

The Hegemony of Bistlethwait

by Nate Jacobs

To P.G. Wodehouse, my inspiration.

Prologue: The Horde

The rotten tomato grazed my head as the furious horde threw fruit at me with incredible precision. I sprinted back to the sanctuary of the drawing room. “Bistlethwait!” I bellowed.

The butler glided into the room with a distinctly amused expression on his face. “Yes, sir?”

“That ghastly crowd seems to number ten thousand! Get me a whiskey.”

“The horde does not appear to be deprived of angry visitors, sir. I shall fetch the tonic.”



When I had drunk the whiskey, I looked back up at Bistlethwait. “I say, this has been the most hectic day of my life since the time I tried to pet the crocodiles.” I flexed my prosthetic thumb.

“Yes sir,” said Bistlethwait. “It does appear to be quite unpleasant. And, sir, there appears to be an abundance of fruit stains on the windows. Shall I call someone to clean it off?”

“No, wait until this ghastly crowd is gone. You know, this is one of those days when a chap wishes he could retreat to a rural, er, retreat. But if I go outside, they will graze on me like a cow on grass.”

“Might I suggest, sir, waiting until nightfall to perform your extrication? All of the people

will be gone.”

“A splendid idea, Bistlethwait. I will wait until the last traces of this blister of a throng have left us, then sneak out to the garage. I will bring the car around, then you and the luggage will hop in. Yes, a nice change of climate will do me good. Ingenious idea, Bistlethwait.”

“Thank you, sir.”



Six hours later, I peeked out the door. What I saw shocked me. Tents were erected everywhere, and some people were cooking bangers over tiny portable grills. “Bistlethwait!” I squawked. “We are besieged. The horde has become scores of new inhabitants.”

“Yes sir,” said Bistlethwait. “I am quite aware that we have many uninvited guests. Shall I prepare the guest beds?”

“No. Help me get out of here!”

“Very good sir. Might I suggest leaving through the private passage to the garage?”

“We have a private passage to the garage?”

“Yes sir. I suggest we take the car to your private resort on the Thanmashire peninsula. The mountainous terrain provides security, and the climate is quite nice. It is humid, but not too humid. When we come back—”

“When we come back, this place will be squalid. Unfit for human habitation!”

“Yes, sir. We can hire a cleaning crew to come on our return. In the meantime, I suggest we make ourselves scarce.”

“Right ho, Bistlethwait.”

We left through the passageway to the garage, which was concealed under the squeaky board in the butler’s pantry. We then took the car to the Thanmashire peninsula.

“You know, Bistlethwait,” I said, “that was a splendid idea of yours. I really don’t know how I got so lucky, butler-wise.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mesologue: The Aunt

I ran towards the phone, which seemed to be ringing even louder than usual, and when I picked it up, the voice on the other end nearly shattered my eardrums.

“Hello, my single-celled organism! I’m surprised you’re still not in bed at this hour.”

I rubbed my head. “Aunt Gratuity, it’s 1:30 p.m. Why would I be in bed?”

“Because I have known you since you were two weeks old, and sleeping has always taken up about three-quarters of your life. Anyway, I need you to come down to my place in Ebrillashire immediately. There has been a development in the household that has put your Uncle Spheniscidae in ruins.”

“But I’m still hiding out from that horde in Thanmanshire. I couldn’t get to your house in less than ten hours.”

“Then fill up your tank, my boy! I believe that the idea of never seeing another dinner at my house should prod you in the right direction.”

I squawked like a parrot of the Amazon. My Aunt Gratuity may not have the cleanest of morals (the incident of the dish of cream and my uncle’s valet comes to mind), but when the populace comes to her residence, they marvel at mealtimes.

A few years back, my aunt was taking a vacation in Échonnes when she stumbled across the most brilliant of cooks. This man was amazing when it came to soufflés, omelets, soups, and beef, and he could make even boiled mutton taste good with a sauce. My point is, I would rather

walk into the fiery furnace like those three chaps in the Bible—Backpack, Haystack, and To-bed-we-go—than miss out on one of Reladonnes’ fabulous meals.

I balked. “Aunt Gratuity—you wouldn’t!”

“I would, and I will, unless you report to Ebrillashire this instant. So get hopping, my boy. I will expect you at six o’ clock tomorrow morning.”

She hung up.

“Bistlethwait!” I bellowed.

The butler glided in with that finesse which makes it look as though he has no feet at all. “Yes, sir?”

“Aunt Gratuity just called. She said that I have to report to Ebrillashire by six o’ clock tomorrow morning. She didn’t actually say she had a job for me, but it was implied by the way she spoke. What should I do?”

“I would suggest submitting to your aunt’s demands, at least for the moment, or until you find out what she has in store for you. I shall begin to pack.”



Seventeen hours later, I was standing in front of my Aunt’s house in Ebrillashire. She rushed out to greet me, giving that yodel which could excite pigeons in the next county. “Hello, you old malaria parasite! Come into the living room and I’ll give you the briefing on current events.”

We strode into the living room and sat down in a couple of easy chairs.

“What is it, Aunt Gratuity?”

“It’s Talida. She wishes to marry the curate, so I need you to get some dirt on him which will make her want to break it off.”

I was agog. “You want me to get info on the curate?”

She waved a lazy hand, reminiscent of Nero in one of his more easygoing moods. “It shouldn’t be difficult, even for you. You *did* go to school with him.”

“Did I?”

“So Talida tells me. His name is Tremenheere.”

I goggled. “Good old Jiffy?”

“If you say so.”

“And now you want me to dig up dirt on him?”

“Indeed.”

“How would I do that?”

“*You* won’t. Ask Bistlethwait. His head is bigger than the planet Jupiter.”



“Bistlethwait, this is a ghastly situation.”

“How so, sir?”

“Because Aunt Gratuity has just given me a job. My cousin Talida wishes to marry the local curate, my good friend J. S. Tremenheere, and Aunt Gratuity has told me to dig up some dirt on him which will make her want to break it off.”

I was confiding the present train of events to Bistlethwait in my bedroom, and at this point, I was pleased to see that he had utmost concern. (That is to say, his left eyebrow lifted the customary eighth of an inch, and his head tilted to the right by about three picas.) Anyway, back to the dialogue. Bistlethwait, as I said, showed the most utmost concern.

“Most distressing, sir.”

“What should I do?”

“I would suggest making sure Miss Talida and Mr. Tremenheere become united in holy matrimony before the damaging information can be revealed.”

“That’s pretty good,” I said. “But there’s a snag. Wedding or no, Aunt Gratuity won’t quit until she feels she has something on the poor sap. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“I might, sir.”

“You might?”

“Indeed. I could possibly find the information necessary to create the rift by way of the BA—”

“The what?” I had never heard of the BA, so I was fogged.

“The Butler’s Association, sir. They can provide you with any information. As I was saying, I could suggest to Mrs. Phipps that I was undertaking my own investigation, giving time for the necessary extrication of Miss Talida and Mr. Tremenheere and their speedy nuptials.”

“Sounds good, Bistlethwait. I will go warn the vacant lovers—or am I thinking of some other word?— and tell them to find a priest and leg it.”



I procured a cold gin and tonic (for my nerves were rather racked at this point), and strolled the grounds, eventually finding Talida on the Oriental bridge. She glared at me as though I were a slug of the lesser sort. Then as she saw who I was, she broke into a smile.

“Hello,” I responded in suitable terms. “I’m awfully glad to see you, old girl. The fact is, your romantic arrangements are in mortal peril. Aunt Gratuity—”

“Oh don’t worry about her,” said Talida. “She has made threats regarding our love, but she can do nothing.”

“Or can she? She has hired me—Bistlethwait, really, for she is under the impression that

my head is as hollow as the Grand Canyon—”

“Impression?”

“Anyway, she has hired Bistlethwait to dig up some information about Jiffy.”

“Who’s Jiffy?”

“J. S. Tremenheere.”

“Oh. Well in that case, we *are* in trouble.”

“Bistlethwait suggests finding a priest and running off more speedily than a cheetah whose zebra has just hopped up a tree.”

“Zebras don’t climb trees.”

“Oh. However, my point is that you should find a priest and leg it.”

“That works. We are going to get married in Paris in three weeks’ time.”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

I was about to say “Ah” again when I realized that if I did, I would be here exchanging monosyllables with this girl from now to next Thursday. “Well, I didn’t think that Jiffy was the orange blossom type. Seemed more of a strong-and-silent chappie to me.”

Talida looked surprised. “Why? Jehoash is more romantic than a turtle dove. He wrote me ten years’ worth of poetry.”

I was puzzled, and I told Talida so. “The first thing is this Jehoash business. Who’s Jehoash, and if he knew that Jiffy was already engaged to you, why would he write you poetry?”

“The reason he wrote me poetry was he is currently engaged to me.”

“So you’re engaged to two lads at the same time?”

Talida groaned and uttered an expletive which would not have gone well with the general public. She then told me to get a clue. “You are such a slug. You try, but you don’t have any brain.”

I was miffed, but once more tried to get to the bottom of the mystery. “Eh?”

Talida sighed. “In simple words, Talida engaged to Jehoash. Jehoash called Jiffy by slug. Jiffy and Jehoash are one.”

The whole thing suddenly became clear to me. “Oh! So Jiffy’s name is...Jehoash?” I laughed heartily. “He always was secretive about that. Jehoash! I’ve scarcely come across a more awful name. Even my cousin Marmaduke or my Uncle Hildabrand could scarcely surpass such a quality.”

Talida looked stung. “It’s a beautiful name.”

I realized that to say Jehoash is a beautiful name you would have to be deep in the ocean of love. I mean, Jehoash! Sounds like a minor prophet of the Old Testament. He’s one of those people who are perfectly sporting, but their names sound like rubbish bin lids banging together. I pointed this out to Talida (the bit about what a fine chappie Jiffy is).

The expression on Talida’s face became dreamy. “Anyway, yes,” she sighed. “His poetry was so beautiful. It made me think of paradise. His writing rivaled Tennyson.”

I was surprised. I had read some Tennyson myself, and old Jiffy’s writing sounded like rocks falling onto a largish gong. “Jiffy? Rivaling Tennyson?”

“Oh yes. He said that his life before I came into it was as dull as a ripped bass drum. And that when he looked at me, he felt like he was in a trance, unable to tear his eyes away.”

“Quite elegant. I remember Bistlethwait saying something like that when giving Tippy

advice on how to woo Veronica Fenwick-Wickford.”

“Oh, yes. Bistlethwait has been wonderful about it all. He said you would be happy to do anything regarding stalling Aunt Gratuity while we are making our getaway.”

I had been sipping a cold gin and tonic while I was listening, and at this point, the portion in my mouth was violently cast out into the river below. “He did WHAT?” I squawked. I was all for this union, but I did not want to get in the way of Aunt Gratuity’s wrath. I had seen her annoyed before, notably on the occasion when I had used a mallet on an antique hand drum, subsequently breaking it and costing Aunt Gratuity 5,000 pounds, but I knew this would be nothing compared to delaying her arrival at her daughter’s wedding, an event to which she was fiercely opposed. “I am sorry Talida, but I will not be able to impede Aunt Gratuity while you are sprinting up the plank.”

She looked shocked. “Why?”

“I’ll tell you why. Bistlethwait’s talk has been seriously misguided. I did not volunteer to detain Aunt Gratuity, nor shall I.”

“But—”

“No. I hope you and Jiffy will be very happy together, but I don’t want that romantic union taking place when my insides are strewn across the high street.”

Talida stared at me. “I suppose that Mother would be rather annoyed if she found out you hadn’t gotten the data on Jehoash.”

I almost fell into the river at the thought of this.

“I suppose she would never invite you over for dinner again.”

I did fall into the river at this. When I got out, Talida was snorting like a pig in need of immediate snout clearing.

“Enough said,” I sighed. “I’ll do it.”



Two days later, I stumbled upon Bistlethwait and Aunt Gratuity talking in the parlor.

“Well, Bistlethwait? Have you found the data?” Aunt Gratuity was saying.

“No, madam, I have not. There has been some difficulty in procuring the information, seeing as only Mr. Tremeneere’s grandfather had means ample enough to have a butler, and he is deceased.”

“What rot! I am acquainted with his third cousin Alfred, who is an American multi-millionaire. The man has fifty butlers if one. And he says that he and that idiocy known as a curate and he were very chummy. You should be able to get info from one of his squadron.”

“I would like to point out, madam, that if I were to procure information from overseas, I would have to find this person and make the necessary oceanic travel, and I could not be back in less than a month. The Butler’s Association only operates in this country.”

“Hm. There’s something in that, I suppose. Well how about if—oh, hello you piece of slime mold.”

I sighed. I was used to being called names by Aunt Gratuity, but it did get tiresome.

“Aunt Gratuity, I have something to tell you in re of Talida’s wedding.”

She looked surprised. “Well?”

I had to think on the spur of the moment, and this was not one of my greatest strengths.

“Um, well, you see, er.”

“What the devil is it, you blithering half-wit?” snapped Aunt Gratuity.

“Er, Talida is getting married in three days. She told me, and mentioned that it was in Kelvetrashire.”

Aunt Gratuity looked stunned. “You actually found something out? Well, I suppose I shall have to put Talida on house arrest for a few days. I won’t have her running off right under my nose. I’d look like a complete fool!”

I smiled inwardly, seeing as that was exactly what Talida had in mind. “It would be bad,” I said.

Aunt Gratuity looked relieved. “Well, that’s that. I will ground Talida for a few days, and she will not be married to a curate with the intelligence of an arse.”



I felt as though God were in his Heaven and all was truly right with the world. I had made sure that Talida and Jiffy would not be divided, and that Aunt Gratuity wouldn’t come down on me like a wolf on the fold, with her cohorts all gleaming with purple and gold. Not that she had any cohorts, but I wouldn’t put it past her to get some.

My life was all happiness until I heard a cry of, “HEY! YOU!”

I went on, assuming this bloke wanted someone else. Then I heard it again. “HEY! YOU! STOP YOUR AIMLESS AMBLE AND TURN AROUND!”

I stopped my amble, even though it wasn’t aimless, and rotated the upper portions. When I did this, I saw a figure about six-foot-nine staring down at me with a sinister look on his face. I knew that face. “Jiffy?” I squawked.

“Yes, it’s me,” he snarled. “But you won’t be able to tell for long because you’ll have two black eyes. After Talida trusted you with the secret of our wedding date, you went and blabbed to that Gratuity.”

I was taken aback. “I did not!”

“You did. You said ‘Talida is getting married in three somethings.’ I couldn’t hear what

the something was, as I was behind a door and there was poor reception anyway, but I have no doubt that it was ‘weeks.’”

I laughed.

“Stop your chortling, you miserable lout!” bellowed Jiffy. “In addition to your eyes, I shall hit your head so hard that your excuse for a brain will rattle in your skull.”

“I was laughing because there was a misunderstanding. I said that Talida was getting married in three *days*. Therefore, Aunt Gratuity will put Talida under house arrest for the above mentioned period of time, and then she will be free as a bird, leaving you to get married in Paris.”

Jiffy looked suspicious, but slightly less homicidal than before. “Oh,” he said. “I’m not entirely sure I believe that, but it makes sense. You can’t make up something like that on the spot without ers, ums, and well you sees.”

“Yes. So Talida will be walking up the aisle in three weeks, and you will live happily ever after.”

“Oh. Sorry for threatening you. It made sense at the time, as I thought that you had blabbed, in which case it would have been completely reasonable to kick your spine up through the roof.”

“That’s okay, old man. Also, you might have more trouble heading your way. Aunt Gratuity will probably do something to prevent you getting married at all, whether in three days or three centuries.”

“Ah. I’ll make sure to hide the tickets to the boat to Kelvetrashire.”

I was taken aback, something which seemed to occur quite often nowadays.

“Kelvetrashire? But that’s where I told Aunt Gratuity you were getting married!”

Jiffy's eyes regained some of their old homicidal glare. "WHY THE BLASTED INFERNO DID YOU DO THAT?" he bellowed.

"I told her that because Talida told me you were getting married in Paris. Therefore, I told Aunt Gratuity you would be in Kelvetrashire."

Jiffy roared. "YOU WHAT? YOU ! YOU SCOURGE OF HUMANITY! YOU DAMN SON OF A—"

I groaned. Jiffy had been miffed to start with, and now he looked like one of those earthquakes you hear about that kill thousands. But then I heard a soft cough. Oh, the sound of that cough filled me with joy, for here had come my salvation, my divine savior, in the form of Bistlethwait.

"If you would excuse me for interrupting, sir," he said.

"No," I said. "Interrupt all you want. Win prizes at it. Now, what is it?"

"Miss Talida wishes to see you in the yellow room. She says she has business to discuss that she does not wish anyone to overhear."

Jiffy glared at me. "Be careful. Be very careful."

As I walked towards the yellow room, I said, "Thank you, Bistlethwait. I thought I was a goner."

"It was nothing, sir. Ah, here we are. I will leave you now."



Talida was sitting on the windowsill with an angry look on her face. "Why," she said, "did you tell Mother our wedding was in Kelvetrashire in three days?"

I was surprised she had found out. There appeared to be very little secrecy in this house. "Because," I said, "you told me it would be in Paris in three weeks."

“Well, what did you expect? I naturally couldn’t trust you with the complete secret. But I suppose it makes sense. So now, I can just hop onto the boat?”

“Yes, that was the idea.”

“But the boat leaves tomorrow.”

I leaped a foot back and a foot up. “Oh, bloody hell. It leaves tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes! So how are we going to sneak me out?”

“I’ll ask Bistlethwait—no! I’ve got it. Wait until everyone is asleep and bunk at Jiffy’s cottage. Then you shall be free to walk up the gangplank.”

“YOU IDIOT! I CANNOT STAY AT JEHOASH’S!”

“Why on Earth not?”

“I’m British, for heaven’s sake.”

“Ah. I see your point. I must have spent too much time in America. Instead, stay at the local inn. Aunt Gratuity will never look there.”

“Good idea. There is a sort of woodland path that I can go out on. It leads to a side gate Aunt Gratuity doesn’t know about. The ship leaves tomorrow at seven-thirty, so Jehoash and I should be able to make it onboard with no trouble at all.”

“Clever.”

“Quite.”

“Quite clever.”

Talida sighed and looked at her watch. I took the hint.

“Goodbye, then.”

“Goodbye.”



The next day, I woke up to a roar that shook the house. Talida’s bedroom was next to mine, and I could hear Aunt Gratuity rampaging around it breaking things. “HOW THE DAMN *HELL* DID TALIDA SNEAK OFF UNDER MY NOSE? I PUT IN *EVERY* PRECAUTION! I LOCKED *ALL* THE GATES AND EVEN BARRICADED HER ROOM DOOR! ALSO, WHY ARE THESE KNOTTED SHEETS HANGING OUT THE WINDOW? WHEN SHE GETS BACK—”

I smiled. Talida and Jiffy were lovebirds on a boat to Kelvetrashire, and I had escaped without a scratch.

I jumped as a picture on the wall fell into my bed.



Two weeks later, I was at Talida’s wedding, and I was about as happy as I have ever been. Aside from the fact that Aunt Gratuity had mangled a great number of Talida’s possessions in her rampage, everything had worked out perfectly. I milled around for a while, until I noticed Jiffy in the crowd. The strange thing was that he did not look happy. I went over to him and inquired about this. “Jiffy, I noticed you seem under the weather a bit. Tell me, old chap. What is troubling you?”

Jiffy’s face reminded me of that chap in the poem who had “the ashen face, the horsehair

escutcheon, the crystal arms.” Only the ashen face part, though, because I wouldn’t know a horsehair escutcheon if you handed it to me on a plate. Jiffy swallowed. “It’s that Gratuity. She’s here.”

“How did she find out?”

“Apparently I left my itinerary on my writing desk. I suppose she decided to go down to my cottage and see if she could find any evidence. Also, she apparently got some info from my third cousin Alfred’s butler, and he spilled.”

“Well?”

“Well, when I was at school during my boyhood, I stole some of the headmaster’s candy.”

“So what?”

“What do you mean, so what?”

“I mean so what?”

“Explain yourself, ass.”

“Why should Talida care about some long-gone Turkish delight or whatever it was?”

“That’s not the version she’ll get. Gratuity is going to paint it like I’m a bank robber.”

“She wouldn’t.”

“She would.”

“Well, yes,” I had to admit. “She would.” I brightened. “Well, I hope you can wait a little. Bistlethwait should be coming along any minute.”

“No one can help me. I’m beyond even Bistlethwait’s help now.”

“Nobody is ever beyond the help of Bistlethwait. And like I said, he should be along any—oh, hello, Bistlethwait.”

Jiffy spun around. “You came?” he said. He sounded like he was praying to a particularly kindly diving being for mercy.

“Yes, I did, sir,” replied Bistlethwait. “I was struck with a sudden urge to come fifteen minutes early. It proved most advantageous, as I was able to speak to Mrs. Phipps after overhearing the atrocity presented to Mr. Tremenheere. I then, as the Americans say, ‘gave her a taste of her own medicine.’”

“Well?” I said. “What did you say?”

“I mentioned that you knew a damaging secret about her, and that if she did release the data on Mr. Tremenheere, then he would—“

“Fire at will?” said Jiffy.

“Precisely, sir.”

“The only problem is,” said Jiffy, “I haven’t any social ammunition. My cannons are empty.”

“Ah. I thought that might be the case. I took the liberty of finding out certain facts from Mrs. Phipps’s butler Butterbury.”

“Well? What is it?”

“I cannot say. Butler Association code insists that details passed between two members must remain entirely confidential. However, I am at a perfect liberty to tell you that Mrs. Phipps would not be pleased if you said you knew all about Viola.”

“Bistlethwait, this is extremely valuable,” said Jiffy. “So I go up and tell her ‘I know all about Viola?’”

“Yes, sir.”

Jiffy looked as though he might faint from happiness. “Thank you so much, Bistlethwait.

Now I can tell Talida that I will be dancing the wedding glide.”

As Jiffy sped off toward the towering figure of my aunt, I leaned in toward Bistlethwait.

“Bistlethwait,” I said, “did I ever tell you my adopted uncle was a butler for a short time?”

“Indeed, sir?”

“Yes. So I imagine you could tell me all about Viola without maligning the Butler’s Association code.”

Bistlethwait was silent, so I pressed on. “Was she a hapless scullery maid? Do tell.”

Bistlethwait coughed gently. “A viola is a stringed instrument, sir. Some time ago a particularly valuable one disappeared from a country house Mrs. Phipps is known to frequent as a guest. A remarkably similar one turned up in her house shortly thereafter. The same occurrence happened at the houses of Lady Snodgrass, Lord Emsworth, and Lady Noir.”

I gasped. “You mean....”

“I am not entirely sure what you mean, sir. I would never suggest that your aunt is a kleptomaniac with a preference for stringed instruments.”

“Aunt Gratuity steals violas? And all this time, I thought it was only me she played on like a stringed instrument.”

Bistlethwait smiled and stepped away. I continued to goggle.

Bistlethwait! That marvelous mind! That chappie Euclid doesn’t hold a matchstick to the ingeniousness of Bistlethwait. Like Aunt Gratuity said, this man's head is bigger than the planet Jupiter!