

THE GUARDIAN

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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Etext by Dagny
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In his Sunday suit (with ten shillings in specie in the right-hand trouser pocket) and a brand-new bowler hat, the youngest of the Shearnes, Thomas Beauchamp Algernon, was being launched by the combined strength of the family on his public-school career. It was a solemn moment. The landscape was dotted with relatives here a small sister, awed by the occasion into refraining from insult; there an aunt, vaguely admonitory. "Well, Tom," said Mr Shearne, "you'll soon be off now. You're sure to like Eckleton. Remember to cultivate your bowling. Everyone can bat nowadays. And play forward, not outside. The outsides get most of the fun, certainly, but then if you're a forward, you've got eight chances of getting into a team."

"All right, father."

"Oh, and work hard." This by way of an afterthought.

"All right, father."

"And, Tom," said Mrs Shearne, "you are sure to be comfortable at school, because I asked Mrs Davy to write to her sister, Mrs Spencer, who has a son at Eckleton, and tell her to tell him to look after you when you get there. He is in Mr Dencroft's house, which is next door to Mr Blackburn's, so you will be quite close to one another. Mind you write directly you get there."

"All right, mother."

"And look here, Tom." His eldest brother stepped to the front and spoke earnestly. "Look here, don't you forget what I've been telling you?"

"All right."

"You'll be right enough if you don't go sticking on side. Don't forget that, however much of a blood you may have been at that rotten little private school of yours, you're not one at Eckleton."

"All right."

"You look clean, which is a great thing. There's nothing much wrong with you except cheek. You've got enough of that to float a ship. Keep it under."

"All right. Keep your hair on."

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"There you go," said the expert, with gloomy triumph. "If you say that sort of thing at Eckleton, you'll get jolly well sat on, by Jove!"

"Bai Jove, old chap!" murmured the younger brother, "we're devils in the Forty-twoth!"

The other, whose chief sorrow in life was that he could not get the smaller members of the family to look with proper awe on the fact that he had just passed into Sandhurst, gazed wistfully at the speaker, but realising that there was a locked door between them, tried no active measures.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "you'll soon get it knocked out of you, that's one comfort. Look here, if you do get scrapping with anybody, don't forget all I've taught you. And I should go on boxing there if I were you, so as to go down to Aldershot some day. You ought to make a fairly decent featherweight if you practise."

"All right."

"Let us know when Eckleton's playing Haileybury, and I'll come and look you up. I want to see that match."

"All right."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Tom."

"Goodbye, Tom, dear."

Chorus of aunts and other supers: "Goodbye, Tom."

Tom (comprehensively): "G'bye."

The train left the station.

* * * * *

Kennedy, the head of Dencroft's, said that when he wanted his study turned into a beastly furnace, he would take care to let Spencer know. He pointed out that just because it was his habit to warm the study during the winter months, there was no reason why Spencer should light the gas-stove on an afternoon in the summer term when the thermometer was in the eighties. Spencer thought he might want some muffins cooked for tea, did he? Kennedy earnestly advised Spencer to give up thinking, as Nature had not equipped him for the strain. Thinking necessitated mental effort, and Spencer, in Kennedy's opinion, had no mind, but rubbed along on a cheap substitute of mud and putty.

More chatty remarks were exchanged, and then Spencer tore himself away from the pleasant interview, and went downstairs to the junior study, where he remarked to his friend Phipps that Life was getting a bit thick.

"What's up now?" enquired Phipps.

"Everything. We've just had a week of term, and I've been in extra once already for doing practically nothing, and I've got a hundred lines, and Kennedy's been slanging me for lighting the stove. How was I to know he didn't want it lit? Wish I was fagging for somebody else."

"All the while you're jawing," said Phipps, "there's a letter for you on the mantelpiece, staring at you."

"So there is. Hullo!"

"What's up? Hullo! is that a postal order? How much for?"

"Five bob. I say, who's Shearne?"

"New kid in Blackburn's. Why?"

"Great Scott! I remember now. They told me to look after him. I haven't seen him yet. And listen to this: 'Mrs Shearne has sent me the enclosed to give to you. Her son writes to say that he is very happy and getting on very well, so she is sure you must have been looking after him.' Why, I don't know the kid by sight. I clean forgot all about him."

"Well, you'd better go and see him now, just to say you've done it."

Spencer perpended.

"Beastly nuisance having a new kid hanging on to you. He's probably a frightful rotter."

"Well, anyway, you ought to," said Phipps, who possessed the scenario of a conscience.

"I can't."

"All right, don't then. But you ought to send back that postal order."

"Look here, Phipps," said Spencer plaintively, "you needn't be an *idiot*, you know."

And the trivial matter of Thomas B. A. Shearne was shelved.

* * * * *

Thomas, as he had stated in his letter to his mother, was exceedingly happy at Eckleton, and getting on very nicely indeed. It is true that there had been one or two small unpleasantnesses at first, but those were over now, and he had settled down completely. The little troubles alluded to above had begun on his second day at Blackburn's. Thomas, as the reader may have gathered from his glimpse of him at the station, was not a diffident youth. He was quite prepared for anything Fate might have up its sleeve for him, and he entered the junior day-room at Blackburn's ready for emergencies. On the first day nothing happened. One or two people asked him his name, but none enquired what his father was—a question which, he had understood from books of school life, was invariably put to the new boy. He was thus prevented from replying "coolly, with his eyes fixed on his questioners": "A gentleman. What's yours?" and this of course, had been a disappointment. But he reconciled himself to it, and on the whole enjoyed his first day at Eckleton.

On the second there occurred an Episode.

Thomas had inherited from his mother a pleasant, rather meek cast of countenance. He had pink cheeks and golden hair—almost indecently golden in one who was not a choirboy.

Now, if you are going to look like a Ministering Child or a Little Willie, the Sunbeam of the Home, when you go to a public school, you must take the consequences. As Thomas sat by the window of the junior day-room reading a magazine, and deeply interested in it, there fell upon his face such a rapt, angelic expression that the sight of it, silhouetted against the window, roused Master P. Burge, his fellow-Blackburnite, as it had been a

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trumpet-blast. To seize a Bradley Arnold's Latin Prose Exercises and hurl it across the room was with Master Burge the work of a moment. It struck Thomas on the ear. He jumped, and turned some shades pinker. Then he put down his magazine, picked up the Bradley Arnold, and sat on it. After which he resumed the magazine.

The acute interest of the junior day-room, always fond of a break in the monotony of things, induced Burge to go further into the matter.

"You with the face!" said Burge rudely.

Thomas looked up.

"What the dickens are you doing with my book? Pass it back!"

"Oh, is this yours?" said Thomas. "Here you are."

He walked towards him, carrying the book. At two yards range he fired it in. It hit Burge with some force in the waistcoat, and there was a pause while he collected his wind.

Then the thing may be said to have begun.

Yes, said Burge, interrogated on the point five minutes later; he *had* had enough.

"Good," said Thomas pleasantly. "Want a handkerchief?" That evening he wrote to his mother and, thanking her for kind enquiries, stated that he was not being bullied. He added, also in answer to enquiries, that he had not been tossed in a blanket, and that so far no Hulking Senior (with scowl) had let him down from the dormitory window after midnight by a sheet, in order that he might procure gin from the local public-house. As far as he could gather, the seniors were mostly teetotallers. Yes, he had seen Spencer several times. He did not add that he had seen him from a distance.

* * * * *

"I'm so glad I asked Mrs Davy to get her nephew to look after Tom," said Mrs Shearne, concluding the reading of the epistle at breakfast. "It makes such a difference to a new boy having somebody to protect him at first."

"Only drawback is," said his eldest brother gloomily "won't get cheek knocked out of him. Tom's kid wh'ought get 'sheadsmacked reg'ly. Be no holding him."

And he helped himself to marmalade, of which delicacy his mouth was full, with a sort of magnificent despondency.

By the end of the first fortnight of his school career, Thomas Beauchamp Algernon had overcome all the little ruggednesses which relieve the path of the new boy from monotony. He had been taken in by a primeval "sell" which the junior day-room invariably sprang on the new-comer. But as he had sat on the head of the engineer of the same for the space of ten minutes, despite the latter's complaints of pain and forecasts of what he would do when he got up, the laugh had not been completely against him. He had received the honourable distinction of extra lesson for ragging in French. He had been "touched up" by the prefect of his dormitory for creating a disturbance in the small hours. In fact, he had gone through all the usual preliminaries, and become a full-blown Eckletonian.

His letters home were so cheerful at this point that a second postal order relieved the dwindling fortune of Spencer. And it was this, coupled with the remonstrances of Phipps, that induced the Dencroftian to break through

his icy reserve,

"Look here, Spencer," said Phipps, his conscience thoroughly stirred by this second windfall, "it's all rot. You must either send back that postal order, or go and see the chap. Besides, he's quite a decent kid. We're in the same game at cricket. He's rather a good bowler. I'm getting to know him quite well. I've got a jolly sight more right to those postal orders than you have."

"But he's an awful ass to look at," pleaded Spencer.

"What's wrong with him? Doesn't look nearly such a goat as you," said Phipps, with the refreshing directness of youth.

"He's got yellow hair," argued Spencer.

"Why shouldn't he have?"

"He looks like a sort of young Sunday-school kid."

"Well, he jolly well isn't, then, because I happen to know that he's had scraps with some of the fellows in his house, and simply mopped them."

"Well, all right, then," said Spencer reluctantly.

The historic meeting took place outside the school Shop at the quarter to eleven interval next morning. Thomas was leaning against the wall, eating a bun. Spencer approached him with half a jam sandwich in his hand. There was an awkward pause.

"Hullo!" said Spencer at last.

"Hullo!" said Thomas.

Spencer finished his sandwich and brushed the crumbs off his trousers. Thomas continued operations on the bun with the concentrated expression of a lurching python.

"I believe your people know my people," said Spencer.

"We have some awfully swell friends," said Thomas. Spencer chewed this thoughtfully awhile.

"Beastly cheek," he said at last.

"Sorry," said Thomas, not looking it.

Spencer produced a bag of gelatines.

"Have one?" he asked.

"What's wrong with 'em?"

"All right, don't."

He selected a gelatine and consumed it.

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"Ever had your head smacked?" he enquired courteously.

A slightly strained look came into Thomas's blue eyes.

"Not often," he replied politely. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Spencer. "I was only wondering."

"Oh?"

"Look here," said Spencer, "my mater told me to look after you."

"Well, you can look after me now if you want to, because I'm going."

And Thomas dissolved the meeting by walking off in the direction of [Image] the junior block. e

"That kid," said Spencer to his immortal soul, "wants his head smacked, badly."

At lunch Phipps had questions to ask.

[Image] "Saw you talking to Shearne in the interval," he said. "What were you g9g9g9g Text Size: 9[Image] talking about?"

"Oh, nothing in particular."

"What did you think of him?"

"Little idiot."

"Ask him to tea this afternoon?"

"No."

"You must. Dash it all, you must do something for him. You've had ten bob out of his people."

Spencer made no reply.

Going to the school Shop that afternoon, he found Thomas seated there with Phipps, behind a pot of tea. As a rule, he and Phipps tea'd together, and he resented this desertion.

"Come on," said Phipps. "We were waiting for you."

"Pining away," added Thomas unnecessarily.

Spencer frowned austerely.

"Come and look after me," urged Thomas.

Spencer sat down in silence. For a minute no sound could be heard but the champing of Thomas's jaws as he dealt with a slab of gingerbread.

"Buck up," said Phipps uneasily.

"Give me," said Thomas, "just one loving look."

Spencer ignored the request. The silence became tense once more. "Coming to the house net, Phipps?" asked Spencer.

"We were going to the baths. Why don't you come?"

"All right," said Spencer.

Doctors tell us that we should allow one hour to elapse between taking food and bathing, but the rule was not rigidly adhered to at Eckleton. The three proceeded straight from the tea-table to the baths.

The place was rather empty when they arrived. It was a little earlier than the majority of Eckletonians bathed. The bath filled up as lock-up drew near. With the exception of a couple of infants splashing about in the shallow end, and a stout youth who dived in from the spring-board, scrambled out, and dived in again, each time flatter than the last, they had the place to themselves.

"What's it like, Gorrick?" enquired Phipps of the stout youth, who had just appeared above the surface again, blowing like a whale. The question was rendered necessary by the fact that many years before the boiler at the Eckleton baths had burst, and had never been repaired, with the consequence that the temperature of the water was apt to vary. That is to say, most days it was colder than others.

"Simply boiling," said the man of weight, climbing out. "I say, did I go in all right then?"

"Not bad," said Phipps.

"Bit flat," added Thomas critically.

Gorrick blinked severely at the speaker. A head-waiter at a fashionable restaurant is cordial in his manner compared with a boy who has been at a public school a year, when addressed familiarly by a new boy. After reflecting on the outrage for a moment, he dived in again.

"Worse than ever," said Truthful Thomas.

"Look here!" said Gorrick.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Phipps, and led Thomas away.

"That kid," said Gorrick to Spencer, "wants his head smacked, badly."

"That's just what I say," agreed Spencer, with the eagerness of a great mind which has found another that thinks alike with itself.

Spencer was the first of the trio ready to enter the water. His movements were wary and deliberate. There was nothing of the professional diver about Spencer. First he stood on the edge and rubbed his arms, regarding the green water beneath with suspicion and dislike. Then, crouching down, he inserted three toes of his left foot, drew them back sharply, and said "Oo!" Then he stood up again. His next move was to slap his chest and dance a few steps, after which he put his right foot into the water, again remarked "Oo!" and resumed Position 1.

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"Thought you said it was warm," he shouted to Gorrick.

"So it is; hot as anything. Come on in."

And Spencer came on in. Not because he wanted to for by rights, there were some twelve more movements to be gone through before he should finally creep in at the shallow end but because a cold hand, placed suddenly on the small of his back, urged him forward. Down he went, with the water fizzing and bubbling all over and all round him. He swallowed a good deal of it, but there was still plenty left; and what there was was colder than one would have believed possible.

He came to the surface after what seemed to him a quarter of an hour, and struck out for the side. When he got out, Phipps and Thomas had just got in. Gorrick was standing at the end of the coconut matting which formed a pathway to the spring-board. Gorrick was blue, but determined.

"I say! Did I go in all right then?" enquired Gorrick.

"How the dickens do I know?" said Spencer, stung to fresh wrath by the inanity of the question.

"Spencer did," said Thomas, appearing in the water below them and holding on to the rail.

"Look here!" cried Spencer; "did you shove me in then?"

"Me! Shove!" Thomas's voice expressed horror and pain. "Why, you dived in. Jolly good one, too. Reminded me of the diving elephants at the Hippodrome."

And he swam off.

"That kid," said Gorrick, gazing after him, "wants his head smacked."

"Badly," agreed Spencer "Look here! Did he shove me in? Did you see him?"

"I was doing my dive. But it must have been him. Phipps never rags in the bath."

Spencer grunted an expressive grunt and, creeping down the steps, entered the water again.

It was Spencer's ambition to swim ten lengths of the bath. He was not a young Channel swimmer, and ten lengths represented a very respectable distance to him. He proceeded now to attempt to lower his record. It was not often that he got the bath so much to himself. Usually, there was barely standing-room in the water, and long-distance swimming was impossible. But now, with a clear field, he should, he thought, be able to complete the desired distance.

He was beginning the fifth length before interruption came. Just as he reached halfway, a reproachful voice at his side said: "Oh, Percy, you'll tire yourself!" and a hand on the top of his head propelled him firmly towards the bottom.

Every schoolboy, as Honble. Macaulay would have put it, knows the sensation of being ducked. It is always unpleasant sometimes more, sometimes less. The present case belonged to the former class. There was just room inside Spencer for another half-pint of water. He swallowed it. When he came to the surface, he swam to the side without a word and climbed out. It was the last straw. Honour could now be satisfied only with gore.

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He hung about outside the baths till Phipps and Thomas appeared, then, with a steadfast expression on his face, he walked up to the latter and kicked him.

Thomas seemed surprised, but not alarmed. His eyes grew a little rounder, and the pink on his cheeks deepened. He looked like a choirboy in a bad temper.

"Hullo! What's up, you ass, Spencer?" enquired Phipps.

Spencer said nothing.

"Where shall we go?" asked Thomas.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Phipps the peacemaker.

Spencer and Thomas were eyeing each other warily.

"You chaps aren't going to fight?" said Phipps.

The notion seemed to distress him.

"Unless he cares to take a kicking," said Spencer suavely.

"Not today, I think, thanks," replied Thomas without heat.

"Then, look here!" said Phipps briskly, I know a ripping little place just off the Ledby Road. It isn't five minutes' walk, and there's no chance of being booked there. Rot if someone was to come and stop it half-way through. It's in a field; thick hedges. No one can see. And I tell you what I'll keep time. I've got a watch. Two minute rounds, and half-a-minute in between, and I'm the referee; so, if anybody fouls the other chap, I'll stop the fight. See? Come on!

Of the details of that conflict we have no very clear record. Phipps is enthusiastic, but vague. He speaks in eulogistic terms of a "corker" which Spencer brought off in the second round, and, again, of a "tremendous biff" which Thomas appears to have consummated in the fourth. But of the more subtle points of the fighting he is content merely to state comprehensively that they were "top-hole". As to the result, it would seem that, in the capacity of referee, he declared the affair a draw at the end of the seventh round; and, later, in his capacity of second to both parties, helped his principals home by back and secret ways, one on each arm.

The next items to which the chronicler would call the attention of the reader are two letters.

The first was from Mrs Shearne to Spencer, and ran as follows

My Dear Spencer I am writing to you direct, instead of through your aunt, because I want to thank you so much for looking after my boy so well. I know what a hard time a new boy has at a public school if he has got nobody to take care of him at first. I heard from Tom this morning. He seems so happy, and so fond of you. He says you are "an awfully decent chap" and "the only chap who has stood up to him at all." I suppose he means "for him." I hope you will come and spend part of your holidays with us. ("Catch me!" said Spencer.)

Yours sincerely,

Isabel Shearne

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P.S. I hope you will manage to buy something nice with the enclosed.

The enclosed was yet another postal order for five shillings. As somebody wisely observed, a woman's P.S. is always the most important part of her letter.

"That kid," murmured Spencer between swollen lips, "has got cheek enough for eighteen! 'Awfully decent chap!'"

He proceeded to compose a letter in reply, and for dignity combined with lucidity it may stand as a model to young writers.

5 College Grounds, Eckleton.

Mr C. F. Spencer begs to present his compliments to Mrs Shearne, and returns the postal order, because he doesn't see why he should have it. He notes your remarks re my being a decent chap in your favour of the 13th pros., but cannot see where it quite comes in, as the only thing I've done to Mrs Shearne's son is to fight seven rounds with him in a field, W. G. Phipps refereeing. It was a draw. I got a black eye and rather a whack in the mouth, but gave him beans also, particularly in the wind, which I learned to do from reading "Rodney Stone" the bit where Bob Whittaker beats the Eytalian Gondoleery Cove. Hoping that this will be taken in the spirit which is meant.

I remain

Yours sincerely,

C. F Spencer.

One enclosure.

He sent this off after prep, and retired to bed full of spiritual pride.

On the following morning, going to the Shop during the interval, he came upon Thomas negotiating a hot bun.

"Hullo!" said Thomas.

As was generally the case after he had had a fair and spirited turnout with a fellow human being, Thomas had begun to feel that he loved his late adversary as a brother. A wholesome respect, which had hitherto been wanting, formed part of his opinion of him.

"Hullo!" said Spencer, pausing.

"I say," said Thomas.

"What's up?"

"I say, I don't believe we shook hands, did we?"

"I don't remember doing it."

They shook hands. Spencer began to feel that there were points about Thomas, after all.

"I say," said Thomas.

"Hullo?"

"I'm sorry about in the bath, you know. I didn't know you minded being ducked."

"Oh, all right!" said Spencer awkwardly.

Eight bars rest.

"I say," said Thomas.

"Hullo!"

"Doing anything this afternoon?"

"Nothing special. Why?"

"Come and have tea?"

"All right. Thanks."

"I'll wait for you outside the house."

"All right."

It was just here that Spencer regretted that he had sent back that five-shilling postal order. Five good shillings.

Simply chucked away.

Oh, Life, Life!

But they were not, after all. On his plate at breakfast next day Spencer found a letter. This was the letter

Messrs J. K. Shearne (father of T. B. A. Shearne) and P. W. Shearne (brother of same) beg to acknowledge receipt of Mr C. F. Spencer's esteemed communication of yesterday's date, and in reply desire to inform Mr Spencer of their hearty approval of his attentions to Mr T. B. A. Shearne's wind. It is their opinion that the above, a nice boy but inclined to cheek, badly needs treatment on these lines occasionally. They therefore beg to return the postal order, together with another for a like sum, and trust that this will meet with Mr Spencer's approval.

(Signed) J. K. Shearne, P. W. Shearne. Two enclosures.

"Of course, what's up really," said Spencer to himself, after reading this, "is that the whole family's jolly well cracked."

His eye fell on the postal orders.

"Still! " he said.

That evening he entertained Phipps and Thomas B. A Shearne lavishly at tea.