

JACKSON'S DIP!

By P. C. Wodehouse

An Amusing Complete
Public School Story



IT was the hottest day on record. The day on which the celebrated American engine-driver was obliged to sit inside his furnace in order to keep cool must have been warm; but it could not have been warmer than this. The thermometer had been going up steadily for hours. It had been high at the end of morning school. During the dinner-hour it had risen. Lying under the trees you could see a sort of dancing haze over the cricket-field, as if the earth were smoking. And now at three o'clock it was worse than ever.

The Upper Fifth struggled painfully across the cloisters, keeping as much as possible in what little shade was thrown by the pillars. They were due at M. Gautier's room at the top of the middle block for their French lesson. From under the trees at the other side of the cricket-field came the raucous voice of the school sergeant, who was engaged in putting a junior form through its drill. Somehow the sound seemed to intensify the at.

U In the middle block it was cool. But the repper Fifth had got so warm by the time they heached it, that they barely noticed the

difference. They lurched into M. Gautier's room and sank languidly into their places, where they sat, looking as if all they wanted was to be left alone. Surely the man wasn't going to be brute enough to try and do any work that afternoon? Given absolute peace and full permission to doze, they might, they felt, just manage to scrape through till four o'clock. Otherwise they could not answer for the consequences.

But the French master, a brown, dried-up little man, who looked as if he had spent a lifetime in the tropics, was sternly determined to waste no time.

"Dictée!" he said crisply.

The form looked stupefied. Not dictation with the thermometer at a hundred and eighty or thereabouts, in the shade! It was an outrage. He must be joking. He couldn't expect a chap to write on a day like that. They took up their pens in disgust. Ten minutes' dictation reduced the Upper Fifth to pulp. The leisurely translation of Erckmann-Chatrien's "L'Invasion," which followed, came as a boon and a blessing, except to the unfortunates who had to stand up and translate. The rest of the form leaned back comfortably in their seats, and composed themselves for slumber.

Jackson, who sat next to the open door, was better off than the others. All the windows of the form-room were open, and he got the benefit of the cooling breezes thus created. But even with this advantage it was sufficiently baking. The voice of the sergeant sounded faintly from without, but now it not only made the air seem warmer, but suggested somehow how cool it must be

under those trees, or, better still, in the pond.

One of the features of Locksley School grounds was the pond. It was an idyllic spot, and the thought of it was maddening on an afternoon like this. This pond stood in the middle of a thick clump of trees at the pavilion end of the cricket-field. Its waters, though not deep—about four feet in the middle—were clear as crystal, owing to the fact that a stream ran through it to the river which divided the school from the town.

It would be very pleasant, thought Jackson, to be in the pond. Locksley, as a rule, bathed in the river; but somehow even the river's attractions paled at this moment before those of the pond.

To put a finishing touch on the thing, his next-door neighbour asked him at this point if he was coming to the river after school.

Jackson's mind was made up. At all costs he must go and have a bathe in the pond immediately. If he were expelled for it on his return he must, nevertheless, go. His position next to the door favoured the scheme. All that it was necessary to do was to seize his opportunity.

He confided his intention to his neighbour, who, appropriately, threw cold water on it.

"You'll be an ass if you do," was his criticism.

"Well, I'm going to," said Jackson. "I'm simply boiled. If I don't get cool soon I shall have a fit or something. I wish you'd shunt up more to the end of the form directly I've gone. Ten to one Gautier won't spot that there's anyone away."

"All right. But I shouldn't advise you to."

Jackson made no reply. His eyes were on the master.

His opportunity soon came. M. Gautier put Firmin on to translate. Firmin sat at the opposite end of the room, so that the master turned his back on Jackson. It speedily became evident that M. Gautier would not have much attention to spare for the rest of the form. All his available stock must be

lavished on Firmin, who was making perhaps as complete a hash of "L'Invasion" as mortal had ever done. M. Gautier's moustache bristled with horror. His manner and speech began to resemble those of a tragedian in his "big scene."

"Ah, no, no, my boy! No, no!"

Firmin looked up from his book in mild astonishment, as if he could hardly believe that he was wrong. Then, with the air of one who is always anxious



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to comply with even the most unreasonable request, he gave out another rendering of the sentence. M. Gautier writhed, dashed a hand across his brow, and spun round in his direction again.

Simultaneously Jackson shot silently out of the door, and began to creep downstairs. On the first landing he waited to see if there was going to be any hue and cry. If M. Gautier had discovered his absence, it would not be too late to return and smooth things over with some excuse.

"Ah, no, no, Fir-r-min, my boy! No, no!" from the class-room.

Jackson concluded that all was well. He continued his descent.

It was very pleasant out of doors, pleasanter perhaps because the pleasure was a stolen one. There was a world of difference between the look of the grounds now and their appearance twenty-five minutes ago. The thought of the pond lent a beauty even to the gravel.

From the middle block to the ponds was a distance of about two hundred yards across very open country. He must look to it that no one saw him making for the pond. He wished he had had to approach it from the opposite side; for behind the pond, some dozen yards from the edge of the clump in which it stood, there began a deep belt of shrubbery, which ran all the way to the end of the grounds. It was separated from the high road by a wooden fence of moderate height.

This shrubbery, trackless to the uninitiated, had no secrets for Jackson. When a fag he had ranged through it from end to end with a delightful sense of secrecy and Robin Hood-cum-Fenimore-Cooper's-Indian daredevilry; and, though he had not entered it since time had brought discretion and a place in the XI., he was confident that he still knew it through and through.

But, since this ideal approach was out of the question, he must risk the open way. After all, everybody was in school, so that there was no one to see him. The sergeant and his junior drillers had moved, in the execution of some intricate and probably brilliant manœuvre, to the football ground at the other side of the shrubbery. He could hear

the sergeant urging them on to glory or death in a voice that sounded faint and metallic, as of one speaking in a gramophone.

He made his dash. All went well. He arrived at the clump streaming but jubilant, and stood panting by the edge of the pond. How cool the water looked, and how clear. He remembered reading somewhere, or being told by someone, that it was very bad for you to go into the water in a state of perspiration. You ought to cool down first. Or was it that, if you were in a state of perspiration, it was very bad for you to cool down before going to the water! He could not remember. Both seemed probable. By way of settling the matter he flung himself out of his clothes, and slid into the pond.

Jackson had had some comfortable dips in his time. He could remember occasions when the river had been remarkably pleasant. The first bathe in Cover Reservoir, too, after the arrival of the School Corps at Aldershot Camp—that had had its points. But for absolute and solid luxury this stolen wallow in the pond beat everything he had ever dreamed of. The only drawback was that, being stolen, it was not a bath which it would be advisable to prolong beyond a certain time. The longer he stayed away, the more likely was M. Gautier to notice his absence.

He tore himself reluctantly from the water and began to dress. Having no towel, he did not stop to dry himself, and it was fortunate for him that he did not.

He had reached a sort of halfway stage in his toilet—that is to say, the lower half of him was clothed, but he had still to don his shirt and coat—when he noticed with horror that somebody was coming towards the clump, and that person was Mr. Knight, the master of the Lower Fifth.

Each form on the classical side at Locksley spent the last hour of afternoon school on two days in the week with its French master, and the regular master of the form was consequently off duty. The French days of the Upper and Lower Fifth coincided. The master of the Upper Fifth had taken himself off at three o'clock to the masters' garden at the back of the junior block. Mr. Knight had done the same, but at half-past three had



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suddenly been seized with the notion of trying the pond clump as a resting-place. It seemed to him that it would be so much cooler than the masters' garden. So he gathered up his novel and deckchair and sallied forth.

For a moment Jackson was paralysed. The danger was so near, Mr. Knight being only a few yards from the clump when he saw him, that it seemed hopeless to try and escape. Then he recollected the shrubbery, and determined to make a dash for safety. At the same time, it flashed across his mind that Mr. Knight was shortsighted—at least, he wore spectacles. Possibly he might not recognise him, for he would only get a back view, and once on board the lugger, once in the shrubbery, and the situation was saved.

The result of these reflections was that the master, on entering the near side of the clump, was astonished to catch sight of a figure flitting rapidly away from the other side. The figure was clad as to its nether limbs in the grey flannels which nearly all the school wore during the hot weather. It was the upper half that struck Mr. Knight as peculiar. A canvas shirt enveloped the head, and beneath this he caught a glimpse of bare back. Over his arm the runner carried a blue flannel coat. Even as Mr. Knight looked, the figure disappeared into the shrubbery. "Extraordinary!" said Mr. Knight to himself. "Most extraordinary!"

He trotted round the pond and out of the clump. The excitement of the chase, instinct

in the mildest of human beings, banished from his mind his desire for a comfortable seat in a cool spot. He went out into the sunshine, and hurried to the edge of the shrubbery.

Here he paused.

It was a little difficult to know what was the best thing to do next. He did not feel equal to probing the shrubbery in search of the fugitive. It was very thick, and he was disposed to think that there were insects in it, "things with wings what stings." Wasps even. No. The course to pursue here was to parley with the boy. He was certain on reflection that it was a boy, though he had not recognised him. Yes, a parley was the thing.

But how to begin was the question. No manual of polite conversation ever dealt with the problem, "What to say to semi-naked strangers hidden in shrubberies." He resolved to try a happy blend of command and statement of fact. "Come out directly," he cried. "I can see you!"

"Liar!" murmured Jackson happily, wriggling into his shirt behind a bush.

"Come out, boy!"

Jackson, clothed now and in his right mind, did not hear the observation. He was half-way towards the fence, threading his way through the bushes with the ease of old acquaintanceship. At the fence he stopped, and peered round a bush to see how Mr. Knight was faring. That gentleman had his back turned, and seemed to be still engaged in addressing the shrubbery. Jackson was over the fence and in the road in a couple of seconds.

It was a long way round by the road, but he re-entered the middle block in safety just as the quarter-to struck from the clock-tower. He trotted upstairs to M. Gautier's room, and there he received his second shock of the afternoon. The door was shut.

There are moments when the gamest man feels that there is nothing left to do but to throw up the sponge, Fate being too strong for him. That was how Jackson felt when he looked at the door which shut him out from the class-room. Anxious as he had been three-quarters of an hour before to get out, he was still more anxious now to get in.

I hope I have made it more or less clear that Jackson was a youth of some little resource. He proved himself so in this crisis.

He knocked at the door and opened it. M. Gautier glared at him from the desk. He did not seem to have enjoyed the last three-quarters of an hour. Firmin's translation on a hot afternoon was enough to drive any man distracted, especially an excitable man like the French master.

"Please, sir," said Jackson humbly, "may I come in now?"

M. Gautier continued to glare, as if he were trying without much success to recall the earlier portion of the lesson. When had he sent Jackson out of the room and why? His mind was a blank upon the matter.

"I will be very quiet, sir," urged Jackson.

Royce, his next-door neighbour, caught on to the points of the idea with rapidity.

"Please, sir," he said, "it was really my fault. I think it would be only fair if you allowed Jackson to come in and sent me out instead."

He rose as he spoke. M. Gautier looked bewildered. Then a solution of the problem occurred to him. The hot weather, brain-fag, and so on. He must have sent Jackson out of the room, and forgotten all about it; but it would never do to show that he had forgotten.

"Yes, come in, my boy; come in," he said. Jackson came in.

"Really," said Mr. Knight for the third time that night, over a quiet pipe with Mr. Ferguson in the latter's study, "it was the most extraordinary thing. The boy went into the shrubbery. Of that I am positive. But I am equally positive that he never came out. It was an amazing thing, quite amazing. I waited and watched for nearly an hour, and I am certain that he did not come out."

"Then," said Mr. Ferguson earnestly, "he must be there still. Probably he was attacked with heat apoplexy and fell in his tracks. All you have to do is to see who has not returned to his House to-night, and the missing boy is your friend. You had better

begin to make the round of the houses now."

But Mr. Knight did not move. His chair was comfortable, and his zeal for detective work decidedly abated.

"Nevertheless," he said, "it was a most extraordinary thing, most. And I am certain he did not come out of the shrubbery."

Jackson was rather anxious for the next few days. He knew that Mr. Knight was still puzzled about the "extraordinary" sight he had seen by the pool, and Jackson feared that he might mention it in the presence of M. Gautier.

Had he done so, it was quite likely that M. Gautier would have brought his mind to bear upon a certain member of the Upper Fifth he was instructing that afternoon, who had timidly requested to be allowed to rejoin the class.

Fortunately for Jackson, M. Gautier was of a somewhat reticent and timid disposition in the presence of his colleagues. Seldom did he

converse with them. And it is certain that he would never have confessed—not even in his most talkative moments—that the heat had dealt him a scurvy trick. M. Gautier was particularly proud of his memory. Had he done so it is extremely probable that Mr. Knight would have solved his problem. And having done so would, doubtless, have preferred to let the mystery remain a mystery.

Mr. Knight was a sensitive little person and disliked very much having trouble with the boys, consequently he decided to let the matter drop and fortunately

for Jackson, at any rate, the whole affair died a natural death.

THE END



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