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Title: Atalanta in Wimbledon

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Edward Plunkett (Lord Dunsany) (1878-1957)

Date first posted: Jun 2 2013

Date last updated: Jun 2 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130612

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

ATALANTA IN WIMBLEDON

Drawn from:

Seven Modern Comedies

By

Lord Dunsany

G. P. Putnam's Sons
London & New York

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MR. DAWK.

MARJORIE DAWK.

MR. JINKS.

CONSTABLE SPELKINS.

BILL.

MR. LEONARD.

ATALANTA IN WIMBLEDON

SCENE: A room in a villa, The Elms, at Wimbledon; a door opening on the street.

[Marjorie Dawk reading.]

Enter her father.

DAWK. Hullo, Marjorie! Reading?

MARJORIE. Yes, father.

DAWK. Well, I never. What are you reading?

MARJORIE. Morris, father.

DAWK. Morris? Morris. It conveys nothing to me, of course.

MARJORIE. Oh, I thought you knew all about him.

DAWK. You can't mean William Morris?

MARJORIE. Yes.

DAWK. Good Lord! You might as well read Tennyson.

MARJORIE. I've been reading him too.

DAWK. You reading Tennyson? Good Lord! Since when?

MARJORIE. Since yesterday. I was reading poetry most of last night.

DAWK. Poetry? What ever for?

MARJORIE. Well, you advised me to.

DAWK. Yes. But you don't take my advice, Marjorie. No, that's not the reason. You can't get away with that.

MARJORIE. Can't I?

DAWK. What's it really?

MARJORIE. Well, why did you advise me to read poetry?

DAWK. Exactly for the reason I told you. Here you are just on twenty-six, and quite presentable, and with plenty of friends. But they don't know that there's a pretty girl going about amongst them. For the simple reason that you don't convey the idea of being a girl.

MARJORIE. What then?

DAWK. A young man.

MARJORIE. I a young man?

DAWK. Yes, you smoke when they smoke, you drive their cars, you play all their games, you talk their talk, you ... there's nothing apparently different between you and them. Of course they know you're a girl when they stop to think. Only, well, that's not the moment that a man falls in love. As I told you, you want to convey the idea that their cigarettes and motors and games are common everyday things that they can't help, but that you in your lonely tower, guarded by a dragon....

MARJORIE. I say, Daddy, you don't look very like a dragon.

DAWK. I don't say I do. I don't say I do. You keep me in the background. But that's the *idea*. Then they'd come tumbling over themselves to liberate you.

MARJORIE. Are you sure, Daddy?

DAWK. Well, they used to in Queen Victoria's time.

MARJORIE. Did they have dragons then?

DAWK. Well, not exactly, not exactly. But I believe they used to in King Arthur's time. And Tennyson dished it all up again

for them, sort of rehashed it, as it were. You see, he sort of made the Prince Consort into King Arthur, and then of course the effect spread right downwards. Nowadays ... but it's no use; you won't take my advice.

MARJORIE. I have taken it. I've been reading poetry for two days.

DAWK. Well, I'm glad to see it. After all, you're twenty-six now; and the motoring and the cigarettes don't seem to have led to anything. I should try the poetry.

MARJORIE. I have. And what is more, I have acted on it.

DAWK. You've acted on it?

MARJORIE. Yes, Daddy, I was desperate.

DAWK. What do you mean?

MARJORIE. Well, I may as well tell you, Daddy. After all, we don't hush it all up nowadays like yon embalméd rose, or whatever it is that holds the world's record for silence. I may as well tell you. It's like this.

DAWK. Yes?

MARJORIE. Well, Bill, you know. I've seen a good deal more of Bill than the rest. More motors and cigarettes, as you'd put it. And we were pals. I liked the way he drove, and the things he said. I liked his point of view. Of course it would only sound silly to you, but I liked it. And we like the same movie-shows. Of course I know they're a depraving influence, Daddy. But they used to deprave Bill and me in just the same way. And, oh, there were a lot of things I liked about him. And, well, that's all.

DAWK. That's all?

MARJORIE. Yes.

DAWK. You mean it went no further.

MARJORIE. It means I was a mug, Daddy, in ever thinking it would. And everything you've said about me was right. And I'm going to chuck it all, cigarettes, motors, and everything, and I've taken to poetry as you said.

DAWK. Well, er, perhaps you are right.

MARJORIE. And I've acted on it.

DAWK. Acted on it? On what?

MARJORIE. On William Morris.

[Dawk, brooding, has turned to walk about the room thoughtfully. He comes upon the great sword with point on floor, resting against the wall and wreathed with dandelions.]

DAWK. Hullo! What did you take this old thing out of my study for?

MARJORIE. That's part of it.

DAWK. Part of what?

MARJORIE. Part of what I got out of William Morris.

DAWK. Good Lord. Well, you mustn't hurt it. It's a fine old sword.

MARJORIE. I've only been sharpening it.

DAWK. Sharpening it?

MARJORIE. Yes, all the morning.

DAWK. What ever for?

MARJORIE. Well, I told you I've been reading poetry, and that I've acted on it. It doesn't seem much good if you can't.

DAWK. But how?

MARJORIE. And I told you I was desperate, Daddy. Well, I put an advertisement in the *Morning Post*.

DAWK. In the *Morning Post*?

MARJORIE. Yes. I 'phoned it up to them yesterday. The idea's out of William Morris.

DAWK. The *Morning Post*? Let me see. (*She hands it to him.*) Let me see.

MARJORIE. The front page.

DAWK. The *front* page, did you say? What's it all about?

MARJORIE (*very, very miserably*). It's time I was married now.

DAWK. Why, Marjorie, cheer up. What's this advertisement about?

MARJORIE. You've got it there. (*Knock on door. Sadly.*) Come in.

Enter Jinks, a young man.

JINKS. Oh, how do you do?

MARJORIE. How do you do?

JINKS. Very nice weather for the time of year, isn't it?

MARJORIE. Yes.

JINKS. Very nice.

MARJORIE. You've come about an advertisement in the *Morning Post*?

JINKS. Yes.

DAWK. The advertisement? What is it?

MARJORIE. All right, Daddy. Let me just.... You've got it there.

DAWK. Well, really, I don't know. The front page, you said. Let me see.

MARJORIE. You've come to play?

JINKS. Yes.

MARJORIE. On my terms?

JINKS. Certainly.

MARJORIE. They may seem hard to you, but. . .

JINKS. Not at all.

MARJORIE. But I was probably feeling pretty desperate when I made them.

JINKS. Don't mention it.

MARJORIE. And now they're made I abide by them.

JINKS. Certainly, miss.

MARJORIE. Well, our ping-pong room is there.

JINKS. Thank you.

MARJORIE. And, I've warned you.

JINKS. I think it's only fair to say, miss; I really feel that it's only right to tell you, even if it should chance to sound a little boastful.

MARJORIE. Yes?

JINKS. Well, I, I am, I mean I am the champion of Surrey.

MARJORIE. Oh. Well, never mind. I play a bit.

[*She shows him through.*]

DAWK. I say. What part of the front page?

MARJORIE. I've challenged him to ping-pong, Daddy. You mustn't interrupt us.

DAWK. Oh, I *see*. A game of ping-pong. And you hope something may come of it. Well, well.

MARJORIE (*grimly*). Something may!

DAWK. But I say. You didn't get ping-pong out of Morris.

MARJORIE. Well, I'm no good at running.

[*Exit.*]

DAWK. No good at running? What does she mean? Well, let's see what she says.

[*Turns to Morning Post again. The sounds of ping-pong are heard.*]

MARJORIE (*off*). I've won my serve, Daddy.

DAWK (*quite mechanically*). Well done, dear. Ah, here we have it. Marjorie Dawk. Now what—what does she say? (*He takes glasses out of his case and puts them on. Knocks on door.*) Come in.

Enter Constable.

DAWK. Well, Spelkins?

CONSTABLE. Very sorry to have to come, sir. Very sorry indeed.

DAWK. Sorry to have to come?

CONSTABLE. It's about Miss Marjorie, sir.

DAWK. Miss Marjorie? Nonsense. You can't have anything against her.

CONSTABLE. Sorry, sir, but the law's the law, you know.

DAWK. But you've nothing against *her*.

CONSTABLE. Incitement, sir.

DAWK. Incitement? But I'm sure my girl would never incite to anything, to anything that ... er. What *is* the absurd trifle, Spelkins?

CONSTABLE. Only murder, sir.

DAWK. What?

CONSTABLE. Just murder.

DAWK. What ever do you mean?

CONSTABLE. You've got it in your hand, sir.

DAWK. Why, I was just going to read it. You don't mean to say she incites to....

CONSTABLE. To murder, sir.

DAWK. Why, dear me. I thought it was all about ping-pong. Let me read it.

[*Fumbles.*]

CONSTABLE. I've a copy here, sir.

DAWK. Oh?

CONSTABLE. Yes.

DAWK. What does it say?

CONSTABLE. "To any young man of courage. I will play ping-pong at The Elms, Wimbledon, against any young man on these terms: that if he win he may claim my hand in marriage, with absolute control over whatever my father may settle on me, not less than £300 a year, and if he lose, he shall forthwith die by the sword. Marjorie Dawk."

DAWK. Good gracious. But look here, Spelkins. Look here. No harm whatever has been done yet. I don't quite see....

CONSTABLE (*with the air of a sleuth*). Hark.

DAWK. What?

CONSTABLE. Listen, sir.

DAWK. Ping-pong.

CONSTABLE. She's well on her way to it.

MARJORIE (*off*). I've won again, Daddy.

DAWK. Good Lord.

CONSTABLE. Just as I said, sir.

DAWK. Well, I'll stop her. Marjorie ... Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Wait a moment, Daddy.

DAWK. Marjorie. Come at once.

MARJORIE. Oh, Daddy. Don't interrupt me. You've made me lose my serve.

[*Constable moves towards door.*]

DAWK. That's all right. I'll stop her.

CONSTABLE. Lost her serve indeed.

DAWK. Well, perhaps that's best, you know.

CONSTABLE. I've something here that will make her lose her serve.

[*Shows handcuffs.*]

DAWK. No, no, Spelkins. Now look here, how can she kill him even if she wants to? A girl like Marjorie. A strong young man.

CONSTABLE. I see she's got a sword out for it.

DAWK. Now, could she use a great thing like that?

CONSTABLE. Might tell him to do it himself.

DAWK. Now, Spelkins. (*Detaining him from door.*) *Would* you kill yourself with a sword because a girl told you to?

CONSTABLE. Not now I wouldn't, sir.

[*A look of regret for past years goes across his face.*]

DAWK. But look here now. Now, really, Spelkins. Supposing he would.

CONSTABLE. That's what we've got to look at, sir.

DAWK. Well, supposing he would. How's he going to get at himself with it? Look here now, if I take hold of it (*does so*)

I'm yards away from the point.

CONSTABLE. Just so, sir. Just so. But she could get someone to do it for her.

DAWK. Well, I won't.

CONSTABLE. Who've you got in the house, sir?

DAWK. Well, Marion and Eliza; you know them. And Blegg who cuts the faggots. Marion or Eliza couldn't handle a thing like that. Marjorie can't do any harm.

CONSTABLE. What about Blegg?

DAWK. Well, of course, he could. But you've known him for the last twenty years. The steadiest man, I should say, in the parish. He'd never do a thing like that.

CONSTABLE. Well, I'll have to make sure, sir, if I'm not to handcuff Miss Marjorie.

DAWK. Certainly. Certainly. Blegg. Blegg. Come here a moment, would you?

BLEGG. Yes, sir.

Enter Blegg.

DAWK. Now look here, Blegg. Miss Marjorie sent up a little joke to the *Morning Post*, purely a joke, and Spelkins has come and taken it very seriously. He wishes to question everybody. Well, all he wants to be sure about is that you for one would never break the law whatever happened. I know you never would.

BLEGG. Oh no, I never would, sir.

DAWK. Well, that's all we wanted to know.

BLEGG. Lived here man and boy for sixty-four years and never broke it yet, sir.

DAWK. No, that's right.

BLEGG. Not a tittle of it, sir.

DAWK. No, I know, Blegg. Thank you. That's all.

BLEGG. Thank you, sir. (*Going.*) Never a tittle of it.

CONSTABLE. Wait a moment. (*Blegg looks round.*) What we wanted to know was: you'd do anything Miss Marjorie told you?

BLEGG. Oh, yes. Anything Miss *Marjorie* told me. Known her since she could walk.

CONSTABLE. Whether it was against the law or not?

BLEGG. Shouldn't feel anything Miss Marjorie wanted was against the law, like.

CONSTABLE. No, but if it was against the law and she told you to do it, you'd do it whatever it was?

BLEGG. Well, I've known Miss Marjorie since she could walk.

CONSTABLE. So you'd break the law for her?

BLEGG. Miss Marjorie knows a lot more about the law than I do. If she said a thing was right, it would be right.

CONSTABLE. And if she told you to kill a man even, that would be right?

DAWK. No, no, Spelkins, of course not.

CONSTABLE. Wait a moment, sir. *I'm* questioning Blegg. Well?

BLEGG. Why, if Miss Marjorie wanted a man killed; if he were that sort of man; all I can say is, he's better killed, if you ask me.

CONSTABLE. And you'd kill him?

BLEGG. Well, if she'd only me to protect her, I wouldn't have any young man coming monkeying round Miss Marjorie, not if they were that sort of man.

CONSTABLE. You mean she could trust you to kill them?

BLEGG. She could indeed, mister. She could.

DAWK. No, no, Blegg, that's not what you mean at all.

BLEGG. Well, I've known Miss Marjorie since she could walk, you know, sir.

CONSTABLE. And she spoke to you this morning about killing a man.

BLEGG. Yesterday, sir.

DAWK. What!

CONSTABLE. Yesterday. And she told you you'd have to kill him with a sword?

BLEGG. No, she didn't. She didn't say that at all. All she said was "Blegg, I may want you to-morrow." And I said "What for?" And she said "Chopping." And I said: "What do you want chopped, miss?" And she said, "Nothing. But I *may* want something chopped; and if I do, would you chop it, whatever it was?" And I said, "Yes, miss." And she said, "Even if it's a man's neck?" And I said, "I've known you ever since you could walk, miss." And then we went and got down the old sword. But she didn't say for certain as she'd want anything chopped.

MARJORIE (*off*). Five all! We're five all, Daddy.

CONSTABLE. Getting along nicely with their game.

DAWK. The devil they are.

[*Constable goes to door R. and opens it.*]

JINKS (*off*). Shall we play sudden death or vantage games?

CONSTABLE. Come on, miss.

MARJORIE (*off*). What's the matter?

CONSTABLE. Inspector just wants to have a talk with you up at the station, that's all. And it's my duty to warn you that anything you may say—oh.

[*Blegg has come towards him with the sword.*]

Constable steps back. Blegg stands in doorway.

DAWK. Come, come, Blegg. Put that down. You mustn't do that.

BLEGG. Always was a law-abiding man, sir. But I'm not going to have anyone touching Miss Marjorie.

[He moves nearer Constable.

CONSTABLE. Here! I wasn't the man she told you to chop.

BLEGG. Don't care about that. I'll chop anyone that interferes with Miss Marjorie.

DAWK. Now, now, Blegg. You know you wouldn't. You know you wouldn't.

BLEGG. Just as soon as I'd chop your faggots, sir. As I've done the last twenty years. *(After a moment's reflection.)* Wet and fine.

[Constable, edging away, puts whistle to his lips.

DAWK. No, don't blow that. Don't blow that. It can all be explained. It...

MARJORIE *(off)*. Oh, what's the matter? *(Enters. Sees sword.)* No, Blegg, not yet. We're only five all, Daddy.

BLEGG. As you like, miss. But you've only to say the word.

MARJORIE *(to Constable)*. Oh, it's you.

CONSTABLE. Yes, miss. The Inspector wants to have just a word with you.

MARJORIE. Very well. But this game must be finished first.

CONSTABLE. If you'd just come here, miss, I've something to show you.

MARJORIE. So long as it doesn't interfere with the game.

CONSTABLE. It might, miss.

MARJORIE. What is it?

CONSTABLE. If you'd come a little farther away from Blegg, miss.

MARJORIE. All right. You don't want that yet, Blegg.

BLEGG. As you wish, miss. As you wish.

[He puts sword back. Marjorie goes to Constable. Constable slips handcuffs on.

MARJORIE. Oh!

CONSTABLE. Just while you talk to the Inspector, miss.

MARJORIE. No, Blegg! *(Knocking on door.)* Well, somebody say "Come in."

DAWK. Er—come in.

Enter Bill.

BILL. Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Bill.

BILL. They told me the police were in here. So I came. What is the matter, Marjorie?

MARJORIE. Well, they are. Now, Blegg!

BILL. Well, I'll rescue you if you say a word.

CONSTABLE. Another of them!

JINKS. Excuse me, but I believe that that is my privilege.

MARJORIE (*to Jinks, snubbingly*). We're only five all.

JINKS. I was five all in the Surrey final.

BILL. Who are you?

JINKS. I hope to become Miss Marjorie's fiancé.

BILL. The devil you do.

MARJORIE. Why, Bill. Do you mind?

BILL. Of course I mind.

MARJORIE. You never said so, Bill.

BILL. Didn't you know?

MARJORIE. How could I know?

BILL. Couldn't you guess?

MARJORIE. I thought I'd guessed wrong.

BILL. Well, you guessed right, Marjorie. Of course I mind. I say, you don't want this young gentleman.

JINKS. Sir!

BILL. Send him away, Marjorie.

MARJORIE. It's too late, Bill.

BILL. Too late?

MARJORIE. Too late.

BILL. I say. Are you serious?

MARJORIE. Quite. It's too late.

BILL. But we'll get these handcuffs off. That's some mistake. It will be all right then, Marjorie? It will be all right then?

MARJORIE. No.

BILL. No?

MARJORIE. No. As soon as I get them off I go on with the game. We're committed to that. (*To Jinks.*) Isn't that so?

JINKS. *I don't draw back.*

BILL. The game? What is it?

CONSTABLE (*shows cutting*). You see.

BILL. Lord! And (*to Jinks*) you won't back out?

JINKS. No, sir.

BILL. Quite right. Quite right from your point of view. But oh, Marjorie.

MARJORIE. We can't go back.

JINKS. No.

MARJORIE. So perhaps you'll all help me to get these handcuffs off.

[*Blegg and Jinks close on Constable.
No one helps Constable.*]

JINKS. Come on. Give us the key quietly.

CONSTABLE. If you dare to touch me.

JINKS. Come on, give us it quietly.

BLEGG. Thankee. (*Blegg unlocks handcuffs and gives them to Constable.*) Here you are, mister.

CONSTABLE. I've got *all* of your names in this book.

MARJORIE. Come on, Mr. Jinks. We must finish the set. I'm sorry, Bill. Wait there, Blegg, in case.

JINKS. I was five all, you know, in the Surrey final.

CONSTABLE (*reading over his list again*). Yes, all your names.

DAWK (*to Bill*). If only you'd spoken sooner.

BILL. I couldn't. I didn't know till to-day that I could have afforded it.

DAWK. Never mind that. You should have spoken sooner.

BILL. I feel everything's ended.

DAWK. Oh, you'll find plenty to do.

BILL. It's all come to an end.

[*Heavy and determined knocking. Constable gets out pencil and reopens book.*]

DAWK. Oh, come in.

Enter Mr. Leonard.

CONSTABLE. And *your* name, sir?

LEONARD. Never you mind my name. (*To Dawk.*) Is this the Elms?

DAWK (*wearily*). Oh yes.

LEONARD. Thank you. Is Mr. Jinks in here?

DAWK. Oh, I believe so. In there. Playing ping-pong.

LEONARD. Playing ping-pong is he?

DAWK (*wearily*). What is *your* objection?

LEONARD. I will tell you my objection, sir, if you will be so good as to call him.

DAWK. Oh, very well. (*Goes to door.*) Marjorie. Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Yes?

DAWK. More trouble.

MARJORIE. What is it?

DAWK. A gentleman says he must see Mr. Jinks.

LEONARD. Instantly.

CONSTABLE. Are you from Scotland Yard, sir?

LEONARD. Certainly not.

Enter Jinks and Marjorie.

JINKS. What is it?

LEONARD. I have come to warn you, sir.

JINKS. To warn me?

LEONARD. Such is my duty. I may as well tell you who I am. I am the Secretary of the World Ping-Pong Amateur Association.

JINKS. Mr. Leonard?

LEONARD. The same, sir. And it is my duty to warn you that if you are playing for the consideration or emolument (those are the Committee's exact words) set forth in this cutting from to-day's *Morning Post*, you forfeit your amateur status.

JINKS. Good God!

MARJORIE. But you can hardly say....

LEONARD. Any consideration whatever.

JINKS. I'm not playing for money.

LEONARD. May I ask, sir, would you settle nothing at all on your daughter?

DAWK. If you mean would I give her away absolutely penniless, no.

LEONARD (*to Jinks*). Well, sir?

JINKS. Wouldn't the Committee reconsider...?

LEONARD. Their decision is final.

[Jinks drops his ping-pong bat.]

JINKS (*to Marjorie*). I must scratch.

MARJORIE. You'll draw back?

JINKS. I must.

LEONARD. I will inform the Committee. (*To Dawk.*) Good morning, sir. (*To Marjorie.*) Good morning. (*To Jinks.*) After you, sir.

[Jinks gives a hopeless shrug and walks downcast into the street. Exit Leonard.]

MARJORIE. You needn't wait, Blegg.

BLEGG. Thank you, Miss. Then I'll get back to my faggots.

[Exit.]

BILL (*picking up Jinks's bat*). Marjorie. Would you care for a quiet game with me? A friendly game, I mean.

MARJORIE. Yes, Bill. Come on.

[Exeunt.]

DAWK. Well, Spelkins, I'm very sorry about all this. But it will be all right now, won't it?

CONSTABLE. Well, sir, I don't want to be too hard, now that they're playing quiet like.

[They both listen a moment to the sounds of the game.]

DAWK. No. Sit down, Spelkins. (*Both sit.*) And.... Hullo. Why, they seem to have stopped.

[Constable listens too. No sounds of ping-pong.]

CONSTABLE. That's what they've done, sir. They've stopped.

DAWK. I hope she's not overtired herself.

CONSTABLE. No, sir. I don't think so, sir.

DAWK. You think not.

CONSTABLE. No, sir. I remember me and my missus. My girl she was then. Her father had a licensed house out at Bromley, and a nice little lawn at the back. My girl and I we used to go there of an evening to play a bit of bowls. A fine set of bowls he had.

DAWK. Did he really?

CONSTABLE. Yes, sir. He did, the old chap. And *we* usedn't to play much bowls.

DAWK. Oh. You didn't?

CONSTABLE. No, sir.

CURTAIN

[The end of *Atalanta in Wimbledon* by Lord Dunsany]