

Plum Punch: Four Short Tales

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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A special-edition etext
from Dagny and
The Blandings Group

Plum Punch: Four Short Tales

DUDLEY JONES, BORE-HUNTER

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I.

As is now well known, my friend, Mr. DUDLEY JONES perished under painful circumstances on the top of Mount Vesuvius. His passion for research induced him to lean over the edge of the crater in such a way as to upset his equipoise. When we retrieved him he was a good deal charred, and, to be brief, of very little use to anybody. One of our noblest poets speaks of a cat which was useless except to roast. In the case of DUDLEY JONES, even that poor exception would not have held good. He was done to a turn.

DUDLEY JONES was a man who devoted his best energy to the extinction of bores. With a clear-sightedness which few modern philanthropists possess, he recognised that, though Society had many enemies, none was so deadly as the bore. Burglars, indeed, JONES regarded with disapproval, and I have known him to be positively rude to a man who confessed in the course of conversation to being a forger. But his real foes were the bores, and all that one man could do to eliminate that noxious tribe, that did DUDLEY JONES do with all his might.

Of all his cases none seems to me so fraught with importance as the adventure of the Unwelcome Guest. It was, as JONES remarked at intervals of ten minutes, a black business. This guest—but I will begin at the beginning.

We were standing at the window of our sitting-room in Grocer Square on the morning of June 8, 189—, when a new brougham swept clean up to our door. We heard the bell ring, and footsteps ascending the stairs.

There was a knock.

"Come in," said JONES; and our visitor entered.

"My name is Miss PETTIGREW," she observed, by way of breaking the ice.

"Please take a seat," said JONES in his smooth professional accents. "This is my friend WUDDUS. I generally allow him to remain during my consultations. You see, he makes himself useful in a lot of little ways, taking notes and so on. And then, if we turned him out, he would only listen at the keyhole. You follow me, I trust? WUDDUS, go and lie down on the mat. Now, Miss PETTIGREW, if you please."

"Mine," began Miss PETTIGREW, "is a very painful case."

"They all are," said JONES.

"I was recommended to come to you by a Mrs. EDWARD NOODLE. She said that you had helped her husband in a great crisis.

"WUDDUS," said JONES, who to all appearances was half asleep, "fetch my scrapbook."

The press-cutting relating to Mr. EDWARD NOODLE was sandwiched between a statement that Mr. BALFOUR never eats doughnuts, and a short essay on the treatment of thrush in infants.

"Ah," said JONES, "I remember the case now. It was out of my usual line, being simply a case of theft. Mr. NOODLE was wrongfully accused of purloining a needle."

"I remember," I said eagerly. "The case for the prosecution was that NEDDY NOODLE nipped his neighbour's needle."

"WUDDUS," said JONES coldly, "be quiet. Yes, Miss PETTIGREW?"

"I will state my case as briefly as possible, Mr. JONES. Until two months ago my father and I lived alone, and were as happy as could possibly be. Then my uncle, Mr. STANLEY PETTIGREW, came to stay. Since that day we have not known what happiness is. He is driving us to distraction. He *will* talk so."

"Stories?"

"Yes. Chiefly tales of travel. Oh, Mr. JONES, it is terrible."

JONES'S face grew cold and set.

"Then the man is a bore?" he said.

"A dreadful bore."

"I will look into this matter, Miss PETTIGREW. One last question. In the case of your father's demise—this is purely hypothetical—a considerable quantity of his property would, I suppose, go to Mr. STANLEY PETTIGREW?"

"More than half."

"Thank you. That, I think, is all this morning. Good-day, Miss PETTIGREW."

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And our visitor, with a bright smile—at me, I always maintain, though JONES declares it was at him—left the room.

"Well, JONES," I said encouragingly, "what do you make of it?"

"I never form theories, as you are perfectly well aware," he replied curtly. "Pass me my bagpipes."

I passed him his bagpipes and vanished.

It was late when I returned.

I found JONES lying on the floor with his head in a coal-scuttle.

"Well, WUDDUS," he said, "so you've come back?"

"My dear JONES, how——?"

"Tush, I saw you come in."

"Of *course*," I said. "How simple it seems when you explain it! But what is this business of Miss PETTIGREW'S?"

"Just so. A black business, WUDDUS. One of the blackest I have ever handled. The man STANLEY PETTIGREW is making a very deliberate and systematic attempt to bore his unfortunate relative to death!"

I stared at him in silent horror.

* * * *

Two days afterwards JONES told me that he had made all the arrangements. We were to go down to Pettigrew Court by the midnight mail. I asked, Why the midnight mail? Why not wait and go comfortably next day? JONES, with some scorn, replied that if he could not begin a case by springing into the midnight mail, he preferred not to undertake that case. I was silenced.

"I am to go down as a friend of the family," said he, "and you are going as a footman."

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it," said JONES. "You see, you have got to come in some capacity, for I must have a reporter on the spot, and as a bore is always at his worst at meal-times you will be more useful in the way of taking notes if you come as a footman. You follow me, WUDDUS?"

"But even now I don't quite see. How do you propose to treat the case?"

"I shall simply outbore this PETTIGREW. I shall cap all his stories with duller ones. Bring your note-book."

"Stay, JONES," I said. "It seems to me—correct me if I am wrong—that in the exhilaration of the moment you have allowed a small point to escape you."

"I beg your pardon, WUDDUS?" His face was pale with fury.

"A very small point," I said hurriedly. "Simply this, in fact. If you begin outboring STANLEY, surely an incidental effect of your action will be to accelerate the destruction of your suffering host."

"True," said JONES thoughtfully. "True. I had not thought of that. It is at such moments, WUDDUS, that a suspicion steals across my mind that you are not such a fool as you undoubtedly look." I bowed.

"I must make arrangements with Mr. PETTIGREW. Until I have finished with brother STANLEY he must keep to his room. Let him make some excuse. Perhaps you can suggest one?"

I suggested Asiatic cholera. JONES made a note of it.

On the following night, precisely at twelve o'clock, we sprang into the midnight mail.

II.

I think STANLEY PETTIGREW had his suspicions from the first that all was not thoroughly above board with regard to JONES. Personally, I think it was owing to the latter's disguise. It was one of JONES'S foibles never to undertake a case without assuming a complete disguise. There was rarely any necessity for a disguise, but he always assumed one. In reply to a question of mine on the subject he had once replied that there was a sportsmanlike way of doing these things, and an unsportsmanlike way. And we had to let it go at that.

On the present occasion he appeared in a bright check suit, a "property" bald head, fringed with short scarlet curls (to match his tie and shirt), and a large pasteboard nose, turned up at the end and painted crimson. Add to this that he elected to speak in the high falsetto of a child of four, and it is scarcely to be wondered at that a man of STANLEY'S almost diabolical shrewdness should suspect that there was something peculiar about him. As regarded my appearance JONES never troubled very much. Except that he insisted on my wearing long yellow side-whiskers, he left my make-up very much to my own individual taste.

I shall never forget dinner on the first night after our arrival. I was standing at the sideboard, trying to draw a cork (which subsequently came out of its own accord, and broke three glasses and part of the butler), when I heard JONES ask STANLEY PETTIGREW to think of a number.

His adversary turned pale, and a gleam of suspicion appeared in his eye.

"Double it," went on JONES relentlessly. "Have you doubled it?"

"Yes," growled the baffled wretch.

"Add two. Take away the number you first thought of. Double it. Add three. Divide half the first number (minus eighteen) by four. Subtract seven. Multiply by three hundred and sixteen, and the result is the number you first thought of minus four hundred and five."

"Really?" said STANLEY PETTIGREW with assumed indifference.

"My dear JONES, how——?" I began admiringly.

JONES flashed a warning glance at me. Miss PETTIGREW saved the situation with magnificent tact.

"JOHN," she said, "you forget yourself. Leave the room."

I was therefore deprived of the pleasure of witnessing the subsequent struggles which, to judge from the account JONES gave me in my room afterwards, must have been magnificent.

"After the fish," said JONES, "he began—as I had suspected that he would—to tell dog-stories. For once, however, he had found his match. My habit of going out at odd moments during the day to see men about dogs has rendered me peculiarly fitted to cope with that type of attack. I had it all my own way. Miss PETTIGREW, poor girl, fainted after about twenty minutes of it, and had to be carried out. I foresee that this will be a rapid affair, WUDDUS."

But it was not. On the contrary, after the first shock of meeting a powerful rival so unexpectedly, STANLEY PETTIGREW began to hold his own, and soon to have the better of it.

"I tell you what it is, WUDDUS," said JONES to me one night, after a fierce encounter had ended decidedly in his rival's favour, "a little more of this and I shall have to own myself defeated. He nearly put me to sleep in the third round to-night, and I was in Queer Street all the time. I never met such a bore in my life."

But it is the unexpected that happens. Three days later, STANLEY PETTIGREW came down to breakfast, looking haggard and careworn. JONES saw his opportunity.

"Talking of amusing anecdotes of children," he said (the conversation up to this point had dealt exclusively with the weather), "reminds me of a peculiarly smart thing a little nephew of mine said the other day. A bright little chap of two. It was like this——"

He concluded the anecdote, and looked across at his rival with a challenge in his eye. STANLEY PETTIGREW was silent, and apparently in pain.

JONES followed up his advantage. He told stories of adventure on Swiss mountains. A bad Switzerland bore is the deadliest type known to scientists.

JONES was a peerless Switzerland bore. His opponent's head sank onto his chest, and he grew very pale.

"And positively," concluded JONES, "old FRANZ WILHELM, the guide, you know, a true son of the

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mountains, assured us that if we had decided to go for a climb that day instead of staying in the smoking-room, and the rope had broken at the exact moment when we were crossing the Thingummy glacier, we should in all probability have been killed on the spot. Positively on the spot, my dear Sir. He said that we should all have been killed on the spot."

He paused. No reply came from PETTIGREW. The silence became uncanny. I hurried to his side, and placed a hand upon his heart. I felt in vain. Like a superannuated policeman, the heart was no longer on its beat.

STANLEY PETTIGREW (it follows, of course) was dead.

JONES looked thoughtfully at the body, and helped himself to another egg.

"He was a bad man," he said quietly, "and he won't be missed. R.S.V.P."

A brief post-mortem examination revealed the fact that he had fallen into the pit which he had dugged for another. He had been bored to death.

"Why, JONES," said I, as we sprang into the midnight mail that was to take us back to town, "did deceased collapse in that extraordinary manner?"

"I will tell you. Listen. After our duel had been in progress some days, it was gradually borne in upon me that this STANLEY PETTIGREW must have some secret reservoir of matter to draw upon in case of need. I searched his room."

"JONES!"

"And under the bed I found a large case literally crammed with tip-books. I abstracted the books and filled the box with bricks. Deprived of all his resources, he collapsed. That's all."

"But—" I began.

"If you ask any more questions, WUDDUS," said JONES, "I shall begin to suspect that you are developing into a bore yourself. Pass the morphia and don't say another word till we get to London."

MISUNDERSTOOD (A STORY OF THE STONE AGE)

Of all the young bachelors in his tribe not one was more highly esteemed than Ug, the son of Zug. He was one of the nicest young prehistoric men that ever sprang seven feet into the air to avoid the impulsive bite of a sabre-tooth tiger, or cheered the hearts of brave elders searching for inter-tribal talent by his lightning sprints in front of excitable mammoths. Everybody liked Ug, and it was a matter of surprise to his friends that he had never married.

One bright day, however, they were interested to observe that he had begun to exhibit all the symptoms. He brooded apart. Twice in succession he refused a second help of pterodactyl at the tribal luncheon table. And there were those who claimed to have come upon him laboriously writing poetry on the walls of distant caves.

It should be understood that in those days only the most powerful motive, such as a whole-hearted love, could drive a man to writing poetry; for it was not the ridiculously simple task which it is to-day. The alphabet had not yet been invented, and the only method by which a young man could express himself was by carving or writing on stone a series of pictures, each of which conveyed the sense of some word or phrase. Thus, where the modern bard takes but a few seconds to write, "You made me love you. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it", Ug, the son of Zug, had to sit up night after night till he had carved three trees, a plesiosaurus, four kinds of fish, a star-shaped rock, eleven different varieties of flowering shrub, and a more or less lifelike representation of a mammoth surprised while bathing. It is little wonder that the youth of the period, ever impetuous, looked askance at this method of revealing their passion, and preferred to give proof of their sincerity and fervour by waiting for the lady of their affections behind a rock and stunning her with a club.

But the refined and sensitive nature of Ug, the son of Zug, shrank from this brusque form of wooing. He was shy with women. To him there was something a little coarse, almost ungentlemanly, in the orthodox form of proposal; and he had made up his mind that, if ever he should happen to fall in love, he would propose by ideograph.

It was shortly after he had come to this decision that, at a boy-and-girl dance given by a popular hostess, he met the divinest creature he had ever seen. Her name was Wug, the daughter of Glug; and from the moment of their introduction he realised that she was the one girl in the world for him. It only remained to compose the ideograph.

Having steadied himself as far as possible by carving a few poems, as described above, he addressed himself to the really important task of the proposal.

It was extraordinarily difficult, for Ug had not had a very good education. All he knew he had picked up in the give and take of tribal life. For this reason he felt it would be better to keep the thing short. But it was hard to condense all he felt into a brief note. For a long time he thought in vain, then one night, as he tossed sleeplessly on his bed of rocks, he came to a decision. He would just ideograph, "Dear Wug, I love you. Yours faithfully, Ug. P.S. R.S.V.P.", and leave it at that. So in the morning he got to work, and by the end of the week the ideograph was completed. It consisted of a rising sun, two cave-bears, a walrus, seventeen shin-bones of the lesser rib-nosed baboon, a brontosaurus, three sand-eels, and a pterodactyl devouring a mangold-worzel. It was an uncommonly neat piece of work, he considered, for one who had never attended an art-school. He was pleased with it. It would, he flattered himself, be a queer sort of girl who could stand out against that. For the first time for weeks he slept soundly and peacefully.

Next day his valet brought him with his morning beverage a piece of flat rock. On it was carved a simple human thigh-bone. He uttered a loud cry. She had rejected him. The parcel-post, an hour later, brought him his own ideograph, returned without a word.

Ug's greatest friend in the tribe was Jug, son of Mug, a youth of extra-ordinary tact and intelligence. To him Ug took his trouble.

Jug heard his story, and asked to see exactly what he had ideographed.

"You must have expressed yourself badly", he said.

"On the contrary", replied Ug, with some pique, "my proposal was brief, but it was a model of what that sort of proposal should be. Here it is. Read it for yourself."

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Jug read it. Then he looked at his friend, concerned.

"But, my dear old man, what on earth did you mean by saying she has red hair and that you hate the sight of her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, this ichthyosaurus."

"That's not an ichthyosaurus. It's a brontosaurus."

"It's not a bit like a brontosaurus. And *is* rather like an ichthyosaurus. Where you went wrong was in not taking a few simple lessons in this sort of thing first."

"If you ask me", said Ug disgustedly, "this picture-writing is silly rot. Tomorrow I start an Alphabet."

* * * * *

But on the morrow he was otherwise employed. He was standing, concealed behind a rock, at the mouth of the cave of Wug, daughter of Glug. There was a dreamy look in his eyes, and his fingers were clasped like steel bands round the handle of one of the most business-like clubs the Stone Age had ever seen. Orthodoxy had found another disciple.

EGBERT, BULL-FROG

"Speaking", said my uncle James, "of dogs, did I ever tell you about Egbert, my bull-frog? I class Egbert among the dogs, partly because of his faithfulness and intelligence, and partly because his deep bay — you know how those bull-frogs bark — always reminded me of a bloodhound surprised while on a trail of aniseed. He was my constant companion in Northern Assam, where I was at that time planting rubber. He finally died of a surfeit of hard-boiled egg, of which he was passionately fond, and I was as miserable as if I had lost a brother.

"I think Egbert had been trying to edge into the household for some time before I really noticed him. Looking back, I can remember meeting him sometimes in the garden, and, though I did not perceive it at first, there was a wistful look in his eye when I passed him by without speaking. It was not till our burglary that I began really to understand his sterling worth. A couple of natives were breaking in and would undoubtedly have succeeded in their designs had it not been for Egbert's frantic barking, which aroused the house and brought me down with a revolver. It is almost certain that the devoted animal had made a practice, night after night, of sleeping near the front-door on the chance of something of the sort happening. He was always suspicious of natives.

"After that of course his position in the house was established. He slept every night at the foot of my bed, and very soothing it was to hear his deep rhythmical breathing in the darkness.

"In the daytime we were inseparable. We would go for walks together, and I have frequently spent hours throwing sticks into the pond at the bottom of the garden for him to retrieve. It was this practice which saved his life at the greatest crisis of his career.

"I happened to have strained my leg, and I was sitting in the garden, dozing, Egbert by my side, when I was awakened by a hoarse bark from my faithful companion, and, looking down, I perceived him hopping rapidly towards the pond, pursued by an enormous oojobwa snake, a reptile not dangerous to man, being non-poisonous, but a great scourge among the minor fauna of Assam, owing to its habit of pouncing upon them and swallowing them alive. This snake is particularly addicted to bull-frogs, and, judging from the earnest manner in which he was making for the pond, Egbert was not blind to this trait in its character.

"You may imagine my agony of mind. There was I, helpless. My injured leg made it impossible for me to pursue the snake and administer one where it would do most good. And meanwhile the unequal race was already drawing to its inevitable close. Egbert, splendid as were his other qualities, was not built for speed. He was dignified rather than mobile.

"What could I do? Nothing beyond throwing my stick in the hope of stunning the oojobwa. It was a forlorn hope, but I did it; and it saved Egbert's life, though not in the way I had intended. The stick missed the snake and fell immediately in front of Egbert. It was enough. His grand intellect worked with the speed of lightning. Just as the snake reached him, he reached the stick; and the next moment there was Egbert, up to his neck in the reptile's throat, but saved from complete absorption by the stick, which he was holding firmly in his mouth.

"I have seldom seen any living thing so completely nonplussed as was the oojobwa. Snakes have very little reasoning power. They cannot weigh cause and effect. Otherwise of course the oojobwa would have nipped Egbert till he was forced to leave go of the stick. Instead of doing this, he regarded the stick and Egbert as being constructed all in one piece, and imagined that he had happened upon a new breed of unswallowable frog. He ejected Egbert, and lay thinking it over, while Egbert, full of pluck, continued his journey to the pond.

"Three times in the next two yards did the snake endeavour to swallow his victim, and each time he gave it up; and after the last experiment Egbert, evidently finding this constant semi-disappearance into the other's interior bad for his nervous system, conceived the idea of backing towards the pond instead of heading in that direction, the process, though slower, being less liable to sudden interruption.

"Well, to make the story short, the oojobwa followed Egbert to the very edge of the pond, the picture of perplexity; and when my little friend finally dived in he lay there with his head over the edge of the bank, staring into the water for quite ten minutes. Then he turned, shook his head despairingly, and wriggled into the bushes, still thinking hard. And a little while later I saw Egbert's head appear cautiously over the side of the pond, the stick still in his mouth. He looked round to see that the coast was clear, and then came hopping up to me and laid the stick at my feet. And, strong man as I was, I broke down and cried like a child."

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THE SLUGGARD

My Uncle James, whose memoirs I am now preparing for publication, was a many-sided man; but his chief characteristic, I am inclined to think, was the indomitable resolution with which, disregarding hints, entreaties and even direct abuse, he would lie in bed of a morning. I have seen the domestic staff of his hostess day after day manoeuvring restlessly in the passage outside his room, doing all those things which women do who wish to rout a man out of bed without moving Uncle James an inch. Footsteps might patter outside his door; voices might call one to the other; knuckles might rap the panels; relays of shaving-water might be dumped on his wash-stand; but devil a bit would Uncle James budge, till finally the enemy, giving in, would bring him his breakfast in bed. Then, after a leisurely cigar, he would at last rise and, having dressed himself with care, come downstairs and be the ray of sunshine about the home.

For many years I was accustomed to look on Uncle James as a mere sluggard. I pictured ants raising their antennae scornfully at the sight of him. I was to learn that not sloth but a deep purpose dictated his movements, or his lack of movement.

"My boy", said Uncle James, "more evil is wrought by early rising by than by want of thought. Happy homes are broken up by it. Why do men leave charming wives and run away with quite unattractive adventuresses? Because good women always get up early. Bad women, on the other hand, invariably rise late. To prize a man out of bed at some absurd hour like nine-thirty is to court disaster. To take my own case, when I first wake in the morning my mind is one welter of unkindly thoughts. I think of all the men who owe me money, and hate them. I review the regiment of women who have refused to marry me, and loathe them. I meditate on my faithful dog, Ponto, and wish that I had kicked him overnight. To introduce me to the human race at that moment would be to let loose a scourge upon society. But what a difference after I have lain in bed looking at the ceiling for an hour or so. The milk of human kindness comes surging back into me like a tidal wave. I love my species. Give me a bit of breakfast then, and let me enjoy a quiet meditative smoke, and I am a pleasure to all with whom I come in contact."

He settled himself more comfortably upon the pillows and listened luxuriously for a moment to the sound of rushing housemaids in the passage.

"Late rising saved my life once", he said. "Pass me my tobacco pouch."

"It was when I was in South America. There was the usual revolution in the Republic which I had visited in my search for concessions, and, after due consideration, I threw in my lot with the revolutionary party. It is usually a sound move, for on these occasions the revolutionists have generally corrupted the standing army, and they win before the other side has time to re-corrupt it at a higher figure. In South America, thrice armed is he who has his quarrel just, but six times he who gets his bribe in fust. On the occasion of which I speak, however, a hitch was caused by the fact of another party revolting against the revolutionists while they were revolting against the revolutionary party which had just upset the existing Government. Everything is very complicated in those parts. You will remember that the Tango came from there.

"Well, the long and the short of it was that I was captured and condemned to be shot. I need not go into my emotions at the time. Suffice it to say that I was led out and placed with my back against an adobe wall. The firing-party raised their rifles.

"It was a glorious morning. The sun was high in a cloudless sky. Everywhere sounded the gay rattle of the rattle-snake and the mellow chirrup of the hydrophobia-skunk and the gila monster. It vexed me to think that I was so soon to leave so peaceful a scene.

"And then suddenly it flashed upon me that there had been a serious mistake.

"Wait!" I called.

"What's the matter now?" asked the leader of the firing squad.

"Matter?" I said. 'Look at the sun. The court-martial distinctly said that I was to be shot at sunrise. Do you call this sunrise? It must be nearly lunch-time.'

"It's not our fault", said the firing-party. 'We came to your cell all right, but you wouldn't get up. You told us to leave it on the mat.'

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"I did remember then having heard someone fussing about outside my cell door.

" 'That's neither here nor there', I said firmly. 'It was your business to shoot me at sunrise, and you haven't done it. I claim a re-trial on a technicality.'

"Well, they stormed and blustered, but I was adamant; and in the end they had to take me back to my cell to be tried again. I was condemned to be shot at sunrise next morning, and they went to the trouble of giving me an alarm clock and setting it for 3 A.M.

"But at about eleven o'clock that night there was another revolution. Some revolutionaries revolted against the revolutionaries who had revolted against the revolutionaries who had revolted against the Government and, having re-re-corrupted the standing army, they swept all before them, and at about midnight I was set free. I recall that the new President kissed me on both cheeks and called me the saviour of his country. Poor fellow, there was another revolution next day, and, being a confirmed early riser, he got up in time to be shot at sunrise."

Uncle James sighed, possibly with regret, but more probably with happiness, for at this moment they brought in his breakfast.