MONEY FOR NOTHING

BY

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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Author: P. G. Wodehouse

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BY P. G. WODEHOUSE

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MONEY FOR NOTHING

CHAPTER I

I

The picturesque village of Rudge-in-the-Vale dozed in the summer sunshine. Along its narrow High Street the only signs of life visible were a cat stropping its backbone against the Jubilee Watering Trough, some flies doing deep-breathing exercises on the hot window sills, and a little group of serious thinkers who, propped up against the wall of the Carmody Arms, were waiting for that establishment to open. At no time is there ever much doing in Rudge's main thoroughfare, but the hour at which a stranger, entering it, is least likely to suffer the illusion that he has strayed into Broadway, Piccadilly, or the Rue de Rivoli is at two o'clock on a warm afternoon in July.

You will find Rudge-in-the-Vale, if you search carefully, in that pleasant section of rural England where the gray stone of Gloucestershire gives place to Worcestershire's old red brick. Quiet, in fact, almost unconscious, it nestles beside the tiny river Skirme and lets the world go by, somnolently content with its Norman church, its eleven public-houses, its Pop.—to quote the Automobile Guide—of 3,541, and its only effort in the direction of modern progress, the emporium of Chas. Bywater, Chemist.

Chas. Bywater is a live wire. He takes no afternoon siesta, but works while others sleep. Rudge as a whole is inclined after luncheon to go into the back room, put a handkerchief over its face and take things easy for a bit. But not Chas. Bywater. At the moment at which this story begins he was all bustle and activity, and had just finished selling to Colonel Meredith Wyvern a bottle of Brophy's Paramount Elixir (said to be good for gnat bites).

Having concluded his purchase, Colonel Wyvern would have preferred to leave, but Mr. Bywater was a man who liked to sweeten trade with pleasant conversation. Moreover, this was the first time the Colonel had been inside his shop since that sensational affair up at the Hall two weeks ago, and Chas. Bywater, who held the unofficial position of chief gossip monger to the village, was aching to get to the bottom of that.

With the bare outline of the story he was, of course, familiar. Rudge Hall, seat of the Carmody family for so many generations, contained in its fine old park a number of trees which had been planted somewhere about the reign of Queen Elizabeth. This meant that every now and then one of them would be found to have become a wobbly menace to the passer-by, so that experts had to be sent for to reduce it with a charge of dynamite to a harmless stump. Well, two weeks ago, it seems, they had blown up one of the Hall's Elizabethan oaks and as near as a toucher, Rudge learned, had blown up Colonel Wyvern and Mr. Carmody with it. The two friends had come walking by just as the expert set fire to the train and had had a very narrow escape.

Thus far the story was common property in the village, and had been discussed nightly in the eleven tap-rooms of its eleven public-houses. But Chas. Bywater, with his trained nose for news and that sixth sense which had so often enabled him to ferret out the story behind the story when things happen in the upper world of the nobility and gentry, could not help feeling that there was more in it than this. He decided to give his customer the opportunity of confiding in him.

"Warm day, Colonel," he observed.

"Ur," grunted Colonel Wyvern.

"Glass going up, I see."

"Ur."

"May be in for a spell of fine weather at last."

"Ur."

"Glad to see you looking so well, Colonel, after your little accident," said Chas. Bywater, coming out into the open.

It had been Colonel Wyvern's intention, for he was a man of testy habit, to enquire of Mr. Bywater why the devil he couldn't wrap a bottle of Brophy's Elixir in brown paper and put a bit of string round it without taking the whole afternoon over the task: but at these words he abandoned this project. Turning a bright mauve and allowing his luxuriant eyebrows to meet across the top of his nose, he subjected the other to a fearful glare.

"Little accident?" he said. "Little accident?"

"I was alluding——"

"Little accident!"

"I merely——"

"If by little accident," said Colonel Wyvern in a thick, throaty voice, "you mean my miraculous escape from death when that fat thug up at the Hall did his very best to murder me, I should be obliged if you would choose your expressions more carefully. Little accident! Good God!"

Few things in this world are more painful than the realization that an estrangement has occurred between two old friends who for years have jogged amiably along together through life, sharing each other's joys and sorrows and holding the same views on religion, politics, cigars, wine, and the Decadence of the Younger Generation: and Mr. Bywater's reaction, on hearing Colonel Wyvern describe Mr. Lester Carmody, of Rudge Hall, until two short weeks ago his closest crony, as a fat thug, should have been one of sober sadness. Such, however, was not the case. Rather was he filled with an unholy exultation. All along he had maintained that there was more in that Hall business than had become officially known, and he stood there with his ears flapping, waiting for details.

These followed immediately and in great profusion: and Mr. Bywater, as he drank them in, began to realize that his companion had certain solid grounds for feeling a little annoyed. For when, as Colonel Wyvern very sensibly argued, you have been a man's friend for twenty years and are walking with him in his park and hear warning shouts and look up and realize that a charge of dynamite is shortly about to go off in your immediate neighbourhood, you expect a man who is a man to be a man. You do not expect him to grab you round the waist and thrust you swiftly in between himself and the point of danger, so that, when the explosion takes

place, you get the full force of it and he escapes without so much as a singed eyebrow.

"Quite," said Mr. Bywater, hitching up his ears another inch.

Colonel Wyvern continued. Whether, if in a condition to give the matter careful thought, he would have selected Chas. Bywater as a confidant, one cannot say. But he was not in such a condition. The stoppered bottle does not care whose is the hand that removes its cork—all it wants is the chance to fizz: and Colonel Wyvern resembled such a bottle. Owing to the absence from home of his daughter, Patricia, he had had no one handy to act as audience for his grievances, and for two weeks he had been suffering torments. He told Chas. Bywater all.

It was a very vivid picture that he conjured up. Mr. Bywater could see the whole thing as clearly as if he had been present in person—from the blasting gang's first horrified realization that human beings had wandered into the danger zone to the almost tenser moment when, running up to sort out the tangled heap on the ground, they had observed Colonel Wyvern rise from his seat on Mr. Carmody's face and had heard him start to tell that gentleman precisely what he thought of him. Privately, Mr. Bywater considered that Mr. Carmody had acted with extraordinary presence of mind, and had given the lie to the theory, held by certain critics, that the landed gentry of England are deficient in intelligence. But his sympathies were, of course, with the injured man. He felt that Colonel Wyvern had been hardly treated, and was quite right to be indignant about it. As to whether the other was justified in alluding to his former friend as a jelly-bellied hell-hound, that was a matter for his own conscience to decide.

"I'm suing him," concluded Colonel Wyvern, regarding an advertisement of Pringle's Pink Pills with a smouldering eye.

"Quite."

"The only thing in the world that super-fatted old Blackhander cares for is money, and I'll have his last penny out of him, if I have to take the case to the House of Lords."

"Quite," said Mr. Bywater.

"I might have been killed. It was a miracle I wasn't. Five thousand pounds is the lowest figure any conscientious jury could put the damages at. And, if

there were any justice in England, they'd ship the scoundrel off to pick oakum in a prison cell."

Mr. Bywater made noncommittal noises. Both parties to this unfortunate affair were steady customers of his, and he did not wish to alienate either by taking sides. He hoped the Colonel was not going to ask him for his opinion of the rights of the case.

Colonel Wyvern did not. Having relieved himself with some six minutes of continuous speech, he seemed to have become aware that he had bestowed his confidences a little injudiciously. He coughed and changed the subject.

"Where's that stuff?" he said. "Good God! Isn't it ready yet? Why does it take you fellows three hours to tie a knot in a piece of string?"

"Quite ready, Colonel," said Chas. Bywater hastily. "Here it is. I have put a little loop for the finger, to facilitate carrying."

"Is this stuff really any good?"

"Said to be excellent, Colonel. Thank you, Colonel. Much obliged, Colonel. Good day, Colonel."

Still fermenting at the recollection of his wrongs, Colonel Wyvern strode to the door: and, pushing it open with extreme violence, left the shop.

The next moment the peace of the drowsy summer afternoon was shattered by a hideous uproar. Much of this consisted of a high, passionate barking, the remainder being contributed by the voice of a retired military man, raised in anger. Chas. Bywater blenched, and, reaching out a hand toward an upper shelf, brought down, in the order named, a bundle of lint, a bottle of arnica, and one of the half-crown (or large) size pots of Sooth-o, the recognized specific for cuts, burns, scratches, nettle stings, and dog bites. He believed in Preparedness.

II

While Colonel Wyvern had been pouring his troubles into the twitching ear of Chas. Bywater, there had entered the High Street a young man in golf

clothes and Old Rugbian tie. This was John Carroll, nephew of Mr. Carmody, of the Hall. He had walked down to the village, accompanied by his dog Emily, to buy tobacco, and his objective, therefore, was the same many-sided establishment which was supplying the Colonel with Brophy's Elixir.

For do not be deceived by that "Chemist" after Mr. Bywater's name. It is mere modesty. Some whim leads this great man to describe himself as a chemist, but in reality he goes much deeper than that. Chas. is the Marshall Field of Rudge, and deals in everything, from crystal sets to mousetraps. There are several places in the village where you can get stuff they call tobacco, but it cannot be considered in the light of pipe-joy for the discriminating smoker. To obtain something that will leave a little skin on the roof of the mouth you must go to Mr. Bywater.

John came up the High Street with slow, meditative strides, a large and muscular young man whose pleasant features betrayed at the moment an inward gloom. What with being hopelessly in love and one thing and another, his soul was in rather a bruised condition these days, and he found himself deriving from the afternoon placidity of Rudge-in-the-Vale a certain balm and consolation. He had sunk into a dreamy trance when he was abruptly aroused by the horrible noise which had so shaken Chas. Bywater.

The causes which had brought about this disturbance were simple and are easily explained. It was the custom of the dog Emily, on the occasions when John brought her to Rudge to help him buy tobacco, to yield to an uncontrollable eagerness and gallop on ahead to Mr. Bywater's shop—where, with her nose wedged against the door, she would stand, sniffing emotionally, till somebody came and opened it. She had a morbid passion for cough drops, and experience had taught her that by sitting and ogling Mr. Bywater with her liquid amber eyes she could generally secure two or three. To-day, hurrying on as usual, she had just reached the door and begun to sniff when it suddenly opened and hit her sharply on the nose. And, as she shot back with a yelp of agony, out came Colonel Wyvern carrying his bottle of Brophy.

There is an etiquette in these matters on which all right-minded dogs insist. When people trod on Emily, she expected them immediately to fuss over her, and the same procedure seemed to her to be in order when they hit her

on the nose with doors. Waiting expectantly, therefore, for Colonel Wyvern to do the square thing, she was stunned to find that he apparently had no intention of even apologizing. He was brushing past without a word, and all the woman in Emily rose in revolt against such boorishness.

"Just a minute!" she said dangerously. "Just one minute, if you please. Not so fast, my good man. A word with you, if I may trespass upon your valuable time."

The Colonel, chafing beneath the weight of his wrongs, perceived that they had been added to by a beast of a hairy dog that stood and yapped at him.

"Get out!" he bellowed.

Emily became hysterical.

"Indeed?" she said shrilly. "And who do you think you are, you poor clumsy Robot? You come hitting ladies on the nose as if you were the King of England, and as if that wasn't enough...."

"Go away, sir."

"Who the devil are you calling Sir?" Emily had the Twentieth Century girl's freedom of speech and breadth of vocabulary. "It's people like you that cause all this modern unrest and industrial strife. I know your sort well. Robbers and oppressors. And let me tell you another thing...."

At this point the Colonel very injudiciously aimed a kick at Emily.

It was not much of a kick, and it came nowhere near her, but it sufficed. Realizing the futility of words, Emily decided on action. And it was just as she had got a preliminary grip on the Colonel's left trouser leg that John arrived at the Front.

"Emily!!!" roared John, shocked to the core of his being.

He had excellent lungs, and he used them to the last ounce of their power. A young man who sees the father of the girl he loves being swallowed alive by a Welsh terrier does not spare his voice. The word came out of him like the note of the Last Trump, and Colonel Wyvern, leaping spasmodically, dropped his bottle of Brophy. It fell on the pavement and exploded, and Emily, who could do her bit in a rough-and-tumble but barred bombs, tucked her tail between her legs and vanished. A faint, sleepy cheering from

outside the Carmody Arms announced that she had passed that home from home and was going well.

John continued to be agitated. You would not have supposed, to look at Colonel Wyvern, that he could have had an attractive daughter, but such was the case, and John's manner was as concerned and ingratiating as that of most young men in the presence of the fathers of attractive daughters.

"I'm so sorry, Colonel. I do hope you're not hurt, Colonel."

The injured man, maintaining an icy silence, raked him with an eye before which sergeant-majors had once drooped like withered roses, and walked into the shop. The anxious face of Chas. Bywater loomed up over the counter. John hovered in the background. "I want another bottle of that stuff," said the Colonel shortly.

"I'm awfully sorry," said John.

"I dropped the other outside. I was attacked by a savage dog."

"I'm frightfully sorry."

"People ought not to have these pests running loose and not under proper control."

"I'm fearfully sorry."

"A menace to the community and a nuisance to everybody," said Colonel Wyvern.

"Quite," said Mr. Bywater.

Conversation languished. Chas. Bywater, realizing that this was no moment for lingering lovingly over brown paper and toying dreamily with string, lowered the record for wrapping a bottle of Brophy's Paramount Elixir by such a margin that he set up a mark for other chemists to shoot at for all time. Colonel Wyvern snatched it and stalked out, and John, who had opened the door for him and had not been thanked, tottered back to the counter and in a low voice expressed a wish for two ounces of the Special Mixture.

"Quite," said Mr. Bywater. "In one moment, Mr. John."

With the passing of Colonel Wyvern a cloud seemed to have rolled away from the chemist's world. He was his old, charmingly chatty self again. He gave John his tobacco, and, detaining him by the simple means of not handing over his change, surrendered himself to the joys of conversation.

"The Colonel appears a little upset, sir."

"Have you got my change?" said John.

"It seems to me he hasn't been the same man since that unfortunate episode up at the Hall. Not at all the same sunny gentleman."

"Have you got my change?"

"A very unfortunate episode, that," sighed Mr. Bywater.

"My change?"

"I could see, the moment he walked in here, that he was not himself. Shaken. Something in the way he looked at one. I said to myself 'The Colonel's shaken!'"

John, who had had such recent experience of the way Colonel Wyvern looked at one, agreed. He then asked if he might have his change.

"No doubt he misses Miss Wyvern," said Chas. Bywater, ignoring the request with an indulgent smile. "When a man's had a shock like the Colonel's had—when he's shaken, if you understand what I mean—he likes to have his loved ones around him. Stands to reason," said Mr. Bywater.

John had been anxious to leave, but he was so constituted that he could not tear himself away from anyone who had touched on the subject of Patricia Wyvern. He edged a little nearer the counter.

"Well, she'll be home again soon," said Chas. Bywater. "To-morrow, I understand."

A powerful current of electricity seemed to pass itself through John's body. Pat Wyvern had been away so long that he had fallen into a sort of dull apathy in which he wondered sometimes if he would ever see her again.

"What!"

"Yes, sir. She returned from France yesterday. She had a good crossing. She is at the Lincoln Hotel, Curzon Street, London. She thinks of taking the

three-o'clock train to-morrow. She is in excellent health."

It did not occur to John to question the accuracy of the other's information, nor to be surprised at its minuteness of detail. Mr. Bywater, he was aware, had a daughter in the post office.

"To-morrow!" he gasped.

"Yes, sir. To-morrow."

"Give me my change," said John.

He yearned to be off. He wanted air and space in which he could ponder over this wonderful news.

"No doubt," said Mr. Bywater, "she...."

"Give me my change," said John.

Chas. Bywater, happening to catch his eye, did so.

III

To reach Rudge Hall from the door of Chas. Bywater's shop, you go up the High Street, turn sharp to the left down River Lane, cross the stone bridge that spans the slow-flowing Skirme as it potters past on its way to join the Severn, carry on along the road till you come to the gates of Colonel Wyvern's nice little house, and then climb a stile and take to the fields. And presently you are in the park and can see through the trees the tall chimneys and red walls of the ancient home of the Carmodys.

The scene, when they are not touching off dynamite there under the noses of retired military officers, is one of quiet peace. For John it had always held a peculiar magic. In the fourteen years which had passed since the Wyverns had first come to settle in Rudge Pat had contrived, so far as he was concerned, to impress her personality ineffaceably on the landscape. Almost every inch of it was in some way associated with her. Stumps on which she had sat and swung her brown-stockinged legs; trees beneath which she had taken shelter with him from summer storms; gates on which

she had climbed, fields across which she had raced, and thorny bushes into which she had urged him to penetrate in search of birds' eggs—they met his eye on every side. The very air seemed to be alive with her laughter. And not even the recollection that that laughter had generally been directed at himself was able to diminish for John the glamour of this mile of Fairyland.

Half-way across the park, Emily rejoined him with a defensive, Where-on-earth-did-you-disappear-to manner, and they moved on in company till they rounded the corner of the house and came to the stable yard. John had a couple of rooms over the stables, and thither he made his way, leaving Emily to fuss round Bolt, the chauffeur, who was washing the Dex-Mayo.

Arrived in his sitting room, he sank into a deck chair and filled his pipe with Mr. Bywater's Special Mixture. Then, putting his feet up on the table, he stared hard and earnestly at the photograph of Pat which stood on the mantelpiece.

It was a pretty face that he was looking at—one whose charm not even a fashionable modern photographer, of the type that prefers to depict his sitters in a gray fog with most of their features hidden from view, could altogether obscure. In the eyes, a little slanting, there was a Puck-like look, and the curving lips hinted demurely at amusing secrets. The nose had that appealing, yet provocative, air which slight tip-tiltedness gives. It seemed to challenge, and at the same time to withdraw.

This was the latest of the Pat photographs, and she had given it to him three months ago, just before she left to go and stay with friends at Le Touquet. And now she was coming home....

John Carroll was one of those solid persons who do not waver in their loyalties. He had always been in love with Pat, and he always would be, though he would have had to admit that she gave him very little encouragement. There had been a period when, he being fifteen and she ten, Pat had lavished on him all the worship of a small girl for a big boy who can wiggle his ears and is not afraid of cows. But since then her attitude had changed. Her manner toward him nowadays alternated between that of a nurse toward a child who is not quite right in the head and that of the owner of a clumsy but rather likable dog.

Nevertheless, he loved her. And she was coming home....

John sat up suddenly. He was a slow thinker, and only now did it occur to him just what the position of affairs would be when she did come home. With this infernal feud going on between his uncle Lester and the old Colonel she would probably look on him as in the enemy's camp and refuse to see or speak to him.

The thought chilled him to the marrow. Something, he felt, must be done, and swiftly. And, with a flash of inspiration of a kind that rarely came to him, he saw what that something was. He must go up to London this afternoon, tell her the facts, and throw himself on her clemency. If he could convince her that he was whole-heartedly pro-Colonel and regarded his uncle Lester as the logical successor to Doctor Crippen and the Brides-in-the-Bath murderer, things might straighten themselves.

Once the brain gets working, there is no knowing where it will stop. The very next instant there had come to John Carroll a thought so new and breathtaking that he uttered an audible gasp.

Why shouldn't he ask Pat to marry him?

IV

John sat tingling from head to foot. The scales seemed to have fallen from his eyes, and he saw clearly where he might quite conceivably have been making a grave blunder all these years. Deeply as he had always loved Pat, he had never—now he came to think of it—told her so. And in this sort of situation the spoken word is quite apt to make all the difference.

Perhaps that was why she laughed at him so frequently—because she was entertained by the spectacle of a man, obviously in love with her, refraining year after year from making any verbal comment on the state of his emotions.

Resolution poured over John in a strengthening flood. He looked at his watch. It was nearly three. If he got the two-seater and started at once, he could be in London by seven, in nice time to take her to dinner somewhere. He hurried down the stairs and out into the stable yard.

"Shove that car out of the way, Bolt," said John, eluding Emily, who, wet to the last hair, was endeavouring to climb up him. "I want to get the two-seater."

"Two-seater, sir?"

"Yes. I'm going to London."

"It's not there, Mr. John," said the chauffeur, with the gloomy satisfaction which he usually reserved for telling his employer that the battery had run down.

"Not there? What do you mean?"

"Mr. Hugo took it, sir, an hour ago. He told me he was going over to see Mr. Carmody at Healthward Ho. Said he had important business and knew you wouldn't object."

The stable yard reeled before John. Not for the first time in his life, he cursed his light-hearted cousin. "Knew you wouldn't object!" It was just the fat-headed sort of thing Hugo would have said.

CHAPTER II

I

There is something about those repellent words, Healthward Ho, that has a familiar ring. You feel that you have heard them before. And then you remember. They have figured in letters to the daily papers from time to time.

THE STRAIN OF MODERN LIFE

TO THE EDITOR

The Times.

SIR:

In connection with the recent correspondence in your columns on the Strain of Modern Life, I wonder if any of your readers are aware that there exists in the county of Worcestershire an establishment expressly designed to correct this strain. At Healthward Ho (formerly Graveney Court), under the auspices of the well-known American physician and physical culture expert, Doctor Alexander Twist, it is possible for those who have allowed the demands of modern life to tax their physique too greatly to recuperate in ideal surroundings and by means of early hours, wholesome exercise, and Spartan fare to build up once more their debilitated tissues.

It is the boast of Doctor Twist that he makes New Men for Old.

I am, sir,
Yrs. etc.,
MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANO.

DO WE EAT TOO MUCH?

TO THE EDITOR

Daily Mail.

SIR:

The correspondence in your columns on the above subject calls to mind a remark made to me not long ago by Doctor Alexander Twist, the well-known American physician and physical culture expert. "Over-eating," said Doctor Twist emphatically, "is the curse of the Age."

At Healthward Ho (formerly Graveney Court), his physical culture establishment in Worcestershire, wholesale exercise and Spartan fare are the order of the day, and Doctor Twist has, I understand, worked miracles with the most apparently hopeless cases.