



# Plum Lines

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WCY + 8

## *Convention phase two was in Kalamazoo!*

Our Kalamazoo convention was just a lot of fun. Our speakers were interesting, the book sale was exciting, the business session painless, and the banquet delicious, and in addition to all that, it was such great fun to meet old friends and new friends and talk and laugh with them for a weekend about Pelham Grenville Wodehouse and his stories. When it ended I think we were all reluctant to leave. I was wondering how to tell you what a good time we had, when I found that Toni Rudersdorf had written a breezy description of the event for Rob Kooy's Dutch newsletter. She agreed to let me print it here, and if this doesn't convince you the convention was fun, nothing will!

### **The Kalamazoo Convention**

An impression by Toni Rudersdorf

Monday. Worse. Monday following the Wodehouse Convention. What this means is that what has until now been an ordinary, rather happy sort of existence has been cast into the dust by seeing just what it is like to be in the company of like minded, right minded, fellows. There is an old Texan remark about the best of all possible good times, "It was a kick in the head." Well, I assure you, this convention was, in the deepest and silliest sense of the phrase, a jolly old kick in the head!



Ed Galligan picked me up at the airport around 2:30 Friday, October 6. I found Kalamazoo to be a cool, sweet world of autumn. The leaves! The sky! The sweaters on the local fauna - the real thing, not a picture.

That evening was the reception at the Kalamazoo House and my first opportunity to cast an eye over the dear old Club Members. What a sight! I never saw so many fellows who reminded me of Uncle Fred or Gally...tucked in among a few crumpets, beans and good eggs. This of course excludes the female contingent, none of which resembled an aunt (there's a comfort). And fizzy! Between you and me, there

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is nothing like a good time to bring out the giggles, flushed faces and flashing eyes which so much improve those of my sex. Even I (a thoroughly tough case) was altered somewhat for the better.

The following morning I joined a small parade of Plumies from the various B&B's, quick marching down Stuart Street, sudden right, quick left and into Kalamazoo College, Mandelle Hall. Your will probably hear from Ed all about the papers presented there. Some were hot stuff, some were cooler stuff, but I'd say the one that took the biscuit was that delivered by Elliott Milstein. Gussie Fink-Nottle could not have surpassed his "make 'em die laughing while you look on with a compassionate smile" manner as he discussed imposters, what they are and how do I get to be one?

I was lucky at the tables (the book-sellers' tables, that is), and got nearly all the books needed to complete my motley collection. I also unloaded my spare copies, making the new books virtually free. Aha! By 4 o'clock, when I staggered out of the lecture hall, I was bowed down with books and I am here to tell you with my own lips that it is not easy to dance on one's toes and carry a ton of books at the same time. It is a testimony to my uplifting joy that I danced all the way to my digs.

Jim Thorne and his crew eclipsed themselves setting up the banquet that evening at the Kalamazoo Center Hotel. They were pushed along by the sheer beauty of the club members who began arriving around 6 o'clock to get theirs at the bar before putting on the nosebag. We were rolling along in a spirit of mutual admiration when what to our wondering eyes should appear but three natty Drones in the disguise of Elliott Milstein, Richard Scrimjer and Ken Fink. These jewels in the crown of young manhood were tuxed, bespatted and ravishing. From the toes of their immaculate pumps to the



tips of their marcelled hair they were in every way suitable to have been turned out by our favorite Gentleman's Gentleman. I was, for the nonce, stricken dumb - which may impart to you the depth of my emotion.

When it became apparent the foodstuffs were about to invade the room in the hands of several pretty Kalamazoo College girls we singly and severally sought our tables. I was fortunate to sit with the Drones (and fellow members Millie, Sherry, Victoria, and David), and watched with a glittering eye the snail-like progress of the servitors. We were growing restive when the baskets of buns arrived. Millie, practical girl that she is, pounced upon a basket and emitted a heart-rending cry. Turning to me with dismay she held up the miserable husks and shrieked "Cold buns?" Beside me, Elliott stirred as one awakening. On my other side Richard snorted like an ancient war horse hearing a distant trumpet. Before my eyes the buns turned as if touched by a Fairie wand from Midnight Stomach Visitations into AMMUNITION! [So *that's* how it started--OM]

I shake my head in disbelief, as did the Kalamazoo College servitors on that fateful night. Eyeing the buns with a wild surmise our better selves battled for our dignity....about one second. Then bread began to fly. About the room cries of "Eh, what?" and "Hold my coat, m'dear, I've a man's work to do" preceded a return volley from Ed Ratcliffe's table, while with equal enthusiasm the rest of the members dived into the fray. [Honest, officer, I wasn't even there that night. I was in Kalamazoo.] I'm glad you, with your pure mind, weren't there, Rob. You would have been revolted and put right off your strawberry fluff, provided by our disconcerted servitors as a sedative and dessert.

After the meal were other great things. For example, I won the Scrimgeour contest, being the only member who found both



It is bad to be trapped in a den of slaving aunts, lashing their tails and glaring at you out of their red eyes.

*continued....*

references to that noble name in Plum's works. My prize was a bot of Bollinger Champagne provided by Elliott. Not too dusty!

### Odds and ends

After that story, what can I say? Let's see what I can do that won't put you to sleep. Our convention kit included:

1. A red and white plastic kazoo.
2. The complete lyrics of "I've Got A Gal in Kalamazoo"
3. A big red and white lapel button that read

Yes, there really is a Kalamazoo

Now you know what the convention was like.

The kit also included a small enameled lapel pin in the form of a closed book with a red cover, outlined in gold. On the cover of the book are a gentleman's top hat, white gloves, and monocle, as well as the initials TWS in gold. Judy Finnegan, an artist and a member of the Kalamazoo crew, designed the pin and arranged for its manufacture. The pin is so handsome that I wanted to reproduce it here, but couldn't find a way to do it. I predict that all the best dressed Plumies will be wearing it in the future - Jeeves would approve.

A few other facts, as lightly as possible: At the Friday evening reception we watched Plum's *Damsel in Distress* (1937) with Fred Astaire and Burns and Allen. A wonderful, funny old movie, with the principals at their best.

A handsome "Goat and Feathers" poster, like a pub sign, on display in our walnut-panelled meeting room, was drawn by Christine Griffin, another Kalamazoo artist and wife of Bob Griffin, our Master of Ceremonies. That "Goat and Feathers" name appears just once, fleetingly, as the name of a pub in a PGW story. But which story? Kim Wilson recognized it as a Market Blandings pub in "Pig-Hoo-o-o-ey!" and was awarded the prize at the banquet - *The World of*

*Jeeves omnibus*. The book was autographed, uniquely I believe, by Reginald Jeeves himself.

You may well wonder what a Goat and Feathers pub sign looks like. This one had "Goat and Feathers" arched across the top and "Fine Ales" across the bottom. Between them was a full frontal view of a billy goat's head, clutching several large feathers in its mouth. (Goats eat anything, you know.)

Booksellers Wilfrid de Freitas from Montreal, and Thomas Taylor from Westland, Michigan, displayed dozens of mouth-watering first editions for our pleasure and, I hope, their profit.

We had that necessary evil, a business meeting. Phil Ayers succeeded Bill Blood as president, Len Lawson followed Phil Ayers as vice president, Tom Wainwright took over as treasurer and manager of the membership and mailing lists from Katy Kilgore, and Ed Ratcliffe continued as editor and publisher of Plum Lines. Dues will be increased next year, the first increase in our history.

Our sincere thanks to our retiring officers Bill Blood, Phil Ayers, and Katy Kilgore for the essential work they have done these last two years to keep our Society going.

Forty nine people attended the convention. Not, as Toni would say, too dusty for a group our size.

After the earthquake struck California the inside of my house was a random mixture of papers, books, and broken glass, and in the Great Cleanup that followed I seem to have thrown away all my convention notes and materials. Most of what you are reading here about the convention has been provided by other members, with the addition of a few shards from my memory. In particular, I had to ask several of the speakers to send me summaries of their talks.

### Jan Kaufman

Jan's talk was illustrated with some highly suspicious photographs of Blandings and its denizens. She writes:

"Blandings and Other Country Houses" was the title of the slide talk given by Jan

## still more Kalamazoo....

Kaufman, who cited her favorite quote: "Blandings Castle, where someone is always up to something, and those who are not up to something are up to something else." As a photographer she somehow gained access to the people and places known to be at the Castle, such as Angus MacAlister, whose photo showed how accurately he has been described as both looking like a minor prophet and having a face like a dissipated potato. She showed photos of some of Blandings' many guests, such as Lord Tilbury, who looked like a man unveiling a statue of himself. There was also the amber drawing room where Freddie Threepwood once uttered the portentous words "I have here a few simple rats....."

### Victoria McClure

Victoria's paper, "Writers of Clergy as Sources of Humor in Wodehouse's Mulliner Stories," discussed the themes of acceptance, family relations, and indebtedness in the Augustine Mulliner stories. Wodehouse was not a critic or reformer, and his acceptance of the world produced his gentle humor, not the biting satire we see in some other writers. The indebtedness among his characters was also positive. Augustine's bishop was indebted to him for the dog incident as well as the vicar incident, and gave him preferment for it - but Augustine deserved the preferment in any case.

### Elliott Milstein

In his talk, "An Examination into the Nature and Development of the Imposter in Wodehouse," Elliott gave examples of the many shades of imposture in PGW's stories, and concluded that the true impostors are those with a hidden intent. By no means all the false-name characters are in this group, while some who use their real names fit quite neatly. Aileen Peavey is an imposter who



uses her own name and appears at Blandings as a poetess, which she is, but she is also a crook known in the underworld as Smooth Lizzie. Ukridge, on the other hand, is never an imposter, but always gives a false name as a routine business precaution. The motives for imposture are generally love, money, and the sheer fun of doing it. The first true imposters are Ashe Marson and Joan Valentine in *Something Fresh*, and imposture becomes the story itself in *Piccadilly Jim*.

Elliott also told us, hilariously, about his visit to the Wodehouse centenary exhibit at the Pierpont Morgan Library in 1981, but that, though a most fitting conclusion to a discussion of imposture, is a story for which the world is not yet ready.

### Ed Galligan

In his "*The Old Reliable: Cheap Imitations and the Real Thing*," Ed Galligan compared a cheap imitation of *The Old Reliable*, a dramatization that was shown on public television in 1988, with the real thing, the novel that PGW completed in February, 1949. He had intended to run a tape of the television program for us but the mechanism got fouled up (so what else is new?) and we had to make do with his description of it.

He argued that the television people's understanding of the nature of farce is vastly inferior to PGW's; not only is their play much less funny than his novel, it is much less credible and finally, much less meaningful. PGW celebrates dopes and dopiness, and cheerfully counts himself among the dopes. The television people think they are superior to everyone else, perhaps especially to their audience and to PGW. They couldn't possibly be more mistaken.

Phil Ayers entertained us with an account of The Wodehouse Pilgrimage and Ed Ratcliffe showed too many slides of the trip. Later that afternoon Jan Kaufman showed just the right number of slides of the trip.

*and more...*

## The Great Scrymgeour Contest

You already know that Toni Rudersdorf won The Great Scrymgeour Contest. What you don't know is where she found those two references to Scrymgeour. The easy reference, found by a number of people, was in Chapter 2 of *The Adventures of Sally* (English edition, 1922) and *Mostly Sally* (American edition, 1923, identical with the English except for title). Scrymgeour is mentioned repeatedly, but takes no part in the action and never appears onstage. He is merely a subject of conversation between two men, one of whom (the hero) is far more interested in a pretty girl nearby (the heroine).

The obscure reference is in "L'Affaire Uncle John" in *Tales of St. Austin's* (1903), where the name J. Scrymgeour appears just once, on the last page of the story, in a list of St. Austin's graduates who have gone on to Oxford. Once again he is not a character in the story. Note Elliott Milstein's fiendish cunning in choosing this name as the object of our search. The name appears many times, but because Scrymgeour is not a character the name doesn't register in our minds and is not listed in those treasure-houses of information, *Jasen's Bibliography and Reader's Guide...* and *Garrison's Who's Who in Wodehouse*.

Florence Cunningham found the obscure reference, but she hadn't found the easy one at convention time. Toni came to Kalamazoo with both books in hand and carried home the loot. It was worth carrying: Bollinger Brut, Special Cuvee.

Elliott presented Toni with her prize at the banquet, and then, for reasons I can't remember, Richard Scrimjer told us his family history. (He didn't need a reason - logic had by that time of the evening entirely disappeared.) He rose to his feet and sense and reason fled from the banquet hall. I laughed much too hard to take notes and sometimes the uproar was so great I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Richard spoke off the cuff that evening. At my urging he later wrote out a talk for Plum Lines that, he says, probably bears scant resemblance to the original. I hesitate to print it - nothing on paper can do justice to his magical

performance that evening. But even stripped of Richard's marvelous delivery, his story is funny.

## A History of the Scrymgeours

Richard Scrimjer

Brushing aside, like so many after-dinner crumbs, all the guff about the unexpectedness of this request to speak and my lack of preparation, let me say briefly that the history of the Scrymgeours is well documented and a matter of quiet pride amongst clan members but, until now, not exactly a matter of public interest. To be completely frank, I have never heard of anyone who wanted to hear it. Which makes you an even more select and eccentric body than you realize.

You see, if there is a single word that summarizes the weltanschauung of the clan Scrymgeour the word is ... well, it's not exciting. Nor is it bold; nor dashing; nor yet heroic. Maybe it's cautious; but I wouldn't be too sure of that. Maybe it's uncertain; and then again maybe it isn't.

The first Scrymgeours, and here I am talking about the very first Scrymgeours, were a lot like everyone else. Quite naturally so; unicellular life doesn't offer much scope for originality. But as the long process of evolution wore on, epoch succeeding epoch, if you follow me, a certain, well, Scrymgeour-ness manifested itself. It was a Scrymgeour who first hauled itself out of the primeval slime onto dry land, took a look around, and decided to go back. Ambition is not our watchword. Leave this strenuous evolving to the lungfish, we said, slipping back into the murky shallows. There's still plenty of time.

And so there was.

Skipping awkwardly over several hundred million years in the family album, I will point out only a few snapshots. It was a Scrymgeour who first realized that killing a large and hostile animal with a small flint tool was much more dangerous than staying in the cave with a migraine headache and dropping round to a friend's for stewed mastodon the following day. Not that we were eager to part with our flint tools. Not at all. We Scrymgeours have brand loyalty. Let others switch to copper, or iron, or

## end of Kalamazoo!

stainless steel. We're quite happy with our flint tools, thanks. You know where you are with flint tools.

In more recent history, it was a Scrymgeour who persuaded the King of Portugal not to back Christopher Columbus. "Your Majesty," he said, "he thinks the world is round. He wants to sail indefinitely in a small boat. He wears a turtleneck sweater. The man is an idiot. As proof, Captain Vasco de Scrymgeour, the only explorer in our history, set sail from Calais and discovered the Orient four hours later. *Four hours.*"

Well, *he* thought it was the Orient. Columbus didn't get it right either, you know.

Vasco fell in love with his Orient and moved there. He liked the creature comforts and the civilization. We Scrymgeours have never been hardy pioneers. The open air life, the backbreaking struggle with nature... There were no Scrymgeours on the Mayflower. Or the next boat. Or the next. We thought we'd wait and see how manifest destiny worked out. It all sounded a bit anxious.

Just as well, on the whole. No Scrymgeour would have bought Louisiana. "Oh, dear," we'd have said to Napoleon. "It's so big. Haven't you anything smaller, preferably with a finished basement?" Had a Scrymgeour been in charge of western expansion there would have been Oklahoma Sooner-or-Laters and the California Gold Stroll. No, no. The Scrymgeours stayed in England, cautious to the last, until the Crimean War.

It was 1853, and Major C.W. "Cowardy Cuthbert" Scrymgeour was a member of the Light Brigade. When the order came to charge, he looked around: cannon to the left of him,



On the occasions when I have met Ukridge's Aunt Julila, I have felt the curious illusion of having just committed some particularly unsavoury crime and - what is more - of having done it with swollen hands, enlarged feet, and trousers bagging at the knee on a morning when I had omitted to shave.

"A Bit of Luck for Mabel," *Eggs, Beans and Crumpets*, 1940

cannon to the right of him, cannon in front of him volleyed and thundered. Cuthbert slipped off his horse and rolled his balaclava helmet down below his knees in a crude but effective camouflage. Into the valley of death rode the 599. Cuthbert stowed away to America disguised as a topiary hedge.

Once there Cuthbert changed his name from Scrymgeour (pronounced Scrim-jer) to Scrimger (pronounced Scrim-jer). The family was fooled. The world at large was fooled. But one man was not. The only known reference to any Scrymgeour living on this side of the Atlantic comes in the work of P.G. Wodehouse - who, as we have seen this weekend, was quick to spot imposture under any circumstances. The Wodehouse reference depicts an offstage Scrymgeour who, it appears, is fond of soup.

Well, well. We *are* fond of soup, we Scrymgeours - always have been. It reminds us of the primeval slime from which, once, long ago, we decided not to crawl.

Suzanne Siegel read an original short story in the Wodehouse style at the banquet. I regret that I have no more information about it at present.

Retiring President Bill Blood gave a brief, humorous speech at the banquet, closing with a toast: "I now propose a toast to the man who *really* brought us together here: Plum. To a fine human being who, through the rich legacy of laughter and happiness which he bequeathed to the world, deserves the world's gratitude and remembrance: Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, our Plum."

Our Kalamazoo convention was a tremendous success. Jim Thorne and his committee prepared with such thoroughness and care that our weekend was fun from first to last. The whole Kalamazoo crew deserves our heartiest thanks!

## Something new

Len Lawson

I have not listed dealers for quite a while so I will remedy that by putting them first this time.

### Modern first editions including PGW

(These dealers carry a wide selections of authors but usually only in first or rare editions.)

Limestone Hills Book Shop, P.O. Box 1125, Glen Rose TX 76043

Pepper & Stern, P.O. Box 2711, Santa Barbara CA 93120

Hawthorne Books, 7 College Park Drive, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS10 7AN, England

Edna Whiteson, 66 Belmont Avenue, Cockfosters, Herts, EN4 9LA, England

The following two gentlemen deal in modern first editions. Neither issue catalogs but they welcome want lists and each had an impressive stock of PGW material at Kalamazoo.

Wilfrid de Freitas, P.O. Box 883, Stock Exchange Tower, Montreal, Canada H4Z 1K2 - or - Box 819, Champlain NY 12919, USA

Thomas Taylor, P.O. Box 85386, Westland MI 48185-0396

Daniels Garrison's fine book *Who's Who in Wodehouse* is due out any day. This edition is called the first trade edition but it is a revised edition with the addition of characters from all of the known uncollected Wodehouse stories. It is rich with appendices of chronological and alphabetical lists of story titles, stories in collections, lists of butlers, valets and their masters and much more. Highly recommended. Barnes and Noble, 126 Fifth Ave., New York NY 10011-5666, offered it about a month ago for \$14.95 + \$4 postage and insurance + tax for CA, CT, MA, MN, NJ, NY, & PA.

*What's in Wodehouse* by Charles Gould is a new book of quizzes, tests, quests and puzzles published by James H. Heineman, Inc., New York. I am pleased to see this offering. It is the first PGW quiz book that I know of, and about time, too. It

broadens the range of books about PGW, and that's great. Charles Gould is offering this 164 page book in wrappers for \$14.95 + \$2.40 for priority mail.

The winner of the 1989 P.G. Wodehouse Humour Prize, jointly sponsored by *The Observer* and Century Hutchinson, was Dennis Gunning. This first winner is *Good Stuff*, published by Century Hutchinson for 11.95 pounds sterling. The judges were Tom Sharpe, Frank Muir, Michael Davie and Anthony Cheetham. They decided that the prize should be awarded on the basis of the quality of prose, how skilfully the plot was delineated, and the style of the work as a whole. They also decided that it should not be any of the broad, violent, sexual comedy so common today. *Good Stuff* is not a PGW imitation, nor are any future winners likely to be, but rather something that the judges thought PGW might enjoy.

Jim Earl told me that the BBC is offering an audio cassette of *Summer Lightning* read by Ian Carmichael. The order number is ZBBC 1044 and the price is 5.99 pounds sterling + 10% postage UK or 20% overseas. I sent a letter to BBC World Service, Mail Order, Bush House, The Strand, London WC2, England along with my VISA card number and expiration date. I think the tape arrived in a little over three weeks. It runs a little over three hours on two cassettes, but it seems to be on rather thin tape, so I recommend that you don't use it in a cheap portable.

Two US companies that rent and sell recorded books on audio cassette offer PGW material. Recorded Books, Inc., 270 Skipjack Road, Prince Frederick MD 20678 has put together seven sets of cassettes of Jeeves stories. Their toll-free number is 1-(800)-638-1304. Books on Tape, P.O. Box 7900, Newport Beach CA 92658 has an initiation fee but you get a catalog with over 1000 offerings. They currently have only one PGW offering consisting of a selection of short stories from several of the sagas. Their toll-free number is 1-(800)-252-6996. Most of their readings are unabridged.

## *New members*

Pongo lit a reverent cigarette. He did not approve of his Uncle Fred, but he could not but admire his work.

*Uncle Fred in the Springtime, 1939*



Lord Ickenham moved forward with elastic step and folded the girl in a warm embrace. It seemed to Pongo, not for the first time, that his uncle went out of his way to kiss girls. On the present occasion, a fatherly nod would amply have met the case.

*Uncle Fred in the Springtime, 1939*

## The Wodehouse Pilgrimage in the English press

Our trip got quite a bit of press coverage in England, in papers ranging from *The Times* to *The Market Drayton Advertiser*. Norman Murphy, Rowena McKenzie and others sent me clippings from 11 English newspapers, whose general response was a mild amusement that so many would come so far for such a purpose. A few headlines will give you the flavor of their stories:

### A Spiffing Feast of Wooster Sauce

*The Sunday Observer*

### Weston is just Jeeves' cup of tea

*Express and Star*

### Is it Jeeves with a Gee?

*The Times*

### An Audience with the Empress

*You*, supplement to *The Sunday Mail*

### On the trail of the Wodehouse castle

*Gloucestershire Echo*

No reporter accompanied us throughout the trip, so each story reported some aspect of it. *The Daily Telegraph* described a quotation spree on our coach. "I examined my imagination - it boggled." "If not actually disgruntled, he was very far from being grunted."

*The Times* gave our London and Dulwich visit a light hearted look under the sub-head "Sustained by a bit of this and that - and a splash or two of the other - a gaggle of American pilgrims are beetling about after the spirit of Wooster and Co."

*The Express and Star* described Col. Murphy as an American, a fact that must have surprised him considerably, and said that we were dressed in period costumes for our tea at Weston Park. (Dear Editor: It was just casual dress for us colonials. We're a little behind the times.)

Alan Road, in the *Observer*, described himself as "an unregenerate Raymond Chandler fan" and confessed to being an imposter in our midst as he mingled with us at Dulwich. He described our almost reverent examination the "true relics" in the Wodehouse Library and

followed our rambles through East Dulwich - the fictional "Valley Fields."

Provincial papers reported our activities in their local areas. The *Telford Journal*, *Birmingham Post* and *Shropshire Star* gave brief, illustrated accounts of our visit to Weston Park. Their stories, like the others, described our group as American - not right, not very wrong. The *Gloucestershire Star* sketched our visit to Sudeley Castle and quoted Dean Ratcliffe, 26, from New York, a member of our group who was somehow overlooked by the rest of us.

*You*, the Sunday supplement to *The Mail*, provided the most entertaining story. It begins as follows:

"Tucked inside her boudoir the Empress of Blandings shows all the symptoms of a deep and implacable lack of interest. She lies on her side like a beached battle cruiser, her long-lashed eyes closed in blissful slumber. And every now and again she sighs deeply, releasing small explosions of sound like a faulty valve on a vast and powerful boiler."

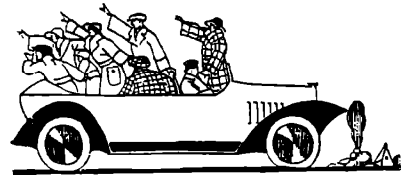
Our exploration of the rest of Weston Park is described and our disappointment with the Empress made plain. Finally, as our visit nears its end:

"The coach is waiting to take the pilgrims on . . . and still the Empress declines to meet her public. Then up jumps the colonel [Murphy]. Waving his umbrella in a commanding fashion, he marches toward the Empress's corrugated retreat. He raps at the door. There is a rumbling and a tumbling and a shaking inside, and the Empress emerges blinking into the concentrated glare of 20 camera lenses, unable to resist Murphy's law.

"Bravo," says Jan.

"Snort snort," says the Empress."

The accompanying color photograph, splashed across two pages, shows Norman in the pigsty jauntily scratching the back of the aloof Empress with the tip of his furred umbrella. What a shame I can't reproduce the picture here!



In most English country towns, if the public houses do not actually outnumber the inhabitants, they all do an excellent business. It is only when they are two to one that hard times hit them and set the innkeepers to blaming the Government.

## A few quick ones

We list a remarkable number of new members in this issue. In each of our last four issues we listed about 10 new members. In this issue we list 93. Nearly all have joined because of a small article about our Society in the October issue of *Victoria* magazine. We were flooded with letters. Our membership increased about one third in six weeks as a result of that little article. We're very happy to have all of you with us and we hope you enjoy the trip!

One of our new members, Yevgueny Semenikhin, is our first member in the Soviet Union. Toni Rudersdorf met Yevgueny this month at a Soviet-American exchange of children's books in Houston and told him about our Society.

Zalman Shoval is our first member in Israel. He writes: "I am the owner of what I suppose is the biggest Wodehouse library in the Middle-East - certainly in Israel." We shall try to suppress our envy.

A number of new memberships this year have been gifts from mothers to sons. May I congratulate these young men for choosing, so early in life, such excellent mothers from among all those available. This note from one of the mothers, Noel Hoyt, shows why editing *Plum Lines* is so much fun: "It delights me to enroll my son in The Wodehouse Society. It delights me to enroll myself, too. It delights me that there is a Wodehouse Society!" It delights us that you and your son are members, Noel.

I'm happy to announce that our Great Bibliography Fund Drive is successful. In the May *Plum Lines* I suggested that the Society might want to buy a copy of the forthcoming McIlvaine/Heineman Wodehouse bibliography. Bill Horn responded at once with a generous contribution, others followed, and I present to you with pride these benefactors: Bill Horn, Bill McConnell, Ed Ratcliffe, Jim Thorne, and Kim Wilson.

Maiden Eggsford, like so many of our rural hamlets, is not at its best and brightest on a Sunday. When you have walked down the main street and looked at the Jubilee Watering Trough, there is nothing much to do except go home and then come out again and walk down the main street once more and take another look at the Jubilee Watering Trough.

The cost of the book, with postage and insurance, will be very close to US \$120 - and worth every penny, I hear. It will include far more than first editions and will be as up-to-the-minute as possible. We expect publication in March of 1990.

A number of people have asked me if any pages were missing from their August *Plum Lines*. I think not - if your copy had 12 pages you're a winner. After I mailed nearly 300 copies I discovered that the printer had apparently added a few duplicate pages to the end of every copy he printed, and this raised the possibility of missing pages.

A personal note: My trip to England this summer was a Jane Austen as well as a Wodehouse pilgrimage, and the travels were equally rewarding.



The Oldest Member

## Plum

Toni Rudersdorf

My dearest friend and mentor  
Is a man I've never met  
Whose happy lessons center  
On the British upper set.

A bashful, busy writer,  
Mr. Wodehouse shows the way  
To a world in laughter lighter  
To a timeless better day.

"Tried in the Furnace," *Young Men in Spats*, 1937

## Convention in 1990?

At the end of our Kalamazoo convention several people said what a shame it was that we have to wait two years to do it again. I agreed wholeheartedly. We don't have to wait that long, of course. We can have a convention next year if we can find a local group willing to sponsor it and if that group has time to prepare. We're an informal bunch, pathetically easy to please. Jim Thorne told me the Kalamazoo gang had fun putting on the convention - "Any group that is offered the chance to sponsor a Wodehouse convention should grasp it!" - and the rest of us blubbered with gratitude that they did it.

When I suggested a 1990 convention at our San Francisco chapter meeting recently the idea received very little support. Some people were opposed to annual conventions - "People wouldn't want to attend that often." Organizers of our 1987 convention said there probably wouldn't be time in the next 10 months to organize the convention, arrange speakers, and notify members soon enough for them to set aside the time to attend, especially since our newsletter appears only quarterly. (That problem might be met with a one page flier to members, announcing the convention dates as soon as they are set.) All these people may be right. "Still," he said wistfully, "it would be fun...."

Our previous conventions were held infrequently, in part, at least, because we had so few local groups. With our increasing membership we're bound to have more of these groups. I'm sure a 1990 Wodehouse convention, if all the spadework could be done, would be fun for those who attend. What do you think?

## Allusions, anyone?

John Scholer writes: "If time would ever permit I hope to compile some sort of article on PGW's use of biblical quotations and allusions. As I read I religiously note his usages as I find them. You may think this rather peculiar, but as a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies this topic has struck a chord within me. [Are you] aware of other articles on this subject?"

I don't think it's peculiar at all, but it does sound daunting. Some of his allusions are woven so closely into the fabric of his text that only the keenest eye can find them. Neither I nor a better informed friend know of a Wodehouse compilation from the Bible or any other source.

If you wish to contribute to this ambitious project, you will find John's address under "Rev. John M. Scholer" in our New Member list in this issue. Similar compilations have been made for Shakespeare and other writers, with interesting results. Good luck!

Memberships and information  
Marilyn MacGregor

Dues payments and changes of address  
Tom Wainwright

Editorial contributions  
Ed Ratcliffe

Lord Emsworth has distinguished company. Tom Wainwright found this newspaper item about pigs, statesmen, and the proper outlook: "Showing a visitor the pigpen at his beloved Chartwell in 1946, Winston Churchill remarked, "I am fond of pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals. "

The item continues, non-Wodehousian but irresistible: During a January 1952 Washington discussion of standardized arms, an "experiment with a bastard rifle, partly American, partly British" was mooted by Sir William Slim. "Kindly moderate your language, Field Marshal," Churchill responded, "it may be recalled that I am myself partly British, partly American."

# Wodehouse Sahib

Richard West

Reprinted from *Harper's and Queen*, June 1988

Forty years after the end of the British Raj, by far the most popular author in India is P.G. Wodehouse, whom some would consider the caricature of an Englishman. So intense is the Wodehouse cult that state television has put on a ten-part film of *Leave it to Psmith*, spoken in Hindi by Indian players, with Blandings Castle changed to a palace in Rajasthan.

The passion for Wodehouse is just as strong with the new generation as with those who grew up in the days of the Raj. Schoolchildren compete with each other in quizzes on Wodehouse knowledge. Most of the Wodehouse fans I met, who represent half of the book-loving Indians, own at least 30 or 40 titles.

The Wodehouse phenomenon strikes you at every bookshop in town, at an airport or railway station, or at any hotel where most of the guests are Indians rather than foreigners. For instance, at the delightful Mandovi Hotel in Goa, there is a whole shelf of Wodehouse in Penguin paperbacks, most of them bearing the tribute from Evelyn Waugh that "Wodehouse has made a world for us to live in and delight in." This was pleasing to see in the same hotel where Waugh once stayed and enjoyed himself and where the manager said that "all Goa" was wanting to know how he had slept.

Although Wodehouse sells as cheaply in India as in England, the books are beyond the means of his younger, poorer admirers. The full immensity of the Wodehouse cult is seen in the libraries of the British Council. At the establishment in Delhi, I spotted a list of the novels which had arrived there that week from Britain: 15 of the 33 were Wodehouse. Next week it was 16. Although the proportion is not always that high, Wodehouse is always the most popular with library members.

An Indian lady librarian at the British Council in Delhi told me, "All the new Wodehouse books come in at least two copies. There's no point in having just one copy of any Wodehouse. There is such a demand. Also many of the copies are getting tatty and have to be replaced. You never see a copy of P.G. Wodehouse on the shelves. You see Graham Greene and V.S. Naipaul on the shelf, but Wodehouse never. As soon as they come back they are snapped up."

The enthusiasm for Wodehouse does not extend to the Council's British staff. When I asked Mr David Spillar how he explained the passion for Wodehouse, he said he could not understand it. No, they had never brought anyone out from England to talk on Wodehouse. He thought that a Wodehouse festival might be a good idea: "But what would we give them to eat? Doughnuts?" He seemed to think Wodehouse was a children's writer.

The British Council in Delhi brings out serious lecturers. Those, like Bertie Wooster, who shy from highbrow women, would not be likely to queue for the talks by Dr. Janet Todd, Director of Studies at Sydney Sussex, Cambridge, on "Sensibility and Women's Writing," or "Feminist Literary Theory of History." The British Council recently brought out Hanif Kureishi, whose films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* contend that the British persecute Asians and homosexuals. Perhaps the British Council dislikes Wodehouse just because he shows the British in a good light.

Indian admirers of P.G. Wodehouse had not enjoyed the film adaptations made in England and afterwards shown on the local television. Still less do they like their own country's adaptation of *Leave It to Psmith*, here renamed *Isi Bahane*, or *On This Excuse*.

Apart from the fact that verdant Shropshire is changed to desert Rajasthan, *Isi Bahane* is close to the story and style of *Leave It to Psmith*. The stately home of the potty Lord Emsworth is once more crammed with imposters trying to get their hands on the diamond necklace belonging to Lady Constance, here shown as the wife and not the sister of Lord Emsworth. Their son, the vacuous Freddie Threepwood, is brought up to date with a Sony Walkman. Lord Emsworth's stern and suspicious secretary, "the Efficient Baxter," comes across as a typical infuriating Indian bureaucrat.

Although *Leave It to Psmith* is farce, the story revolves on the two serious issues of blighted love and shortage of money, in one episode. "Poor dear father," says one of the girls. He "always seemed to be writing an article against time with creditors scratching earnestly at the door."

In modern India, more than ever in Britain, want of money can stop a girl getting a man she wants to marry. In Delhi alone, last year [1987], there were 600 "dowry deaths," the euphemism for burning alive the brides who do not bring enough money. Since the killer is often the mother-in-law, the figure of Lady Constance is not a jolly one. Indeed, the only important change to *Leave It to Psmith* was turning Lady Constance into a tragic character, soured by her forcible marriage to Lord Emsworth.

In one respect, *Leave It to Psmith* was a suitable choice for serialisation in India. It is one of the few Lord Emsworth books that do not include his prize pig, Empress of Blandings. The beast is regarded as unclean by Muslims, by Hindus - indeed everyone in a country where pigs can be seen eating human excrement. However in most respects *Isi Bahane* angered lovers of Wodehouse. The hero Psmith, played by an actor who looks like Imran Khan, the captain of cricket for Pakistan, is called, for some reason, Rambo, and acts the part with the same elephantine gusto.

My interpreter as I watched the film, Miss Anu Chopra, said that the dialogue and production were crude. As well as being *The Times of India* critic, she is a Wodehouse fanatic, with the inevitable "30 or 40" volumes. In India, unlike Britain, women are just as keen as men on the Master.

The writer "Vidushak" in *The Times of India*, devoted the whole of one "Jesting Around" column to *Isi Bahane*, done as a parody

of a Jeeves and Wooster short story. As Bertie is tucking into his breakfast, Aunt Dahlia arrives to disrupt his life:

"Have you a clean shirt?"

"Yes, several."

"And a toothbrush?"

"Two, both of the finest quality."

"Then pack them. You're going to India. And taking Jeeves with you."

"India?" I clicked my tongue. "Are you all right, old ancestor? The Drones Club darts competition is coming up and you ask me to go to India?"

"And you'd better start, young Bertram," she howled. "Otherwise the curse of the Woosters will be on you. You are going to India to cancel that TV programme and save the reputation of your venerable ancestor and creator."

Jeeves, of course, knows all about *Isi Bahane*: "An Indian butler brought the cassette to the Junior Ganymede and I had the occasion to view it." He suggests hiring a lawyer and filing a case at the Bombay High Court. This is a reference to a recent attempt to stop a television serial on the massacres at the time of Partition in 1947. As Jeeves tells Bertie, "One of the judges, Lentin, quotes profusely from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Milton and the Bible in court. I understand from the Indian butler that he is a fan of our creator, Wodehouse, and naturally would not want his reputation to be smirched. Once we get him to try our case, the serial almost certainly would be stopped."

A New Delhi bookseller, Fakir Chand, was the only Indian I met who spoke in a slighting fashion of Wodehouse: "It is very simple and very light. So people can be reading it even in their offices. Sir, this is a very lazy land." Certainly, there are Indian bureaucrats with time to read Wodehouse as well as to drink cups of tea and listen to cricket on the radio. But only Mr. Chand, who had not himself read Wodehouse, neglected to mention the beauty of Wodehouse's writing.

Another great master of English, Evelyn Waugh, once wrote of Wodehouse: "Most of us who rejoice in his work do so primarily for the exquisite felicity of his language." And it is not so much in the dialogue that we find this beauty, as in the passages of descriptive and narrative writing. Here is the wonderful bit in *Leave it to*

*Psmith* where a conwoman, Aileen Peavey the poetess, first meets Psmith, who is impersonating Ralston McTodd, the Canadian poet:

The slim and willowy figure who during the brief conversation had been waiting in an attitude of suspended animation, gazing at Psmith with large, wistful eyes, stepped forward. She clasped Psmith's hand in hers, held it, and in a slow soft voice, like thick cream made audible, uttered one reverent word.

"Maitre."

"I beg your pardon," said Psmith...

The diffident P.G. Wodehouse once described his books as musical comedy, but without the music. When put on the stage or the screen, and without those wonderful passages of description, Wodehouse can sound as banal as *Isi Bahane*. It is like a Da Ponte libretto without the Mozart.

In Delhi, the capital, politics has an old-fashioned English ring. I heard a columnist say: "It is not true that I called Rajiv Ghandi a moron. I called him a duffer, and what's more an amiable duffer." The only two politicians I met were Wodehouse fans, as was top political cartoonist, Ravi Shankar. The London *Independent's* India correspondent, Bruce Palling, tells me that being a Wodehouse devotee is an open sesame to the world of government. One senior and aloof official completely dropped his reserve when Gussie Fink-Nottle was introduced into the conversation.

To find Wodehouse mania in its extreme form one has to travel east to Calcutta, the great metropolis of the Bengalis. It is not a city conducive to mirth, or even light literature. Calcutta is best known to the outside world as a place of disease and famine, where dogs, rats, and crows sometimes feed off the dying as well as the dead. For more than 80 years, Calcutta has also had a reputation for terrorism. Tens of thousands were massacred in the streets in the Hindu-Muslim battles after the Second World War. Fifteen years ago, Maoist terrorists hurled acid into the jam-packed trains, and bombs into the cinemas. Once they bombed a hospital, to which the police replied by throwing quantities of tear-gas into the TB ward.

Calcutta would seem like the last place in the world to enjoy P.G. Wodehouse. Yet the first person I spoke to on the telephone, said of my mission: "That's funny, I'm just re-reading *Sam the Sudden*." It was there that I learnt of the Wodehouse quizzes. Calcutta children have long compiled elaborate tests of general knowledge or special subjects like cricket. Now in the schools, they are testing each other with questions like, "In which novel does Madeline Bassett first meet Bertie Wooster?"

At the offices of the newspaper house, Ananda

Bazar Partika, I found the most avid collector so far, Aveek Sarkar, the Editor-in-Chief. "I have almost a hundred Wodehouse titles. I lent some and never got them back, and since then I've never lent a Wodehouse. The only one I've never been able to get is *Joy in the Morning*. Is it a good one?" I told Mr. Sarkar that *Joy in the Morning* is one of the greatest, and later I saw it both at Bombay domestic airport and at the Mandovi Hotel in Goa.

One of the journalists on Mr. Sarkar's staff is Chitrita Bannerjee, who is a "40 to 50" Wodehouse collector. Although Bengalis are by nature talkative and vivacious, the very mention of Wodehouse brings new light to their eyes and new speed to their tongues. I noticed this when I had the good fortune to meet the most famous literary figure in Calcutta, R.P. Gupta. Friends had told me of "R.P."s wit and wisdom, his vast knowledge of Bengali and English literature, and of the physical books themselves. Visitors troop from all over the world to hear his talk and laugh at his jokes.

When R.P. had poured me a generous rum - "Drink what the locals do, and avoid like the pox any whisky calling itself something like "Thousand Bagpipers," probably made in Bangalore" - he launched into rapid and often hilarious literary gossip. After half an hour I mentioned the name of P.G. Wodehouse, at which R.P. sprang to his feet and exclaimed: "It is one of the great complaints of my life that P.G. Wodehouse was never given the Nobel Prize for Literature. His humour and lightness of touch are completely lacking in those outlandish, Arctic wastes of Sweden where they award the prize." Here was a Bengali saying that P.G. Wodehouse deserved the same honour given to the national hero of Bengal, Rabindrath Tagore.

Bengalis were famous and sometimes mocked for their love of Shakespeare and for their universal knowledge, or claim to it. The last great survivor of these Bengalis is Nirad Chaudhuri, now 90, and living in Oxford, still writing, still scandalising his fellow Indians. On the subject of Shakespeare, Chaudhuri wrote: "I do not know if any other country or people in the world has ever made one author the epitome, test and symbol of literary culture as we Bengalis did with Shakespeare in the nineteenth century...It was a cult which we had made typically Bengali, although the deity was foreign."

The second Bengali characteristic, of universal knowledge, is typified by Chaudhuri himself. Although he spent most of his life as a clerk and freelance journalist, Chaudhuri absorbed prodigious information not only on Indian and English literature and history, but also on abstruse subjects like German historiography, ancient Egypt, medieval Italian poetry, railway engineering, naval architecture and French vintage wines. He remarks in his *Autobiography of an*

*Unknown Indian* on how he had seen some photographs of German field guns: "The sight of these pictures was the beginning for me of a study of artillery technique which lasted many years. I shall relate later the extraordinary story of my preoccupation with the breech mechanism of guns."

The Bengalis, with their pedantry and their flow of Shakespear's tags, were frequent targets of laughter both in India and England. The word "babu," which started by meaning "clerk" or "man of learning," soon acquired the invidious sense of one who garbled the English language. Rudyard Kipling, who much preferred North Indians, often poured scorn on Bengali babus. The humorist F.S. Anstey, author of *Vice Versa*, wrote dozens of stories for *Punch* about Babu Bannerjee, the comic Bengali, constantly garbling Shakespeare quotations. Wodehouse admired both Kipling and Anstey.

The comic babu lives on in Calcutta: I met one the first evening, next to me at the hotel bar. He had been listening to a group of Scottish construction workers, then turned to ask me: "Am I right in thinking that those men have cockney accents? I have never been to the UK but it is what I remember from Shaw's *Pygmalion* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*...I've studied Hegel's dialectic, thesis and antithesis, and of course Karl Marx and as a scientist I admire it, just as I like the second law of thermodynamics..." He ended up with a garbled and hardly relevant version of Shakespeare's lines: "The evil that men do lives after them./The good is oft interred with their bones." As I was listening to this man, I recalled a learned theory that Bertie Wooster himself was partly modelled on Babu Bannerjee, with his ill-recalled snatches of English poetry, his mangled Shakespeare and intellectual boastfulness, especially on Scriptural Knowledge. I thought of the moment in *Joy in the Morning* when Florence Craye, the high-minded literary lady, finds Bertie holding Spinoza's *Ethics*, a work intended for Jeeves. When Florence, greatly impressed, asks Bertie if he has now taken to serious reading, he cannot resist a swank: "When I have a leisure moment, you will generally find me curled up with Spinoza's latest."

And just as Bertie has something of Babu Bannerjee, so Jeeves resembles the all-knowing Bengali typified by Nirad Chaudhuri. He has all the answers, he gets his quotations right. In Jeeves, as in some Bengalis, there is often a hint of pedantry. For instance, Mr. Chaudhuri replies to someone who called him "an octopus in the world of knowledge," that "my intellectual nucleus was certainly more solid than the body of the unlovely cephalopod." When Jeeves is asked by Bertie if Gussie Fink-Nottle looked like a fish on a slab, he concedes that "certainly there was a suggestion of the piscine, sir."

If Calcutta is the supremely Wodehouse city, much of his writing appeals to all Indians. For one thing, there is no explicit sex. Pornography is taboo in India. When a French film company recently tried

to produce a love story, *La Nuit Bengali*, the Indian heroine would not even be shown kissing on screen. The director tried to suggest the amour by having a small sister spy on the lovers and then report to her mother: "The foreigner's touching her breast." The little actress would not soil her lips with a dirty word like breast.

In Delhi, at the memorial for those who fell in the Indian Mutiny, I saw the graffiti "Madhur Weds Pooja." The verb in England would not be weds. In Wodehouse, as in all literature till a few years ago, the romance ends at the bedroom door. In Wodehouse, bedrooms are used for such harmless pursuits as hiding purloined cow-creamers, sticking pins in hot-water bottles, and smashing statuettes of the Infant Samuel at Prayer.

Few English readers of Wodehouse still remember a life with butlers, valets, and chambermaids and the boots. It is safe to say that most Indian readers of P.G. Wodehouse have at least one servant, probably several. The best Indians, that is to say the Wodehouse readers, probably look on their servants with a paternal care. The politicians of Delhi rail at the "feudal" relics. But feudal Indians care for and feed the people who show them loyalty. The politicians of Delhi do not care for or feed the Calcutta slum-dwellers.

Above all, Wodehouse appeals to Indians who, in some way or other, respect the British Raj. Not all are as extreme as Nirad Chaudhuri, who blames the British for abdicating their power. Yet I have heard a young, intelligent Indian say that the worst thing the British government did was giving his country independence: "The only writer who understood us was Rudyard Kipling..."

These sorts of Indians do not look with nostalgia to modern England, which they detest even more than modern India. They hanker after the India of 50 years ago. That was the age when the English loved and treasured their own language, when schoolchildren learned Shakespeare, Wordsworth and even Rudyard Kipling. The Muslim and Hindu Indians, unlike the Christian Indians, even remember the King James Bible and *Book of Common Prayer*. Consider that Wodehouse title, *Joy in the Morning*. Few English under the age of 40 would even have heard the words of the Psalm from which it is taken: "For his wrath endureth but the twinkling of an eye, and in his pleasure is life: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." The modern Englishman might not even see that these words are beautiful: but many an Indian would.

It was Malcolm Mudderidge who remarked that the Indians are now the last Englishmen. That may be why they love the quintessentially English writer, P.G. Wodehouse.