

DODO: A DETAIL OF THE DAY

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Dodo: A Detail of the Day by E. F. Benson

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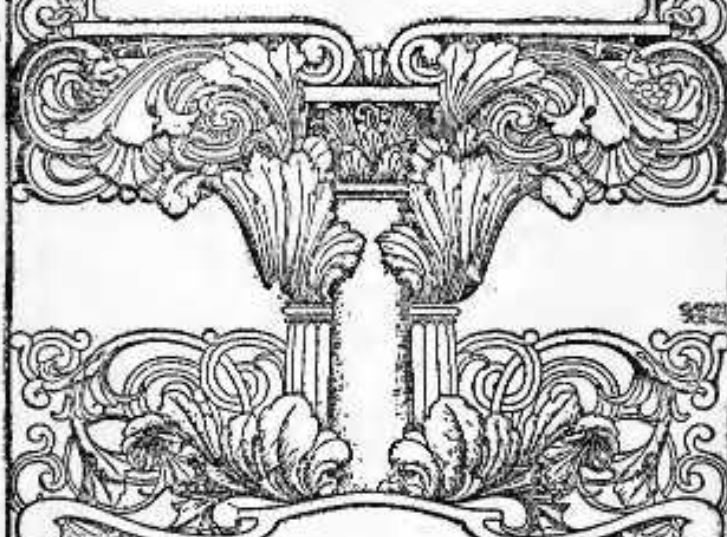
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DODO

CHAPTER ONE



POETS of all ages and of all denominations are unanimous in assuring us that there was once a period on this grey earth known as the Golden Age. These irresponsible bards describe it in terms of the vaguest, most poetic splendour, and, apart from the fact, upon which they are all agreed, that the weather was always perfectly charming, we have to reconstruct its characteristics in the main for ourselves. Perhaps if the weather was uniformly delightful, even in this nineteenth century, the golden age might return again. We all know how perceptibly our physical, mental and spiritual level is raised by a few days of really charming weather; but until the weather determines to be always golden, we can hardly expect it of the age. Yet even now, even in England, and even in London, we have every year a few days which must surely be waifs and strays from the golden age, days which have fluttered down from under the hands of the recording angel, as he tied up his reports, and,

after floating about for years in dim, interplanetary space, sometimes drop down upon us. They may last a week, they have been known to last a fortnight; again, they may curtail themselves into a few hours, but they are never wholly absent.

At the time at which this story opens, London was having its annual golden days; days to be associated with cool, early rides in the crumbly Row, with sitting on small, green chairs beneath the trees at the corner of the Park; with a general disinclination to exert oneself, or to stop smoking cigarettes; with a temper distinctly above its normal level, and a corresponding absence of moods. The crudeness of spring had disappeared, but not its freshness; the warmth of the summer had come, but not its sultriness; the winter was definitely over and past, and even in Hyde Park the voice of the singing bird was heard, and an old gentleman, who shall be nameless, had committed his annual perjury by asserting in the *Morning Post* that he had heard a nightingale in the elm-trees by the Ladies' Mile, which was manifestly impossible.

The sky was blue; the trees, strange to say, were green, for the leaves were out, and even the powers of soot which hover round London had not yet had time to shed their blackening dew upon them. The season was in full swing, but nobody was tired of it yet, and "all London" evinced a tendency to modified rural habits, which expressed themselves in the way of driving down to Hurlingham, and giving water parties at Richmond.

To state this more shortly, it was a balmy, breezy day towards the middle of June. The shady walks that line the side of the Row were full of the usual crowds of leisurely, well-dressed people who constitute what is known as London. Anyone acquainted with that august and splendid body would have seen at once that something had happened; not a famine in China, nor a railway accident, nor a revolution, nor a war, but emphatically "something." Conversation was a thing that made time pass, not a way of passing the time. Obviously the larger half of London was asking questions, and the smaller half was enjoying its superiority, in being able to give answers. These indications are as clear to the practised eye as the signs of the weather appear to be to the prophet Zadkiel. To the amateur one cloud looks much like another cloud: the prophet, on the other hand, lays a professional finger on one and says "Thunder," while the lurid bastion, which seems fraught with fire and tempest to the amateur, is dismissed with the wave of a contemptuous hand.

A tall, young man was slowly making his way across the road from the arch. He was a fair specimen of "the exhausted seedlings of our effete aristocracy"—long-limbed, clean-shaven, about six feet two high, and altogether very pleasant to look upon. He wore an air of extreme leisure and freedom from the smallest touch of care or anxiety, and it was quite clear that such was his normal atmosphere. He waited with serene patience for a large number of well-appointed carriages to go past, and

then found himself blocked by another stream going in the opposite direction. However, all things come to an end, even the impossibility of crossing from the arch at the entrance of the Park to the trees on a fine morning in June, and on this particular morning I have to record no exception to the rule. A horse bolting on to the Row narrowly missed knocking him down, and he looked up with mild reproach at its rider, as he disappeared in a shower of dust and soft earth.

This young gentleman, who has been making his slow and somewhat graceful entrance on to our stage, was emphatically "London," and he too saw at once that something had happened. He looked about for an acquaintance, and then dropped in a leisurely manner into a chair by his side.

"Morning, Bertie," he remarked; "what's up?"

Bertie was not going to be hurried. He finished lighting a cigarette, and adjusted the tip neatly with his fingers.

"She's going to be married," he remarked.

Jack Broxton turned half round to him with a quicker movement than he had hitherto shown.

"Not Dodo?" he said.

"Yes."

Jack gave a low whistle.

"It isn't to you, I suppose?"

Bertie Arbuthnot leaned back in his chair with extreme languor. His enemies, who, to do him justice, were very few, said that if he hadn't been the tallest man in London, he would never have been there at all.