

"Yes, sir. Midian, troops of. Christian, dost thou hear them on the holy ground? Christian, up and smite them!"

"Quite. Yes. Precisely. Just what I was about to suggest myself. You will need a shotgun. I will give you one. Never let it out of your hands, and if

the occasion arises, use it. Mind you, I am not saying commit a murder and render yourself liable to the extreme penalty of the law. But if one of these nights some bally bouncer—I name no names—comes sneaking around Queen of Matchingham's sty, there's nothing to prevent you giving him a dashed good peppering in the seat of the pants."

"Nothing whatever, sir," assented George Cyril Wellbeloved cordially.

The conference had gone with such a swing up to this point, overlord and vassal being so patently two minds with but a single thought, that it was a pity that Sir Gregory should now have struck a jarring note. A sudden idea had occurred to him, and he gave it utterance with all the relish of a man whose betrothed has put him on a strict teetotal regimen. Misery loves company. "And another thing," he said, "From this moment you abstain from all alcoholic beverages."

"Sir!"

"You heard. No more fuddling yourself in tap-rooms. I want you keen, alert, up on your toes."

George Cyril Wellbeloved swallowed painfully. "When you say alcoholic beverages, sir, you don't mean beer?"

"I do mean beer."

"No beer?"

"Not a drop."

George Cyril Wellbeloved opened his mouth, and for a moment it seemed as if burning words were about to proceed from it. Then, as though struck by a thought, he checked himself. "Very good, sir," he said meekly.

Sir Gregory gave him a keen glance. "Yes, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you'll

be able to sneak off on the sly and lower yourself to the level of the beasts of the field without my knowing it. Well, you won't. I shall give strict orders to the landlords of the various public houses in Market Blandings that you are not to be served, and as I am on the licensing board, I think these orders will be respected. All right, that's all. Push off."

DROOPINGLY, George Cyril Wellbeloved, having given his employer one long, sad, reproachful look, left the room, taking some, but not all, of the pig smell with him. A few moments after the door had closed behind him, Lady Constance's telephone call came through.

"Sir Gregory?"

"Yes."

"Are you there?"

"Yes."

"What I rang up about was this trouble of yours. Gloria, you know. The dieting, you know. The exercises, you know."

Sir Gregory said he knew.

"All that sort of thing cannot be good for you at your age."

Sir Gregory, who was touchy on the subject, would have liked to ask what she meant by the expression "your age," but he was given no opportunity to do so. Like most female telephonists, Lady Constance was not easy to interrupt.

"I couldn't bear to think of you having to go through all that dieting and exercising, because I do think it is so dangerous for a man of your age. A man of your age needs plenty of nourishing food, and there is always the risk of straining yourself seriously. A distant connection of ours, one of the Hampshire Wilberforces, started touching his toes



The restorative had its effect. Beach was able to speak. "Have another," said Penny

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT FAWCETT

before breakfast, and he had some sort of a fit. Well, just after you left this afternoon, I suddenly remembered seeing an advertisement in the paper the other day of a new preparation for reducing the weight. Slimmo, they call it, and it sounds excellent.

"Apparently it contains no noxious or habit-forming drugs and is endorsed by leading doctors, who are united in describing it as a safe and agreeable medium for getting rid of superfluous flesh. It seems to me that if it is as good as they say, you would be able to do what Gloria wants without all that dieting and exercising which had such a bad effect on that distant connection of ours. Rupert Wilberforce it was—he married one of the Devonshire Fairbairns. He was a man getting on in years—about your age—and when he found he was putting on weight, he allowed himself to be persuaded by a thoughtless friend to touch his toes fifty times before breakfast every morning. And on the third morning he did not come down to breakfast, and they went up to his room, and there he was writhing on the floor in dreadful agonies. His heart had run into his liver. Slimmo. It comes in the small bottles and the large economy size. You can get it at Bulstrode's, the chemist in the High Street. Oh, Clarence! I was speaking to Clarence, Sir Gregory. He has just come in and is bleating about something. What is it, Clarence? He wants to use the telephone, Sir Gregory, so I must ring off. Good-by. You won't forget the name, will you? Slimmo. I suggest the large economy size."

Sir Gregory removed his aching ear from the receiver and hung up.

For some moments after silence had come like a poultice to heal the blows of sound, all that occupied his mind was the thought of what pests the gentler sex were when they got hold of a telephone. Gab, gab, gab, and all about nothing.

THEN, suddenly, he was asking himself whether his late hostess' spate of words had, after all, been so devoid of significance. Like most men trapped on the telephone by a woman, he had allowed his attention to wander during the recent monologue, but his subconscious self had apparently been drinking it in, for now it brought up for his inspection the word Slimmo and then a whole lot of interesting stuff about what Slimmo did. The picture of himself, with a tankard of Slimmo at his elbow, sailing into the starchy foods with impunity intoxicated him.

There was but one obstacle. Briefly, you had first to get the bally stuff, and Sir Gregory, a sensitive man, shrank from going into a shop and asking for it. Then what to do?

"Ha!" said Sir Gregory, suddenly inspired. He pressed the bell, and Binstead, his butler, entered.

We have heard of Binstead before, it will be remembered. He was the effervescent sportsman who electrified the taproom of the Emsworth Arms by bounding in and offering five to one on his employer's pig. It is interesting to meet him now in person.

Scrutinizing him, however, we find ourselves unimpressed. This Binstead was one of those young, sprightly butlers, encountering whom one feels that in the deepest and holiest sense they are not butlers at all, but merely glorified footmen. He had none of Beach's measured majesty, but was slim and perky. And when we say that he was often to be found of an evening playing ha'penny nap with George Cyril Wellbeloved and similar social outcasts and allowing them to address him as "Herb," we think we have said everything.

"Sir?" said this inadequate juvenile.

Sir Gregory coughed. Even now it was not going to be easy. "Uh, Binstead," he said. "Have you ever heard of Slimmo?"

"No, sir."

"It's some sort of stuff you take. Kind of medicine, if you see what I mean, endorsed by leading doctors. A distant connection of mine—one of the Hampshire Wilberforces—has asked me to get him some of it. I want you to telephone to Bulstrode in the High Street and tell him to send up half a dozen bottles."

"Very good, sir."

"Tell him the large economy size," said Sir Gregory.

THERE had been a grave, set look on the face of the Honorable Galahad Threepwood as he stumped away from the tea table on the terrace, and it was still there when, after considerable moody meditation in the grounds, he turned into the corridor that led to Beach's pantry. In the battle of wills which had just terminated he had not come off any too well, and an immediate exchange of views with Shropshire's shrewdest butler seemed to him essential.

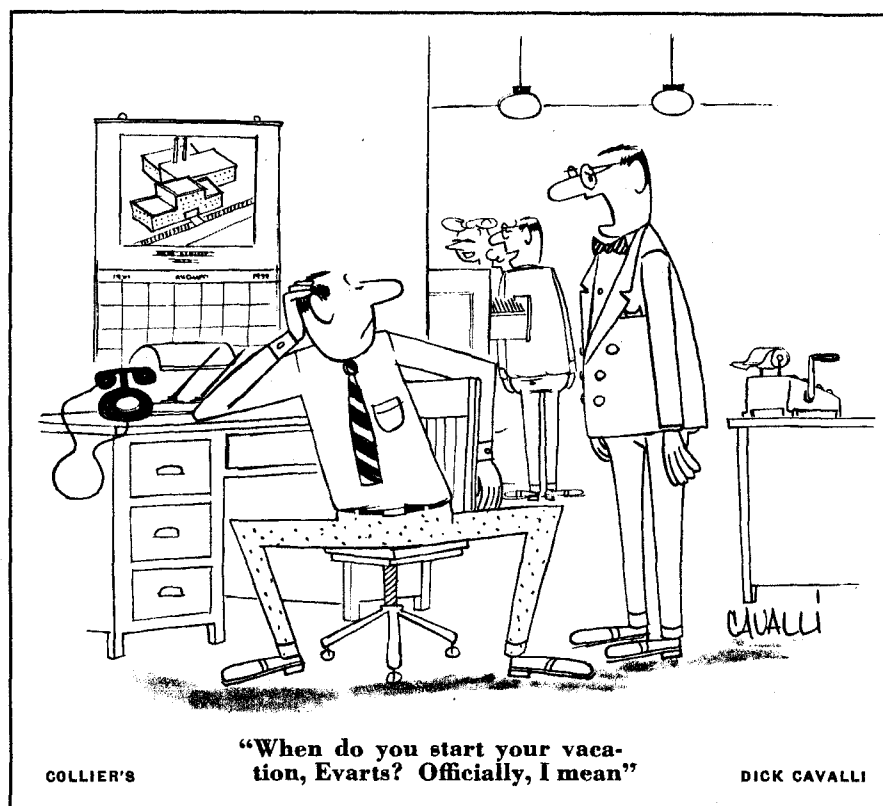
Entering the pantry, he found only Penny there. She had come, as she so often did, to sit at the feet of one whose society had been a constant inspiration

If there was one thing Gally prided himself on—and justly—it was his ability to tell a story. Step by step he unfolded his tale, and it was not long before Penny had as complete a grasp of the position of affairs as any raconteur could have wished. When, after stressing the blackness of Sir Gregory Parsloe's soul in a striking passage, he introduced the Queen of Matchingham motif into his narrative and spoke of the guerrilla warfare which must now inevitably ensue, she expressed her concern freely: "This Parsloe sounds like a hot number."

"As hot as mustard. Remind me to tell you sometime how he nobbled my dog Towser on the night of the rat contest. But you have not heard the worst. We come to the Simmons menace."

"What's that?"

"In your ramblings about the grounds and messages, do you happen to have seen a large young female in trousers who looks like an all-in wrestler? That is Monica Simmons, Clarence's pig-girl. When this Queen of Matchingham thing came up, Clarence and I agreed that it would be insanity to leave the Empress' fortunes in the hands of a girl like that."



to her. Right from the start of her visit to this stately home of England, the younger daughter of Mr. Donaldson of Donaldson's Dog Joy had recognized in Beach a soul mate and a buddy.

"Oh, hello, Gally," she said. "Looking for Beach? He's gone into Market Blandings."

"Dash the man. What did he want to go gadding off to Market Blandings for? He should never have left his post."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"This pig situation."

"What pig situation would that be?"

Gally passed a careworn hand over his brow. "I'd forgotten you weren't there when Clarence broke the big story. You had left to go and telegraph to that young man of yours—Dale, Hale, Gale, whatever his name is."

"Vail. One of the Loamshire Vails. You must learn to call him Jerry. So what happened after I left?"

"Clarence appeared, buffeted by the waves and leaking at every seam like the Wreck of the Hesperus. He had an amazing story to relate. He had just been talking to that hellhound, Sir Gregory Parsloe."

"Oh, yes, the character who keeps taking off his shoes. Who is he?"

"Good God! Don't you know that?"

"I'm a stranger in these parts."

"I'd better begin at the beginning."

As Clarence hadn't the nerve to tackle Connie about it, I said I would. I've just been tackling her."

"With what result?"

"None. She dug her feet in and put her ears back and generally carried on like a grade-A deaf adder. And do you know why? Clarence had told me that Connie's interest in this Simmons was due to the fact that the Simmons was tied up in some way with someone Connie wanted to oblige. Who do you suppose that someone is?"

"Not Parsloe?"

"None other. Parsloe himself. The girl is his cousin."

"Gosh!"

"You may well say 'Gosh!' The peril would be ghastly enough if we were merely up against a Parsloe weaving his subtle schemes in his lair at Matchingham Hall. But Parsloe with a cousin in our very citadel, a cousin enjoying free access to the Empress, a cousin whose job it is to provide the Empress with her daily bread—Well, dash it, if you see what I mean."

"I certainly do see. Dash it is right."

"What simpler than for Parsloe to issue his orders to this minion and for the minion to carry them out? It's an appalling state of things."

"Precipitates a grave crisis. What are you going to do?"

"That's what I came to see Beach about. Ah, here he comes."

Outside, there had become audible the booming sound of a bulky butler making good time along a stone-flagged corridor. But a glance at Beach, as he entered, was enough to tell them that his haste had not been due to high spirits. His face was twisted with mental agony; his gooseberry eyes bulged from their sockets. Penny squeaked in amazement. She had never before seen a butler with the heebie-jeebies.

"Beach!" she cried, deeply stirred. "What is it?"

"Good Lord, Beach," said Gally. "Then you've heard, too?"

"Sir?"

"About the Simmons girl being Parsloe's cousin."

Beach's jaw fell another notch. "Sir Gregory's cousin? I had no inkling, Mr. Galahad."

"Then what are you sticking straws in your hair for?"

Beach tottered to a cupboard. "Mr. Galahad," he said, "I can hardly tell you. I think, Mr. Galahad, if you will excuse me, I must take a drop of port."

"Double that order," said Gally.

"Triple it," said Penny. "And fill mine to the brim."

Beach filled them all to the brim, and further evidence of his agitation, if such were needed, was afforded by the fact that he drained his glass at a gulp.

The restorative had its effect. He was able to speak. "Sir—and madam—"

"Have another," said Penny.

"Thank you, miss. I believe I will. I think you should, too, Mr. Galahad, for what I am about to say will come as a great shock."

"Get on, Beach. Don't take all night about it."

"I know a man named Jerry Vail, a young author of sensational fiction," said Penny chattily, "who starts his stories just like this. You never know till page twenty-three what it's all about. Suspense, he calls it."

"Cough it up, Beach, this instant. I don't want to be compelled to plug you in the eye."

WITH a powerful effort, the butler forced himself to begin his tale. "Very good, Mr. Galahad. I have just returned from Market Blandings, Mr. Galahad. I went there for the purpose of making a certain purchase. I don't know if you have happened to notice it, sir, but recently I have been putting on a little weight, due no doubt to the sedentary nature of a butler's—"

"Beach!"

"Let him work up to it," said Penny. "The Vail method. Building for the climax. Go on, Beach. You're doing fine."

"Thank you, miss. Well, I chanced to see in the paper an advertisement of a new preparation called Slimmo, guaranteed to reduce superfluous flesh, which was stated to contain no noxious or habit-forming drugs and to be endorsed by leading doctors. So I thought I would look in at Bulstrode's in the High Street and buy a bottle. It was somewhat embarrassing walking into the shop and asking for it, but I nerved myself to the ordeal, and Bulstrode's young assistant wrapped the bottle up in paper and fastened the loose ends with pink sealing wax."

"Beach, you have been warned!"

"Do be quiet, Gally. And then what, Beach?"

Beach closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were praying for strength. "I had scarcely paid for my purchase and received my change when the telephone bell rang. Bulstrode's young assistant answered it."

"And a dead body fell out?"

"Miss?"

"Sorry. My mind was on Mr. Vail's stories. Carry on. What happened?"

"He spoke a few words into the in-

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strument. 'Okey-doke,' I remember, was one of them, and 'Righty-ho,' from which I gathered that he was speaking to a customer of the lower middle class, what is sometimes called the burjoisy. Then he turned to me with a smile and observed, 'Well, that is what I call a proper coincidence, Mr. Beach. That was Herb Binstead. And know what he wants? Six bottles of Slimmo, the large economy size.'

Gally started as if he had been bitten in the leg by baronets. "What!"

PENNY looked from one to the other, perplexed. "Why shouldn't he buy Slimmo? Maybe he's a leading doctor."

Gally spoke in a voice of doom. "Binstead is Gregory Parsloe's butler. And if you have the idea that he may have been buying this antifat for his own personal use, correct that view. He's as thin as a herring. His motive is obvious. One reads the man like a book. Acting on instructions from Parsloe, he plans to pass this Slimmo on to the accomplice Simmons, who will slip it privily into the Empress' daily ration, thus causing her to lose weight, thus handing the race on a plate to Queen of Matchingham. Am I right, Beach?"

"I fear so, Mr. Galahad. It was the first thought that entered my mind."

"No other explanation will fit the facts. I told you Parsloe was mustard, Penny."

Silence fell, one of those deep, uneasy silences which occur when all good men realize that now is the time for them to come to the aid of the party yet are unable to figure out just how to set about doing so.

But it was not in the nature of the Honorable Galahad to be baffled for long. A brain like his, honed to razorlike sharpness by years of association with the members of the Pelican Club, is never at a loss for more than a moment. "Well, there you are," he said. "The first shot of the campaign has been fired, and soon the battle will be joined. We must consider our plan of action."

"Which is what?" said Penny. "I take it the idea is to keep an eye on this Simmons, but how is it to be done? You can't watch her all the time."

"Exactly. So we must engage the serv-

ices of someone who can, someone trained to the task of keeping an eye on the criminal classes, and most fortunately we are able to lay our hand on just such a person—the guiding spirit of Digby's Day-and-Night Detectives."

Beach gave a start which set both his chins quivering. "Maudie, Mr. Galahad? My niece, Mr. Galahad?"

"None other. Is she Mrs. Digby?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Stubbs. Digby is a trade name. But—"

"But what?"

"I am in perfect agreement with what you say with regard to the necessity of employing a trained observer to scrutinize Miss Simmons' movements, Mr. Galahad, but you are surely not thinking of bringing my niece Maudie here? Her appearance—"

"I remember her as looking rather like Mae West."

"Precisely, sir. It would never do."

"I don't follow you, Beach."

"I was thinking of Lady Constance, sir. I have known her ladyship to be somewhat difficult at times where guests were concerned. I gravely doubt whether her reactions would be wholly favorable, were you to introduce into the castle a private investigator who is the niece of her butler and looks like Miss Mae West."

"I am not proposing to do so. The visitor who arrives at Blandings Castle will be a Mrs. Bunbury, a lifelong friend of your father's, Penny. You remember that charming Mrs. Bunbury?"

Penny drew a deep breath. "You're a quick thinker, Gally."

"You have to think quick with a man like Gregory Parsloe. By the way, Beach, not a word of all this to Lord Emsworth. We don't want him worrying himself into a decline, nor do we want him giving the whole thing away in the first ten minutes, as he undoubtedly would if he knew about it. An excellent fellow, Clarence, but a rotten conspirator. You follow me, Beach?"

"Oh, yes indeed, Mr. Galahad."

"Penny?"

"He shall never learn from me."

"Good girl. Too much is at stake for us to take any chances. The hopes and dreams of my brother Clarence depend on Maudie, and so, Beach, does the little

bit of stuff which you and I have wagered on the Empress. Get Maudie on the telephone at once and instruct her to pack her toothbrush and magnifying glass and be with us at her earliest convenience."

"Very good, Mr. Galahad."

"Make her see how urgent the matter is. Play up the attractive aspects of Blandings Castle, and tell her that she will find there not only a loved uncle but one of her warmest admirers of the old Criterion days. I will now go and inform my sister Constance that at the urgent request of Miss Penelope Donaldson I am inviting the latter's father's close crony, Mrs. Bunbury, to put in a week or two with us."

Gally trotted out, to return a few minutes later, beaming satisfaction through his monocle. "All set. She right-hoed like a lamb. She seems to have an overwhelming respect for your father, Penny, no doubt because of his disgusting wealth. And now," said Gally, "now that what you might call the preliminary spadework is completed and we are able to relax for a bit, I think a drop more port might be in order. Start pouring, Beach, and as you pour, keep saying to yourself that tempests may lower and storm clouds brood, but if your affairs are in the hands of Galahad Threepwood, you're all right."

IT HAS long been observed in authoritative quarters that sudden joy affects different people in different ways. Some laugh and sing. Some leap. Others go about being kind to dogs. When Jerry Vail, in his modest flat in Battersea Park Road, London, SW, received the heart-warming news that Penny Donaldson would be with him on the morrow, he sat down and started writing a story, designed for one of the American magazines if one of the American magazines would meet him halfway. It was about a New York private detective who was full of Scotch whisky and sex appeal and got mixed up with a lot of characters with names like Otto the Ox and Bertha the Body.

He was just finishing it on the following afternoon—for stories about New York private detectives, involving as they do almost no conscious cerebration, take very little time to write—when the telephone bell stopped him in the middle of a sentence.

"Hullo?" Jerry, hoping it would be Penny, put a wealth of pent-up feeling into the word.

"Hullo, Jerry. This is Gloria."

"Eh?"

"Gloria Salt, ass," said the voice at the other end of the wire, with a touch of petulance.

There had been a time when Jerry Vail's heart would have leaped at the sound of that name. Between Gloria Salt and himself there had been some tender passages in the days gone by, passages which might have been tenderer still if the lady had not had one of those level business heads which restrain girls from becoming too involved with young men who, however attractive, are short of cash.

But though, like the Fairy Queen in Iolanthe, on fire that glows with heat intense she had turned the hose of common sense, and though on Jerry's side that fire had long since become a mere heap of embers, their relations had remained cordial. From time to time they would play a round of golf together, and from time to time they would lunch together. One of those nice, unsentimental friendships it had come to be, and it was with hearty good will that he now spoke.

"Why, hullo, Gloria. I haven't heard from you for ages. What have you been doing with yourself?"

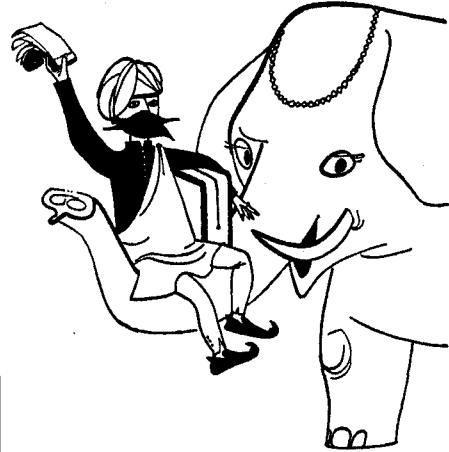
"Just messing around. Playing a bit of tennis. Playing a bit of golf. Ridin' a bit, swimmin' a bit. And I've got engaged."

Jerry was delighted at the news. "That's the stuff. I like to see you young

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folks settling down. Who's the other half of the sketch? Orlo the Ox, I presume?"

"Who?"

"I'm sorry. I was thinking of something else. My lord Vosper, I mean."

There was a silence. Then Gloria Salt spoke in an odd, metallic voice. "No, not my lord Vosper, thank you very much. I wouldn't marry Orlo by golly Vosper to please a dying grandmother. Not in a million years, laddie, not to win a substantial wager. Let me inform you that I would rather be dead in a ditch. Orlo Vosper, egad! I should jolly well say not."

Jerry was concerned. Here was tragedy. Mystery, too. Like most of her circle, he had always supposed that it was only a matter of time before these twain sent out the wedding announcements. Affinities, they had seemed to be, always being "seen" together at Cannes or "glimpsed" together at Ascot or "noticed" together playing in the mixed doubles in some seaside tennis tournament. To hear Gloria Salt talking in this acid strain about Orlo, Lord Vosper, was as surprising as if one had heard Rodgers saying nasty things about Hammerstein.

"But, good Lord, I always thought—"

"I dare say you did. Nevertheless, I have returned Orlo Vosper to store and shall shortly—wind and weather permitting—become the bride of Sir Gregory Parsloe, Bart., of Matchingham Hall, Much Matchingham, in the county of Shropshire."

"But what happened?"

"It's too long to go into over the phone. I'll tell you when we meet, which will be tonight. I want you to give me dinner at Mario's."

"Tonight, did you say?"

"Tonight. Are you getting deaf in your old age?"

JERRY was not deaf, but he was deeply agitated. This night of nights was earmarked for his dinner with Penny. He had been counting the minutes to that sacred reunion. If you have been torn from the only girl that matters and have got an utterly unforeseen chance of having a bite to eat with her at the Savoy, of gazing into her eyes at the Savoy and holding her little hand at the Savoy, it is a pretty state of things when other girls, however old friends they may be, come muscling in, wanting to divert you to Mario's.

"But listen, old thing, I can't possibly manage tonight. Won't tomorrow do?"

"No, it won't. I'm leaving for the country tomorrow. I don't want to see you just for the pleasure of your society, stupendous though that is. I want to do you a good turn. Do you remember telling me once that you were trying to raise two thousand pounds to buy in on some private loony bin?"

The actual project for which Jerry required the sum mentioned was not, as we have seen, the securing of a share in the management of a home for the mentally unbalanced, but this was no moment for going into explanations. He gasped, and the room flickered before his eyes.

"You don't mean—?"

"Yes, I think I can put you in the way of getting it."

"Good Lord! Gloria, you're a marvel. Let's have full details."

"Tonight. It's much too long to tell you now. Eight sharp at Mario's. And I'm going to dress. Because if you aren't dressed at Mario's they shove you up in the balcony, a thing my proud spirit would never endure. Have you a dickey and celluloid cuffs?"

"But, Gloria, half a second—"

"That's all there is, there isn't any more. Good-by. I must rush. Got to see a man about a tennis racket."

For some time after the line had gone dead, Gerald Anstruther Vail sat wrestling with himself, torn this way and that,

a living ganglion of conflicting emotions.

The thought of canceling his dinner with Penny was about as unpleasing a thought as had ever entered his mind. It is not too much to say that it gashed the very fibers of his being.

On the other hand, if Gloria had meant what she said, if by conferring with her at Mario's there was really a chance of getting his hooks on that two thousand, would it not be madness to pass it up?

Aeons later, he decided that it would. The money was his passport to Paradise, and he knew Gloria Salt well enough to be aware that, though a girl of kind impulses, she was touchy. Spurn her, and she stayed spurned. To refuse to meet her at Mario's would mean pique, resentment and dudgeon. She would drop the subject of this two thousand pounds entirely and decline to open it again.

Heavily, for the load on his heart weighed him down, he began to turn the pages of the telephone book. *Chez Lady Garland*, whoever she might be, Penny had said she would be during her brief stay in the great city, and there was a Garland, Lady with a Grosvenor Square address among the Gs. He dialed the number and hooked what sounded like a butler.

"Could I speak to Miss Donaldson?"

He could not. Penny, it appeared, was out having a fit. A what? Oh, a fitting? Yes, I see. Any idea when she will be back? No, sir, I am unable to say.

Would you care to leave a message, sir?

"Yes. Will you tell Miss Donaldson that Mr. Gerald Vail is terribly sorry but he will be unable to give her dinner tonight owing to a very important business matter that has come up."

"Business matter, sir? Very good, sir."

And that was that. But oh, the agony of it. After replacing the receiver, Jerry slumped into a chair with a distinct illusion that mocking fiends were detaching large portions of his soul with red-hot pincers. . . .

At Wiltshire House, Grosvenor Square, residence of Dora, relict of the late Sir Everard Garland, K.C.B., Lady Constance Keeble was not feeling any too good herself.

Jerry had made his call at the moment when Riggs, the butler, was bringing tea for herself and Lord Vosper, who had looked in hoping for buttered toast and a chat with Penny.

"Who was that, Riggs?" Lady Constance asked.

"A Mr. Gerald Vail, m'lady, regretting his inability to entertain Miss Donaldson at dinner tonight."

"I see. Thank you, Riggs."

"Sinister" was the word that flashed through Lady Constance's mind. She picked up the cake with jam in the middle which had fallen from her nerveless fingers and ate it in a sort of trance. The discovery that, on the pretext of dining

with her father's old friend Mrs. Bunbury, Penelope Donaldson had been planning to sneak off and revel with a young man who, from the fact that she had never mentioned his name, must be somebody quite impossible, froze her blood. It revealed the child as what her brother Galahad would have called a hornswoggling highbinder, and anyone who has had anything to do with highbinders knows that that is the very worst sort.

It was with relief that she remembered that by tomorrow evening Penelope Donaldson would be safely back at Blandings Castle, well away from the Vail sphere of influence.

WHEN girls like Gloria Salt, planning dinner with an old friend, say they are going to dress, they use the word in its deepest and fullest sense. Jerry, waiting in the lobby of Mario's restaurant some three hours later, was momentarily stunned by what came floating in through the revolving door twenty minutes or so after the time appointed for the tryst.

Gloria Salt was tall and slim and the last word in languorous elegance. Though capable of pasting a golf ball two hundred yards and creating, when serving at tennis, the illusion that it was raining thunderbolts, her dark beauty made her look like a serpent of the old Nile. A nervous host might have been excused for wondering whether to offer her a dry Martini or an asp.

He would have been wrong in either case. She would have declined the asp, and she now declined Jerry's suggestion of a cocktail.

"Never touch 'em. Can't keep fit if you put that foul stuff into you. That's what I told my future lord and master," said Gloria, as they seated themselves at their table. "Lay off those pink gins, Greg," I said. 'Cut out the starchy foods and take regular daily exercises, because a girl who marries a man who looks like you do is going to have an uneasy feeling that she's committing bigamy.'"

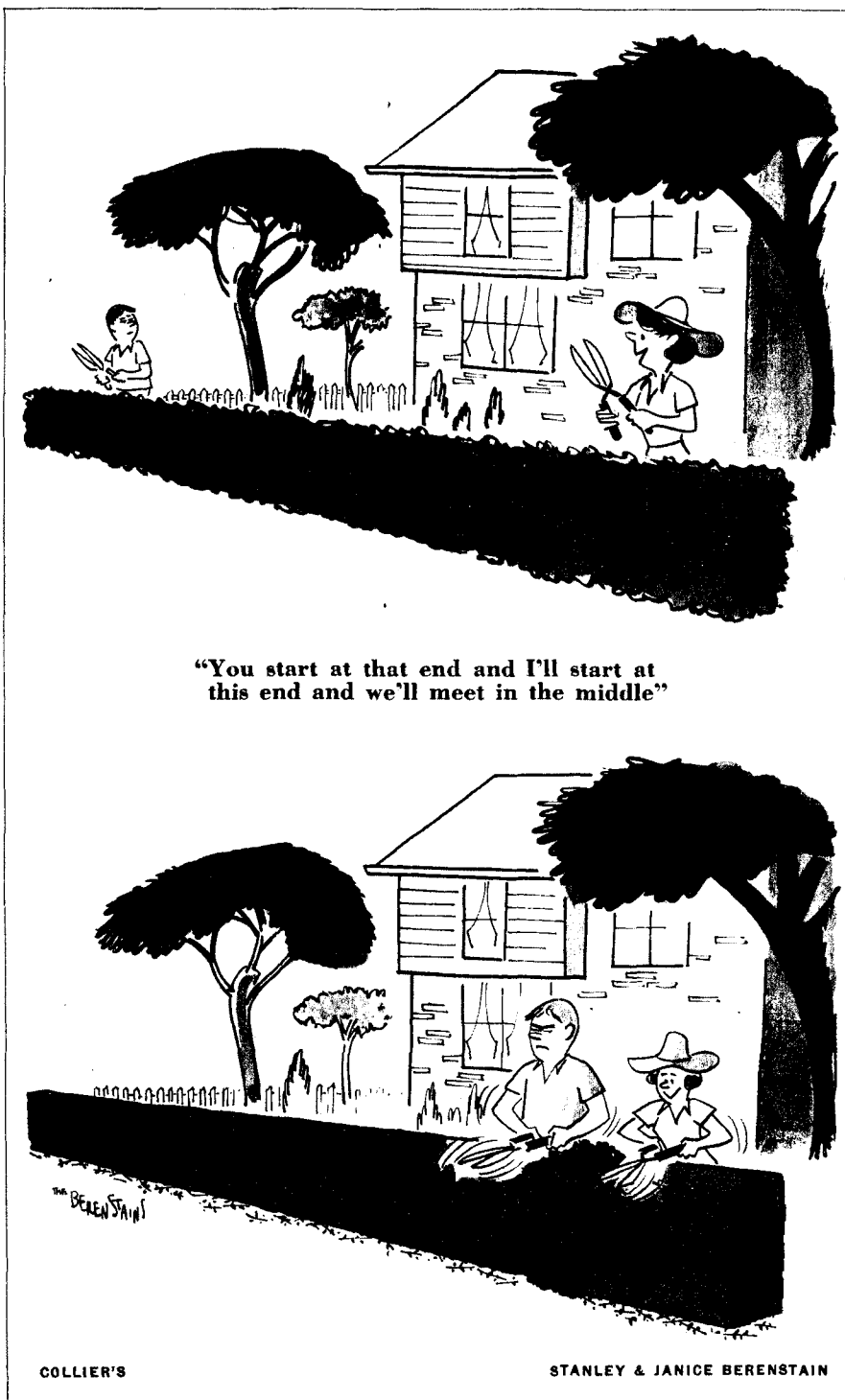
Jerry was not unnaturally anxious to condense preliminaries to a minimum and come to the real business of the evening, but a host must be civil. He cannot plunge into business over the smoked salmon. He was, moreover, extremely curious to learn the inside story of the rift within the lute at which his guest had hinted—if hinted is the word—when speaking earlier in the day of Orlo, Lord Vosper. Jerry, who had known that handsomest ornament of the peerage from boyhood days and was very fond of him, had been saddened by her tale of sundered hearts. "A bit of a change from old Vosper," he ventured.

"That overbearing louse," observed Miss Salt with bitterness.

"Would you call him an overbearing louse?"

"I did. To his face. On the tennis court at Eastbourne. We were playing in the mixed doubles, and I admit that I may have been slightly off my game. But that was no reason why, after we had dropped the first set, he should have started barging into my half of the court, taking my shots for me as if I were some elderly aunt who had learned tennis in the previous week at a correspondence school. 'Mine!' he kept yelling. 'Mine, mine!' And where was Gloria? Crouching in a corner, looking at him with wide, admiring eyes and saying, 'My hero!' No, sir. I told him that if he didn't stop his damned poaching, I would brain him, if he had a brain. That held him for a while. But every time I missed a shot—and a girl with an emotional nature couldn't be expected not to miss a few after an ordeal like that—he raised his eyebrows in a superior kind of way and kept saying, 'Too bad, too bad.' And when it was over, and we had lost—2-6, 3-6—he said what a pity it all was

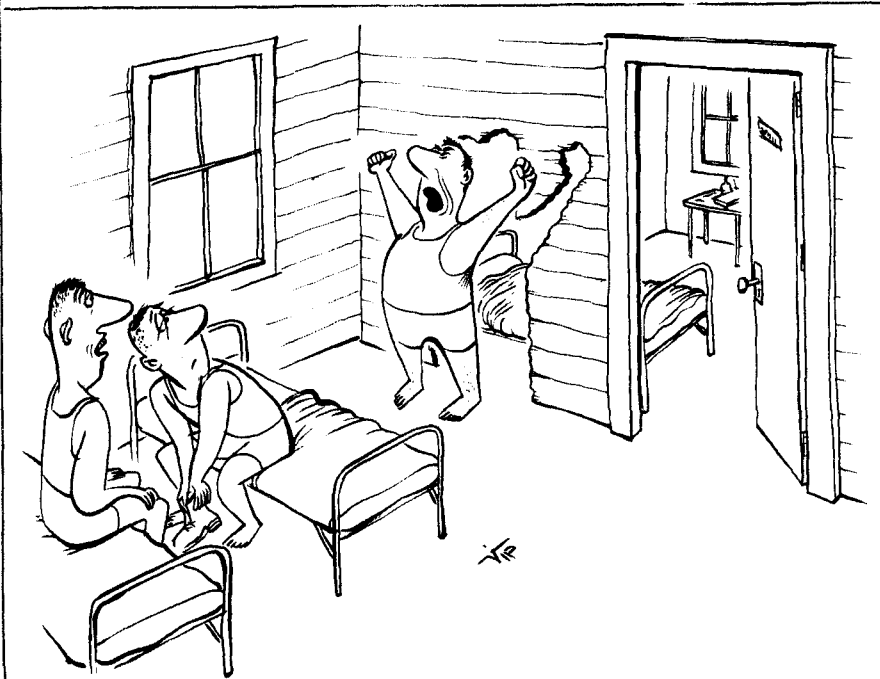
Collier's for August 23, 1952



COLLIER'S

STANLEY & JANICE BERENSTAIN

VIP'S WAR



"The Sergeant sure got out on the wrong side of the bed this morning"

COLLIER'S

VIRGIL PARTCH

and if only I had left it to him . . . Well, that was when we parted brass rags. Shortly afterward, I got engaged to Greg Parsloe."

Jerry was distressed. Nobody likes to hear of these rifts between old friends. "Has Vosper heard about it?"

"I suppose so. It was in the Times."

"It must have given him a jolt."

"One hopes so."

"Where is he now?"

"Goodness knows. And for Heaven's sake let's stop talking about him. I should have thought you would have shown some interest in what I said to you over the phone this afternoon."

JERRY VAIL was dismayed to think that she should have got so wrong an impression from his gentlemanly reserve.

"Good Lord, of course I'm interested. But I didn't want you to think that was the only reason I wanted to dine with you."

"Did you want to dine with me?"

"Of course I did."

"You didn't sound too pleased."

"Well, you see, actually I had another date for tonight, and I was feeling it might be awkward breaking it."

"A girl?"

It was a loose way of describing the divinity of her species, but Jerry let it pass. "Yes, a girl."

Gloria Salt's eyes grew soft and sympathetic. She leaned across the table and patted his cheek. "I'm terribly sorry, Jerry. I didn't know. Is this love? Yes, I can see it is from the way your eyes are goggling. Well, well. When are you going to get married?"

"Never, unless I can raise that two thousand pounds."

"I see. Well, as I say, I'm sorry I had to come butting in, but this was my last chance of getting hold of you. I'm motoring down to Shropshire tomorrow, to stay at a place called Blandings Castle."

Jerry started. "Blandings Castle?"

"You know it?"

Jerry hesitated. Should he tell her all about Penny? On the whole, he thought, no. The fewer people who knew, the better.

"I've heard of it," he said. "Nice place, I believe."

"So they all tell me. It's only a mile or two from where Gregory hangs out; so we'll be able to see something of each other. I imagine that's why Lady Con-

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stance invited me. Well, keep the words 'Blandings Castle' steadily in your mind, because they are the heart of the matter."

A waiter brought roast beef, underdone, and she took a thin slice. Jerry took two slices, with potatoes, and Gloria in her austere way advised him to be very careful how he tucked into those things, because she was convinced that it was a lifelong passion for potatoes that had made Sir Gregory Parsloe the man he was—or, rather the two men he was.

"Where were we?" she asked, as the waiter withdrew.

"You were about to approach the heart of the matter."

"So I was. Well, here it comes. I don't know about the flora of Blandings Castle," she said, "though no doubt they are varied and beautiful, but its fauna consist of—amongst others—Clarence, ninth Earl of Emsworth, and his sister, Lady Constance. What the relations are between the noble lord and my betrothed I cannot say; but Lady Constance and he appear to be on matey terms, so much so that when, the other day, she wanted to get a new secretary for Lord Emsworth, she asked if he could do anything to help. 'Charmed, dear lady,' said Greg, and got me on the phone and told me to attend to it, if it was not giving me too much trouble. 'No trouble at all, my love,' I said. 'As a matter of fact, I know a man.' You're the man."

Jerry gasped. "You don't mean—?"

"The job's yours, if you care to take it, and I strongly advise you to take it, because there is more in this than meets the eye and the plot is shortly about to thicken. But I suppose you're going to come all-over haughty and say that the Vails don't take jobs as secretaries."

Jerry laughed. The thought of being too proud to allow himself to be employed in a house which contained Penny, a house probably stiff with rose gardens and other secluded nooks where he and Penny could meet and talk of this and that, was an amusing one. Had it been required of him, he would have accepted office as the boy who cleaned the knives and boots.

"I'll be there with bells on and with my hair in a braid. You couldn't have suggested anything that would have suited me better."

"That's all right, then. And now for the thickening of the plot. About a year ago I ran into a lad I used to go dancing with, named Hugo Carmody. He was

Lord Emsworth's secretary at one time, and he had me in stitches with his diverting stories about the old boy. It seems that he is practically dotty on the subject of pigs. He has a prize pig called Empress of Blandings, to which he is devoted. Hugo's tenure of his job was very rocky off and on, but he told me he could always stabilize it by talking pig to Lord Emsworth. There were times, he said, when he was at the top of his form as a pig talker, when he got the impression that Lord Emsworth would have given him all he had, even unto half his kingdom. And when Greg told me about this secretary thing and I thought of you, it was because it suddenly struck me that it was quite possible that if you went to Blandings and showed yourself sufficiently pig-conscious, old Emsworth might be induced to advance you that two thousand. Mind you, I'm not saying that you could walk into Blandings Castle tomorrow and expect to get a check for two thousand before bedtime; but after the lapse of some weeks, after you had softened him up with your encyclopedic knowledge of pigs, I don't see why you shouldn't have a sporting chance for a loan. Think it over."

Jerry was doing so, and now he came up with an objection. "But I haven't an encyclopedic knowledge of pigs."

"There are a million books you can get it from. Good heavens! Go to the British Museum and ask for everything they have on the subject. You don't suppose Hugo Carmody knew anything about pigs, do you? Whenever the sack seemed to him to be looming, he used to sneak down at night to Lord Emsworth's library and bone up on the subject till breakfasttime. By then, he tells me, though he was a little apt to fall asleep where he sat, he did know about pigs. What Hugo could do, you can do. Or are you a spineless worm incapable of honest effort?"

So might the Cleopatra she so closely resembled have addressed one of her soldiers who seemed in need of a pep talk before the Battle of Actium. And just as this soldier would have sprung to his feet with flashing eyes, so did Jerry Vail leap with flashing eyes from his chair.

"Want to dance?" said Gloria.

Jerry quivered. "What I really want is to fold you in my arms and cover your upturned face with burning kisses."

"You can't do that here. And you seem to be forgetting that we're both engaged to somebody else."

"You don't get the idea. These would be kisses of gratitude, the sort of kisses a brother would bestow on a sister who deserved well of him. I simply don't know what to say, Gloria, old thing. Well, I suppose all I can say is 'Thank you.'"

She patted his cheek. "Don't mention it," she said. "Come on, let's dance."

IN HER bedroom in her neat little house in the suburb of Valley Fields, Maudie Stubbs, nee Beach, was enjoying a last cigarette before turning in for the night.

All her arrangements for tomorrow's exodus were completed—her packing done, her hair waved, her cat Freddie lodged with a friend down the road—and now she was musing dreamily on something her Uncle Sebastian had said over the telephone yesterday.

The story he had told had of necessity been brief and sketchy, and she had still to learn in detail exactly what was expected of her on arrival at this Blandings Castle of which she had heard so much. But in the course of his remarks, Uncle Sebastian had mentioned as the menace of the well-being of himself and associates a Sir Gregory Parsloe.

She wondered if this could possibly be the Tubby Parsloe she had known so well in the days when she was Maudie Montrose.

(To be continued next week)

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A Fathom of Pearls

By F. H. YOUNG and JAMES ATLEE PHILLIPS

Cobber was the best deep-water man from Hong Kong to Sydney. He had dived all the pearling waters of the Pacific. He might not have handled many murderers, but he could if he had to

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