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The Bertie Project

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

THE BERTIE PROJECT

44

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In memory of Dr Herbert Gold,
a wise and kind doctor.

1

Beer and Knees

On any Friday evening, the Cumberland Bar, just round the corner from Drummond Place and Scotland Street, might be expected to be busy, the meeting place of assorted mercantile tribes, of office workers from further down the hill, of young accountants, of estate agents and lawyers, and, conspicuous by their less formal attire, of some of the more bohemian, the more artistic inhabitants of this eastern corner of Edinburgh's Georgian New Town. At least two of this last group were present early that evening – Angus Lordie, portrait painter and owner of the dog, Cyril, and his friend, Matthew, proprietor of a small art gallery on Dundas Street, husband of Elspeth, and father of the robust and increasingly rumbustious triplets, Tobermory, Rognvald, and Fergus. Cyril, the only dog in Scotland to have a gold tooth, and the only dog anywhere to have been trained to lift his leg at the mention of the controversial conceptual art award, the Turner Prise, was also there, lying contentedly beneath the table at which Matthew and Angus sat. Underneath this table was to be seen an empty metal bowl, licked clean of the dark stout poured into it only ten minutes earlier, and the consumption of which had induced Cyril's state of somnolent contentment.

"Your dog," observed Matthew, "really is a most peculiar creature. I've never quite worked him out, you know. He keeps looking at me in a distinctly disconcerting way."

Angus glanced down at Cyril. Although one of the dog's eyes was closed, he saw that the other, half-open, was focused on Matthew's feet.

"It's as if he had something against me," Matthew continued. "Some canine grudge perhaps."

"Oh, I don't think Cyril dislikes you. Quite the opposite, in fact." Angus smiled at Matthew. "It's just that he's always had this thing about your ankles."

"He nipped me," said Matthew accusingly. "Remember?"

"Yes. That was when he couldn't control himself any further. He yielded to temptation." Angus paused, ready to defend his dog. "We all have our temptations, don't we? Some hidden desire, something we're perhaps a bit ashamed of. Nobody's immune to that." He paused again, before concluding, "Chocolate …"

Matthew stared at Angus. He blushed. He had yielded to temptation only that afternoon, eating an entire bar of expensive Belgian chocolate bought by his assistant, Pat, as a birthday present for Elspeth. The chocolate had been entrusted to him, beautifully wrapped, for delivery to Elspeth, and he had sat and gazed at it, struggling with temptation, until at last he had succumbed. He had then eaten it in a single sitting when Pat went to post some letters, afterwards concealing the wrapping in the drawer of his desk. He had told himself that he would replace it in good time and that Elspeth would never know. But it was, he later decided, an entirely shameful thing to do – no different from the act of a postman who steals a parcel, or a charity collector who pockets donations. Was it possible that Angus had guessed what he had done? That seemed so unlikely, and yet why else would he suddenly bring chocolate into the conversation?

He dismissed his scruples; it was hardly anything to get into a *fankle* over, hardly an issue at all … chocolate was a fungible, after all; something that could be replaced by more of the same. *A fankle* – the Scots word seemed just right for its purpose, as so many Scots words did; a *fankle* was a mess, a state of confusion, sometimes leading to a *stramash* – another

useful Scots word – and it was something one sought to avoid if at all possible.

Angus raised his glass to his lips. Having broached the topic of temptation, he was keen to abandon the subject. He himself experienced the occasional temptation – nothing serious, of course, and barely anti-social – but he was not sure that he would actually own up to such thoughts. Better, though, to think about something else altogether, which was, of course, a recommended way of tackling temptation in the first place.

But it was Matthew who moved the conversation on. "Oh well," he said. "Be that as it may, have you seen the plans for that new building?"

Angus had, and sighed. "You'd think …" he began, and then stopped. There was not much one could add, he felt, to the charges of gross Philistinism that had already been levelled at the developers.

"Exactly," said Matthew, "you'd think, wouldn't you? However, I just don't have the energy to protest. I know I should; I know we should all rise up as one and flood the council with objections, but do they care? Does anyone actually imagine they give any weight to the likes of us, Angus? *Les citoyens?*"

Angus thought for a moment, and then answered, "No."

"So perhaps we should just give the matter a Gallic shrug …"

Angus looked puzzled. "A Gallic shrug?"

"The French are always shrugging," explained Matthew. "You ask their view on things and they give a sort of insouciant shrug, as if to say that these things happen and they, at least, are completely unsurprised."

Angus knew what Matthew meant. He remembered a visit that he and Domenica had been paid by a French anthropologist a few months previously. The topic of French politics had cropped up in the conversation – there was a long

and crippling strike in France, with the government digging in against virtually everybody – and the French visitor had simply shrugged. *Pouf!* he had said, adding, for clarification, *Bif!*

"Perhaps a shrug is not such a bad response," Angus said. "What's the alternative? Getting all steamed up? Hot under the collar? You end up being angry – outraged even – but does that actually do any good?"

Matthew himself was about to shrug, but stopped in time. One could not pronounce on shrugs with a shrug. "I suppose that a shrug indicates acceptance," he said.

"Which is what we should all cultivate," added Angus. "Those who accept things are calmer, more resolved … and, I imagine, live much longer than those who rail against them."

"Probably," said Matthew.

"I can't abide moaning," said Angus, taking a sip of his beer. "Moaning gets us nowhere. It confirms the moaner in his state of discontent, and it irritates those who have to listen to the complaints." He paused, and looked enquiringly at Matthew. "Have I told you about my knee?" he asked.

Matthew shook his head. "You're having knee trouble?"

"A bit," said Angus. He looked at his beer glass, half full, with an expression of regret. "I can only have one beer; you know – because of my knee."

Matthew frowned. "Because of your knee?"

Angus told him. "You see what happened," he began, "is this …"

2

News of Bruce

"I first noticed it," said Angus, "when I was driving up to St Fillans. We have friends there, you see. Actually, she's some sort of cousin of Domenica's, and he used to manage a branch of the Bank of Scotland in the days when banks had proper managers in their branches – somebody you could actually speak to."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Remember our wonderful, solid, *Presbyterian* banks, Angus?" He paused. "Who wrecked our banks? Who actually *did* it? And I don't mean who lost the money by gambling on toxic mortgages and things like that, but who actually decreed that we shouldn't be able to speak to anybody if we phoned the branch? Or who said that banks needn't answer letters their customers wrote to them? Who ended the idea that banks actually supported people through rough times? Who ended all that?"

"People down in the City of London," said Angus. "Avaricious, arrogant people. I have a list of them somewhere. I cut it out of the newspaper. But, as I was saying …"

"Of course – as you were saying."

"We were driving up to St Fillans, going by way of Comrie. You know that back road that goes from Braco – up over the hills?"

Matthew thought for a second before he remembered. As a sixteen-year-old boy he had gone to cadet camp during the summer and they had been driven in an ancient green army truck along that winding road, half looking forward to, half dreading the experience ahead: the tepid, frequently

cold, showers, the rough camaraderie of the Nissen huts, the bullying (both subtle and unsubtle), the shouting and the crudity of males living in close proximity to one another for a week or more. "Past Cultybraggan Camp?" he said.

"Almost," said Angus. And he, too, remembered what that had been like in his own day. For a moment there was an additional bond between them, a bond that surpassed the ordinary ties of friendship, a bond based on a shared tribal experience. He continued, "It was on that road, just as it begins to drop down sharply towards Comrie – that's when I felt this pain in my knee. I thought I'd pulled something."

"You often don't notice it when you actually pull the muscle," said Matthew. "Then later on the pain starts."

"It was quite intense," said Angus. "It was a sharp, insistent pain. Quite bad."

"And?"

"Well, it got steadily worse after we got to St Fillans. That night I found it difficult to bend my knee at all. It was hard to get into bed – I had to sit on the edge of the mattress and then swing the useless leg up. It was far from easy."

Matthew shook his head in sympathy. "Poor you."

"We were due to come back to Edinburgh the following afternoon, but we cut our trip short and drove back the next morning. Domenica drove, in fact, as I couldn't move my leg. It was that painful."

Matthew waited. He was thinking of Cultybraggan Camp and the generations of young men who had passed through it, for some of whom, of course, it had been the prelude to real conflict, to war with real explosives rather than the fireworks their instructors used to simulate explosions.

Angus continued his story. "I saw my doctor in Edinburgh and he prescribed a pretty strong anti-inflammatory. Cyril had something similar from the vet when he caught his front paw in a drain cover. It did the trick for me. I also had a blood test."

"And?" prompted Matthew.

Angus looked morose, and Matthew wondered whether he was about to hear bad news; Angus did not look unwell, but then seriously ill people could often look perfectly healthy.

"Gout," muttered Angus.

Matthew was relieved. "Oh well," he said. "At least …"

He did not finish.

"It's no joke," said Angus. "People make light of it, you know. They know that gout often goes for the big toe, and they find that amusing, for some reason. But it can flare up in other joints."

Matthew started to grin, but checked himself.

"Of course, the diagnosis is not definite," said Angus. "Apparently the only way in which you can really confirm gout is to stick a needle into the joint and see if there's any sign of uric acid crystals."

Matthew, being squeamish, made a face.

"It's crystals that cause it," Angus continued. "They form if your uric acid level is too high. They're shaped like needles – hence the pain."

"And how do they treat it?" asked Matthew.

Angus's face fell again. "There are pills you can take," he said. "They neutralise the uric acid. But you can also treat it by avoiding the foods that cause it."

"Well, there you are," said Matthew.

"Which means cutting out everything I like the most," Angus said. "Seafood, steak, red wine and …" He pointed to his glass of beer. "This stuff too."

Matthew sympathised. "Oh, bad luck."

"I was given a leaflet published by the British Gout Society," said Angus. "It tells you about all the foods you have to avoid – or, if you must, eat in moderation."

Matthew could not help but imagine meetings of the British Gout Society. "The British Gout Society," he mused. "Do you

think they have an annual dance, like other societies?" he went on. "Can you imagine how much fun that would be?"

Angus looked at him reproachfully. "I don't find that at all funny," he said. "And anybody can get it, you know. Not just men who drink port in clubs …"

Matthew assumed a serious expression. "Of course. Sorry." The problem, he thought, was that so much humour involved human misfortune of one sort or another, and now that same human misfortune was out of bounds – interdicted by self-appointed guardians of sensitivity. There was somebody to be offended by everything, he thought, which left little room for laughter.

"I wasn't making light of it, Angus. It's just that the name of the society …"

Angus waved a hand. "No, I know that. And I'm not hypersensitive. But I don't think people should make light of gout. People don't laugh at other conditions."

Matthew knew Angus was right, and decided that another change of subject was called for.

"Bruce," he said. "I saw him the other day, you know. He's back in circulation – with a new Australian girlfriend."

"Poor girl," said Angus.

Matthew shook his head. "If sympathy is called for," he said, "it should be directed towards Bruce. He's the one I feel sorry for."

"I find that hard to believe," said Angus. "Poor girl. Does she have any idea what he's like?"

"I suspect she does," replied Matthew. "If I had to describe her eyes, I think I'd use the expression *wide open*."

"Ah," said Angus. "Doe-eyed?"

Matthew shook his head. "No," he said. "Far from it."

3

Bruce in Danger?

When Angus returned to Scotland Street, he found Domenica in her study. She was reading, engrossed in the latest issue of *The Review of Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*, the arrival of which, at quarterly intervals, was a high point in her calendar.

He let Cyril off his lead. "Anything interesting?" he asked.

Marking her page with a scrap of paper, she put the journal down on her desk. "A rather interesting piece on shifting identities," she said. "Or perhaps it's not so interesting – I haven't quite made up my mind yet. And something on parting ceremonies in Java."

Angus contemplated shifting identities. He was not quite sure what they were – could identity really be shifted, or was it something that you acquired in your early years and kept for life? Could he, by some act of self-revision, become somebody other than the person he had always been? Of course people could change – they grew out of their earlier selves and sometimes became completely unrecognisable, looking the same, perhaps, but having a wholly different view of life. He suspected, though, that this was not the sort of shifting identity that the *Review* had in mind. These shifts, he imagined, were those created by changes in the identity of whole groups of people, perhaps even of nations, caused by … by what? What led to a change in identity so significant that the people who experienced it became different people altogether? Conquest, migration, religious conversion, the subjection of the poor and vulnerable by the strong and solvent?

And parting ceremonies?

"Formal acts of farewell," explained Domenica. "We have them too. Retirement parties. Graduations. Waving goodbye to those embarking on a journey."

Angus looked thoughtful. "Do we still do that?"

"Do what?"

"Wave goodbye to people."

Domenica frowned. "When we get the chance to do so. Mind you, I don't suppose that's all that often. You can't wave farewell to people at airports. You don't see them go. They disappear through a doorway and that's that – in much the same way as they do at Warriston Crematorium."

Angus remembered his father talking about waving farewell to people boarding planes at Turnhouse Airport. "He said they used to let you go out onto the tarmac and wave to the plane as it took off. You could even pose for a photograph in front of the plane."

Domenica smiled. "That seems so quaint now. So trusting. Now we've come to expect that everybody we see wants to kill us."

"And ships too," continued Angus. "Didn't people stand on the quayside and catch paper streamers thrown down from the passengers on the deck of liners?"

"They did," said Domenica. "They held on to the streamers as the liner pulled away – until they broke." She paused. "The streamers represented the links between those embarking on the journey and those staying behind. It was rather touching, don't you think?"

Angus nodded. "*The Parting Glass*," he said. "Do you know the words?"

Domenica did not, and so he told her. *And since it falls unto my lot / That I should rise and you should not* … "That song," he said, "makes me choke up. That and *Auld Lang Syne*."

"And don't forget *Soave sia il vento*," added Domenica. "That great song of parting. *Soave sia il vento* – may the breeze that carries you on your journey be a gentle one …"

They looked at one another, and became briefly silent. Then Domenica said, "Perhaps we've no stomach for parting any more. Perhaps it's denied, just as we tend now to deny death. We pretend it's not happening. Pretend that we're not actually saying goodbye."

"This conversation," said Angus, "is becoming maudlin. Let me tell you, instead, about what happened at the pub."

Domenica smiled. She had been tempted on more than one occasion to conduct an anthropological study of the Cumberland Bar. "Matthew was there?"

"Yes."

"And he said?"

"He saw Bruce the other day."

Domenica raised an eyebrow. "The young man with the …"

"With the hairstyle. Yes. And with the attitude."

"You told me once that Matthew didn't like him."

Angus paused before saying, "I don't think he does. They're meant to be friends, and I suppose they treat one another as friends, but I get the impression that Matthew simply tolerates him. He has no great enthusiasm for him."

Domenica did not think this unusual. "Which I suspect," she said, "is how many people think about at least some of their friends. They're landed with them. They continue with the relationship, such as it is, simply because they can't bring themselves to break it off."

"Perhaps," said Angus. "But the point is this: apparently Bruce has found a new girlfriend."

"Not surprising. He's very good-looking, isn't he?"

Angus's lip curled. "Not my type," he said.

Domenica laughed. "Like all men, Angus," she said, "you suffer from the male inhibition about commenting on the

looks of other males. It's a very strong taboo, isn't it? The most that men will say is something like, 'He's thought to be good-looking' or ''I gather women find him handsome'. They won't say they do."

Angus remained silent, and Domenica continued, "Whereas we women – not being afflicted with this inhibition – are very happy to comment on female beauty. We find no difficulty in saying to another woman, 'You're looking very pretty today.' Can you imagine many men saying that to another man?"

"They wouldn't use the word pretty," suggested Angus. "Or …"

"My point," interjected Domenica.

"Or they just don't see it."

But Domenica disagreed. "Oh, they see it all right. Men are quite capable of judging male beauty in exactly the same way as women are."

"Well, they may be able to detect it," conceded Angus. "But perhaps they don't like to say anything because they actually resent it."

"You mean they're envious of it? I think you may be right. But anyway, what about Bruce's new girlfriend?"

"Australian," said Angus. "Six foot tall. Blonde."

"He'll like that, no doubt."

"Apparently she was a waitress on an airline."

Domenica looked puzzled. "A waitress on an airline?"

"You know," said Angus. "The people who bring you your meals and serve coffee and so on."

Domenica's look of puzzlement changed to a broad smile. "No, Angus; stewardess, you mean. Or flight attendant, now. Not waitress."

"Same thing," said Angus casually. "Anyway, she was a wait … a stewardess for Qantas and then she decided to come and work in Scotland as a personal trainer. She's very sporty, apparently."

"I suppose six foot Australian stewardesses are highly likely to be sporty," said Domenica.

"Yes, but she's keen on extreme sports," said Angus. "You know, jumping off structures and so on. Can you believe it? Matthew thinks that Bruce is going to end up being killed."

Domenica's eyes widened. "Oh, surely not."

"Her last boyfriend was," said Angus.

"But to lose two …"

"As Oscar Wilde would say …"

"To lose two vehicles sounds like carlessness."

They both laughed. Then Angus asked, "What's for dinner, Domenica?"

Domenica was about to reply when she remembered something. "I saw wee Bertie today – on the stair. We had a long conversation."

"Poor Bertie. I don't suppose there's any chance of his mother going away again?"

Domenica shook her head. "Alas," she said. "Not the slightest chance, I fear."

"If only *she* would take up extreme sports."

"Charity, Angus," admonished Domenica. But then she added, "Yes, if only."