

WILTON'S HOLIDAY

by P.G. Wodehouse

When Jack Wilton first came to Marois Bay, none of us dreamed that he was a man with a hidden sorrow in his life. There was something about the man which made the idea absurd, or would have made it absurd if he himself had not been the authority for the story. He looked so thoroughly pleased with life and with himself. He was one of those men whom you instinctively label in your mind as 'strong'. He was so healthy, so fit, and had such a confident, yet sympathetic, look about him that you felt directly you saw him that here was the one person you would have selected as the recipient of that hard-luck story of yours. You felt that his kindly strength would have been something to lean on.

As a matter of fact, it was by trying to lean on it that Spencer Clay got hold of the facts of the case; and when young Clay got hold of anything, Marois Bay at large had it hot and fresh a few hours later; for Spencer was one of those slack-jawed youths who are constitutionally incapable of preserving a secret.

Within two hours, then, of Clay's chat with Wilton, everyone in the place knew that, jolly and hearty as the new-comer might seem, there was that gnawing at his heart which made his outward cheeriness simply heroic.

Clay, it seems, who is the worst specimen of self-pitier, had gone to Wilton, in whom, as a new-comer, he naturally saw a fine fresh repository for his tales of woe, and had opened with a long yarn of some misfortune or other. I forget which it was; it might have been any one of a dozen or so which he had constantly in stock, and it is immaterial which it was. The point is that, having heard him out very politely and patiently, Wilton came back at him with a story which silenced even Clay. Spencer was equal to most things, but even he could not go on whining about how he had fozzled his putting and been snubbed at the bridge-table, or whatever it was that he was pitying himself about just then, when a man was telling him the story of a wrecked life.

'He told me not to let it go any further,' said Clay to everyone he met, 'but of course it doesn't matter telling you. It is a thing he doesn't like to have known. He told me because he said there was something about me that seemed to extract confidences--a kind of strength, he said. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but his life is an absolute blank. Absolutely ruined, don't you know. He told me the whole thing so simply and frankly that it broke me all up. It seems that he was engaged to be married a few years ago, and on the wedding morning--absolutely on the wedding morning--the girl was taken suddenly ill, and--'

'And died?'

'And died. Died in his arms. Absolutely in his arms, old top.'

'What a terrible thing!'

'Absolutely. He's never got over it. You won't let it go any further, will you old man?'

And off sped Spencer, to tell the tale to someone else.

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Everyone was terribly sorry for Wilton. He was such a good fellow, such a sportsman, and, above all, so young, that one hated the thought that, laugh as he might, beneath his laughter there lay the pain of that awful memory. He seemed so happy, too. It was only in moments of confidence, in those heart-to-heart talks when men reveal their deeper feelings, that he ever gave a hint that all was not well with him. As, for example, when Ellerton, who is always in love with someone, backed him into a corner one evening and began to tell him the story of his latest affair, he had hardly begun when such a look of pain came over Wilton's face that he ceased instantly. He said afterwards that the sudden realization of the horrible break he was making hit him like a bullet, and the manner in which he turned the conversation practically without pausing from love to a discussion of the best method of getting out of the bunker at the seventh hole was, in the circumstances, a triumph of tact.

Marois Bay is a quiet place even in the summer, and the Wilton tragedy was naturally the subject of much talk. It is a sobering thing to get a glimpse of the underlying sadness of life like that, and there was a disposition at first on the part of the community to behave in his presence in a manner reminiscent of pall-bearers at a funeral. But things soon adjusted themselves. He was outwardly so cheerful that it seemed ridiculous for the rest of us to step softly and speak with hushed voices. After all, when you came to examine it, the thing was his affair, and it was for him to dictate the lines on which it should be treated. If he elected to hide his pain under a bright smile and a laugh like that of a hyena with a more than usually keen sense of humour, our line was obviously to follow his lead.

We did so; and by degrees the fact that his life was permanently blighted became almost a legend. At the back of our minds we were aware of it, but it did not obtrude itself into the affairs of every day. It was only when someone, forgetting, as Ellerton had done, tried to enlist his sympathy for some misfortune of his own that the look of pain in his eyes and the sudden tightening of his lips reminded us that he still remembered.

Matters had been at this stage for perhaps two weeks when Mary Campbell arrived.

Sex attraction is so purely a question of the taste of the individual that the wise man never argues about it. He accepts its vagaries as part of the human mystery, and leaves it at that. To me there was no charm whatever about Mary Campbell. It may have been that, at the moment, I was in love with Grace Bates, Heloise Miller, and Clarice Wembley--for at Marois Bay, in the summer, a man who is worth his salt is more than equal to three love affairs simultaneously--but anyway, she left me cold. Not one thrill could she awake in me. She was small and, to my mind, insignificant. Some men said that she had fine eyes. They seemed to me just ordinary eyes. And her hair was just ordinary hair. In fact, ordinary was the word that described her.

But from the first it was plain that she seemed wonderful with Wilton, which was all the more remarkable, seeing that he was the one man of us all who could have got any girl in Marois Bay that he wanted. When a man is six foot high, is a combination of Hercules and Apollo, and plays tennis, golf, and the banjo with almost superhuman vim, his

path with the girls of a summer seaside resort is pretty smooth. But, when you add to all these things a tragedy like Wilton's, he can only be described as having a walk-over.

Girls love a tragedy. At least, most girls do. It makes a man interesting to them. Grace Bates was always going on about how interesting Wilton was. So was Heloise Miller. So was Clarice Wembley. But it was not until Mary Campbell came that he displayed any real enthusiasm at all for the feminine element of Marois Bay. We put it down to the fact that he could not forget, but the real reason, I now know, was that he considered that girls were a nuisance on the links and in the tennis-court. I suppose a plus two golfer and a Wildingesque tennis-player, such as Wilton was, does feel like that. Personally, I think that girls add to the fun of the thing. But then, my handicap is twelve, and, though I have been playing tennis for many years, I doubt if I have got my first serve--the fast one--over the net more than half a dozen times.

But Mary Campbell overcame Wilton's prejudices in twenty-four hours. He seemed to feel lonely on the links without her, and he positively egged her to be his partner in the doubles. What Mary thought of him we did not know. She was one of those inscrutable girls.

And so things went on. If it had not been that I knew Wilton's story, I should have classed the thing as one of those summer love-affairs to which the Marois Bay air is so peculiarly conducive. The only reason why anyone comes away from a summer at Marois Bay unbetrothed is because there are so many girls that he falls in love with that his holiday is up before he can, so to speak, concentrate.

But in Wilton's case this was out of the question. A man does not get over the sort of blow he had had, not, at any rate, for many years: and we had gathered that his tragedy was comparatively recent.

I doubt if I was ever more astonished in my life than the night when he confided in me. Why he should have chosen me as a confidant I cannot say. I am inclined to think that I happened to be alone with him at the psychological moment when a man must confide in somebody or burst; and Wilton chose the lesser evil.

I was strolling along the shore after dinner, smoking a cigar and thinking of Grace Bates, Heloise Miller, and Clarice Wembley, when I happened upon him. It was a beautiful night, and we sat down and drank it in for a while. The first intimation I had that all was not well with him was when he suddenly emitted a hollow groan.

The next moment he had begun to confide.

'I'm in the deuce of a hole,' he said. 'What would you do in my position?'

'Yes?' I said.

'I proposed to Mary Campbell this evening.'

'Congratulations.'

'Thanks. She refused me.'

'Refused you!'

'Yes--because of Amy.'

It seemed to me that the narrative required footnotes.

'Who is Amy?' I said.

'Amy is the girl--'

'Which girl?'

'The girl who died, you know. Mary had got hold of the whole story. In fact, it was the tremendous sympathy she showed that encouraged me to propose. If it hadn't been for that, I shouldn't have had the nerve. I'm not fit to black her shoes.'

Odd, the poor opinion a man always has--when he is in love--of his personal attractions. There were times when I thought of Grace Bates, Heloise Miller, and Clarice Wembley, when I felt like one of the beasts that perish. But then, I'm nothing to write home about, whereas

the smallest gleam of intelligence should have told Wilton that he was a kind of Ouida guardsman.

'This evening I managed somehow to do it. She was tremendously nice about it--said she was very fond of me and all that--but it was quite out of the question because of Amy.'

'I don't follow this. What did she mean?'

'It's perfectly clear, if you bear in mind that Mary is the most sensitive, spiritual, highly strung girl that ever drew breath,' said Wilton, a little coldly. 'Her position is this: she feels that, because of Amy, she can never have my love completely; between us there would always be Amy's memory. It would be the same as if she married a widower.'

'Well, widowers marry.'

'They don't marry girls like Mary.'

I couldn't help feeling that this was a bit of luck for the widowers; but I didn't say so. One has always got to remember that opinions differ about girls. One man's peach, so to speak, is another man's poison. I have met men who didn't like Grace Bates, men who, if Heloise Miller or Clarice Wembley had given them their photographs, would have used them to cut the pages of a novel.

'Amy stands between us,' said Wilton.

I breathed a sympathetic snort. I couldn't think of anything noticeably suitable to say.

'Stands between us,' repeated Wilton. 'And the damn silly part of the whole thing is that there isn't any Amy. I invented her.'

'You--what!'

'Invented her. Made her up. No, I'm not mad. I had a reason. Let me see, you come from London, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Then you haven't any friends. It's different with me. I live in a small country town, and everyone's my friend. I don't know what it is about me, but for some reason, ever since I can remember, I've been looked on as the strong man of my town, the man who's all right. Am I making myself clear?'

'Not quite.'

'Well, what I am trying to get at is this. Either because I'm a strong sort of fellow to look at, and have obviously never been sick in my life, or because I can't help looking pretty cheerful, the whole of Bridley-in-the-Wold seems to take it for granted that I can't possibly have any troubles of my own, and that I am consequently fair game for anyone who has any sort of worry. I have the sympathetic manner, and they come to me to be cheered up. If a fellow's in love, he makes a bee-line for me, and tells me all about it. If anyone has had a bereavement, I am the rock on which he leans for support. Well, I'm a patient sort of man, and, as far as Bridley-in-the-Wold is concerned, I am willing to play the part. But a strong man does need an occasional holiday, and I made up my mind that I would get it. Directly I got here I saw that the same old game was going to start. Spencer Clay swooped down on me at once. I'm as big a draw with the Spencer Clay type of maudlin idiot as catnip is with a cat. Well, I could stand it at home, but I was hanged if I was going to have my holiday spoiled. So I invented Amy. Now do you see?'

'Certainly I see. And I perceive something else which you appear to have overlooked. If Amy doesn't exist--or, rather, never did exist--she cannot stand between you and Miss Campbell. Tell her what you have told me, and all will be well.'

He shook his head.

'You don't know Mary. She would never forgive me. You don't know what sympathy, what angelic sympathy, she has poured out on me about Amy. I can't possibly tell her the whole thing was a fraud. It would make her feel so foolish.'

'You must risk it. At the worst, you lose nothing.'

He brightened a little.

'No, that's true,' he said. 'I've half a mind to do it.'

'Make it a whole mind,' I said, 'and you win out.'

I was wrong. Sometimes I am. The trouble was, apparently, that I didn't know Mary. I am sure Grace Bates, Heloise Miller, or Clarice Wembley would not have acted as she did. They might have been a trifle stunned at first, but they would soon have come round, and all would have been joy. But with Mary, no. What took place at the interview I do not know; but it was swiftly perceived by Marois Bay that the Wilton-Campbell alliance was off. They no longer walked together, golfed together, and played tennis on the same side of the net. They did not even speak to each other.

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The rest of the story I can speak of only from hearsay. How it became public property, I do not know. But there was a confiding strain in Wilton, and I imagine he confided in someone, who confided in someone else. At any rate, it is recorded in Marois Bay's unwritten archives, from which I now extract it.

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For some days after the breaking-off of diplomatic relations, Wilton seemed too pulverized to resume the offensive. He mooned about the links by himself, playing a shocking game, and generally comported himself like a man who has looked for the escape of gas with a lighted candle. In affairs of love the strongest men generally behave with the most spineless lack of resolution. Wilton weighed thirteen stone, and his muscles were like steel cables; but he could not have shown less pluck in this crisis in his life if he had been a poached egg. It was pitiful to see him.

Mary, in these days, simply couldn't see that he was on the earth. She looked round him, above him, and through him, but never at him; which was rotten from Wilton's point of view, for he had developed a sort of wistful expression--I am convinced that he practised it before the mirror after his bath--which should have worked wonders, if only

he could have got action with it. But she avoided his eye as if he had been a creditor whom she was trying to slide past on the street.

She irritated me. To let the breach widen in this way was absurd. Wilton, when I said as much to him, said that it was due to her wonderful sensitiveness and highly strungness, and that it was just one more proof to him of the loftiness of her soul and her shrinking horror of any form of deceit. In fact, he gave me the impression that, though the affair was rending his vitals, he took a mournful pleasure in contemplating her perfection.

Now one afternoon Wilton took his misery for a long walk along the seashore. He tramped over the sand for some considerable time, and finally pulled up in a little cove, backed by high cliffs and dotted with rocks. The shore around Marois Bay is full of them.

By this time the afternoon sun had begun to be too warm for comfort, and it struck Wilton that he could be a great deal more comfortable nursing his wounded heart with his back against one of the rocks than tramping any farther over the sand. Most of the Marois Bay scenery is simply made as a setting for the nursing of a wounded heart. The cliffs are a sombre indigo, sinister and forbidding; and even on the finest days the sea has a curious sullen look. You have only to get away from the crowd near the bathing-machines and reach one of these small coves and get your book against a rock and your pipe well alight, and you can simply wallow in misery. I have done it myself. The day when Heloise Miller went golfing with Teddy Bingley I spent the whole afternoon in one of these retreats. It is true that, after twenty minutes of contemplating the breakers, I fell asleep; but that is bound to happen.

It happened to Wilton. For perhaps half an hour he brooded, and then his pipe fell from his mouth and he dropped off into a peaceful slumber. And time went by.

It was a touch of cramp that finally woke him. He jumped up with a yell, and stood there massaging his calf. And he had hardly got rid of the pain, when a startled exclamation broke the primeval stillness; and there, on the other side of the rock, was Mary Campbell.

Now, if Wilton had had any inductive reasoning in his composition at all, he would have been tremendously elated. A girl does not creep out to a distant cove at Marois Bay unless she is unhappy; and if Mary Campbell was unhappy she must be unhappy about him; and if she was unhappy about him all he had to do was to show a bit of determination and get the whole thing straightened out. But Wilton, whom grief had reduced to the mental level of an oyster, did not reason this out; and the sight of her deprived him of practically all his faculties, including speech. He just stood there and yammered.

'Did you follow me here, Mr Wilton?' said Mary, very coldly.

He shook his head. Eventually he managed to say that he had come there by chance, and had fallen asleep under the rock. As this was exactly what Mary had done, she could not reasonably complain. So that concluded the conversation for the time being. She walked away in the direction of Marois Bay without another word, and presently he lost sight of her round a bend in the cliffs.

His position now was exceedingly unpleasant. If she had such a distaste for his presence, common decency made it imperative that he should give her a good start on the homeward journey. He could not tramp along a couple of yards in the rear all the way. So he had to remain where he was till she had got well off the mark. And as he was wearing a thin flannel suit, and the sun had gone in, and a chilly breeze had sprung up, his mental troubles were practically swamped in physical discomfort.

Just as he had decided that he could now make a move, he was surprised to see her coming back.

Wilton really was elated at this. The construction he put on it was that she had relented and was coming back to fling her arms round his neck. He was just bracing himself for the clash, when he caught her eye, and it was as cold and unfriendly as the sea.

'I must go round the other way,' she said. 'The water has come up too far on that side.'

And she walked past him to the other end of the cove.

The prospect of another wait chilled Wilton to the marrow. The wind had now grown simply freezing, and it came through his thin suit and roamed about all over him in a manner that caused him exquisite discomfort. He began to jump to keep himself warm.

He was leaping heavenwards for the hundredth time, when, chancing to glance to one side, he perceived Mary again returning. By this time his physical misery had so completely overcome the softer emotions in his bosom that his only feeling now was one of thorough irritation. It was not fair, he felt, that she should jockey at the start in this way and keep him hanging about here catching cold. He looked at her, when she came within range, quite balefully.

'It is impossible,' she said, 'to get round that way either.'

One grows so accustomed in this world to everything going smoothly, that the idea of actual danger had not yet come home to her. From where she stood in the middle of the cove, the sea looked so distant that the fact that it had closed the only ways of getting out was at the moment merely annoying. She felt much the same as she would have felt if she had arrived at a station to catch a train and had been told that the train was not running.

She therefore seated herself on a rock, and contemplated the ocean. Wilton walked up and down. Neither showed any disposition to exercise that gift of speech which places Man in a class of his own, above the ox, the ass, the common wart-hog, and the rest of the lower animals. It was only when a wave swished over the base of her rock that Mary broke the silence.

'The tide is coming in' she faltered.

She looked at the sea with such altered feelings that it seemed a different sea altogether.

There was plenty of it to look at. It filled the entire mouth of the little bay, swirling up the sand and lashing among the rocks in a fashion which made one thought stand out above all the others in her mind--the recollection that she could not swim.

'Mr Wilton!'

Wilton bowed coldly.

'Mr Wilton, the tide. It's coming IN.'

Wilton glanced superciliously at the sea.

'So,' he said, 'I perceive.'

'But what shall we do?'

Wilton shrugged his shoulders. He was feeling at war with Nature and Humanity combined. The wind had shifted a few points to the east, and was exploring his anatomy with the skill of a qualified surgeon.

'We shall drown,' cried Miss Campbell. 'We shall drown. We shall drown. We shall drown.'

All Wilton's resentment left him. Until he heard that pitiful wail his only thoughts had been for himself.

'Mary!' he said, with a wealth of tenderness in his voice.

She came to him as a little child comes to its mother, and he put his arm around her.

'Oh, Jack!'

'My darling!'

'I'm frightened!'

'My precious!'

It is in moments of peril, when the chill breath of fear blows upon our souls, clearing them of pettiness, that we find ourselves.

She looked about her wildly.

'Could we climb the cliffs?'

'I doubt it.'

'If we called for help--'

'We could do that.'

They raised their voices, but the only answer was the crashing of the waves and the cry of the sea-birds. The water was swirling at their feet, and they drew back to the shelter of the cliffs. There they stood in silence, watching.

'Mary,' said Wilton in a low voice, 'tell me one thing.'

'Yes, Jack?'

'Have you forgiven me?'

'Forgiven you! How can you ask at a moment like this? I love you with all my heart and soul.'

He kissed her, and a strange look of peace came over his face.

'I am happy.'

'I, too.'

A fleck of foam touched her face, and she shivered.

'It was worth it,' he said quietly. 'If all misunderstandings are cleared away and nothing can come between us again, it is a small price to pay--unpleasant as it will be when it comes.'

'Perhaps--perhaps it will not be very unpleasant. They say that drowning is an easy death.'

'I didn't mean drowning, dearest. I meant a cold in the head.'

'A cold in the head!'

He nodded gravely.

'I don't see how it can be avoided. You know how chilly it gets these late summer nights. It will be a long time before we can get away.'

She laughed a shrill, unnatural laugh.

'You are talking like this to keep my courage up. You know in your heart that there is no hope for us. Nothing can save us now. The water will come creeping--creeping--'

'Let it creep! It can't get past that rock there.'

'What do you mean?'

'It can't. The tide doesn't come up any farther. I know, because I was caught here last week.'

For a moment she looked at him without speaking. Then she uttered a cry in which relief, surprise, and indignation were so nicely blended that it would have been impossible to say which predominated.

He was eyeing the approaching waters with an indulgent smile.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she cried.

'I did tell you.'

'You know what I mean. Why did you let me go on thinking we were in danger, when--'

'We were in danger. We shall probably get pneumonia.'

'Isch!'

'There! You're sneezing already.'

'I am not sneezing. That was an exclamation of disgust.'

'It sounded like a sneeze. It must have been, for you've every reason to sneeze, but why you should utter exclamations of disgust I cannot imagine.'

'I'm disgusted with you--with your meanness. You deliberately tricked me into saying--'

'Saying--'

She was silent.

'What you said was that you loved me with all your heart and soul. You can't get away from that, and it's good enough for me.'

'Well, it's not true any longer.'

'Yes, it is,' said Wilton, comfortably; 'bless it.'

'It is not. I'm going right away now, and I shall never speak to you again.'

She moved away from him, and prepared to sit down.

'There's a jelly-fish just where you're going to sit,' said Wilton.

'I don't care.'

'It will. I speak from experience, as one on whom you have sat so often.'

'I'm not amused.'

'Have patience. I can be funnier than that.'

'Please don't talk to me.'

'Very well.'

She seated herself with her back to him. Dignity demanded reprisals, so he seated himself with his back to her; and the futile ocean raged towards them, and the wind grew chillier every minute.

Time passed. Darkness fell. The little bay became a black cavern, dotted here and there with white, where the breeze whipped the surface of the water.

Wilton sighed. It was lonely sitting there all by himself. How much jollier it would have been if--

A hand touched his shoulder, and a voice spoke--meekly.

'Jack, dear, it--it's awfully cold. Don't you think if we were to--snuggle up--'

He reached out and folded her in an embrace which would have aroused the professional enthusiasm of Hackenschmidt and drawn guttural congratulations from Zbysco. She creaked, but did not crack, beneath the strain.

'That's much nicer,' she said, softly. 'Jack, I don't think the tide's started even to think of going down yet.'

'I hope not,' said Wilton.