

Jeeves and the Three Wicket Haul

A short story by PG Wodehouse (as told to Chris Curtis)

'Jeeves!' I hollered from the drawing room whilst getting outside my second whisky and s- of the day. 'It's Wednesday evening. Cricket. I'm dressed and ready to go. Be a good chap and and go and put the kitbag in the two-seater.'

Jeeves appeared in the usual manner. In all the years he has been my Gentlemen's personal gentlemen, I have yet to discover how he does it, but he glides in and presents himself at one's side without one noticing. He looked at me in my old whites, a bit tatty perhaps but neatly pressed with the grass stains mostly faded. His right eyebrow lifted almost imperceptibly, perhaps a quarter of an inch.

'I had assumed you would be playing in your new whites with the maroon trim, sir, and not,' he paused for a second 'in the cricketing attire preferred by those of the lower-middle classes.'

Well I don't mind saying I was jolly well pipped with his attitude. These old whites had been through some fine old scrapes during my time up at Oxford, but Jeeves had strong views about the quality of goods from my previous purveyor of kit, Chav Sports. Nevertheless, time was short, so to avoid another scene like that time we disagreed about the pink tie, I duly changed into the uniform of the Sad Fat Dads with Pads and set off down Watling Street. I had taken up with this team only recently, and beating the odds of even the most generous of turf accountants, we had been on a bit of a run, unbeaten in three matches.

We arrived at Greenwood Park, in that part of town known as Chiswell Green, just after six. The weather was set fair, a perfect evening for a walk around the gardens with a couple of cocktails before dining, but on this evening cricket was the *raison d'être*. The opposition were those cads from FCC, being the Final Cricket Team, and not that bunch of crooks and frauds who pretend to run the morning train to St Pancras.

There was a ticklish moment just before the start of proceedings when we realised that there were two players AWOL. Young Matty Bond, a new boy, hadn't turned up as the telegram sent by the match manager had evidently failed to arrive, the GPO not being as efficacious as it once was. Michael 'Corporal' Jones was also absent, being delayed due to a complicated legal matter at Bow Street magistrates. One of his clients had been up before the beak for knocking the helmet off a police officer on boat race night and got 7 days without the option. Rather felt for the chap.

Notwithstanding the shortage of talent, and being two players short, our captain Graham 'Potato' Peel, in a departure from the published routine, bally well won the toss and elected to bat. With the Corp. Jones absent, the batting order was in a state of some disarray, and so it was that Potato and Taffy Williams marched to the square, whilst Trotty Nightingale and Bricky Evershed padded up at 3 and 4. Jeeves maintained a dignified distance, watching proceedings from a nearby bench.

Taffy took strike, and immediately unleashed a glorious smash for 4. Next ball was run for a bye, and Potato took guard. Then, reverberating across the field of play there was a strange noise, like the sound of a tray of afternoon cocktails being dropped by a nervous parlour-maid, followed by a polite cheer from the field. Potato had been clean bowled for a duck.

'One can scarcely conceive the angle that the ball turned for Mr Peel, sir,' said Jeeves appearing amongst us. 'I fancy he was attempting a square cut, but it nipped back at an alarming rate. Most unfortunate for he is a player of the highest standard. Perhaps Mr Nightingale will fare better.' SFDWP were rocked at 5/1.

Nightingale's first delivery was what my old friend Lord Boycott of Grimethorpely Manor, S Yorks, refers to as a buffet ball. Trotty duly helped himself to a sumptuous cover drive for a four. The next nine overs passed by in a steady procession of ones and twos with Taffy calling the runs in that deep provincial drawl reminiscent of my Aunt Agatha when she's had one too many e-cigars over the port. The accumulation was punctuated by Trotty sweeping a loose one down to fine leg for four, and then in the tenth over, he retired on 31 following another brilliant four down to the cover boundary. The scoreboard ticked up to 56/1.

Bricky Evershed is known in the trade as the posh builder, although until such time he has been contracted to bung the long awaited east wing on Blandings Castle, home of the 9th Earl of Emsworth, I reserve judgement. Bricky swaggered up to the crease like a man who has had an inflated estimate accepted by a recently be-widowed Countess, and lived up to the promise by promptly flicking two quick ones to the deep backward square leg boundary. By the turn of the over he was already in double figures, with Taffy on 21. At this point a gentle cough brought me to attention. Jeeves wished to speak.

'You have something to say Jeeves?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well come on then, spit it out, time waits for no man, what!'

'I think, sir, that you should prepare yourself for the contingency that both Mr Williams and Mr Evershed return to the pavillion in the very near future. Mr Williams is but one good shot from retirement, whilst Mr Evershed is attempting some rash strokes outside off stump, and I fear the worst. Mr Wilson is well prepared to bat next at five, but with Mr Jones and Mr Bond absent I surmise you will be elevated up the order to six. Perhaps I could assist with your leg protection?'

Jeeves was right of course, he always is. His brain is twice the size of a regular chap, something to do with all the fish he eats. Taffy, facing a slow spinner chucking pies out of the setting sun was dropped by the bowler, but then caught next ball at square leg by a sprightly chap who dived low like an Uruguayan forward in Association Football. A couple of deliveries later Bricky was clean bowled on 14, his supporting wall needing some reinforcement. With Sergeant Wilson having already replaced Taffy, I then shuffled up to the wicket with some mild encouragement from Jeeves.

I don't know what the record is for giving your wicket away to mediocre bowling, but I must surely hold it. On perhaps my fourth delivery, facing the sun without regulation eyewear, I saw it late, swung, missed, and was bowled through the gate. Out for an egg, dash it, the score now 79/4. Returning to base, the team looked at me much as the ratings must have looked at Nelson as he lay prone on the fo'c'sle of HMS Victory. Sad but also embarrassed that someone that one looks up to could put oneself into such a position of vulnerability. Jeeves was nowhere to be seen, he had slunk off embarrassed, no doubt, about the effect his selection of the maroon trimmed kit had had on my performance. Simon 'Busted' Knee was next in.

Busted and the Sgt. then gave the cherry a bit of the hard stuff, a boundary for Sarge while Busted clubbed a couple up the hill to deep mid wicket, although his clubbing wasn't quite of the right stuff to push it over the rope. Late in the 17th over, Busted was out clean bowled for 6 to a ball that was identical to the one that accounted for yours truly. This bowler - Stone was his name - was clearly made of the hard stuff.

By now Corp. Jones had arrived, delivered safely by the evening train from St Pancras. Pressed straight into action, the Corp. wasted no time in delivering a motivating speech to comrade Wilson in the middle.

'Don't Panic!' said the former, promptly attempting to pull a loose delivery somewhere to the east of Walmington-on-Sea, managing a single.

'Do you think that's wise?' replied the Sergeant, a comment that was shown to be justifiably prescient next ball, when the Corp., playing through his shot early, was out to a simple catch at mid-off for that solitary run.

Prof. Hollerton strode purposefully to the crease. Clever old bird. Written some books on something or other to do with telescopes or some such intelligent stuff. Jeeves told me all about one morning a while back, however as I had been at the Oriental with comrades Diprose and Longbottom the previous evening until the postmen had started their rounds, my brain was disinclined to pay attention. But I digress. The Prof. relished the harder, flatter wicket than seen in recent weeks and wasted no time in getting himself up to 9 runs, including a boundary. Unfortunately for him and the Sgt, the twenty overs were up, leaving both stranded one short of double figures as the innings drew to a close at 110/6. Not a bad effort for a Saddos innings, but there was a slight whiff that the score might be an olive short of a stiff martini. During the changeover interval, Jeeves hove to abaft the kit bag.

'A reasonable score in the circumstances, sir, particularly with the sun at an inconvenient aspect on the northwestern horizon.'

'Quite, quite Jeeves, but same for both teams eh?'

'If I may hazard an opinion, sir, I would venture that for the next 15 minutes the sun will be directly in rear of the right handed bowlers arm when over the wicket from the Pavillion end. Were you to

propose that Mr Jones opens the bowling from that end, his particular brand of flighted leg breaks will be difficult to play, indeed one that straightens is likely to induce the batsmen to play inside leg stump and be clean bowled.'

I must say that up to this point Jeeves had not shown much interest in cricket, or indeed any form of outdoor sport save for the occasional flutter on a rank outsider at Sandown Park, which somewhat fortuitously for him always seemed to come in. However it is a brave man who prepares to act contrary to his advice, so with a poker face I suggested to Potato and the Corp. that the latter should open proceedings, using Jeeves' words verbatim. It is to their credit that they pursued that course of action, although they probably detected Jeeves' hand in the proposal; I had never before used the phrase 'flighted leg breaks' without the benefit of the latest Wisden in very close proximity.

What with all the fuss about leg breaks and what-not, and finding myself positioned somewhere in the region of extra cover with the sun just off the port bow, my aspect of the game was somewhat diminished. I was, however, roused from a deepening slumber at the sixth ball by what sounded much like the Master of the Quorn Hunt calling to his dogs across four ploughed fields in a force eight gale. The Corp. had clean bowled the opener in his first over. Jeeves' plan had bally well worked!

Amid the celebrations, the Prof dished up some medium pace from the other end, and in his first over claimed the scalp of Rhodes with the plummiest of plum LBWs you will ever see. I expect all that work with telescopes had improved the Prof's eyesight, and now Saddos were in uncharted territory with the opposition two down in two overs.

Corp. Jones started his second over, then, and I still can't believe I am penning these words dear reader, he took a second wicket. FCC were now truly in the soup, 6/3 after 13 balls, a sticky posish if ever there was one. A couple more wickets and we'd be into their tail, and be on the brink of giving them the hardest thrashing since Master Albrightson caught me sampling his secret stash of cognacs late one evening in the lower fourth common room at Eton.

And so the game wore on. Busted and Taffy took the next bowling pair, Taffy keeping it very tight conceding only 9 runs in his two overs, whilst Busted took another wicket, bowling Bligh, oddly not their captain, for 11 with a peach of a delivery that nipped back. Jonno 'Captain' Hook, oddly not our captain either, weighed in with some tight, parsimonious bowling, the batsmen only connecting with two of his twelve deliveries. The Captain was not happy with that return, and if lady fortune favours the brave, she must have been otherwise engaged for the evening so as to deny him a surely deserved wicket. Up to this point the Saddos bowling had been pretty tight, keeping the FCC run rate on the right side of the ledger as far as we were concerned. However the sun had continued its slow journey to and beyond the horizon, and we were now into the teen-overs, the space on the scorecard reserved for the newer bowlers in the attack. Brickly went up for his first ever dash of Saddo bowling, and kept up the season tradition of taking a wicket on debut, clean bowling Tomming for 17. FCC now at 65/5 and on the ropes.

Ask any of the my old cricketing pals, Oofy Russell, Lord Doel of Cambridge et al, and they will tell you that Bertram Wooster-Curtis trades as a batsman, not a great batsman, but a bat all the same. My

bowling, however, was to tired batsmen what the dew is to the parched earth at the close of an August afternoon. It was with some trepidation therefore that I strode to the wicket when called to arms by Potato Peel. I was startled to realise at this point that this maroon trimmed kit that Jeeves had schemed me into wearing was not one I had acclimatised myself to for bowling. True, the old kit was not particularly successful in the bowling department either, 1 wicket for 1,489 runs at the last count, and that wicket only because the batsman was laughing so much at the slowness of my delivery that he bent double and was out hit wicket.

I sailed in with my first ball from the Watford Road end, and in keeping with my tradition this season, a wide was called. The next couple failed to confound the batsmen with their speed, spin and flight, having none of the above, and were easily scored from. The fourth ball, to Ralph batting, went a fraction of an inch inside the return crease to which he threw out the bat, just finding the edge. Old Potato behind the stumps then pouched the nut to the delight of all except Ralph himself, who had to be reminded by the Umpire of his duty in such situations with the smallest waggle of the index finger.

Next man in was Rhodes senior, the FCC captain and wicket keeper. Reputationally a rather stiff bludger to remove from the crease, and with FCC in a spot of bother with respect to the wicket count there was no doubt he would be difficult to dislodge. It was with some surprise therefore that my last delivery of the over, termed the 'even-slower' ball by some of my less benevolent team mates, had an unhurried meeting with Rhodes' middle stump. Cheers abounded, and I withdrew to square leg for a spot of quiet contemplation.

It seemed barely minutes later that I was called for a second over. The passage of time had left a haze reminiscent of a summer day on the terrace at the Hotel Splendide in Cannes, but midway through the over I bowled one that pitched in line, carried on straight, and gave a definite clunk as it hit something non-willow on the batsman's person. Potato went up, the close fielders went up, I politely enquired of the umpire if that indeed was a leg before, and his index finger made a slow steady journey due north. The team rallied round to celebrate a famous, and frankly incomprehensible three wicket haul. The dessert plates having now been cleared for this innings we were into the coffee and petits fours at 82/8 with 4 overs remaining.

Unfortunately, the opposition were rather well stocked in the tail-ended department, and had no desire to make inroads into the port and cigars. A chap called Patrickson came in and proceeded to knock it around a bit. The run rate required dropped, and when Trotty Nightingale stepped up to bowl the 18th over they required fewer than a run a ball.

It is at this point in the narrative that I should introduce to the proceedings our substitute fielder. Being short of a man we had borrowed an FCC chap, who to protect from future embarrassment amidst polite company I shall refer to simply as Butterhands. He was stationed throughout the innings out of the way down at the long on boundary, being a place where no runs had been scored all evening. Patrickson had other ideas however and sent a good delivery from Trotty straight down to his team mate. Butterhands dropped to one knee intending to make the stop and throw it back to keep it to a single. Unfortunately he was nutmegged (I believe the term to be) and it trickled over the

boundary for four. On the very next delivery, a replay occurred with the same result. Six runs lost in 2 balls, the profuse apologies from Butterhands falling on 22 deaf ears, busily scratching the chap from future invitations to lunch.

It was thus no surprise when the FCC tail knocked off the requisite runs with the last ball of the 19th over, despite the close attention of a leg gully, silly point, short mid-on and yours truly at silly mid-on. Normal service resumed with yet another match lost inside the last 6 balls.

Trudging back to the pavilion, Jeeves manifested himself on the boundary.

'Very bad luck, sir. A great team performance, let down only by those two boundaries in the 18th over. One could scarcely conceive how a man conversant with the rudiments of cricket could have failed to arrest those shots, but it was with some distress that I observed his shortcomings.'

'Yes, quite Jeeves,' I replied tersely, 'but let us not speak of this any longer, and push off to the Six Bells for a couple of sharpners, and perhaps a furtive glance at the lissom figure of that compact brunette behind the bar.'

'I do think, sir, if you pardon the continuation of the discourse, that the match is worthy of some critical analysis. Many members of the team emerged with due credit, not least the fine batting performances of Mr Nightingale and Mr Williams. Mr Peel's captaincy demonstrated a shrewd cricketing brain, whilst Mr Jones has again exceeded even his own expectations with the ball, in what is turning into a glittering season for him. Mr Evershed gave a good account of himself on debut, Mr Hook was decidedly unfortunate not to take at least one wicket, whilst Messrs Wilson, Hollerton and Knee all contributed runs and/or wickets. But I must, sir, reserve praise for your good self. Three wickets in 12 balls is a rare feat; you must be pleased of the achievement and the considerable difference the maroon trimmed whites made to your action.'

I started visibly. 'What the deuce are you rattling on about Jeeves?' I continued aquiver. 'The kit had nothing to do with it, it was just a spot of luck.'

'In this circumstance, sir, it is not the case. Your previous whites had deteriorated to an extent that you gave the impression of a tired old man ambling to the crease. Opposing batsmen held no fear. But the new whites with the maroon trim present a vista akin to a stampeding polar bear in full flight with blood and gore trailing down his sides. Even the stoutest batsman with the firmest of dispositions can not resist from quailing before your approach. In summary, sir, you frightened the wickets out of them.'

I have said it before and I will say it again. Jeeves stands alone in matters of intelligence.

'Jeeves,' I said firmly, 'the old whites.'

'Sir?'

'Throw them out. I have no need for them.'

'Of course sir. I had taken the liberty of disposing of them shortly after the changeover. I presented them as a new uniform to the apprentice kitchen porter at the Six Bells, in exchange for which I received a large plate of sausage and chips.'