PELHAM GRENVILLE WODEHOUSE

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PODMARSH

GOOD NEWS FOR AFTER-DINNER SPEAKERS

Stuyvesant Bodger, the explorer, is back from West Africa with a strange story, — several strange stories, in fact, but one which differs from the others in that we cannot be absolutely certain that it is a lie. He claims to have seen and spoken to Robert Podmarsh.

Only the oldest members now remember Podmarsh, once the scourge of the club. It is so many years since he disappeared. He vanished one summer without warning, and I can still recall the period of anxiety we lived through. We were afraid he might be in our midst at any moment, telling us those old familiar humorous stories of his under which we had suffered so long. Then, as the days went by and he still remained absent, a new hope began to animate our breasts. And finally we came to the conclusion that he must be dead.

Those were happy days.

But Bodger says that Podmarsh is not dead.

"I will tell you the whole thing," said Bodger. "I was travelling through the Oojoobwa region, south of the M'Pongo, when, as night was falling, I came to a small village, a mere collection of mud huts. The inhabitants looked friendly, so I determined to stop for the night. There seemed to be a good deal of excitement in the place. There was a crowd of semi-naked persons of both sexes chattering and gesticulating. I enquired the reason, and learned that it was the night of the complimentary dinner to Ggbrllmx, which in the M'Pongo dialect, means "He Who Entertains." A fowl was to be roasted whole in the market-place, and human sacrifices and all sorts of jollifications, and afterwards He Who Entertains would make one of his famous speeches and tell some of his inimitable dialect stories.

Well, to cut a long story short, — which Podmarsh would never have done, — I attended the dinner, and the first thing that struck me (not counting a cocoanut thrown by one of the guests) was the extraordinary likeness of the principal guest to someone I had seen before.

That speech of his took me straight back to this club. It was Robert Podmarsh. The speech contained no fewer than six of those Irish dialect stories which he used to inflict on us. He spoke, of course, in the M'Pongo dialect, but the stories were the

same.

It seems that he began to suspect from almost imperceptible signs that his anecdotes had outstayed their first strong welcome in this club.

He decided to travel, to give us time to miss him. And, while off the coast of West Africa, his vessel was wrecked. Coming ashore, he was met and captured by roving natives, and conducted to that village.

The first and only ballot taken among the inhabitants on the question of what to do with him resulted in a sweeping victory for the party the main plank in whose platform was that Podmarsh should be cooked and eaten.

The preparations were well under way, when a fowl, which had been nesting in some bushes, ran past. Habit, even in that crisis, was too much for Podmarsh.

"Why," he asked, "did that chicken cross the road?" The tribe gave the matter its attention. Opinions varied. Some said that it crossed the road to avoid a snake. Others hinted at witchcraft. "Not at all," said Podmarsh. "It crosses the road to get to the other side."

The effect, he tells me, was instantaneous. There was a riot. Dignified medicine-men held their sides: portly witch-doctors rolled in the dust. And before they could recover, Podmarsh was telling them other stories of the same vintage.

After that there was no more talk of eating Podmarsh. The tribe took him to its heart. A special hut and seven wives were assigned to him.

Podmarsh was in his element. The M'Pongo are a simple, untutored race, and such is their mental darkness that they did not even know, till Podmarsh informed them, that a door could ever be anything but a door.

"The whole affair," concluded Stuyvesant Bodger, "is a remarkable example of the law of supply and demand. And I could not help thinking, as I left the village, where there was already talk of running Podmarsh for the office of local God, in place of a stone idol which had let the M'Pongo down badly in its last two wars with neighboring tribes, what a pity it is that all our club jesters and after-dinner speakers cannot be induced to follow his example and go to some distant spot where they would be really appreciated."

"Failing that," he added sadly, "the next best thing would be to adopt in New York the admirable M'Pongo custom of human sacrifices."