

THE WIRE-PULLERS.

(A Cricket Story.)
By P. G. Wodehouse.



It is a splendid thing to be seventeen and have one's hair up and feel that one cannot be kissed indiscriminately any more by sticky boys and horrid old gentlemen who "knew you when you were *that* high, my dear," or who nursed you on their knees when you were a baby. When I came down to dinner for the first time in a long frock and with my hair in a bun there was a terrific sensation. Father said, "My dear Joan!" and gasped. The butler looked volumes of respectful admiration. The tweeny, whom I met on the stairs, giggled like an idiot. Bob, my brother, who is a beast, rolled on the floor and pretended to faint. Altogether it was an event. Mr. Garnet, who writes novels and things and happened to be stopping with us for the cricket, asked me to tell him exactly how it felt to have one's hair up for the first time. He said it would be of the utmost value to him to know, as it would afford him a lurid insight into the feminine mind.

I said: "I feel as if I were listening to

beautiful music played very softly on a summer night, and eating heaps of strawberries with plenty of cream."

He said, "Ah!"

But somehow I was not satisfied. The dream of my life was to spend the winter in town, as soon as I had put my hair up, and go to dances and theatres and things, and regularly come out *properly*, instead of lingering on in this out-of-the-way place (which is ducky in the spring and summer, but awful in the winter), with nobody to be looked at by except relations and father and the curate and village doctors, and that sort of people.

We knew lots of nice people in town who would have given me a splendid time; but father was always too lazy to go. He hates London really. What he likes is to be out of doors all day and every day all the year round with his gun or rod. And he loves cricket, too. So do I. That is to say, I like watching it. But you can't watch cricket in the winter.

It really wasn't fair of father to keep me stowed away in a place like Much Middlefold

now that I was grown up. I spoke to him about it after dinner.

I said, "Father, dear, you *are* going to take me to town this winter, aren't you?"

He shied. It is the only word to express it. "Er—well, my dear—well, we'll see, we'll see."

Poor old father, he does hate London so. It always brings on his rheumatism or something, and he spends most of his time there, I believe, when he is really obliged to go up on business, mooning about Kensington Gardens, trying to make believe it's really the country. But there are times when one feels that other people's objections must give way. When a girl is pretty (I believe I am) and has nice frocks (I know I have), it is perfectly criminal not to let her go and show them in town. And I love dancing. I want to go to dances every night. And in Much Middlefold we have only the hunt ball, and perhaps, if we're lucky, two or three other dances. And you generally have to drive ten miles to them.

So I was firm.

I said, "Father, dear, why can't we settle it now, and then you could write and get a house in good time?"

He jibbed this time. He sat in his chair and said nothing.

"Will you, father?"

"But the expense——"

"You can let the Manor."

"And the land; I ought to be looking after it."

"Oh, but the tenant man who takes the house will do that. Won't you write to-night, father, dear? I'll write if you'll tell me what to say. Then you needn't bother to move."

Here an idea seemed to strike him. I noticed with regret that his face brightened.

"I'll tell you what, my dear," he said; "we will make a bargain."

"Yes," I said. I knew something horrid was coming.

"If I make fifty in the match on Monday, we will celebrate the event by spending the winter in town, much as I shall dislike it. Those wet pavements always bring on my rheumatism; don't know why. Wet grass never does."

"And if you don't make fifty, father?"

"Why, then," he replied, cheerfully, "we'll stay at home and enjoy ourselves."

The match that was to be played on Monday was against Sir Edward Cave's team. Sir Edward was a nasty little man who had made a great deal of money somehow or other and been knighted for it. He always

got together a house-party to play cricket, and it was our great match. Sir Edward was not popular in the county, but he took a great deal of trouble with the cricket, and everybody was glad to play in his park or watch their friends playing.

Father always played for Much Middlefold in this match. He had been very good in his time, and I heard once that, if only the captain had not had so many personal friends for whom he wanted places in the team, father would have played for Oxford against Cambridge in his last year. But, of course, he was getting a little old now for cricket, and the Castle Cave match was the only one in which he played.

He had made twenty-five last year against Sir Edward Cave's team, and everybody had said how well he played, so I thought he might easily do better this year and make double that score.

"And if you make fifty you really will take me to town? You'll promise faithfully?"

"*Foi de gentilhomme!* The word of a Romney, my dear Joan; and, mind, if I do not make fifty the subject must be dropped for the present year of grace. Next year the discussion may be re-opened; but for this winter there must be no further attempt at coaxing. You know that I am as clay in your hands, young woman, and you must not take an unfair advantage of my weakness."

I promised.

"And you really will try, father, to make fifty?"

"I can promise you that, my dear. It would take more than the thought of the horrors of London to make me get out on purpose."

So the thing was settled.

I went to see Bob about it before going to bed. Bob is a Freshman at Magdalen, so, naturally, he is much more conceited than any three men have any right to be. I suppress him when I can, but lately, in the excitement of putting my hair up, I had forgotten to give him much attention, and he had had a bad relapse.

I found him in the billiard-room with Mr. Garnet. He was sprawling over the table, trying to reach his ball without the rest, and looking ridiculous. I waited till he had made his stroke and missed the red ball, which he ought to have pocketed easily.

Then I said, "Bob!"

He said, "Well, what?"

I think he must have been losing, for he was in a very bad temper.

"I want to speak to you."

"Go ahead, then."

I looked at Mr. Garnet. He understood at once.

"I'm just going to run upstairs for a second, Romney," he said. "I want my pipe. Cigarettes are bad for the soul. I sha'n't be long."

He disappeared.

"Well?" said Bob.

"Father says that if he makes fifty on Monday against the Cave he'll take me to London for the winter."

Bob lit another cigarette and threw the match out of the window.

"You needn't hurry to pack," he said.

"Don't you think father will make fifty?"

"He hasn't an earthly."

"He made twenty-five last year."

"Yes; but this year the Cave men have got a new pro. I don't suppose you have ever heard of him, but his name's Simpson—Billy Simpson. He played for Sussex all last season, and was eleventh in the first-class bowling averages. The governor may have been the dickens of a bat in his day, but I'll bet he doesn't stand up to Billy for many overs. As for getting fifty——"

Words failed him. I felt like a cat. I could have scratched somebody—anybody; I did not care whom. No wonder father had made the bargain so cheerfully. He knew he could only lose by a miracle.

"Oh, Bob!" I said. My despair must have been tremendous, for it touched even Bob. He said, "Buck up!"

I said, "I won't buck up. I think everybody's horrid."

"Look here," said Bob, anxiously—I could see by his face that he thought I was going to cry—"look here, chuck playing the giddy goat and going into hysterics and that sort of thing, and I'll give you a straight tip."

"Well?"

"This man Simpson—I have it on the highest authority—is in love with your maid—what's her name?"

"Saunders?"

"Saunders. At present it's a close thing between him and a chap in the village. So far it's anybody's race. Billy leads at present, because it's summer and he's a celebrity in the cricket season. But he must pull it off before the winter or he'll be pipped, because the other Johnny plays footer and is a little tin god in these parts directly footer begins. Why don't you get Saunders to square Billy and make him bowl the governor some tosh which he can whack about?"

"Bob," I cried, "you're an angel, and I'm going to kiss you!"

"Here, I say!" protested Bob.

"Break away!"

While I was kissing him Mr. Garnet came back.

"They never do that to me," I heard him murmur, plaintively.

I spoke to Saunders while she was brushing my hair.

I said, "Saunders!"

"Yes, miss."

"Er—oh, nothing."

"Yes, miss."

There was a pause.

"Saunders!"

I said.

"Yes, miss."

"Do you know Simpson, the cricket professional at Castle Cave?"

"Yes, miss."

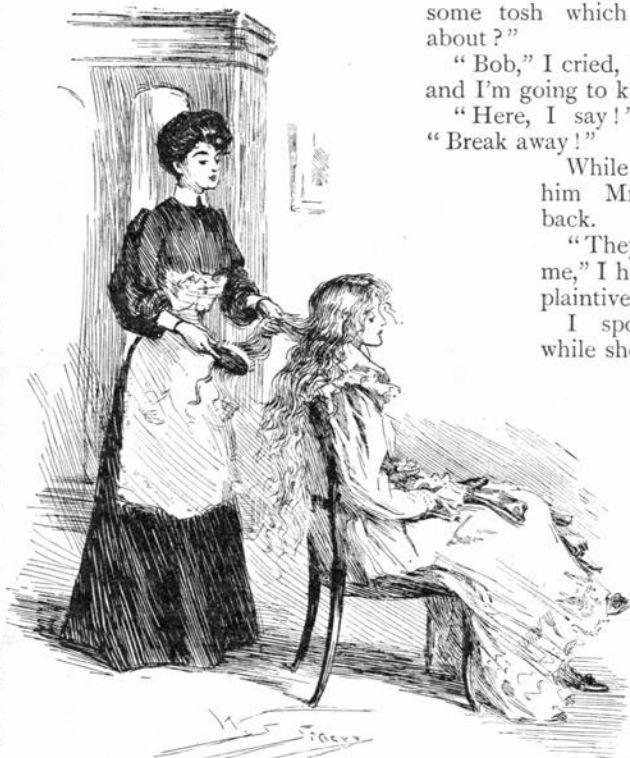
Her face, reflected in the glass in front of me, grew pinker. It is always rather pink.

"He is very fond of you, isn't he?"

"He says so, miss."

She simpered—visibly.

"He would do anything for you, wouldn't he?"



"DO YOU KNOW SIMPSON, THE CRICKET PROFESSIONAL AT CASTLE CAVE?"

"He says so, miss." Then, in a burst of confidence, "He said so in poetry once, miss."

We paused again.

"Saunders!" I said.

"Yes, miss."

"Would you like that almost new hat of mine? The blue chiffon one with the pink roses?"

She beamed. I believe her mouth watered.

"Oh, yes, miss."

Then I set out my dark scheme. I explained to her, having first shown her how necessary it was to keep it all quite secret, that a visit to town that winter depended principally on whether Mr. Simpson bowled well or badly in the match on Monday. She held Simpson in the hollow of her hand. Therefore she must prevail upon him to bowl father a sufficient quantity of easy balls to allow him to make fifty runs. In return for these services he would win Saunders's favour, and Saunders would win the hat she coveted and also a trip to London.

Saunders quite saw it.

She said, "Yes, miss."

"You must *make* him bowl badly," I said.

"I'll do what I can, miss. And I do really think that Mr. Simpson will act as I tells him to."

Once more she simpered.

Father came back in very good spirits from practising at the village nets next day.

"I was almost in my old form, my dear," he said. "I was watching them all the way. Why, I am beginning to think I shall make that fifty after all."

I said, "So am I, father, dear."

Saunders had stirring news on the following night. It seemed that Mr. Simpson was in an awkward position.

"Sir Edward, miss," said Saunders, "who always behaves very handsome, Mr. Simpson says, has offered to give him a ten-pound note if he bowls so well that nobody of the Middlefold side makes fifty against Castle Cave."

Here was a blow. I could not imagine any love being proof against such a bribe. London seemed to get farther away as I listened.

"And what does Simpson——"

"Well, Mr. Simpson and me, miss, we talked it over, and I said, 'Oh, if you prefer Sir Edward's old money to a loving heart,' I said, 'why, then,' I said, 'all is over between us,' I said, 'and there's others I could mention who worships the ground I tread on, and

wouldn't refuse me nothing,' I said. And Mr. Simpson, he said ten pounds was a lot of money and wasn't to be found growing on every bush. So I just tossed my head and left him, miss; but I shall be seeing him to-morrow, and then we shall find out if he still thinks the same."

The next bulletin of Mr. Simpson's state of mind was favourable. After a day of suspense Saunders was able to inform me that all was well.

"I walked out with Mr. Harry Biggs, miss, and Mr. Simpson he met us and he looked so black, and when I saw him again he said he'd do it, he said. Ho, he is jealous of me, miss."

Mr. Harry Biggs, I supposed, was the footballer rival.

I slept well that night and dreamed that I was dancing with Saunders at a house in Belgrave Square, while Mr. Simpson, who looked exactly like Bob, stood in a corner and stared at us.

It was a beautiful day on the Monday. I wore my pink sprigged muslin with a pink sash and the pink chiffon hat Aunt Edith sent from Paris. Fortunately, the sun was quite hot, so I was able to have my pink parasol up the whole time, and words can't express its tremendous duckiness.

The Cave team were practising when we arrived, and lots of people had come. The Cave man, who was wearing a new Panama, met us at the gate.

"Ah, Sir William," he said, fussing up to father, "you're looking well. Come to knock our bowling about, eh? How do you do, Miss Joan? We're getting quite the young lady now, Sir William, eh? quite the young lady."

"How do you do, Sir Edward?" I said in my number four manner, the distant but gently tolerant. (It wants practice, but I can do it quite well now.)

"I hear you have a new professional this year," said father. "Which is he?"

"Ah, yes, yes; Simpson. You have probably seen his name in the papers. He did well for Sussex last season. There he is, standing by the tent. That tall young fellow."

I eyed Mr. Simpson with interest. He was a nice-looking young man, but gloomy. He was like a man with a secret sorrow. And I don't wonder. I suppose a bowler hates to have to bowl badly on purpose. And there was the ten pounds, too. But he must have thought it worth while, or

he wouldn't have done it. I could not help wondering what was Saunders's particular attraction. Perhaps I don't see her at her best, reflected over my head in the looking-glass.

Much Middlefold won the toss, and father and another man went in to bat. I was awfully excited. I was afraid, when it actually came to the point, Mr. Simpson's blood would be up to such an extent that he would forget all about Saunders's attractiveness. The other man took the first ball. I could see that he was very much afraid of Mr. Simpson. He looked quite green. He made a huge swipe at the ball and missed it, but it didn't hit the wickets. Then he hit one right into Sir Edward's hands, and Sir Edward let it fall and puffed out his cheeks as if he was annoyed, as I suppose he was. And then Mr. Simpson bowled very fast, and knocked two of the stumps out of the ground.

"It isn't playing the game, don't you know," I heard one of our side say, "bringing a man like Billy Simpson into a country cricket match." He was sitting on the grass not far from me with his pads on. He looked very unhappy. I suppose he was going in to bat soon. "He's too good, don't you know. We shall all be out in half an hour. It spoils all the fun of the thing. They wouldn't like it if we got a lot of first-class pros to come and bat for us. Tell you what—it's a beastly shame!"

The next man missed his first ball; it went past the wicket-keeper. They ran one run, so that now father had to bat against Mr. Simpson.

Vol. xxx.—5.

"If old Romney doesn't do something," said the man who thought Mr. Simpson too good for country cricket, "we're in the cart. He used to be a rattling bat in his time, and he might stop the rot."

He did. I was watching Mr. Simpson very carefully, but I couldn't see that he bowled any differently to father. Still, he must have done, because father hit the ball right into the tent, close to where I was sitting. And the next ball, which was the last of the over, he hit to the boundary again. Everybody clapped hard, and the man sitting on the grass near me said that, if he could keep it up, he would "knock Billy off his length, and then they'd have to have a change."

"And then," said he, "we'll have them on toast."

The match went on in a jerky sort of way. That is to say, father continued to score as if the bowling was the easiest he had ever seen, and the others simply went to the wickets and were instantly destroyed by Mr. Simpson.

"The fact is," said the young man near me, cryptically,



"IT ISN'T PLAYING THE GAME, DON'T YOU KNOW," I HEARD ONE OF OUR SIDE SAY."

"we're all rabbits, and old Romney is the only man on the side who could hit a football." He had himself been in, and been bowled second ball.

The last man was now at the wickets, and it was getting frightfully exciting, for father had made forty-eight. The whole score was only ninety-three. Everybody hoped that the last man would stop in long enough to let father make his fifty—especially myself.

managed to make anything, and then it was only one. So now he had made forty-nine. And then that horrid, beastly idiot of a last man went and spooned up the easiest catch, and Sir Edward Cave, of all men, caught it.

I went into a deserted corner and *bellowed*.

Oh, but it was all right after all, because father said that forty-nine not out against one of the best bowlers in England was enough for



"SIR EDWARD CAVE, OF ALL MEN, CAUGHT IT."

I was in such a state of suspense that I dug quite a trench with my parasol. I felt as if I were going to faint.

The other bowler, not Mr. Simpson, was bowling. Father was batting, and he had the whole six balls to make his two runs off.

This bowler had not taken any wickets so far, and I could see that he meant to get father, which would be better than bowling any number of the rabbits, as the young man called them. And father, knowing that he was near his fifty, but not knowing quite how near, was playing very carefully. So it was not till the fifth ball of the over that he

his simple needs, and that, so far as our bargain was concerned, it should count as fifty.

So I am going to town for the winter, and Mr. Simpson has got his ten-pound note, and will marry Saunders, I suppose, if he hurries and manages it before the football season comes; and father is as pleased as possible with his forty-nine, because he says it restores his faith in himself and relieves him of a haunting fear that he was becoming a veteran; and the entire servants' hall is moaning with envy at Saunders's blue chiffon hat with pink roses.