



Plum Lines

The quarterly newsletter of The Wodehouse Society Vol. 17 No 1 Spring 1997

BOLTON AND WODEHOUSE AND ...

WRIGHT AND FORREST!

By Elin Woodger

In 1945, the Trio of Musical Fame became a duo, irrevocably, when Jerome Kern died suddenly and unexpectedly. It had been 21 years since the triad of Bolton, Wodehouse and Kern had last worked together, and the Broadway musical had changed completely—thanks, in no small part, to their groundbreaking work in the first part of this century. But the Princess Theater shows were a thing of the past, much to the sorrow of both Plum Wodehouse and Guy Bolton. Although each was to go on to score other successes, with or without other collaborators, they were never again to recreate the heady days of working on the Princess musicals—until the late 1960s, when Broadway producer-composer Frank Loesser brought them together with two extraordinary men named Robert Wright and George (“Chet”) Forrest.

Bob and Chet—or “The Boys,” as they are known to their colleagues—were more than 30 years younger than their famous collaborators when Loesser enlisted them to write the music for *Betting on Bertie*, the last show Bolton and Wodehouse would work on together, and the first to incorporate Bertie Wooster and Jeeves as its protagonists. Successful composers and lyricists themselves, with innumerable musical hits to their credit, Bob and Chet are now in their 80s and still going strong. A delightful first encounter with them at a reading of *Betting on Bertie* in October, 1996, resulted in a generous invitation to visit with them whenever I was in New York. Never one to waste time when presented with a golden opportunity, I arrived on their doorstep a mere two weeks later, with Tony Ring along for the joyful ride.

The Wright & Forrest abode is a beautiful apart-

ment in the center of Manhattan, filled to the brim with the evidence of their long, productive careers in show business. Awards, memorabilia, and photographs of famous friends and colleagues are distributed handsomely throughout the place, and cover the top of their grand piano in the living room. Every inch of every wall seems to be lined with the covers of sheet music for songs they have written and posters of shows they have produced. As Tony and I wandered through the rooms, examining all these treasures, we experienced much the same emotion as the stout Cortez must have felt when with eagle eye he stared at the Pacific!

After showing us around their impressive apartment, our genial hosts settled down with us to talk about P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton and their own lives in show business. Bob Wright, an attractive, silver-haired man with a ready smile and a quick wit, did most of the talking, while Chet Forrest, a charming gent with a humorous sparkle in his eye, contributed the occasional insightful comment. This state of affairs has been the case throughout all the long years of their partnership. Bob has always been the outspoken member of the team, and a raconteur *par excellence*; Chet is quieter, on the shy side, and content to let Bob do the talking for both of them. Together, these two opposites are a dynamic combination that has produced some of this century’s most memorable music; and for two and a half hours, they regaled their listeners with fascinating tales of show business myths, madness, and merriment.

Robert Wright was born in 1914 in Daytona Beach, Florida; George Forrest Chichester entered the world via Brooklyn, New York in 1915—coincidentally, just as

the famed Trio was about to embark on the Princess shows. Bob and Chet were not to meet, however, until 14 years later, by which time each had already come into his own as a talented musician. By the time he was in Junior High School, in fact, Bob was already trying his hand at composing. "I did a revue called *Pieces of Twenty-Eight*," he recalled, then added with a chuckle, "Later that same year, I did a musical version of *Twelfth Night*, and it must have been terrible, just terrible!"

Nevertheless, Bob was the musical star of Miami High School and the pianist for the Boys Glee Club when George Chichester came along. Known in those days as Chi, he was himself an excellent pianist who had already been an accompanist for the likes of Al Jolson and others. Bob wasn't aware he had a rival in the school until the day when, returning from a lunch break, he heard somebody playing his piano—too well! It was Chi, entertaining his schoolmates with tunes from all the latest Broadway shows, a sure route to popularity. To make matters worse, Chi possessed perfect pitch and an excellent singing voice. It was months before Bob got over his jealousy and became fast friends with the young man who would eventually become his lifelong partner.

Their first professional collaboration came about when Bob and Chi were selected to write a fight song for the football team. Years later, in 1995, the rousing "Hail to Miami High" was, to their surprise and delight, performed for them by Musical Director Jack Lee (*Grand Hotel, Betting on Bertie*). The occasion: their receipt of the Richard Rodgers ASCAP Award for Outstanding Lifetime Contributions to the American Musical Theatre.

Despite the success of their first song, it would be a while before the boys would work together again. They separated after graduation from high school, but reunited about two years later, when Bob (who had been working as an accompanist for Helen Morgan, among other musical commitments) tracked down Chet in New York and convinced him that the grass was greener in Florida. Chet returned, and immediately landed a job working as an accompanist for Ray Bourbon, a notoriously risqué comedian of that era. Bourbon took a shine to both the young men, especially after hearing some of the songs they had written, and in 1935 he took them on a cross-country tour. They ended up in Hollywood, where they found work in a cabaret while making the rounds of movie studios, although they were not yet convinced that they were ready for the big time. Nevertheless, when the head of Paramount's music department suggested they write, on spec, a song called "The Alma Mammy," the budding team quickly produced a ballad, an anthem, and a dance number. This audition led to another with Cy Feuer at Republic Pictures, and finally to MGM, where they were hired on the spot. They were then just 19 and

20 years old.

At MGM, Chet was informed that the moniker of George Forrest Chichester simply wouldn't do, and he obligingly changed his name to Chet Forrest. It was also here that the boys were introduced to the "factory system" of Hollywood movie-making, so well described by Wodehouse in his Mulliner stories. "In those days," said Bob, "the producers stayed with producers, the writers stayed with writers, and the composers stayed—oh! Over there!" By the luck of the draw, however, he and Chet were not sequestered in a hutch, but instead enjoyed the luxury of a good-sized studio with a piano, situated close enough to the Costume Department that they received numerous guests throughout the day: a parade of movie stars and extras, who enjoyed stopping by to chat and sing with The Boys, as they had come to be known by this time.

It was Herbert Stothart who started it. The famed film composer and musical director was their mentor at MGM, yet he could never remember which of the two was Bob and which was Chet. He solved the dilemma by introducing them to others as "The Boys"—and the sobriquet stuck. Certainly it was appropriate at the time, for Bob and Chet were more often than not considerably younger than their colleagues. Interestingly, even now, when they have reached well into the other end of the age spectrum, they are still The Boys to all who know and work with them.

The Boys remained in Hollywood until 1942, by which time they had become amazingly prolific songwriters and arrangers. They composed the music for movies such as *Maytime* (their personal favorite and the first in a series of Nelson Eddy-Jeannette MacDonald musicals they worked on); *Sweethearts*; *Balalaika*; *Broadway Serenade*; *Blondie Goes Latin*; and so on—58 movies altogether, and more besides for which they are uncredited. They received three Academy Award nominations for Best Song: "Always and Always," from *Mannequin*; "It's a Blue World," from *Music in My Heart*; and "Pennies for Peppino," from *Fiesta*. But perhaps their best-known song during this time was "The Donkey Serenade," featured in *The Firefly*. Based on Rudolph Friml's "Chanson for Cello," this piece would help to establish their reputation for successfully (and often eloquently) adapting the work of other composers for both stage and screen.

They had just completed work on *I Married an Angel* when Pearl Harbor was bombed, whereupon they moved to the east coast. On the verge of being drafted, they were instead conscripted to write special material for *The Treasury Star Parade*, an entertainment vehicle for selling war bonds. During breaks from their work for the Treasury, they took a turn producing and directing shows at Camp Tamiment (the summer resort that gave birth to numerous well-known actors, writers and directors of the musical theater), then went

on to produce and direct shows at the world-famed Copacabana. These experiences whetted their appetite for the Real Thing: Broadway. Here they were to enjoy enormous success, starting with *Song of Norway* in 1944. Based on the life and music of Edvard Grieg, this show featured the hit song "Strange Music." *Kismet* (1953-55), with music based on themes of Borodin ("Stranger in Paradise," "And This is My Beloved"), won no less than six Tony Awards in 1954, including Outstanding Musical and Best Composer. Their vast body of work also includes: *Gypsy Lady*; *Magdalena*; *The Great Waltz*; *Anya*; *Kean*; *Timbuktu!*; and *Grand Hotel*, winner of five Tony Awards in 1990, as well as 11 nominations (including Best Original Musical Score).

In the course of their long careers in Hollywood and on Broadway, The Boys were to meet and befriend many of the best-known and most talented names in the business, so it was perhaps inevitable that they would eventually encounter Wodehouse and Bolton. Their first brush with Guy Bolton came in 1944, when they were offered the opportunity to write the score for *Follow the Girls*, which they turned down. However, 13 years later, they were asked to work with Bolton on the musical adaptation of his renowned play, *Anastasia*; this time they very quickly agreed. By now they had signed with the legendary Frank Loesser (*Guys and Dolls*, *The Most Happy Fella*, etc). Frank became their publisher, manager, confidant and friend, as well as the one who drew them into the project with Guy Bolton. At Bob's suggestion, it was decided to adapt the music of Rachmaninoff (who had, Bob discovered, taught piano to the Russian grand duchesses). It took seven years for the show, by then called *Anya*, to reach Broadway, during which time Guy and the director, George Abbott, suffered serious disagreement over the vision each had for the play; it closed in 1965 after a run of only two weeks, but continued to be presented in varying forms for years afterward. It currently exists as a musical play (recently performed in California) called *The Anastasia Affaire*, with music by Wright and Forrest and book by Jerome Chodorov.

Although *Anya* did not succeed, it did have a positive result: a close and lasting friendship between Bob and Chet and Guy and Ginny Bolton. "Guy was a delightful and genial man," said Bob. "There was always a twinkle in his eye, and he was full of the joy of living." The two pairs would visit each other frequently at their respective homes in Remsenburg and Brooklyn Heights, and lend each other the use of their residences in London and Florida. In all this time, however, Bob and Chet did not meet Guy's good friend, P.G. Wodehouse—although they had certainly heard plenty about him. "You must meet my pal," Guy was always saying to them. "We are a great deal alike—Plummie and I and you and Chet. You must meet Plummie." But this meeting was not to take place until 1968, when

Betting on Bertie entered the picture.

By a wonderful coincidence, Frank Loesser had bought a house in Remsenburg, close to both Wodehouse and Bolton, with whom he spent a great deal of time socially. It was he who conceived the idea, which he first proposed in 1966, of doing another musical in the Princess tradition, using Bertie and Jeeves as the protagonists. Plum had in fact thought of using his two most famous characters on stage previously—as recently as 1965, in fact. Letters between Wodehouse and Bolton show that they toyed that year with the idea of capitalizing on the success of the BBC TV series, *The World of Wooster*, by revising their straight play, *Come on, Jeeves* (produced in 1954 and known in novel form as *Ring for Jeeves* or *The Return of Jeeves*). By 1968, thanks to Frank's encouragement, they were ready to start on the new musical; the only thing lacking was a composer. As it happened, Frank knew of two who would fit the bill—Guy Bolton's good friends, Bob Wright and Chet Forrest.

"Frank Loesser called one afternoon," said Bob, "and he asked us what we were doing. Well, we were always working on two or three things at a time, so I told him. 'I want you to do me a favor,' he said. 'You know Guy Bolton, you like him, and he likes you. I want you and Chet to work with him and Plum Wodehouse on a musical which I have persuaded them to do about Bertie Wooster and Jeeves. I promised them that I would find them a composer with whom they could be happy. So how about it? Will you meet with Wodehouse?' And I said, 'Of course we will meet with Wodehouse!'"

Under different circumstances, with different people, Bob and Chet would have refused this request. For one thing, they were already preoccupied with several other projects. For another, this would be a first for them: they had never before collaborated on the songs for a show with anybody but each other, and on this one they would only supply the music for Plum's lyrics. But it didn't matter; to work with Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse would be a dream come true for any composer. They had every expectation, in fact, that they would get along with Plum as well as they always had with Bolton. "Guy had gone into such detail through the years talking about his friend, it was as if we already knew him," said Bob. And indeed, they hit it off immediately; within minutes of their meeting, Plum called Ethel into the room to introduce her to "my new young collaborators." Thus did the Trio of half a century before become a Quartet, with Frank and his wife, Jo Sullivan Loesser, acting as benevolent observers of the proceedings.

Plum Wodehouse quickly charmed The Boys. "He was like a kewpie doll," said Bob. "He radiated innocence." And he was, apparently, a delight to work with, for the collaboration was harmonious from the start.

Two to four days a week, Bob and Chet drove out from Brooklyn Heights, arriving in Remsenburg around 10:15 or so. The Quartet would usually meet at the Boltons' home, only occasionally at the Wodehouses'. If a piano was needed, which was often, they headed over to Frank Loesser's house. They worked until 1:00 or so, then broke for drinks and lunch, usually a handsome meal prepared by Ginny Bolton or Jo Loesser. The afternoon would be spent resting and talking, often about Hollywood—Plum and The Boys had much to share on that subject! This made for a very leisurely working pace, but it hardly seemed to matter; Plum and Guy were delighted with their collaborators, and worked well with them. Theirs was, in fact, a mutual admiration society. Asked by The Boys how he came up with such clever lyrics, Plum admitted that he often wrote them to the rhythm of Jerome Kern melodies floating around his cranium. However, it was not long before he was expressing his preference for all things Wright and Forrest—as was Guy. “They liked everything we submitted to them,” said Chet, and when asked if there had ever been a clinker, he replied with a twinkle, “No, of course not!”

Frank Loesser, who had set this happy experience in motion, adored *Betting on Bertie*, and referred to it often as his “Darling of a show”. It was a great sadness to the Quartet—and the entire theater world—when he died in 1970.

Plum and Guy and Bob and Chet continued to work on the show after Loesser's passing, and Guy began casting about for a producer. Negotiations with Harold Fielding for a London production were underway before the book had even been finished, but casting complications and Fielding's other professional commitments resulted in some frustrating delays. Then Fate took an unexpected turn. One day in 1972, a large Rolls Royce—“the longest limousine I've ever seen!” Plum said at the time—pulled up in Remsenburg and out popped Andrew Lloyd Webber with a proposal to produce his own show based on Bertie and Jeeves. Lloyd Webber's financial offer was so enormous that it couldn't be ignored; but it would mean putting *Betting on Bertie* to one side. Plum and Guy both worried

about how Bob and Chet would react to this—needlessly, as it turned out, for their two young collaborators were also old pros.

“Guy Bolton called and told me about this offer from Andrew Lloyd Webber,” Bob explained. “And he said, ‘We wouldn't dream of doing it without your approval, of course.’ I said, ‘But you have that automatically.’ Plum created these characters about the day I was born, you see. They belonged entirely to him, and he should do whatever he wanted to do. We understood perfectly.”

So plans to produce *Betting on Bertie* were suspended while Lloyd Webber mounted his show, *Jeeves*, in London. It opened in 1975, two months after Plum's death. Unfortunately, it was an unqualified disaster—much to Guy's distress. He was, in fact, quite vocal in his disapproval, telling Bob and Chet: “They missed the point of the characters. They were miscast, they were misdirected, and they were miswritten for. There wasn't one felicitous phrase in the whole play, and the songs certainly didn't have anything to do with the spirit of Wodehouse.” Determined to once again pick up the *Betting on Bertie* banner, Guy elicited a promise from The Boys that they would one day bring Frank's “Darling of a show” to the stage.

Alas, it was not to happen in Guy's lifetime, the primary cause being a disastrous event that had taken place in 1974. Late on the eve of Bob's 60th birthday, Chet was brutally mugged, not too far from their home. He had been so badly beaten that he was near death when he was brought to the hospital. Although his life was saved, his recovery and rehabilitation would take years; and the partners would produce little to no work in all that time. Sympathetic and supportive, Plum and Guy offered to give Bob and Chet one third of their proceeds from the Lloyd Webber show, believ-

ing at the time that it was going to be a success. Kind as it was, they refused the offer without hesitation.

They were in Florida when they received the sad news that Plum had passed away on February 14, 1975. Guy followed his good friend four and a half years later. To the end, he repeatedly reminded Bob and Chet of their promise: “Will you go



Betting on Bertie's Modern Quartet (l-r):
Chet Forrest, Bob Wright, Walter Willison, Douglas Holmes

back? Will you finish it? Will you do it?" And they gave him their solemn word that they would.

For years *Betting on Bertie* lurked on their consciences as they pursued other projects: *Timbuktu!*, an all-black, African rewrite of *Kismet*, was produced in 1978; concerts of their music were performed in the U.S. and Canada; and they produced numerous recordings. Then, in 1989, they made a triumphant return to the stage with *Grand Hotel*. In the cast was a multi-talented performer named Walter Willison. A Tony award nominee (*Two by Two*) and Theater World Award winner, Walter had already written and directed numerous nightclub acts, concerts, and musicals. His talent and enthusiasm immediately impressed Bob and Chet, who were further taken with him when, in 1991, he co-produced and co-starred on a recording of *The Anastasia Affaire*. It was clear that they had found the man to help them resurrect *Betting on Bertie*. Walter agreed to arrange and direct the first reading of the show; and to adapt the book with his partner, Douglas Holmes. A new Quartet had now formed, and they set about their task with the goal of retaining the essence of the Bolton-Wodehouse book but making it palatable for a 1990s audience.

Since then, the road to seeing Guy's and Plum's dream fulfilled has been a slow but certain one, with the occasional rocky moments one expects in the theater. Broadway producer Michael Frazier (*Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music*) signed on to produce the show, and an initial reading was performed in May of 1992. However, personal and professional commitments for the principal collaborators, as well as health problems for Bob and Chet, prevented work on the musical from moving at anything but a snail's pace. It wasn't until 1996 that plans finally picked up speed—and, coincidentally (or not so coincidentally), Andrew Lloyd Webber reentered the picture with the announcement of a revision and restaging of his old musical, now called *By Jeeves*. The timing of his "revisal" inspired speculation within the trade about his reasons for doing it at a time when *Betting on Bertie* was known to be on the horizon. Nevertheless, *Bertie* plowed on, with Walter Willison now firmly established as Director and Douglas Holmes signed to star in the title role. Set to open in Boston in the fall of 1996, the production

suffered a setback when the actor cast as Jeeves became ill a few days before rehearsals were to begin. Consequently, the decision was made to forego road tryouts and to open directly in New York. Towards that end, a staged reading of the show was performed on October 15 (see *Plum Lines*, Autumn 1996). Currently the search is on for a small Broadway theater or large Off-Broadway theater where a fully-staged production can be mounted and enjoyed—30 years after Frank Loesser convinced Plum and Guy that a musical in the Princess tradition was still a ripe idea.

Meanwhile, Bob and Chet continue to work on *La Vie*, a romantic musical with a score based on themes of Camille Saint-Saens and book by Jerome Chodorov. Walter Willison and Douglas Holmes are themselves working on the 1997 revisal of Frank Loesser's *Greenwillow: The Musical Folktale*—thus bringing the Loesser connection full circle in a very fitting way.

But it is *Betting on Bertie* that is closest to The Boys' hearts. "We're very proud of this," said Bob. "We're looking forward to this being done, and hopefully being embraced by audiences. We want it to happen as a tribute to Frank Loesser and to Sir P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton."

Like Bolton and Wodehouse, Bob Wright and Chet Forrest have been one of this century's great creative teams, a partnership of mutual respect and support. Guy himself recognized this when he told Bob, "We are a great deal alike—Plummie and I and you and Chet." Indeed, very much like the team of Bolton and Wodehouse, Wright and Forrest have complemented each other from the start. They have provided years of entertainment to millions of people via hundreds of movies, stage shows and concerts, not to mention thousands of recordings of their classic songs and shows. And now, through their efforts, P.G. Wodehouse's and Guy Bolton's last collaboration will finally be produced and enjoyed by new generations. Plum and Guy are undoubtedly looking on these developments with heavenly approval—as are we all!

As Bertie himself might put it: "Jolly good show, old chaps!"

[Thanks to Walter Willison for his editorial assistance.-A.D.]

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Few who have not experienced it can realize the eerie solitude of a motion-picture studio. Human intercourse is virtually unknown. You are surrounded by writers, each in his or her little hutch, but if you attempt to establish communication with them, you will find on every door a card with the words "Working. Do not disturb." And if you push open one of these doors, you are greeted by a snarl so animal, so menacing, that you retire hastily lest nameless violence befall.

"The Castaways"
Mulliner Nights, 1933

A FEW QUICK ONES

Jan Kaufman found this item in *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhear, 1915-1938*, edited by Kenneth Young:

January 20, 1933

Lady Ottoline Morrell has been staying with the ex-Kaiser of Germany along with other English guests. Lady Ottoline says that the ex-Kaiser is well and reads aloud to his family and guests every night. He does this because Napoleon read aloud at St Helena. His favorite author just now is P.G. Wodehouse. Stoic German members, who may not appreciate the humor of P.G.W., never need fear that they shall not laugh in the right place. All those passages which the ex-Kaiser considers funny he reads out twice!

Robert Persing, whose article on Plum's *Punch* articles will appear in a future issue, had the happy thought recently of encouraging the publication of the columns in book form. They are the only significant body of Plum's work that has never been collected. Robert wrote to A. P. Watt, the Wodehouse literary agent, suggested publication, and was pleased to find that Watt was interested. Latest word is that Watt is looking for a publisher. A line to Watt, encouraging it by word and gesture, would not be amiss: A. P. Watt Ltd, Literary Agents, 20 John St., London WC1N 2DR, United Kingdom.

Marilyn MacGregor, our courteous and efficient membership secretary, is a member of the Lansdowne Club, just off Berkeley Square, and was delighted to find the following item in one of its recent newsletters. It's part of an obituary for a club member. "As you might guess," writes Marilyn, "I was all agog, amazed, and dumbfounded until I called Len Lawson, who worked out from the dates that this can't be the original for Bertie and Tuppy. All the same, I think it's a lovely coincidence in my own club."

From Mrs. Gillian Wilson.

This is to let you know that my father, Mr. Ralph Gerald Rolls, died last month at the age of 93.

He was, I think, one of the first to join the Lansdowne Club when it opened in the '30s, and he used it to the full with great enjoyment. He was a good swimmer, and as a party trick when a young man he would swing across the pool on the rings and trapeze in full evening dress: until the night when a friend pulled the ring away at the crucial moment...

Editor's note:

You may still see the securing lugs in the ceiling where the ropes and trapeze were once fitted above the swimming pool. His

membership file is of great interest and includes copious correspondence with the Secretary concerning the replacement of the ropes and trapeze which had been removed for the greater safety of those swimming up and down the pool. His file also shows that subscription rates at this time were Three Guineas. Breakfast was Two Shillings (10p) and lunch Eleven Shillings (55p).

William Hardwick informs us that a radio adaptation of *By Jeeves*, the current Ayckbourn-Lloyd-Webber musical, was broadcast on BBC Radio shortly before Christmas. "It featured the original stage cast," says William, "and very good it was, too!"

Late in October," writes Francine Swift, "my husband and I were driving on the A394 between Helston and Marazion in Cornwall. We were startled to see 'Bertie Wooster's Restaurant' beside the road, closed. Local inquiries indicated that it was probably a seasonal closing. Menu offerings included Gussie Fink-Nottle's Scallops and Bingo Little's Mushrooms on the starters side. Entrees included Anatole's Best End of Lamb, Jeeves's Pork Medallions, and Oofy Prosser's Duck Breast.

"We were even more startled to find a pub in an eastern suburb of Southampton renamed the Pickled Newt, formerly The Miter. We didn't have time to sample it."

Francine's photograph of an advertising sign in front of Bertie Wooster's Restaurant couldn't be reproduced here successfully, to my infinite sorrow. In the reproduction on the printed page, a human figure on the sign persisted in looking like a jolly white pig.

Phil Ayers came across Books of the Century, published by the New York Public Library in 1996, and found listed in it, under "Joy, Optimism, Gentility," *The Inimitable Jeeves* of 1923. It's a good world after all.

The cry rings round the chancelleries, "Did Uncle Tom Travers ever in fact say anything in any of the books?" Murray Wilson found three very short speeches by Uncle Tom in Chapter 22 of *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Are there any others?

How idyllic it must be to live in a country where Wodehouse characters are part of the culture, like Hamlet and Falstaff, and need no introduction. Notice this paragraph in the "Reader's Guide" of *Debrett's Handbook*, 1982:

8. Where the entry heading in bold typeface differs as to name from the code marked "Style" it reflects the fact of a person being known professionally by one name and socially by another, eg, Miss Rosie M. Banks, the popular novelist, is also Mrs. Bingo Little, the giver of mouth-watering dinner parties.

Theater updates: *By Jeeves* has moved from the Goodspeed Opera House to the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles for a short run beginning March 4. Tickets are available through the Geffen Playhouse Box Office at (310) 208-5454, or Telecharge at (800) 233-3123. *By Jeeves* was named one of the “10 Best of 1996” by *Time Magazine*. It may move to Washington, D.C. after its L.A. run. Meanwhile, *Betting on Bertie* is still “circling the airport” and hopes to land in a New York theater soon. Stay tuned for details.

Jan Piggott’s article, two issues back, described the Dulwich concert of July, 1899, in which P. G. Wodehouse (who’s *that*?) sang the “Song of Hybrias the Cretan.” Its first three lines ran as follows:

My wealth’s a burly spear and brand,
And a right good shield of hides untann’d,
Which on my arm I buckle;

Forty-nine years later in Chapter Five of *Uncle Dynamite*, Plum described Lady Bostock listening to her husband:

She could hear him singing in his study now. Something about his wealth being a burly spear and brand and a right good shield of hides untanned which on his arm he buckled—or, to be absolutely accurate, ber-huckled.

Our increased dues, announced in this issue, will allow your editors certain freedoms with future issues of Plum Lines. Like Lancelot Mulliner in “Came the Dawn,” we shall “require [them] to be printed in hand-set type on deep cream-coloured paper. With beveled edges. [They] must be published, of course, bound in limp leather, preferably of a violet shade, in a limited edition...”

This just in: *Heavy Weather* will be repeated on PBS stations in the U.S. on Sunday, March 30. Check your local listings for times.

Finally, a non-Wodehousian item: Marilyn MacGregor found in *A History of Reading* Virginia Woolf’s dream of a Day of Judgment: “The Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, ‘Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading.’” Amen.



The Oldest Member

THE GREAT TIE

By Shamin Mohamed

The Drones Club Tie is a beautiful handmade tie of pure English silk, manufactured by Messrs. Ben Silver and Co. The colours are plum, yellow and black, with the stripes cut from the heart. (This was the design that won the most votes in an informal poll carried out on the Internet.) Recognizing the topping sort of chaps and gals we are, the cost to us is a mere \$34 per tie. Bow-ties are also available, for the paltry sum of \$27. Regrettably, no scarves are available, since the minimum order for them is considerably larger. But women in neckties look rather handsome, what?

The tie design may be viewed in all its glory on the World Wide Web: <http://www.crl.com/~spm/drone-tie.html> is the URL.

The deadline for the orders shall be April 15, and I shall send off the order to Ben Silver and Co. on or about April 16. (That is when your cheques will be deposited.) We should have the ties in hand around early June, well in time for summer punting trips down the river.

The ties from Ben Silver are works of art—the highest quality silk, and with a wonderful drape. I was wearing one on my recent trip to the nation’s capital, and it was admired on all sides by the Capital!ists. The regular price for them is \$54 but we get them for much less since we are ordering at wholesale prices, which is a dashed good stroke of luck.

To order, send a cheque for \$34 for each tie requested and \$27 for each bow-tie to:

(Within the US and Canada; shipping to other countries may be slightly more, depending on the country. Send email to spm@crl.com for more information.)

“There is no time, sir, at which ties do not matter.”



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Fellow Plummiess,

Well, technically the vote on raising dues by \$5 is not quite over by the calendar, but inasmuch as the flood of letters, FAXes and Emails has subsided to a trickle and the response has been overwhelmingly in favor, I feel confident in saying that the Yeas have it: as of this writing, on the 22nd anniversary of the passing of our dear one, I have received 137 votes in favor and 2 against. It is so easy being president when there is a mandate. Nothing to think about, you know. What we call here a "no-brainer". So what ho! \$20 a year it is, and onward and upward for Plum Lines. And let me here publicly pass along the many many compliments to our Oldest Member and Aunt Dahlia for their fine work!

Some have suggested that we raise dues to \$25 to prevent this kind of emergency again in the future. I have broached this with the OM and he agrees that whatever money we are kind enough to put in the treasury, he will find a way to spend, so it is best, at this point, to keep him well out of temptation 's way. I mean, need we any better example of an editor with money in the offing than Aunt Dahlia and that perpetually in-the-hole publication, Madame's Nightshirt, or whatever it was called. But the OM, dreamy at the idea of more loot in the kitty, came up with half a dozen ways of improving Plum Lines, so I think this might be a worthy issue of discussion at our annual meeting.

Apropos of which (if that's the word I want), let me here suggest the following agenda for the beloved business meeting at the convention:

- A. Report of Officers
- B. Setting of Dues
- C. Association with other P.G. Wodehouse Societies
- D. Choice of Convention Sites and Dates
- E. General Discussion of possible projects
- F. Election of new Officers

If anyone has other ideas, please let me know, but I think this should keep us pretty busy. I have touched on the dues issue. Let me touch now on the other issues, so you know what we will be discussing.

As the only thing I have done is to write the Post Office regarding a Wodehouse stamp, my report will be blissfully short: No stamp yet. By the way, the campaign continues and all those who desire such a thing should bombard the committee. Address to write:

The Citizen's Stamp Advisory Committee
United States Postal Service
475 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 202600-6757

Re other societies: I have had some contact with The P. G. Wodehouse Society in the Netherlands as well as our own Tony Ring and his heroic efforts at launching a similar group in Great Britain. There are also a few other of us scattered around the globe. Basically, the idea is to somehow get together as an International Society. Our European cousins, however, are justly concerned about becoming a mere backwater suburb of our continental organization and disappearing into it, like moths to a flame. We have been hard at work trying to figure a way that we can all be under one umbrella and remain individual. Discussions will continue and I am sure that some sort of concrete proposal will be made in October in Chicago. Without a constitution, it's hard to know exactly how to proceed. (There goes Milstein on his damn hobby horse again)

Re conventions: without a constitution (the dreaded "C" word again!) the choosing of sites and dates for our biennial convention is a bit haphazard. My understanding is that the whole idea of a convention grew up spontaneously. A local chapter, which had been wont to get together several times a year, threw open a general invitation to one and sundry to come to a meeting in celebration of Plum's rooth or so anniversary. This party was such fun that it was repeated by another group two years later. This, ultimately, became "the convention". So the convention, far from being an event put on by the Society as a whole, is a local event, hosted by a chapter, for the benefit of all. In 1993, and again in 1995, bids were put in for the honor of hosting the next convention right on the spot. I use the word "bids" loosely, since in both cases only one chapter was interested in hosting, and therefore won the bidding by default. Given the increase in the number of local chapters, however, it seems possible that there may be competition for hosting honors in the future; therefore we should be prepared for this contingency. There has also been some mild concern expressed in the past about the cost of holding conventions in major cities when good old South Bend may be just as fine a spot for browsing and sluicing. I would therefore propose that any chapter or group of individuals who wish to host the 1999 convention come with a plan and proposal for tentative dates and let's see if we can get some exciting competition going for some locales not hitherto explored (anyone for Des Moines?).

Well, that's it from your phlegmatic president. Any ideas, please write or call. See you all in Chicago!

Elliott Milstein
President, TWS

THE GREAT POETRY HANDICAP!

A NEW WHEEZE FOR THE 1997 WODEHOUSE SOCIETY CONVENTION

It is no secret that Calliope, the Muse of Poetry, perched on P. G. Wodehouse's shoulder from his school days on, whispering frequently and earnestly into his shell-like ear. Even Bertie Wooster, to express this or that thought, could pluck lines of poetry out of the dusty recesses of his school-boy memory (though Jeeves usually had to fill in or finish them for him). And we at the Chicago Accident Syndicate are impressed by the calibre of verse that members of The Wodehouse Society contribute to *Plum Lines*. So, looking for ways to involve people more than ever in this year's convention, we have fastened like limpets onto a ripe new wheeze we call The Great Poetry Handicap.

Roughly the idea is this. Members of the Wodehouse Society, whether attending the '97 convention in Chicago or not (see the last issue of *Plum Lines* for details), are invited to write and submit poems inspired by P. G. Wodehouse. A panel of judges will scrutinize the entries carefully and pick the top half dozen or so, on the basis of their Originality, *Espièglerie*, *Joie de Vivre*, and Parabolic Curve. These will be read at the convention's Gala Saturday Night Banquet, by their authors if present, by a deputy if not, and the top three winners will be chosen by those at the banquet. (The Handicap arises from the fact that banqueters may not be quite as sober as a judge by then.) The rules are as follows:

1. Poems may take any form, from ode to sonnet, from haiku to limerick, from pastels in prose to vignettes in verse, so long as they're related to P. G. Wodehouse and his *Oeuvre*. They may be as madcap as Uncle Fred or as solemn as the Senior Conservative Club. They may not, however, exceed thirty lines in length.

2.

Authors of poems entered in the competition need not be present at the convention to win.

3. More than one entry per person may be submitted, but only the best of any given person's entries, in the opinion of the judges, will be eligible to be a finalist. No poem entered in the competition may have been published anywhere previously.

4. Following the reading of the finalists' poems at the Saturday Night Banquet, those attending the banquet will select three of them for Win, Place, and Show. The top three winning poems will be published in *Plum Lines*.

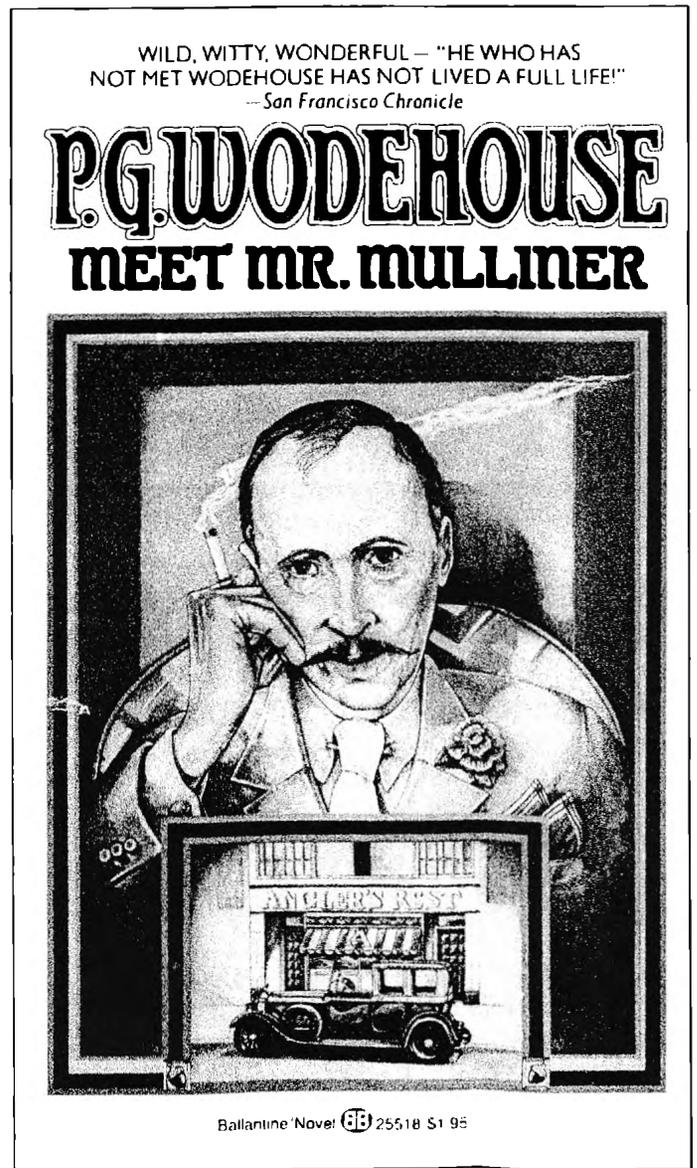
**THERE, THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT! GET CRACKING!
LET VERSIFICATION BE UNCONFINED!**

KEEP UP TO DATE ON CONVENTION PLANS AT THE
CHICAGO ACCIDENT SYNDICATE'S WEBSITE: [HTTP://WWW.STICHICAGO.COM/PLUM97.HTM](http://www.stichicago.com/plum97.htm)

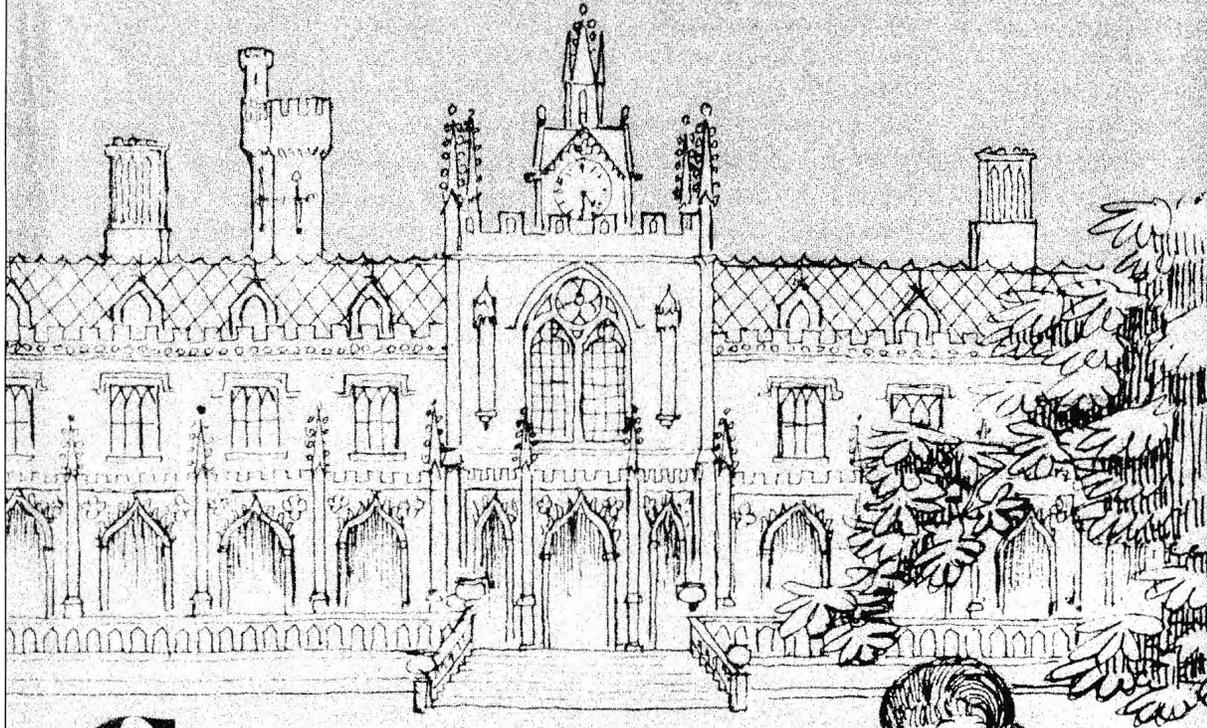
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THESE PICTURES?

Charles Gould has devised a little entertainment for us. There is at least one mistake (possibly several!) in each of these cover illustrations of Wodehouse books. Find them, list them, send them to Aunt Dahlia or me, and if you are correct you will be hailed in the next Plum Lines as a downright Wodehouse genius. You will also receive an eighty year supply of moth balls. For those who aren't feeling particularly downright at the moment, answers will be published in the next issue.

—OM



P.G. WODEHOUSE



Company for Henry



NOT INVITED TO TEE

Two eagle-eyed Plummiess have sent reports of an incident that could have come from the files of the Oldest Member. David McDonough found this item in *Sports Illustrated* of October 21, 1996.

In this year of mad cows and romping royals, an amateur golf tournament has become the focus of an unlikely media blitz in Great Britain, as papers from the *Times* to the tabs have followed the plight of a mother-and-son twosome from West Kirby in Cheshire. The good news is that—thanks to all the attention—the grand British tradition of decency and fair play has won out once again over the grand British tradition of snobbery and discrimination.

In August, Audrey Briggs and her 13-year-old son, Laurie, entered a father-daughter/mother-son tournament at the Burhill Golf Club in Walton-on-Thames. Audrey, a four-time Welsh ladies' champion, and Laurie, a 15 handicapper, performed well enough to reach the third round. But their tournament ended suddenly when a competitor wrote anonymously to Burhill's club secretary, Dick Richards, saying that the Briggses should be disqualified because Laurie is adopted. Richards agreed, telling the Briggses that the competition "is open only to mothers and fathers with natural sons and daughters."

Audrey said that no restriction was mentioned beforehand. Richards replied that while the disappointment of the family "touched" him, the decision stood. According to Audrey, Laurie, who was adopted as an infant in Brazil, handled the ouster fairly well, putting it down to "grown-ups behaving very oddly."

The rest of the nation was not so forgiving. BURHILL BAN BREACHES SPIRIT OF GAME headlined the *Daily Telegraph*, which also parodied snobbish golfers, while the *Evening Standard* shouted WHY THE WORLD WOULD BE A BETTER PLACE WITHOUT GOLF, above an editorial decrying the incident. In the face of the storm, club captain Vince Dean announced Burhill's retreat (MEANIES IN GOLF U-TURN whooped the *Daily Record*), saying that "fresh rules and regulations are going to be drawn up and our priority will be to ask Audrey Briggs and her son to come back and play next year." Audrey said the Briggses would return in 1997. As for Laurie, the whole fuss still seemed pointless. "My mum," he said, "is my mum."



John Karcoces sent the *Guardian Weekly* version of the story, which starts out in the right spirit: "It is hard to believe that even the bounders who get their come-uppance in the pages of P.G. Wodehouse could have dreamed up such a wheeze."



David suggests that perhaps Steggles is making book on this tournament, "or do I detect the heavy hand of Ukridge in here?" Whatever the case, he has grandly offered to judge a proposed contest: Submit the best plot for a Plum short story based on this incident and win a prize. Another prize will be offered for the best title of the story. We have yet to determine what the prizes will be, but we like the idea. Send your submissions to the Oldest Member or Aunt Dahlia. Winner to be announced in a future *Plum Lines*. —AD

NEWS FROM HOLLAND

George Van Capelle, president of the P. G. Wodehouse Society of Holland, has happy news for us about recent doings. In addition to the First International P. G. Wodehouse Memorial Dinner at Zuylen Castle, ably reported by Helen Murphy in the last *Plum Lines*, the society members visited their Belgian counterparts, the Drones Club, at their country house, Millfleet Hall.

"In May, 1997," says George, "we plan to introduce a brand new rose, dedicated to the Master, the Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, a splendid variety, deep red (almost plum) and with a dazzling scent."

"And in October 1997 there will be of course the Second Edition of the PGW Memorial Dinner! As you can see, this small tribe of the Wodehouse family is rather industrious! Of course each and every one of you guys is invited to every happening we have here!"

Here, he reflected, as they walked round the square, was a girl whose ear was more or less on a level with a fellow's mouth, so that such observations as he might make were enabled to get from point to point with the least possible delay.

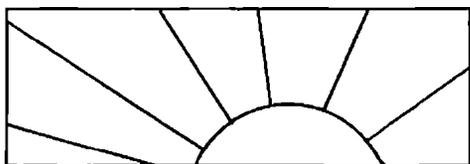
"The Amazing Hat Mystery"
Young Men in Spats, 1936

STARTING THE SUMMER OFF RIGHT!

The busy folks of Chapter One are even busier as they plan a Dronesian binge to be held during the weekend of June 20-22, 1997 in lovely Cape May, New Jersey. All members of The Wodehouse Society are invited to Cape May, which will represent Bingley-on-the-Sea, with the historic Chalfonte Hotel standing in for the Hotel Splendide. Plans for the weekend include a Drones Club Miniature Golf Tournament, complete with prizes; a wicked quiz on the golf stories as only David McDonough can create it; sumptuous dinners at the Chalfonte; a send-off Sunday barbecue hosted by Chapter One members Hope Gaines and David MacKenzie; and a few other jolly surprises!

The weekend will be relaxing and informal, and there is no better place than Cape May for such an experience. Noted for its abundance of Victorian architecture, Cape May also boasts beaches galore, wildlife sanctuaries (great for birding!), and delightful shops for those who like to dispense their wealth freely. The base of operations will be the Chalfonte, a charming and authentic Victorian hotel with a large and lovely verandah that catches the sea breeze. The Chalfonte also has a delightful bar and other facilities that will be at the disposal of Plummiess who wish to browse and sluice together, not to mention any informal talks and presentations that may occur to the revelers. Most important—it's inexpensive! Room rates include two meals a day, and we are talking delicious, Southern-style cooking here. All this plus the opportunity to explore one of the loveliest spots on the eastern seaboard—who could ask for anything more?

A number of rooms have been reserved for TWSers at the Chalfonte, and they are going fast, thanks to Plummiess from Chapter One, the NEWTS and Capital! Capital! who have already signed up. There are also numerous attractive B&Bs and motels in the area.



CHAPTERS CORNER

Happy Anniversary to The Pdrones Club of St. Louis! The Pdrones turned 4 last fall, and celebrated with an anniversary feast worth of Anatole's best efforts on Wednesday, November 13. The Pdrones have slated their annual Afternoon Tea on Sunday, March 9, to be followed by a Winery Tour on April 20, and then a Picnic in the Park on June 8. Good food and PGW book discussions combine to make the Pdrones' gatherings jolly good fun!

The latest gathering of **The Drone Rangers** of Houston on February 15 marked their "Annual Remember Plum Party", complete with fancy dress. Flappers, golfers, movie stars and more were in attendance as the Rangers browsed and sluiced and played games such as "Pot the Bending Baxter." Chapter members are also getting a head start on their convention entries for The Great Poetry Handicap. Next up: A discussion of *The Golf Omnibus* on March 28.

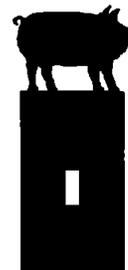
Chapter One meets regularly at the Dickens Inn in Philadelphia, although may need to look for larger quarters to accommodate the growth in chapter membership—I hear they were bursting at the seams at their last two meetings. See the accompanying article on this page regarding Chapter One's upcoming Summer Binge.

After a year filled to the brim with Plum-filled activities, the NEWTS (now celebrating their fifth year as a chapter) appear to be in hibernation. They will awaken from their slumbers when they celebrate spring on Sunday, April 13. Host for the occasion will be the Rev. Wendell Verrill, so of course a Sermon Handicap is being planned!

Meanwhile, the hard-working folks of the **Chicago Accident Syndicate** have been up to their ears in planning for this October's convention. Rumor has it some great surprises are in store for conventioners. Don't waste time! Send in your registration form now!

PIG ON/OFF

Marilyn MacGregor has found a pig, on a light switch plate, that bears a striking resemblance to the Empress. Alas, members outside the US may find it won't fit their local fixtures. For more information call (508) 827-9900 or write to Shaker Workshops, P. O. Box 8001, Ashburnham MA 01430.



THE WODEHOUSE SEASON AT THE BRITISH NATIONAL FILM THEATRE

By Tony Ring

British members of TWS have just had the opportunity to enjoy a dozen examples of Wodehouse-related film and TV.

The British National Film Theatre (“NFT”) should be both thanked and congratulated for sponsoring a season of films and television with a P G Wodehouse link, a total of twelve evenings in the thirty-five-day period between 26 November and 30 December. Remarkably, despite some near misses, the erratic British climate was kind enough to give us only low temperatures, wind, rain, fog and ice, but no chaos-causing snow to prevent our getting to the London location.

The NFT divided the programme clearly into “film evenings” and “television evenings,” and each group was enjoyable for different reasons. The television series reminded me just how good had been the *Wodehouse Playhouse* series of Mulliner/Golf stories, starring John Alderton and Pauline Collins (*Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court* and *A Voice From The Past* being my personal favourites). We poor Angles have never had a chance to see these portrayals, in many people’s view the peak of perfection of television Wodehouse, since home video recorders were invented, and have been living on our memories for some twenty years. Will some enterprising video producer not obtain the rights and produce a complete set for fans to enjoy?

It was also interesting to see again what is, alas, the only surviving episode of the Ian Carmichael/Dennis Price *World of Wooster* series from 1966. Interesting, because it confirms the impression I had retained that Price was too old for Jeeves. Which he was, by a mile. And too supercilious. Which he was. Ian Carmichael was much the more accomplished of the two, though in my view he was also too old (Bertie didn’t reach thirty in the stories) and he and his director will never be wholly forgiven for planting on an unsuspecting modern public the suggestion that Bertie Wooster wore a monocle! Nowhere is this suggested in the books, one tiny piece of circumstantial evidence notwithstanding. It is the magazine illustrations, and then Mr Carmichael, which have misled us. It was good to see that Hugh Laurie, who featured one evening in two episodes of the recent series with Stephen Fry, did not fall into the same trap.

Two other television adaptations of stories are worthy of note. The earliest surviving example of televised Wodehouse is a creditable 1956 *Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend*, and we were privileged to see this, which was for its age really very good. The two most noticeable flaws, apart from the sets, were the evident immaturity of young child actors (in this case, the one playing Ern), and the skills of the continuity function. In both these areas, I believe, vast improvements have taken place in forty years! And in 1982 we saw John Alderton again, performing *Jeeves and the Impending Doom* in what I can only describe as play-reading form. That is to say, he read or recited most of it, but acted out some scenes. And, of course, did it brilliantly.

The remaining television evenings concentrated on interviews with PGW, between 1958 and 1971, which did not reveal a great deal, and two programmes put out around Christmas 1989, one a documentary called *Bookmark* (which included parts of these interviews) and the other *Wodehouse on Broadway*, a celebration of his theatrical career. Strangely, for this was a recording of a stage performance at Plymouth, I felt this made better viewing on the smaller screen at home.

The film season was something special for the connoisseur. The NFT has brand new prints of *Brother Alfred* (based on the short story “Rallying Round Old George”) and *Leave It To Me* (based on *Leave it To Psmith*). The treatment was competent rather than riveting, the film omitting an awful lot of plot and being created as a vehicle for the star rather than the story, and of course there was no Wodehouse screenplay, but it was good to have a chance to see them.

We also saw the two Jeeves films. *Thank You, Jeeves!* was supposedly based on the novel of the name, but it was difficult to see how! At least Bertie Wooster (played by David Niven) appeared in this, but the naiveté of the American film industry was shown up very clearly by a close up of a hotel register, in England, which pictured a guest registering on 8.13.19xx! The follow-up was an early example of that distasteful habit of selling commercial rights to a character or its name. *Step Lively, Jeeves!* had no Wodehouse involvement whatsoever, and did not even feature Bertie Wooster. It was the inter-war equivalent of a 1990s James Bond film based

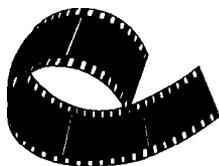
on a story written by a screen-writer who probably never met Ian Fleming.

Perhaps the most satisfactory films were *A Damsel in Distress* and *A Girl on the Boat*, each of which drew a good audience and were very entertaining. The former, featuring Fred Astaire, does appear on television occasionally, but the latter had seemed to have been lost. It features the diminutive Norman Wisdom, and a very youthful Richard Briers, and kept much more closely to the original plot than we had any right to expect. In all, it was very well received.

On each of the film evenings, we were additionally treated to a silent film, either a Reggie Pepper from 1919 or a golf story from 1924. These were accompanied by a live pianist, who musically improvised the mood changes with utmost skill. These films each lasted about twenty-five minutes and although they were of general interest, to the non-aficionado they would have been somewhat slow! I feel it was a mistake to give us two of the golf silent pictures on the last evening; it caused at least one person to walk out, but meant that all the surviving five golf pictures (out of six) had been squeezed into the season.

My only real regret from the season is that it did not include *Those Three French Girls*, a film for which Wodehouse did actually write the dialogue. But you can't have everything—and we had a lot!

The British Film Institute made an important plea for help on the programme leaflets. As mentioned, only one of the 1960's World of Wooster episodes has survived, and nothing from Blandings Castle or Ukridge. They are asking for anybody who may have a copy of episodes from these series to contact them so that a copy can be made for the archive and a screening. If TWS members know where copies could be found, please let me or TWS know, and I would be happy to pass on the information.



PLUM AND JEEVES IN WISDEN

Helen Murphy writes:

I recently bought a little book of thirty obituaries printed by Wisden over the years. You probably know that this is the great Cricketers' Almanac, founded in 1864. There are many collectors of Wisden, but probably only Lords and the British Library have complete sets. Wisden started printing obituaries in 1892 and has now printed about 10,000. Wonderful, then, that in this little book of thirty there should be not only P. G. Wodehouse (by virtue of public school cricket and later literary fame), but also Percy Jeeves, whose name he used for the ultimate gentleman's personal gentleman. Jeeves was killed on the Somme, the eightieth anniversary of which we have been remembering recently.

JEEVES, PERCY (Royal Warwickshire Regiment), was killed on July 22, 1916, England losing a cricketer of whom very high hopes had been entertained. Jeeves was born at Earlsheaton, in Yorkshire, on March 5, 1888. He played his first serious cricket for the Goole CC, and became a professional at Hawes. He took part in Yorkshire trial matches in 1910, but presumably failed to attract much attention. Soon afterwards he went to live in Warwickshire, playing for that county, when not fully qualified, against the Australians and South Africans in 1912. No special success rewarded him in those matches, but in 1913 he did brilliant work for Warwickshire, both as bowler and batsman, and firmly established his position. He took 106 wickets in first-class matches that season at a cost of 20.88 each, and scored 765 runs with an average of 20.13. In 1914 he held his own as a bowler, taking 90 wickets in first-class matches, but in batting he was less successful than before. He was chosen for Players against Gentlemen at the Oval, and by his fine bowling helped the Players to win the match, sending down in the Gentlemen's second innings 15 overs for 44 runs and four wickets. Mr P. F. Warner was greatly impressed and predicted that Jeeves would be an England bowler in the near future. Within a month War had been declared. Jeeves was a right-handed bowler on the quick side of medium pace, and with an easy action came off the ground with plenty of spin. He was very popular among his brother players.

(Wisden 1917)

WODEHOUSE, SIR PELHAM GRENVILLE, the famous novelist who died in hospital on Long Island on February 14, 1975, at the age of 93, had been a member of the Dulwich College XI in 1899 and 1900. He was godfather of M. G. Griffith, the late Captain of Sussex.

(Wisden 1976)

Jeeves let out his brain another notch.
The Mating Season, 1949

THE OLD SCHOOL TIE THAT BINDS

By Anne Cotton

An abbreviated version of a talk delivered at the Boston Wodehouse convention, October 1995. Anne's talk was illustrated with twenty-six slides, which could not be included here. References to them have been removed from this version of her talk. -O.M.

First of two parts

P.G. Wodehouse, a century ago, was beginning his second year at Dulwich College—one of what the English call “public” schools. Dulwich had a deep and lasting effect on Wodehouse's life and furnished him with a full supply of ringing Latin phrases such as *rem acu tetigisti*. And so we will look at some aspects of Plum's school experience that shaped his unique and delightfully off-center view of the world.

I must thank two people who contributed much of the source material for this talk. Dr. Jan Piggott, the current Dulwich archivist, sent me many slides, along with documents illuminating Plum's Dulwich years. And our own NEWT, David Landman, found a marvelous anthology of comments on the English prep school, written by noted Britons in all sorts of professions. While “prep school” is roughly equivalent to our own upper elementary to middle schools, much of what is said about it applies equally well to the “public” schools that are on a level with our junior and senior high schools. Together, these schools inspired a burning loyalty among their students. Make no mistake: the “old school tie” is not simply a piece of cloth one wears about the neck. And the “school” referred to did not mean university; it meant those schools one attended as a boy.

School began with the tearful arrival of small boys in a terrifying world inhabited by much larger boys, some of whom were definitely bullies. The first official function of the year, for students new and old at prep or public school, was usually an Assembly, at which the boys would be prayed over, exhorted to toe the line, and sent to bed. One young lad (not Plum) reports that he could not bring himself to ask the location of the bathroom—his family did not speak of such things to strangers—with the predictable awful results (and the other boys never let him forget it). Plum seems either not to have suffered a similar fate, or he promptly

forgot it; he says, in his biography *Over Seventy*,

The three essentials for an autobiography are that its compiler shall have had an eccentric father, a miserable misunderstood childhood and a hell of a time at his public school, and I enjoyed none of these advantages... as for my schooldays at Dulwich they were just six years of unbroken bliss.¹

But then, when one is over seventy, one may remember the past in a mellow glow that fuzzes the truth.

Plum was one of Dulwich's luminaries. He studied Classics (when he chose), boxed, played cricket and football, and co-edited the school paper, the *Alleynian* (writing much of its material). Joseph Connolly, in his biography, quotes Plum's lifelong friend Bill Townend as saying that Plum was

A noted athlete, a fine footballer and cricketer. . . in fact, one of the most important boys in school. [But Connolly adds that in 1899] Plum was doing disastrously in the Classical Sixth.²

A most important feature of any school was its headmaster. This august figure set the tone of the entire school, and by example and authority created the atmosphere in which the students lived and learned. Wodehouse attended Dulwich under a truly extraordinary headmaster, Arthur H. Gilkes. He was apparently a brilliant teacher and leader of the school. Surely it is Gilkes that Wodehouse had in mind in a scene from his novel, *The White Feather*, when a student informs his headmaster that he plans to make his career working with that newfangled toy, the motorcar:

The headmaster was silent. To him the word “Education” meant Classics. There was a Modern side at Wrykyn, and an Engineering side, and also a Science side; but in his heart he recognised but one Education—the Classics. Nothing that he had heard, nothing that he had read in the papers and the monthly reviews had brought home to him the spirit of the age and the fact that Things were not as they used to be so clearly as this one remark...³

Headmasters, of course, did not rule alone; they had a whole faculty to help. The masters at Dulwich, as elsewhere, seem to have varied considerably in quality. In addition to teaching, they often served as suitable targets for the high spirits and creative energies of the more enterprising boys in their care.

Sir Osbert Sitwell commented on masters of prep schools:

A few Latin tags, a knowledge of the more reputable parts of the Bible, an aptitude for footer and cricket—and, of course, fives; that, they knew, was what got most gentlemen comfortably through life. But while, of course, they liked every boy to be of the same mental height, with nothing odd, or “weird” as they would have said about him, yet they did not actually want unusual boys to be beaten to death in the dormitories, for that, too, would have been unconventional and would interfere with the games...

As teachers....they could, with a few words, tear every plume out of British history and render Latin, from being a dead language, into one that could plainly never have lived.⁴

Plum's opinion of his own masters seems to have been more ambiguous. While he loved school, his stories are full to the brim of reports of the vengeance taken by boys on their unloved masters. Why are there so many of these stories, unless he had encountered at least one or two masters who did not come up to the mark? In some early parodies of the Sherlock Holmes stories Wodehouse wrote very soon after he left Dulwich for a brief career in banking, we see an outrageous example. "The Strange Disappearance of Mr. Buxton-Smythe" centers on a master who assigned essay topics in series of six. By week four, the entire form was so heartily sick of writing essays on David,

that the form rose as one man from their seats, tore him to pieces, and ate him... The local coroner...said that a master who could act as Buxton-Smythe had done had, to all intents and purposes, committed suicide. He added a rider to the effect that the form had behaved in a most conscientious and praiseworthy manner.⁵

O'Hara, in *The Gold Bat*, is one of Plum's most expert raggers of masters. When he occasionally desires to be relieved of the onerous task of attending dull classes, he deals thus with the French master:

It was that gentleman's custom to sit upon a certain desk while conducting the lesson. This desk chanced to be O'Hara's. On the principle that a man may do what he likes with his own, he had entered the room privily in the dinner-hour, and removed the screws from his desk, with the result that for the first half-hour of the lesson the class had been occupied in excavating M. Gandinois from the ruins. That gentleman's first act on regaining his equilibrium had been to send O'Hara out of the room, and O'Hara, who had foreseen this emergency, had spent a very pleasant half-hour in the passage with some mixed chocolates and a copy of Mr. Hornung's *Amateur Cracksman*. It was his notion of a cheerful and instructive French lesson.⁶

But for the really classic ragging of a master one must turn to *The Prefect's Uncle*, wherein young Farnie, a new boy, does not seem capable of staying at any one school for very long. The reason just might have something to do with his tendency to come up with such admirably creative rags as this. Farnie has accidentally upset an inkpot, and the substitute master of the fourth form, one Somerville Smith, universally disliked by the boys, orders him to have the resulting stain washed up before afternoon class, or else "there would be trouble:"

Now, success in the field is a good thing, and undoubtedly makes for popularity. But if you desire to command the respect and admiration of your fellow-beings to a degree stretched almost to the point of idolatry, make yourself proficient in the

art of whiling away the hours of afternoon school...Farnie observed (to himself) that there would be trouble in any case, for he had hit upon the central idea for the most colossal 'rag' that, in his opinion, ever was. After morning school he gathered the form around him, and disclosed his idea. The floor of the form-room, he pointed out, was some dozen inches below the level of the door. Would it not be a pleasant and profitable notion, he asked, to flood the floor with water to the depth of those dozen inches? On the wall outside the form-room hung a row of buckets, placed there in case of fire, and the lavatory was not too far off for practical purposes. Mr Smith had bidden him wash the floor. It was obviously his duty to do so. The form thought so too. For a solid hour, thirty weary but enthusiastic reprobates laboured without ceasing, and by the time the bell rang all was prepared. The floor was one still, silent pool. Two caps and a few notebooks floated sluggishly on the surface, relieving the picture of any tendency to monotony. The form crept silently to their places along the desks. As Mr Smith's footsteps were heard approaching, they began to beat vigorously upon the desks, with the result that Mr Smith, quickening his pace, dashed into the form-room at a hard gallop. The immediate results were absolutely satisfactory, and if matters subsequently (when Mr Smith, having changed his clothes, returned with the Headmaster) did get somewhat warm for the thirty criminals, they had the satisfying feeling that their duty had been done,; and a hearty and unanimous vote of thanks was passed to Farnie.⁷

This brings to mind the time the third floor residents of my own dormitory flooded the corridor one evening, so they could have a water ballet. It was a tremendous success, though those of us living on the same floor with the housemistress were unfortunately not able to attend.

One hears many tales of the discipline to which boys in the English educational system were subjected—only once in a while. Beatings, often severe, were far from unknown, though they seem to have been reported more at the lower school levels than at public school. There are two possible reasons: one is that public school boys are reaching an age, and size, at which they are more capable of defending themselves against a tyrannical master. The other is the system of prefects. These were older and more responsible students, chosen by the Headmaster, selected to keep order among their less "organized" and younger colleagues. They had some special privileges, rather better quarters, and a great deal of authority in the school. However, while many were real leaders, it was easy enough for students given this authority to become bullies; and the "school bully" is reported in more than one piece of fiction set in English boarding schools.

We have now played hooky long enough from a topic essential to any discussion of school: the curriculum. Plum had quite a few pointed comments on the relative importance of what he continually calls "work," by which he invariably means academic work—as con-

trasted to sports, and rags, and all the other pleasant diversions which the school day offered. Here is an excerpt from an essay, included with the collected *Tales of St. Austin's*, entitled, simply, "Work:"

Work is supposed to be the centre round which school life revolves—the hub of the school wheel, the lode-star of the schoolboy's existence, and a great many other things. "You come to school to work," is the formula used by masters when sentencing a victim to the wailing and gnashing of teeth provided by two hours' extra tuition on a hot afternoon. In this, I think, they err, and my opinion is backed up by numerous scholars of my acquaintance, who have even gone so far—on occasions when they themselves have been the victims—as to express positive disapproval of the existing state of things. In the dear, dead days (beyond recall), I used often to long to put the case to my form-master in its only fair aspect, but always refrained from motives of policy. Masters are so apt to take offence at the well-meant endeavours of their form to instruct them in the way they should go.⁸

Yet Plum certainly did work, for a while at least, well enough to have picked up the classical references that filled his writing. The early Greek curriculum was of course loaded with Thucydides, year after year of it. I cannot comment personally on Thucydides, having escaped the study of Greek; but one can only say about Caesar's Gallic Wars (which of course formed an integral part of the Latin curriculum at Dulwich) that once you have translated one battle, you have done the lot. Only the name of the opponent changes; the various episodes are an excellent example of writing to formula. In addition to these, among the sixth-form classics studied by Plum were Sophocles' *Electra*, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, a book of Plato's *Republic*, pieces by Demosthenes, Aristophanes, Aristotle and Pindar. That's just Greek; in Latin, they had Juvenal and Catullus and Cicero (the latter being surely one of the dullest authors ever to set pen to papyrus), and one book of Vergil's *Aeneid* (now we're getting some decent stuff at last). In history, the form studied the French Revolution and English history in the time of George III; in English, Tennyson's *The Princess* and assorted essays on "literary subjects." In addition, there was Divinity, with such enthralling topics as the Captivity of the Jews and the Gospel of St. Matthew; and French, with lots of grammar and a play by Corneille. No wonder that by the sixth form, Plum's mind may have wandered just a bit.

But Plum did learn English—how to use it, and to great effect. And since he never attended University, he must have learned much of what he knew at Dulwich. Richard Usborne indicates another possible source of Plum's education, in his compendium *The Penguin Wodehouse Companion*, wherein he describes

Wodehouse's appetite for reading of all sorts:

Latin and Greek, well taught in scholarship forms at Dulwich, disciplined the structure of his English sentences. He read voraciously; Dickens for his funny characters...; W. S. Gilbert's verse; Anstey, Hornung, Conan Doyle, Kipling; all the stories in all the magazines, especially the trashy ones... He chose clichés, of words, situations and attitudes, as material with which to make many of his verbal jokes.⁹

For a somewhat contrasting view of the study of the Classics, let us look at a comment by another undisputed master of the English language, Winston Churchill, on first being introduced by a master to Latin:

'You have never done any Latin before, have you?'

'No, sir.'

'This is a Latin grammar.' He opened it at a well-thumbed page. 'You must learn this,' he said, pointing to a number of words in a frame of lines. 'I will come back in half an hour and see what you know.'

Behold me, then, on a gloomy evening, with an aching heart, seated in front of the First Declension... What on earth did it mean? Where was the sense in it?... There was one thing I could always do, I could learn by heart... In due course the master returned.

'Have you learnt it?' he asked.

'I think I can say it, sir,' I replied, and I gabbled it off...

'What does it mean, sir?'

'Mensa means a table.'

'Then why does mensa also mean O table?' I enquired. 'And what does O table mean?'

'O table—you would use that in addressing a table, in invoking a table.' And then, seeing he was not carrying me with him, 'You would use it in speaking to a table.'

'But I never do,' I blurted out, in honest amazement... Such was my first introduction to the classics from which, I have been told, many of our cleverest men have derived so much solace and profit.¹⁰

And then, inevitably, as rash and itching follow exposure to poison ivy, exposure to the Curriculum was followed by examinations. Wodehouse makes his opinion of this particular form of torment perfectly clear, in a passage from one of *The Tales of St. Austin's* called "A Shocking Affair:"

"You will be allowed two hours for this paper," said Mellish...as he returned to his desk after distributing the Thucydides questions. "At five minutes to four I will begin to collect your papers, but those who wish may go on till ten past..."

Now I have remarked already that I dare not say what I think of Thucydides, Book II. How then shall I frame my opinion of that examination paper? It was Thucydides, Book II, with the few easy parts left out. It was Thucydides, Book II, with special home-made difficulties added. It was—well, in its way it was a masterpiece. Without going into details—I dislike sensational and realistic writing—I may say that I personally was not one of

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those who required an extra ten minutes to finish their papers. I finished mine at half-past two, and amused myself for the remaining hour and a half by writing neatly on several sheets of foolscap exactly what I thought of Mr Mellish, and precisely what I hoped would happen to him some day. It was grateful and comforting."

Along with "work," one dreaded component of School was, without doubt, its food. Oh, it is indeed possible to sustain life on the fare served at boarding schools, if one calls that "life." But English cooking of that era was not noted particularly for its flavor or its variety. Breakfast, for example, consisted almost entirely of bread and butter, with milk or tea, and perhaps, as a special treat, some fruit juice. As for the other meals, Thomas Anstey Guthrie gives some subtle hint of the quality of prep school food:

The midday meal was dreaded by myself and most of the boys who were in the least fastidious. The meat was probably good in quality but, the cook being no artist, it often required an effort, even for healthy and hungry boys, to get it down and there were one or two soups and dishes which gave dismal notice of their imminence a good hour before we faced them.¹²

My, that brings back memories of my own boarding school meals, where Saturday's lunch was nicknamed affectionately, "The Food of the Week in Review." No wonder the boys saved their pennies to visit the Dulwich "Buttery," and that they squirreled away goodies for tea, which they shared only with privileged friends.

Eating was of course not the only extracurricular activity at School. There were all sorts of diversions in the form of concerts and plays. In a concert of July, 1899, Wodehouse sang "Hybrias the Cretan," a work which seems unaccountably to have faded from popular view.

[To be continued in the next issue of *Plum Lines*.]



"Talking of earwigs, Miss Kent," he said, in a low musical voice, "have you ever been in love?"
"The Awakening of Rollo Podmarsh"
The Heart of a Goof, 1926

FINANCIAL REPORT, 1996 FROM THE HORSE'S

MOUTH

By Tom Wainwright, Treasurer

Balance Dec. 31, 1995		\$8519.38
Income		
Dues and fees	\$9846.50	
Interest	<u>50.61</u>	
Total income		9897.11
Expenses		
Plum Lines:		
printing, mailing	\$12048.12	
Correspondence: postage, back issues, telephone	<u>1224.34</u>	
Total expenses		<u>13272.46</u>
Balance Dec. 31, 1996		\$5144.03

William Hardwick relays the sad news that "our" horses have not done well on the British turf recently:

Plum First	6 races, 1 third, 1 second
Pelham	3 races, 2 thirds
Winsome Wooster	5 races, 1 third
Laughing Gas	1 race, nowhere

"No fortunes to be made there," William notes. "Back to the day job."



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Information and new memberships Marilyn MacGregor	
Dues payments and address changes Tom Wainwright	
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Dues are \$20 per year.

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