

# St. Mike's, Wodehouse, and Me: The Great Thesis Handicap

BY ELLIOTT MILSTEIN

*Editor's note: Elliott Milstein was primary perpetrator of and opening speaker at The Wodehouse Society convention held in Toronto last August. This is Part 1 of Elliott's talk; tune in to the next issue to read his exciting conclusion.*



*Elliott Milstein What-Doing with gusto at the Toronto Convention.*

Welcome one and all to The Wodehouse Society's 12th International Convention. I hope you are all entering the true spirit of Detroit and enjoying the lovely city of Toronto. I know I am. I always have and probably always will. You see, it was here that I, too, lived in Arcady, plucking, as 'twere, the gowans fine. I

did my undergraduate work here at St. Michael's College from 1971 to 1976. How an American Jew ended up at a Catholic Canadian University is another story. I must say, however, that planning this convention on the site of my alma mater, not to mention attending my daughter's graduation ceremonies this past June with all its attendant festivities and speeches, has put me in a nostalgic mood, and all of you are about to become the unwitting victims of this mood.

I was introduced to P. G. Wodehouse by my father at the tender age of 12. Having announced to him that I had read everything of interest there was to read (I had finished off the Tom Swift series, you understand), I complained bitterly that there was nothing left in life. He handed me his tattered old (first edition, you understand) *Nothing But Wodehouse* and instructed me to begin at the end with *Leave It to Psmith*. Now, if this were a fairy tale, I would tell you that from that moment on I never looked back, but I must be totally honest with you. I found it silly. I did not even get through the first chapter, and I returned it to him. He muttered something underneath his breath—I think it was "Youth! Youth!"—and sent me off with a Jules Verne, which kept me busy for some time.

Around the age of 15, I underwent another period of ennui, having polished off Verne, Wells, Poe, and the like, and returned to him for advice. He slipped *Jeeves in the Offing* into my hand. I made it past the first chapter, but not much further than that. "This guy's an idiot," I said, handing the book back to him. "But that's the point," he said. "I don't see much of a point in that," said I and spent the next two years wallowing in murder mysteries.

By the age of 17, I was far too cool to ask my father for advice, so being bored and once again out

of ideas for something to read, I began prowling his library. In my mind, I can still see the Wodehouse shelf—it was the second shelf from the top, a series of Penguins about three feet long. I climbed up onto the counter and began to look at the titles. *Service With A Smile* caught my attention as a pleasant title, so I pulled it down. Now I get to say it: I never looked back!

By the time I graduated high school, I had about a dozen Wodehouses under my belt. I set off for Toronto in August 1971 and settled quite nicely into my life as a scholar (to say nothing of that fine Canadian beer).

It was not long into that first year that, exploring the library—that one right across the street where you all registered—I thought I would check to see how many Wodehouses they had. Well, you could have knocked me down with an f. There were dozens and dozens of them. I can still recall the thrill of astonishment in discovering that there was more than one Psmith book! I waded into them.

Once I had finished the books in the library, it became necessary to start buying them. As chance would have it, the bookstore I chose did not stock any Wodehouses; instead, they gave me the name and phone number of the Canadian distributor for Barrie and Jenkins. It was Fate, as sure as apples is apples. I wrote them and asked what Wodehouses they had. They sent me a list with the most bizarre prices; too high to be paperbacks, but too low for hardcovers. Well, I ordered four or five of them, and imagine my surprise when they arrived: mint-condition first editions. The prices were the original publication prices. My mother was a book collector, but I had never had any interest in the pursuit. Now I was hooked. And so began my collecting of Wodehouse, a journey with many twists and side alleys that led to, among other things, the Heineman auction and the unintended purchase of lot 147. But that's another story.

I don't know exactly when the idea of doing my thesis on Wodehouse first put down roots in my febrile brain, but I know that I had already submitted my proposal and was searching for an advisor when news of Wodehouse's death reached me. I was in my room in the house across the way there, McCorkell House, third floor, when a housemate and friend of mine came into my room the Sunday night after Valentine's Day and said, "Sorry to hear about P. G. Wodehouse." I called my friend Curtis, and we commiserated together over the phone. Over the next few days I gathered together a few friends of a Wodehousian bent and we had a wake, or memorial service, in my room. One person who joined us was a bookstore clerk I had met and with whom I had discussed Wodehouse. She introduced me

to the works of Nancy Mitford that evening, for which I will always be grateful.

Anyway, by this time I was pretty well known on campus as a Wodehouse nut and I had already pestered several professors to be the advisor for my thesis, all of whom had turned me down like a bedspread. Some were very nice about it—"Well, I'm not really qualified in that area . . ."—others, less so—"A thesis on P. G. Wodehouse? Are you nuts?"

One professor I had tried to rope in, Professor Joaquin Kuhn, approached me the following Monday. "You still looking for an advisor?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Do you know J. M. Cameron?"

Well, of course, I knew him. J. M. Cameron was St. Mike's only University Professor, a special designation that allowed him to give a course on any subject of his choosing in any department. He was equally qualified in the areas of English, history, and philosophy (he had held the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Leeds) and taught in all three disciplines. I knew him distantly as we had both served on a committee the year before, during my political phase. But that's another story.

"Well," said Joaquin, "you might want to approach him. At mass yesterday, during the call for petitions, he asked that we pray for the soul of P. G. Wodehouse." It was with me the work of a moment to sprint through the quad, into Carr Hall, up to the second floor, and pound on the good man's door. "Come in," he replied. I did, and in a few well-chosen words I put the idea before him and asked if he would be my advisor. I will never forget the look on his face. There was no question at all that this man did *not* want to do this. But, behind the blank stare, the wheels were turning. I could almost hear the internal monologue. "How do I say no? Less than 24 hours ago I petitioned God for P. G. Wodehouse's soul and now this young man is at my door. This must be some kind of test. If I say no, God will think I wasn't sincere in my prayer." I had him. And he said yes.

Actually, when I had finished the grand opus and he and I were going over the high and low points of our collaboration, he confided to me that he really did not want to do it (he said nothing about the internal spiritual struggle—that was purely my interpretation of his inscrutable silence). But he was kind enough to say that he was glad he did consent because it brought back his youth. I knew what he was talking about. I remembered clearly one day when he was reading over a passage I had written that week and he came across the line "Wodehouse still knew how to crack them

through the covers.”

“Do you know what means? ‘Crack them through the covers?’”

“I assume it’s a cricket term.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, “but do you know what it means?”

“Well, I guess I assumed it meant you hit the ball so hard the cover comes off.”

“Nooooo. Not at all. The covers are positions played on the cricket field. The batter stands like this [demonstrating], and if he gets a really good shot, he cracks the ball so it goes between the two covers and he gets extra runs.”

In that stuffy office, I could see before my very eyes the years peel away from old Professor J. M. Cameron, and little Jimmy Cameron was up there on the pitch, bat in hand, cracking them through the covers.

Many Wodehousians, when they hear that I did my thesis on P. G. Wodehouse, look at me enviously. I assure you, there is no reason for such envy. Oh, there were some wonderful aspects to it—besides learning a lot about cricket and little Jimmy Cameron, I learned a lot about Wodehouse and academic scholarship. And, after four years of majoring in English at Canada’s premier university, I really only learned how to write from my weekly meetings with Professor Cameron, wherein he patiently dissected my work and taught me to put it back together properly. But it was a slog, I assure you. In order to complete my research on time, I had to read, on average, one Wodehouse novel every three days for six months, taking copious notes as I went along. Halfway through the process, I explained my situation to my father. He understood completely. “Rather like getting up every morning and drinking a bucket of cream.” Rem, as the fellow says, *acu tegisti*.

Not to mention the difficult trek through the stinkers. You know the ones I’m talking about. The ones you read once and never quite get back to. Well, when you’re writing a thesis you don’t have that luxury. Imagine, if you will, reading *If I Were You* on Monday, *Doctor Sally* on Wednesday, and nothing to see you through the weekend but *Summer Moonshine*. After completing the damn thing, I didn’t read another Wodehouse for nearly five years, only jumping back into the refreshing pool in preparation for my interview with James Heinemann when Ken Fink and I crashed the Wodehouse Centenary exhibit posing as reporters from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. But that’s another story.

By the way, it may interest you to know there was strong opposition in the university English department to my doing a thesis on Wodehouse. Several professors

attempted to get the committee to revoke its approval of the topic. When I found out that one of them was the head of the St. Mike’s English department, I was so angry I put in for a transfer to Victoria College. About a week later, I heard the whole thing had blown over and so I was off and running. I only found out years later that good old Cameron had acted behind the scenes on my behalf. He contacted Father John Michael Kelly, president of St. Mike’s. Father Kelly was a gruff old bird, feared or detested (or both) by most of the student body. I don’t think I ever detested him, but I sure feared him. I found out only long after he died that he had taken a special interest in me, protecting me from the occasional fits of anti-Semitism that threatened from time to time. When Cameron came to him with the tale of professors plotting against me, he called the group of them into his office for a meeting. I never heard the particulars of that meeting, other than that it was very short, the discussion was entirely one-sided, and the issue was closed before the office door was opened. My personal opinion is that he threatened them with excommunication. Cameron, I know, took special glee in phoning in my grade, which was obscenely high. I think I deserved a good score, but I know he probably raised it a few notches just to shove it down the throat of that nasty department head.

During the course of my researches I found out, by the way, why St. Mike’s had such a lovely Wodehouse collection. It belonged to one Father Scollard, an old priest-librarian who, though long retired, still hung about the library, helping out. He had been reading and buying Wodehouses since he was a schoolboy and, upon entering the priesthood, donated his library to the Basilian order, which ultimately dumped them in this library. When my thesis was complete I gave Father Scollard a copy, which he immediately deposited in the Rare Book Room, much to my great ego satisfaction, where it resides to this day. There was, however, greater satisfaction than that to be had. After thanking me profusely, Father Scollard took me up to the fourth floor of the library, which was then nothing but storage. He knew exactly where he wanted to go, because he walked right up to the section and pulled from it a small, thin, old green pamphlet. It was the *Oxford University Periodical*, Volume 24, Number 200, July 15, 1939. Page 70 quotes the Horatian hexameters of the public orator, Dr. Cyril Bailey, in honor of Mr. P. G. Wodehouse receiving his honorary doctorate. I have the *Periodical* to this day and, in fact, have put it on display in the library for this occasion. It is one of the most cherished possessions in my collection, not just for its rarity and value, but for its commemoration

of that wonderful act of generosity on behalf of the ancient cleric. Whenever I look at it, I remember his kindly old face and his open horse laugh when we traded Wodehouse nifties back and forth. He is also the only person I ever met who read the school stories as they came out. He said his favorite Wodehouse would always be *Mike*, because it was the first one he read and he was such a young boy when it came out. Rereading it was, for him, a *Madeleine de Proust*.

At this point, you are no doubt wondering why I am gassing away so long on stories that can only be considered interesting to my children and grandchildren, if them. Well, for one thing, I wanted to put this meeting at St. Mike's into a little context. For another, a speaker dropped out rather unexpectedly and this was all I could come up with on short notice. And, finally, this gives me an opportunity to share with you the high points of that thesis I wrote some 30 years ago and I thought a short introduction was due. Why I gave you a long introduction instead, I will never know.

The paper was called "The Growth of Sweetness and Light (A study of the novels of P. G. Wodehouse)," and I described the main task thusly: "To divide the books of P. G. Wodehouse into three distinct periods," which, being the creative and imaginative writer I was in those days, I called "Early, Middle, and Late." When I had completed the thing, I convinced myself that the published book version was but a few years off, and my name would eclipse those of Robert Hall, R. B. D. French, Richard J. Voorhees, and David Jasen. It would be Richard Osborne and Elliott Milstein tied for first; all the rest, also-ran. All subsequent scholars would quote me, and the phrases "a Late Period Wodehouse," "a typical example of the Early Period," and "Wodehouse's Middle Period, often called Vintage Wodehouse" would ring through the halls of academe. I sent the paper to Richard Osborne, who had some very nice things to say about it, but that's another story. He sent it on to Barrie and Jenkins, but they had other ideas on how to spend their money. The upshot is that the book was never written, and the likes of Tony Ring and Norman Murphy have eclipsed that glowing vision. So here I stand, making one last-ditch effort at Wodehouse immortality. And if you don't like it, you can wait outside 'til I'm done.

When one thinks of Wodehouse's earliest publications, one naturally turns to the world of the public school and his well-loved stories of St. Austin's, Wrykyn, Beckford, Eckleton, and all the other fictional representations of his beloved Dulwich College, but in reality most of his effort was spent combing the pulps

and imitating whatever style he thought would sell, churning out bilge under a multitude of pseudonyms, generating cash, and honing his craft.

*Love Among the Chickens* is generally cited as Wodehouse's first mature book but, though it is his first novel written for adults, it is not a particularly good effort. Wodehouse himself realized this and revised it for its reprinting in 1921. I think we can best mark Wodehouse's turning point with the 1909 boy's school story *Mike* and the creation of the sublime character of Ronald Rupert Eustace Psmith.

There is a reason Psmith is the only character to make the transition from boy's school to the adult world. He is unlike any other public school figure; much more grown up and sophisticated, as we can see from the exchange between him the headmaster at the end of *Mike*, when the headmaster asks Psmith why he confessed to a crime he did not commit:

"Strictly between ourselves, sir . . ."

Privately, the headmaster found Psmith's man-to-man attitude somewhat disconcerting.

"Well, Smith."

"I should not like it go any further, sir. This is strictly between ourselves."

"I think you are sometimes apt to forget, Smith, the proper relations existing between boy and . . . Well, never mind about that for the present . . ."

"Not a bad sort," said Psmith meditatively to himself, as he walked downstairs. "By no means a bad sort. I must drop in from time to time and cultivate him."

*A Gentleman of Leisure* is another important Early Period book often overlooked, again because the quality of writing is not up to the later works. But it is critical because it is the first book set in what would become known as the Wodehouse World. As David Jasen says, "It was the first humorous story to be set in a stately home in Shropshire, feature an amiable but dim peer, the first in a long line of Drones, a tycoon, a formidable aunt, a pretty but foolish girl and a butler." Further, it introduces the underworld motif, which Wodehouse would use for the rest of his career. Later, too, the pretty but foolish girl becomes the girl of spirit or The Modern Girl.

We are still in the Early Period here, a period characterized mostly by experiment and change, as Wodehouse works to find his *métier*. His first truly fine book of this period is, I think, *Something Fresh*, the first of the Blandings Castle stories. Everything that

was begun, but not quite mature in *A Gentleman of Leisure*, here succeeds. Of all Wodehouse novels, this gives us the broadest vision, offering detailed accounts of every aspect of British society, from earls and dukes to younger sons, members of the church, the middle class, the servants, and the dark underbelly of London. We even have the visiting American millionaire. This panoramic view distracts at times from important aspects of the story, but it was a bold attempt and, on the whole, it succeeds.

Wodehouse's finest Early Period work, in my opinion, is *Piccadilly Jim*. Here, at last, the characters, the writing, the humor and the story are fully integrated. Nothing in the book detracts from the final effect. In Jimmy Crocker we have the perfect Wodehouse hero, and in Ann Chester the perfect heroine.

But the most enduring creation of the Early Period is, beyond a doubt, Bertie Wooster and his man, Jeeves. Of the myriad of Wodehouse characters, these two are the best-loved and mostly widely known. Of all the sagas, Wooster/Jeeves has the greatest number of books—14 in all. And the voice of Bertie Wooster becomes a critical feature in the transition from Middle to Late Period.

optimism with her wherever she went, and she made it a point of the last 10 years to see as much of the world as she could.

Part of those travels was to TWS conventions, the Millennium Tour of 2000, the Pilgrimage of 1996, and the U.K. Society's Wodehouse Dinner in 2002. At the conventions she always played TWSCC cricket. Anne made friends from around the world at these Wodehouse events, and she treasured her memories of the fun she had with us all.



*Anne Bianchi advertising a ripe Plum.*

## In Memoriam: Anne Bianchi

BY TONI RUDERSDORF

For those who did not know Anne Bianchi, I will tell you a little bit about her. She was a pretty, slender woman who, although not tall, had tall Texas charm. She was graceful and intelligent and was kind to small animals. She had two children, a boy and a girl, now grown, and a husband of 30 or more years.

Anne was a founding member of the Texas chapter of TWS, the Drone Rangers. She worked at Drone Ranger fundraisers, helped set up the chairs and tea table at DR meetings, and sometimes gave talks or prepared puzzlers for other members to solve, based on the book of the evening. Anne loved Wodehouse because she loved to laugh, and when she laughed it was the laugh of a schoolgirl. She brought energy and

I got to know Anne through our shared interests in Wodehouse and traveling. If the devil were to wander into our path, he would think he could set us at each other over politics (we held opposing views), or religion (ditto), or possibly even what we thought was a good play. We were not alike, but that never seemed to make any difference. The shared love of PGW gave us such a happy plane upon which to meet that our differences never had a chance to intrude.

The last two years were hard for Anne, but unless you knew her well, you would not have guessed. Twenty years earlier she had beat the devil known as breast cancer, but now it was back, and though she fought it valiantly, she lost the fight the last week in March. Toward the end, all of us who loved her were in despair, but I never heard her complain, and when any of the Drone Rangers went to see her in hospital that last seven weeks, she rallied and laughed with us again.

Without her the bluebird formations are flying with a missing bit of happiness.

*Anne passed away on March 26, 2004. Her messages from Blandings on the Bayou will be greatly missed.—Ed.*

# Wodehouse—A Male Thing?

BY HELEN MURPHY

*A paper presented by Elin Woodger Murphy at the 2003 convention in Toronto. Unfortunately, Helen wasn't there to deliver her talk personally, as illness prevented her from attending. Tragically, she died on April 16, 2004. Helen had been a speaker at two previous conventions—San Francisco in 1993 and Chicago in 1997—and her numerous contributions to Plum Lines never failed to both entertain and educate us. We will miss her very much. For more about Helen, see Elin's "Letter from England."*



When one is a devotee of P G Wodehouse one becomes used to having to defend him against certain very common slurs. Leaving aside the broadcasts, the most common is that he wrote solely about rich, idle toffs. Though this is not a crime in itself, it is also not true. In 1995 Roy (now Lord) Hattersley thought it worthwhile to pen an entire page in the *London Evening Standard* much along these lines. He grudgingly admits the occasional laugh, but has clearly not researched well, as Spode becomes “an

ineffable young buffoon” who wishes to set up the “Blue Shorts” in opposition to Mosley’s “Blue Shirts,” and Sir Watkyn-Basset (hyphenated) is described as a friend of Bertie’s. Still, it doesn’t matter if you’re having a pop at Wodehouse, does it? The fact that Wodehouse worked supremely hard all his life writing often about other strugglers of varying backgrounds, in the field of writing, health farms or onion soup bars is irrelevant. Long live the class struggle!

That’s one misconception. But the one I ignored at the time, but has puzzled me since, is that Wodehouse is a writer who really only appeals to men, and that women certainly don’t have the right sense of humour to appreciate him. “It’s a male thing, Helen,” I was informed from an early age. But I was certainly not discouraged from reading the books, mostly Jeeves and Bertie, at that early part of my life.

Then, at the age of 10, I went to boarding school, a convent. Convents provide just about the most feminist form of education there is. I should loosely define my terms at this stage. I am well aware that feminism has undergone many guises. For the purposes of this talk, I loosely interpret it to mean the willing support and encouragement of women in whichever sphere they choose to occupy themselves.

The nuns at my school were keen on Character and character building. We had the examples of many saints and martyrs available to us in the school library, and were constantly lectured on the need to be strong, independent women. There was another, special library, though, in the headmistress’s office, where the best books were kept. Here were the treasures, the Sherlock Holmeses and the Wodehouses. *Young Men in Spats* was the first I borrowed from Sister Goddard (currently a member of the UK Society) so Wodehouse must have written for girls and women, mustn’t he?

The more thought I gave to this, the more I realised that in fact Wodehouse is one of the most consistently feminist writers of the 20th century, as I hope to demonstrate. In this he runs second only to the early girls school stories of the same era. I think there are several reasons for this, mainly empathy, the work ethic, and Platonism.

First, empathy. As a young man at the bank, Wodehouse used to go to tea with the three little Bowes-Lyon girls, Ernestine, Joan and Effie, the late Queen Mother’s “naughty cousins” as she called them. They told him what they’d been up to—admiring

beautiful guardsmen through opera glasses as they rode to parade, or planning to buy a really big hat when they grew up (this was in the era, remember, of hats like cartwheels), or debating whether it would be better to marry or be boiled in oil, or whether Plum should leave the Bank. Of course he should, and he did, and he dedicated his first full-length book, *The Pothunters*, to them. Whether it was these three, or the young servants with whom he had so often been parked when on formal visits to aunts, who knows? Certainly, he liked all his young girl characters, unlike the fiendish small boys. And I do know that I have come across no other school story, ostensibly for boys, with such an accurate female perspective. In the short story "Playing the Game" Charteris is ensnared by Scott's sister, whose hair isn't quite "up" yet. Scott tells a story about this against Molly, and Charteris doesn't laugh. It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of hair being "up." It was the passport to adulthood and dances and being eligible that ceased after the Great War, when everyone went bobbed or shingled. It was of acute importance. Later Molly sends Charteris her photo. Other schoolboys are attracted to their friends' sisters in the stories occasionally. These girls nearly always play cricket—and why wouldn't they? Here is an early advertisement:

GIRLS! Here's the bat that knocks the centuries. Are you keen on cricket? You should be, it's a grand game. But you must have a good bat. And the best you can get is a Gunn and Moore bat. A big majority of cricketers use the Gunn and Moore bat—so should you. Think of it! The Gunn and Moore bats which test players use are made in special sizes for girls. Your Gunn and Moore bat will be the same quality as those used to knock the big scores this season.

We may also remember Sammy Gosling being invalided out of a match after giving his young sister a few balls. "I think it's simply sickening the way girls want to do everything we do," said Norris disgustedly [Norris being the captain].

More empathy. In a couple of the early short stories, Wodehouse again shows a rare ability to identify with the feelings of his female protagonists, and in a way unexpected in a writer who so consistently shuns the physical aspects of intimacy. Long before he had devised the Ickenham method of accosting women, in "The Romance of an Ugly Policeman," when PC Ted Plimmer decides to be arch and accosts

his unsuspecting inamorata, she is actually not just shocked but frightened. And more empathy, when she has to be arrested:

There was the misery of the stricken animal in her gaze. He had seen women look like that in Whitechapel. The woman to whom, indirectly, he owed his broken nose had looked like that. As his hand had fallen on the collar of the man who was kicking her to death he had seen her eyes. They were Ellen's eyes, as she stood there now—tortured, crushed, yet uncomplaining.

And we recall the girlfriend Gladys, and the picture conjured up for us of her struggling through the London streets carrying a child almost as big as herself, leading another by the hand and yelling at another in the distance.

These stories were written before Wodehouse had established his market and what was to become his trademark style with his trademark characters. I think there were still lingering traces to be found of his identification with Mike Jackson in *Psmith in the City*, when Mr Waller clearly has grave troubles:

Mike's was essentially a sympathetic character. He had the gift of intuitive understanding, where people he was fond of were concerned. It was this which drew to him those who had intelligence enough to see beyond his sometimes rather forbidding manner, and to realise that his blunt speech was largely due to shyness. In spite of his prejudice against Edward he could put himself into Mr Waller's place and see the thing from his point of view.

I think there was something of Plum himself in this description.

Wodehouse does continue to express sympathy for the most unlikely seeming characters, those bossy aunt types, for example. He can even make us sorry for Lady Constance. Can you imagine trying to host a dinner party for the cream of the county with the Earl of Emsworth as host? It is true that by the time he is well into his stride with the Blandings saga, he is certainly identifying most with Lord Emsworth's antisociability: "a host can always solve the problem of the unwanted guest if he has a certain animal cunning and no social conscience." Ah, that Wodehouse glide! But there is some feeling left for Lady Constance, as

proof of which she is given two husbands who not only love her devotedly but are also decent, likeable chaps. Choice of spouse is always an indicator of Wodehouse's favour—hence Pongo, Freddie Widgeon and, much earlier, Ginger, are given the ultimate reward of girls called Sally.

Now, the work ethic. Other than Dickens and Kipling, I can think of no writer who so reinforces the redemptive power of working for a living than Wodehouse. All his most powerful and popular female characters work—often very hard—unless they're in one of the Bertie and Jeeves books, where their energies are devoted to starting things or stirring things. They are all spirited and occasionally fall on hard times through putting their chemise on a dead cert that isn't, like Eve Halliday or Emerald Stoker. They sculpt, or nurse, or are secretaries or, of course, chorus girls—and remember Wodehouse knew how hard that was, and describes it. Sometimes they are quite high-powered. In *A Pelican at Blandings*, the impostor Vanessa Polk, who works for the multimillionaire JB Polk, tells Gally, "You wouldn't have a hope of seeing him or me without an appointment." Vanessa is going to reform Wilbur Trout and make him fit to marry her by making him get a job "and generally realise that life is stern and life is earnest. He'll be fine." *Jill the Reckless* and *The Adventures of Sally* bear me out.



Wodehouse's women are allowed other jobs, too. The longest discussion on this is in *Doctor Sally*; the title character not only works hard herself but cannot ever love a man who doesn't. In *Ring for Jeeves*, Jill Wyvern is the vet; the other "worker" is Rory, only a shop walker. And I think we can all agree who is the brains of the operation out of Dolly and Soapy Molloy.

Even the generally unsympathetic female characters, apart from Madeline Bassett, have strong interests outside the home. There are the Girton Girls, starting with Miss Beezley in *The Babe and the Dragon*

and continuing through Honoria Glossop and Florence Craye. The early Girton girls had had to work hard for their education but were not allowed to join the university. Lectures were given by kind dons in their spare time to the young women in a house in Hitchin. These women were allowed to sit their Cambridge final exams but not awarded degrees until nearly the Second World War. No wonder their songs (the *Girton Song Book* had one in Latin and 16 in English) were so fervent in praise of the early pioneers. But Wodehouse mocks their hearty, intellectual manner and their bossiness, not the fact of their education.

Women even stand for Parliament, which is hardly a fitting occupation for anyone in Wodehouse's world. Uncle Percy Worplesdon has known dozens of cabinet ministers who, to paraphrase, he wouldn't give you tuppence for. On learning that peers aren't allowed to stand, Bertie is impressed that the House of Commons draws the line somewhere. Aunt Agatha had been interested in politics, until the heckling put her off. And we are fully prepared to dislike Mrs McCorquodale who stands against Bertie's friend Ginger. But, even when offered material by the vile Bingley that will assure her of victory, she is too honourable to use it. Even more convincing proof of her fundamental good eggishness is afforded when she is revealed as an ace crossword solver and puts Aunt Dahlia's mind at rest.

The aunts are some of the strongest characters in all the books, of course, and Wodehouse was writing powerfully about these middle-aged women long before he moved on to his other favourites, women (often American) of a certain age, almost all of whom, once again, work, often by writing. Not a writer for women? I think not. What better role model than Aunt Dahlia, not least for her power of invective, if not her magazine editing skills.

Finally, Platonism. Wodehouse had had a classical education. He knew that the Platonic philosophical ideal is one from which all other forms derive as flawed imitations. Therefore, when he was writing, especially after years of practice, he could hardly help creating ideal forms himself. His butlers are more butlerine (you even need to coin the adjective), his aunts more auntly, his uncles more avuncular, his young men about town more Droneslike and bespatted. It is this quality, of course, that lets people like Lord Hattersley think they remember the works well after such a brief and limited reading. Therefore Wodehouse could not help his female characters being strong, memorable female characters.

We also recall that Wodehouse had married a woman who gave him an ideal young girl who grew

into a charming adult—Leonora. And we remember how he adored Ethel—marvellous in a crisis, party loving, but taking care of all the details of their lives so he could get on and work. Malcolm Muggeridge described her, memorably, as a mixture of Mistress Quickly, Lady Macbeth, and Florence Nightingale. Practically an aunt.

I do not know where, if anywhere, Princess von und zu Dwornitchek came from. Maybe she was necessary only as a plot device, the sort of monster who would buy up a whole play production to stop it being staged again. Is it a tribute to the female sex that she is the most horrible character in the oeuvre? Ma Price is pretty dire, but *If I Were You* is not a book Wodehouse should ever have written, and this book was dealt with thoroughly and in a masterly fashion by Charles Gould at the New York convention. But no mere men, be they feeble interior decorators or even bank boss Bickersdyke, come up to the princess's level of villainy.

This has been a far too brief canter through some of Wodehouse's female characters, good and bad. Any aspect could have merited far more detailed examination. But I hope I have demonstrated why to me, at least, despite what I was told as a child, my experience has been that P G Wodehouse is definitely not just a male thing.

Oh—before I go—I should just have pointed out that the wicked Princess von und zu Dwornitchek does share one thing with one of the greatest male characters, Psmith. When saying her name, the D is silent, as in Dvorak, or Dvodka.

## A Few Quick Ones

### *Subway Series*

Bauman Rare Books of New York was advertising a 1927 edition of Wodehouse's *The Small Bachelor* "wonderfully inscribed by Wodehouse" for \$3,200. The inscription reads in part, "Hoping that there will be a subway series, even if it means the Mets finishing second. . ." There was and they did. The Yankees beat them in 2000. Alas, Plum did not live to see it. The inscription serves as a reminder that Wodehouse did become a New York baseball fan.

### *Shrinking Helmets*

John Baesch tells us that another tradition, dear to the hearts of Wodehousians, appears about to vanish. The traditional bobbies' helmets may be cut down in size "with new helmets that look more like hats for

schoolgirls," according to one British newspaper. The new helmets are made from lightweight plastic instead of the usual cork and are two and a half inches shorter than the traditional 12-inch-high helmets.

The main reason for the proposed change is that the shorter helmet has a lower center of gravity, making it less likely to fall off. Says Jan Berry of the Police Federation: "The helmets traditionally worn by many officers are wobbly and considered insufficiently tough for the needs of the 21st century."



Not everyone was pleased with the proposed change. Tim Bonner of the Countryside Alliance decried "the cult of modernism." Graham Bond of the Heart of England Tourist Board complained, "[The helmets] are part of the iconic view of British culture around the world, like London buses and country pubs. That is something that is hard to replace."

Cries of anguish were also heard coming from the Drones Club in Mayfair where members complained that one of the great traditions of Boat Race Night would be ruined, or at least made more difficult.

### *Wish We Were There*

And speaking of John Baesch, we got a card from Ahim "Posted Onboard *Queen Mary 2*." John wrote: "Crossing on this grand new ship is very elegant—and very Wodehousian. And I'm pleased to report the ship's library is well stocked with P. G.W."

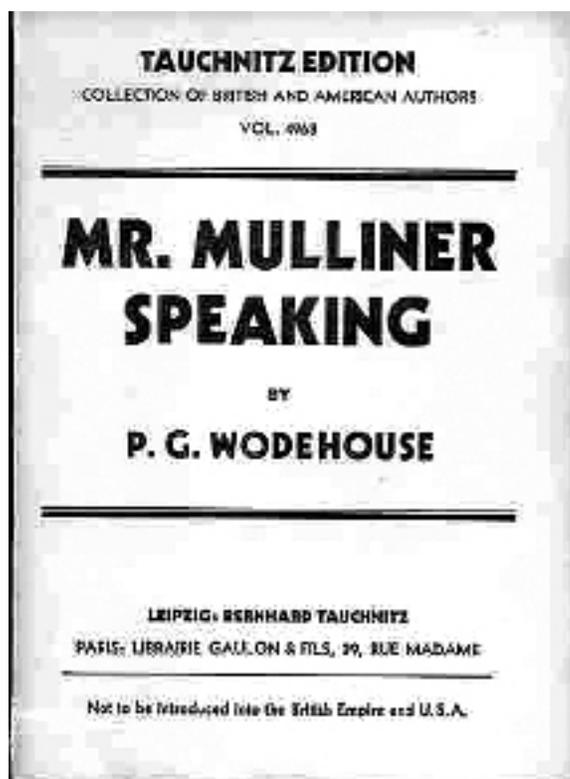
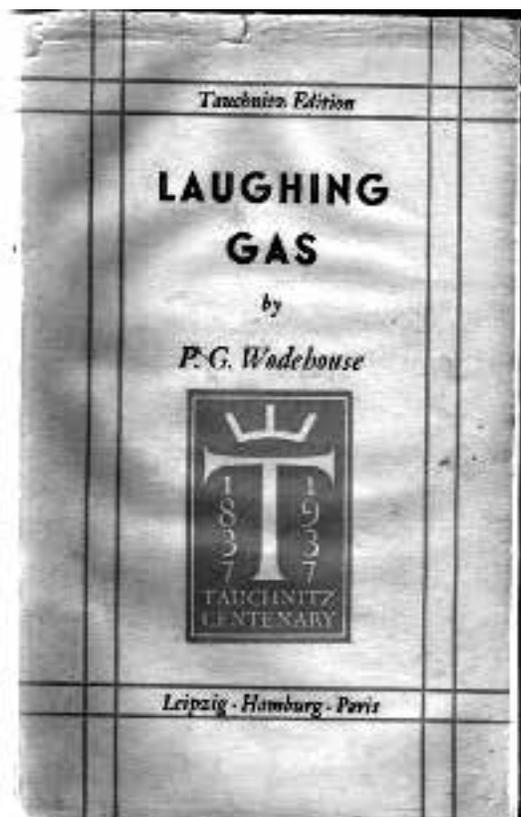
We are green with envy!

—Dan Cohen



# Collecting Wodehouse: The Tauchnitz Editions

BY JOHN GRAHAM



Imagine yourself a young Englishman sitting comfortably on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes in the early years of the 20th century. Or perhaps you are one of those Anglo-American invalids who were said to collect in gangs at Baden-Baden between the wars. In any event, you suddenly remember you left that unfinished volume of *Strychnine in the Soup* behind on the train and have nothing else to read. Not a Rex West or a Rosie M. Banks to your name. You'd even settle for Shakespeare's latest, if you could only find a copy in English.

It was for just such occasions that the "Tauchnitz Collection of British and American Authors" was created. In 1841 Christian Bernhard Tauchnitz began to publish in Leipzig, Germany, an inexpensive series of literary works in English for distribution on the continent. Prior to the introduction of international copyright agreements, Tauchnitz was remarkable for paying authors for the exclusive right to reprint their works for sale in non-English-speaking countries. Inclusion in the series was said to be prized as a mark of success. Each selection was numbered consecutively (beginning with a novel by Bulwer Lytton), and by 1924

the series had reached 4,650 (*The Beasts of Tarzan*). For Wodehouse collectors, the real story begins with volume 4,651. In August 1924 Tauchnitz published *Ukridge*, just two months after its initial release by Herbert Jenkins in England and nearly a year before its first American publication by Doran (under the peculiar title *He Rather Enjoyed It*). Before they were done, Tauchnitz would go on to publish a total of 41 Wodehouse titles. In the end, the firm was hit hard by two world wars and faced increasing competition from other paperback publishers, especially Penguin. In 1954, exactly 50 years ago, Tauchnitz finally handed in its dinner pail.

Although cheaply made paperbacks, Tauchnitz volumes have the distinction of being the first uniform series of Wodehouse editions ever published, and indeed, to this day they remain the longest such series (tied at 41 with *The Autograph Edition*). The series includes 38 of the 45 books Plum wrote between 1913 (*The Little Nugget*) and 1938 (*The Code of the Woosters*) along with three later books discussed below. In section K ("Named Editions") of her Wodehouse bibliography, Eileen McIlvaine catalogues all 41 volumes. In some

cases, first printing details are missing or incomplete, and in many cases reissues are simply not listed. (Presumably, McIlvaine worked from available copies in the James H. Heineman collection.) For comprehensive details, the serious collector should turn to *Tauchnitz International Editions in English*, compiled by William B. Todd and Ann Bowden. At 1,078 pages, it remains the Baedeker to the entire Tauchnitz catalogue. (A good reference library is likely to have a copy, and a few copies can be found for sale on the Internet.)

Collecting Wodehouse in Tauchnitz editions can certainly be recommended as an inexpensive alternative to collecting English and American first editions. In early May of this year, a search on abebooks.com turned up 29 different titles priced between \$6 and \$100, with a median asking price of about \$30. (By the way, don't be embarrassed about offering less than the asking price for any used book—I find you can frequently negotiate a hefty discount.) Toward the end of their run, most Tauchnitz editions were issued with decorated red-and-white covers wrapped around the standard-issue black-and-white cover (see illustrations). Copies still in wrappers today tend to command a sizeable premium.

Besides their low price, Tauchnitz editions of Wodehouse are desirable for another reason. By my count, five Tauchnitz Wodehouse titles precede the first American editions. These are *Ukridge*, *Bill the Conqueror*, *Carry on Jeeves*, *Heart of a Goof*, and *Louder and Funnier*—the last of which has never been published in America. And there is one Tauchnitz title (*Money in the Bank*) which even precedes the first English edition.

If you collect Tauchnitz editions, there is at least one book you may want to look out for that is not listed in McIlvaine. It is volume S119, published in 1953 under the title *English Short Stories*, with stories by 12 authors listed alphabetically on the cover, from H. E. Bates to P. G. Wodehouse. I have not been able to find a copy, so I don't know which of Plum's stories is included here. If you know, I'd appreciate hearing from you.

Wodehouse titles clearly sold well for Tauchnitz, judging by the number of times they were reprinted. Unfortunately, no sales records exist. Still, one might make a good case that Wodehouse represents the alpha and omega of the entire Tauchnitz catalogue. Let's start with the omega: in point of fact, Wodehouse-related editions can lay multiple claims to being the final Tauchnitz volume. According to Todd and Bowden, the original Leipzig-based Tauchnitz firm issued just one new title per year during the Second World War. For 1943 this was volume 5,370, *Money in the Bank*,

based on the American text which had appeared in 1942. It was printed in August, and then in September, Tauchnitz reprinted copies of volume 4,995, *Summer Lightning*. These were the last two books to roll off the Leipzig presses: in early December allied bombs destroyed the plant. After the war the firm was revived briefly, first in Hamburg (where a new edition of *Money in the Bank* was released in 1949) and finally in Stuttgart (where *The Mating Season* and *Ring for Jeeves* were added to the series in 1952 and 1954). So much for the end of the story. What about the alpha, you ask? Well, way back at the beginning, that very first Tauchnitz release by Bulwer Lytton happened to be a novel called *Pelham*. It was clearly the harbinger of great things to come.

## Yet More Quick Ones

*W. C. and P. G.*

David McDonough sent along an interesting snippet from *W. C. Fields: A Biography* by James Curtis (Knopf, 2003). Regarding the film *The Bank Dick*, which Fields wrote and starred in, Curtis writes, "On Halloween, he [Fields] sent a wire to Jack Gross to remind him to credit the original story to Mahatma Kane Jeeves, a Fieldsian nod to his friend Orson Welles, who had just finished directing *Citizen Kane*, and to author P. G. Wodehouse, whose 'Jeeves' stories Welles had urged him to read. ('My hat, my cane, Jeeves!')

*Postal Relief*

Ammy Plofker, our Membership Manager and Treasurer, would like to remind one and all Society members that you are always welcome to renew your membership for multiple years. Not only would this reduce the frequency with which you receive those daunting yellow Dues Are Due sheets, but it would cheer her local postman who, each calendar quarter, carries the flood of renewal checks up the 47 flights of steps to her apartment. Imagine two or three or more years of *Plum Lines* with nary a fear of interruption. Paradise is indeed possible on Earth!



# Letter from England

BY ELIN WOODGER MURPHY

This letter is difficult to write, because my subject is a sad one. On April 16 this year, Norman's daughter and my friend, Helen Virginia Clare Murphy, passed away a week after being admitted to hospital for treatment of a chest infection. Unfortunately, a longstanding medical condition complicated her treatment; the chest infection became severe pneumonia, and she suffered a massive organ shutdown. The suddenness of it was a shock to all her family and friends. In addition to her father, she left a brother, Tim; sister-in-law, Anne; niece, Rachael; and aunts, uncles, and cousins in England and Scotland.

Born in Aden, South Arabia, on May 12, 1965, Helen was Norman's daughter with his first wife, Charlotte (née Archibald), who died in 1999. Norman's career as a British Army officer meant he and Charlotte were always on the move, and Helen therefore boarded at a convent, Woldingham School, which played an important role in her education and development. Following Woldingham, she went on to Edinburgh University, where she studied English literature. For many years she worked for the Metropolitan Police.

Very early on, Helen became, like her father, a keen Wodehousean. She was, in fact, extraordinarily well-read in a vast range of subjects. Her interests were, in fact, quite widespread, and she was extraordinarily well-read in a vast range of subjects. Her intellectual powers both awed and intimidated me from the time I met her in 1993. The breadth of her knowledge was impressive, to say the least, and she had that enviable ability to carry on a conversation about anything, from literature to history to politics. At Savage Club evenings she could be seen surrounded by people as she "held court," leading discussions around any number of avenues. Her favorite subject, in addition to Wodehouse, was the American Civil War; her shelves were filled with a variety of books on that topic, and she could tell you all about even the most obscure participants, including generals I had never even heard of.

Helen's love for things American extended to several trips to the United States—which of course included her attendance and presentations at several Wodehouse Society conventions. In 1993 she presented a paper at the San Francisco convention, entitled "School Prizes and the People Who Won Them." In this review of the sometimes appallingly sentimental and moralistic school stories of the late 19th and early 20th

centuries, Helen explained how and why Wodehouse's school stories were far more realistic and so popular by comparison. Four years later, at the Chicago 1997 convention, she spoke on "Plum & Rosie: A Match Made in Heaven," a paper that was published in the Summer-Autumn 1998 issue of *Plum Lines*. This talk demonstrated Helen's wide and perceptive knowledge of the best-selling novels and women's romantic fiction that Wodehouse quoted and satirized so often. She also reported Richard Usborne's discovery of the well-known and wildly popular British novelist Ruby M. Ayres as the woman Wodehouse had in mind when he created Rosie M. Banks.

Last year illness prevented Helen from attending the Toronto convention, so I had the honor of presenting her paper, "Wodehouse—A Male Thing?"; you can read it in this issue. In addition to her talks at conventions, Helen made numerous entertaining and informative contributions to *Plum Lines*.

When the U.K. Society was reformed in 1997, Helen became its first Membership Secretary and Treasurer. This work brought her into contact with other Wodehouseans all over the world, and she maintained a regular correspondence with several dozens of them. Her ability to remember details about individual members was staggering, given the number of people who wrote to her. After her death, the U.K. Society set up a tribute to her on its website (see [www.eclipse.co.uk/wodehouse](http://www.eclipse.co.uk/wodehouse)), and numerous Wodehouseans wrote to express their dismay at her loss, citing the warm and detailed letters she wrote, the incredible range of her knowledge, her vivacity, and her charm, among her many sterling qualities. It is clear that she will be missed not only by the Murphy and Archibald families but by Wodehouseans worldwide. We are all sure that Plum has welcomed her into heaven with open arms.



# Rivals of P. G. Wodehouse

BY DAN COHEN

In 1952 Wodehouse and his agent, Scott Meredith, coedited a collection of stories, poems, cartoons, and jokes called *The Week-End Book of Humor*. (It was reprinted in 1965 under the title *P. G. Wodehouse Selects the Best of Humor*, which indicates the Wodehouse name was a bigger draw than that of his agent.) Wodehouse also contributed a short story, "Trouble Down at Tudsleigh," which first appeared in 1925, and an introduction written specially for the collection.

The introduction, written in Plum's characteristic gentle and humorous style, actually tackles a serious subject: the decline of humor writing in America (virtually all of the writers and cartoonists in the book are American). He starts out by saying how he hopes an anthology of the writings of humorists will bring "a ray of sunshine into the poor devils' drab lives . . . the pleasant shock of finding that somebody loves them revives them like watered flowers."

"Light writing," he says, is no longer popular. "In some states, I believe, it is legal to hunt them [humorists] with dogs, and even in more humane localities they are scorned and sneered at. . . . The fact of the matter is, America is suffering from a touch of liver."

Plum runs through a long list of once-famous and, even then, largely forgotten American humorists, and asks, "Where are their successors?" He suggests young humorists are in danger "of being stopped dead in their tracks by coming across a photograph of Gromyko or Senator McCarthy." Surely he is not being serious here, for humor flourished throughout the 1930s and '40s when there were photographs of breadlines and Adolph Hitler.

He is closer to the mark when he touches on the changes in what we now call the media. Plum recalls that when he first came to America there were a huge number of newspapers, morning and evening, ". . . and each had its team of humorists turning out daily masterpieces in prose and verse. A magazine like *The Saturday Evening Post* had two funny short stories and a comic article in every number. Publishers published humorous books. It was the golden age. . . ."

The number of newspapers in the United States declined dramatically between the time Plum first came to America in 1904 and 1952, when he wrote his introduction. And the decline has continued and accelerated since.

Many of the humorists Plum cited in his

introduction were newspaper columnists, or began their careers writing for newspapers. How many current newspaper humor columnists can you think of? Sadly, Russell Baker has been retired for several years. There is Dave Barry, and there is . . . well, Dave Barry. Oh, there are others writing very funny stuff for the papers—Molly Ivins comes to mind. But they are primarily political columnists, and their humor is political satire—an entirely different area. There are doubtless some humor columnists with a local or regional following, but as a class they must be regarded as a severely endangered species.

*The Saturday Evening Post* is gone, along with virtually all of the other what were once called "general interest" magazines. There is always *The New Yorker*, but it no longer holds the position it once did, and the magazine's very survival is threatened regularly. *The New Yorker* may be available in Manhattan, but just this week I tried to find it at a newsstand near where I live in South Jersey (it isn't Manhattan, but it isn't Dogpatch either). I couldn't find a copy anywhere. I guess *The Reader's Digest* staggers on, but does anyone actually read it? Books like *The Week-End Book of Humor* or other collections of "light" bedside reading have disappeared entirely. Today, weekend entertainment usually starts with a visit to Blockbuster Video. Humorous novels are still being published, but there is not much of a market for humorous short stories (or indeed for short stories of any kind).

Plum takes a swipe at television, and he is right to do so. But I think the decline in the popularity of humor writing began earlier, with radio. Before radio, professional humor was brought into the home exclusively through the printed word in newspapers, magazines, and books. People could go to a show or, later, a film, but at home they had to rely on Uncle Henry's stale jokes for a laugh, or they had to read something funny. By the 1940s, radio was bringing Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Burns and Allen, and Fibber McGee and Molly right into the living room. Television, a much more influential medium, swallowed up that kind of radio, along with the newspapers and magazines.

It's not that there isn't any funny writing anymore; there is lots of it around, but we don't read it. Miles Kington, the former editor of the former *Punch*, makes a useful distinction between what he calls humor writing and comedy writing: humor writing is written

for the printed page, comedy writing is written to be performed.

Early in his career Kington teamed up with another young writer named Terry Jones. But after a year the partnership just didn't work out. "I was a humorous writer by bent and he was a comedy writer. . . . He wanted to see his face on T.V., I wanted to see my name at the top of articles. How right he was is proved by the fact that half a dozen years later he was one-sixth of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, while I was one-sixth of the staff of *Punch* magazine. In other words, he was facing firmly into the future and I was facing fearlessly into the past."

The same trends had taken place in America, but even more swiftly and thoroughly. As a result, a whole era of American humor writers—all of the people Wodehouse praised in his introduction and many more besides—have been entirely forgotten. Even James Thurber, who was an absolute icon of American humor 40 or so years ago, has faded. Ask anyone under 30 who James Thurber is and you will get more blank stares than answers. And when he is recognized, it is more for his cartoons than for his writing.

Wodehouse, however, survives. I would like to think this is due partly to the tireless activities of Wodehouse cultists like ourselves, but the real reason is that Plum was simply better than all the others, and sometimes quality does count. Go to the humor section of a good bookstore (if you can still find a good bookstore) and you will most likely find Wodehouse books. You might find something by Thurber, but I seriously doubt if you will find Robert Benchley or Will Cuppy. And that's a shame.

Back in the 1970s, Sir Hugh Greene (Graham's brother and a noted historian of the detective story) edited a series of books called *Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*. (They were also the basis for an excellent 1978 Thames Television series that was later shown in the United States.) These were detective stories written at about the same time Conan Doyle was writing the Holmes stories. There was even an *American Rivals of Sherlock Holmes* volume. None of the stories came up to Doyle's standard, but most of them could still be read with pleasure.

This is all a rather roundabout way of announcing a new occasional feature in *Plum Lines*, to be called "Rivals of P. G. Wodehouse." We are going to introduce, or sometimes reintroduce, some of the other humor writers who were active and popular during Plum's day. We are not going to reprint large sections of their work; we don't have the space, and this is a WODEHOUSE publication. Besides, there are things such as copyrights

and reprint fees that we just don't have the staff or budget to deal with. But what we can do is tell you something about these writers and hope you find your way to some of their works. They can still make you laugh, and Wodehouse fans love to laugh.

These writers also can help you understand the world in which Wodehouse lived and worked. Plum was not primarily a creature of country homes and Mayfair clubs. He was a very hard-working professional writer who did a large percentage of his writing in America. These men (and a few women) were his colleagues, sometimes his friends, but most of all his fellow laborers in the world of publishing.

We will begin with Frank Sullivan. Frank who? Sullivan, the "Sage of Saratoga" and a humorist whose work Plum greatly admired. Indeed, Plum confessed that much of the introduction to *The Week-End Book of Humor* was stolen from an article Sullivan had written for *The New York Times Book Review*. "I'm sorry, Frank," he wrote, "but you ought not tempt a fellow by writing such good stuff."

David McDonough provides the introduction:

Frank Sullivan

"There's only one Frank Sullivan. I can do with a dozen. To my mind—and it is a mind not to be sneezed at—he is America's foremost humorist."

That quote appears on the front cover of *Well, There's No Harm in Laughing* (original title: *Frank Sullivan Through the Looking Glass*), a collection of Sullivan humor and letters published in 1970. The author of the tribute is one P. G. Wodehouse.

Sullivan was one of America's funniest writers at a time when humor flourished in this country: the golden era of the late 1920s, '30s and '40s. He outlived most of his contemporaries, but, curiously, his fame has diminished over the years. It is difficult to understand why. Perhaps it is because Sullivan, who had a real aversion to travel, spent most of his time after 1931 in his home town of Saratoga Springs, New York. Unlike Robert Benchley, he never became a public figure; unlike James Thurber and S. J. Perelman, he never experimented with fiction and plays. He was content to stay home and do what he did best: create some of the finest examples of the humorous essay the world has ever seen. Although most of his work is out of print, collections like *A Pearl in Every Oyster*, *The Night Old Nostalgia Burned Down*, and the above-mentioned title can sometimes be found in used-book stores and people's attics. In 1997 Dover published *Frank Sullivan at His Best*, which is still available.

Sullivan was born in Saratoga Springs in 1892. He attended Cornell University, served in World War I, and in 1919 became a reporter on *The New York Herald*. He had a brief stint with *The New York Sun* and was a columnist for *The New York World* from 1925 until its demise in 1931.

It was in the late 1920s that Sullivan shared an apartment with another well-known if now-forgotten humorist, Corey Ford. In his memoir *A Time of Laughter*, Ford devotes a whole chapter to the man he refers to as his “Ugly Roomer.” He claims to have seen little of Sullivan, who, in the style of the era, spent a great deal of his time in speakeasies, along with (briefly) a third roommate, William Faulkner. Another portrait of Sullivan appears in *Merry Gentlemen (And One Lady)*, a 1985 work by J. Bryan III of *The New Yorker*.

When *The New York World* folded in 1931, Sullivan, who never married, removed himself back to his Saratoga home. He continued his comic essays for the next 40 years, writing for *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and various other publications. He became well known for two of his characters. One was Aunt Sarah Gallup, a 104-year-old feisty teller of tall tales from Ticonderoga, New York, who, according to Sullivan, first saw the light of day in 1928 when she came to New York City to root for Al Smith at the Democratic convention. The other character was the Cliché Expert, who was constantly being called upon to testify on all the great topics of life. (“Mr. Arbuthnot, you attend the movies . . . Why?” “Because the movies bring romance into starved lives such as mine. The shimmering, glamorous creatures of the silver screen provide me with an escape from the drab realities of the workaday world.”)

In later years, Sullivan became best known for his annual New Year’s poem (first in *The New York World* and, after 1931, in *The New Yorker*), in which he cheerfully mentioned the names of scores of people who had caught his eye during the last year. In his poem of 1971, he paid tribute to Plum on his 90th birthday: “And give three rousing New Year’s cheers / For Plum Wodehouse’s 90 years.”

The two humorists had great respect for each other’s work. In almost every anthology Plum was called upon to edit, he included Sullivan. In the introduction to *The Best Of Modern Humor* (1951) edited by Plum and his agent, Scott Meredith, Plum says, “I have genuine Frank Sullivans pasted in my scrapbook which, if revealed, would rock civilization.” The volume contains Sullivan’s “The Deadly Parallel.”

In the introduction to *P. G. Wodehouse Selects the Best of Humor* (1965, originally *The Week-End Book of*

*Humor*), Plum says, “Frank Sullivan—I seem always to be writing about Frank Sullivan—Hi, Frank!—had an article on humor in a recent *New York Times Book Review* so profound, so lucid, and so well expressed, that I propose to pinch most of it and pass it off as my own.” He then goes on to quote Sullivan at length. The book includes Sullivan’s classic “Yvonne.”

*A Carnival of Modern Humor*, which Plum and Meredith edited in 1967, contains Sullivan’s “The Cliché Expert Testifies on the Drama.”

Plum mentions Sullivan three times in *Author! Author!*, the 1962 book of his correspondence with lifelong friend Bill Townend. In a 1945 letter he quotes approvingly from a Sullivan piece about plagiarism. In 1947 he writes, “. . . my evening was made by meeting Frank Sullivan. I have always loved his stuff, and he’s a jewel of the first water.” And in 1961, ruminating about being over 80, Plum observes, “The hot blood of the late seventies has cooled. Today when I see a sexagenarian—Frank Sullivan, as it might be, or someone like that—climbing a tree, I smile and say to myself, ‘Boys will be boys. When you are my age, child,’ I say to myself, ‘You will realize that the true pleasures are mental.’”

The admiration was mutual. In 1960 Simon & Schuster took out an ad in *The New York Times* to salute Plum’s 80th birthday. It was signed by various authors, including Kingsley Amis, W. H. Auden, Agatha Christie, Ira Gershwin, Graham Greene, Aldous Huxley, Ogden Nash, James Thurber, John Updike, and Evelyn Waugh. Somewhere between Nash and Thurber came Sullivan.

In David Jansen’s *P. G. Wodehouse: Portrait of a Master*, the author reproduces a 1955 letter from Sullivan congratulating Plum on his newly acquired American citizenship. “Dear Plum: The happy news that you had joined our club met my eye in this morning’s *Herald Tribune* and I hasten to offer congratulations to you. . . . I have given it careful thought and my opinion is that your becoming an American citizen makes up for our loss of T. S. Eliot and Henry James combined. . . . As you know, having formally become a citizen, you now have the inalienable right to abuse the Government. I hope you will take full advantage of this pleasant privilege, when feeling logy and out of sorts. . . .”

Sullivan died on February 19, 1976, one year almost to the day after Wodehouse. Perhaps he had reasoned there was more fun to be had with Plum on the other side.

I felt uplifted to no little extent, and you might say I was simply so much pure spirit, without any material side to me whatever. *Thank You, Jeeves, 1934*

# By the Way

BY JAN WILSON KAUFMAN

One of my daily pleasures is clipping articles about P. G. Wodehouse from newspapers and magazines. I usually pass them along to Tony Ring in England, who includes them in his “Recent Press Comment” in *Wooster Sauce*. When I see how often Wodehouse is mentioned in print, I’m amazed that teeming multitudes never seem to have heard of him.

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“Beyond a Joke—the Perils of Loving P. G. Wodehouse Too Much” is the provocative title of an article by the Englishman Anthony Lane in the April 19 and 26 issue of *The New Yorker*. The article begins with a jaunty photo of a smiling Wodehouse smoking a big cigar. Lane, the magazine’s film critic, describes the quiet life of his great-uncle Eric Vachell, a bachelor doctor who served in the Orient. Vachell’s main legacy to Lane was a set of books by P. G. Wodehouse, heavily annotated by Vachell, that Lane has read and reread just as often as his great-uncle did. Lane accuses Vachell of living vicariously through Wodehouse. He ponders such questions as: “Can one, after too much Wodehouse, take anything seriously? And, when something incorrigibly serious comes along, are we Wodehouseans equipped to recognize it as such?” He raises many issues about the nature of escaping into Wodehouse’s idyllic fictional world, worrying “that ignoring real life can leave you open to damnations, great and small.”

I am not qualified or willing to analyze all these damnations, but I did enjoy many of Lane’s observations: “The thought of not reading Wodehouse strikes me as no less indecent, and in some ways no less impractical, than walking down Madison Avenue wearing only a pair of loafers” and “You could argue Wodehouse did more than any other writer to soothe the citizens of a harried country.” My house is on three floors, and I’ve found that telephones and Scotch tape are necessary on every floor, but his Uncle Eric’s arrangement of having a complete set of Wodehouse upstairs and another downstairs strikes even me as a slightly extreme measure.

Two good letters about the article appeared in the May 10 *New Yorker*, one of them from Bill Hogan of Oakland, California. Oakland is my neighboring city, so I took a chance and called him. Hogan turned out to be a very personable lawyer who practices in San

Francisco but was unable to use two spare tickets to *The Cabaret Girl*, a 1922 Wodehouse musical playing that weekend. He sent me a copy of his letter to *The New Yorker* so I could see how it had been edited for publication, and he said they had also quizzed him to see if he were the original writer. His letter ends, “Rudyard Kipling called ‘Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend’ the perfect short story. No argument there. And, as when Gladys ‘slipped at this moment a small, hot hand into his,’ despite Lane’s fears about the effect of too much Wodehouse, we certainly do give a damn.”

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“Punctuation and It’s Discontents” is the title of a review by Edmund Morris in *The New York Times* Book Review of April 25, 2004, on the surprise English best-seller *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, by Lynne Truss. Morris writes: “The greatest stylists—those who ‘hear’ as they write—punctuate sparingly and subtly. Truss errs in saying P. G. Wodehouse eschews the semicolon, but I can see why she thinks so. He uses it, on average, once a page, usually in a long sentence of mounting funniness, so that its luftpause, that tiny intake of breath, will puff the subsequent comma clauses along, until the last of them lands with thistledown grace. By then you’re laughing so much, you’re not even aware of the art behind the art.” Ed Ratcliffe, who kindly read this column, says, “The comment about PGW’s use of semicolons caused me to look through 18 of his books in my computer. I examined 16 novels and two collections from 1902 to 1954, used Microsoft Word to count the pages and semicolons, and found an average of only one semicolon in every four pages, one-fourth as many as estimated by the reviewer Edmund Morris. *Bertie Wooster Sees It Through (Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit, U.K.)* has no semicolons at all.”

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If Ed can gather that much knowledge on Wodehouse’s use of the semicolon, imagine what he can do when he spreads himself on the subject of horse-drawn vehicles of the early 19th century. Look for his illustrated article “Transports of Delight: Carriages in the Time of Jane Austen,” on the website of the Jane Austen Society of North America Northern California. Just go to [www.jasnanorcal.org](http://www.jasnanorcal.org) and click on “Inkwell” for a staggering amount of arcane and interesting information on the engineering, nomenclature, and social status of carriages of the period.



Thinking of matters porcine, a startling photo in *The New York Times* of May 10 shows some determined-looking pigs running in competition at the Royal Easter Show, an agricultural carnival that attracts thousands in Sydney, Australia. The pigs are a big hit with the crowds, as there are diving pigs, trained to jump off a 13-foot platform into a pool of water, and racing pigs that tear around a 115-foot track. The racers wear numbers for the bettors. The mind boggles at the thought of the Empress of Blandings being subjected to such indignities at a Shropshire Agricultural Show.

## Genealogy, Anyone?

### *Genealogical Plea*

Mr. Bill McMahan, of Manassas, Virginia, would like to contact any U.K. Wodehouseans who are interested in genealogical research. It seems that Bill's mother referred to an ancestral story wherein some prior McMahan, as a young boy, played toy soldiers with a toddling Oliver Cromwell. The venue might have been Clifton Castle, if such a castle exists. So please contact Mr. McMahan if you have any light to shed on this interesting bit of history. And if that weren't enough cause for intrigue, Bill's wife traces her ancestry to a Scottish chappie named John Young, who came to America in the 18th century, and Bill himself believes that there were several McMahans running rampant about Ireland in past times. If you live in the U.K. and can help Bill with his research, feel free to contact him as listed above.

### *HMS Victory and Other Old Floaters*

Bill McMahan is also seeking members of the Society who have interest in sailing ships of the 18th and 19th centuries. He has built models, has a small library about such ships, and hopes to build a scale model using the authentic "plank on frame" approach used by builders in those days. If you are interested in such ships, particularly the USS *Constitution*, USS *Constellation*, or HMS *Victory*, and would like to exchange information with Bill, please contact him at the address listed above.

## Remembering Alistair Cooke

BY NORMAN MURPHY



It's odd how certain things become rituals in families. They vary, of course, but they become important, they become routine, they become a regular marker in the week. Listening to *Letter from America* became a ritual in thousands of British households for more than 40 years. The world has changed, and TV companies now work on a viewer's attention span of 30 seconds or so—and Alistair Cooke was the last of his type. I remember A. J. P. Taylor, the historian, staggering the BBC in the 1950s when he turned up to give a series of talks without a script or any visual aids. He just talked at the camera without a pause for—what was it?—15 minutes, half an hour? And we all sat there spellbound, absorbed by this history lecture spoken in beautiful, correct, flowing English.

Alistair Cooke did it too. He showed America in a believable, kindly light; he did what he wanted to do, he made Britons realise that America was not all millionaires, gangsters, and film stars. And he did it better than anyone else. He relaxed us, he made us feel as though we had just dropped in for a cup of coffee and an old friend was bringing us up to date on what was going on. We believed his soft voice far more than we believed the frenetic news flashes.

A journalist on *The Daily Telegraph* pointed out another factor, one which Cooke had in common with Wodehouse (he mentioned his enjoyment of Wodehouse just a few months before his death). He said: "Rereading the texts of his broadcasts reminds you that Alistair Cooke was a terrific prose writer. Everyone went on about his radio voice, but it was his prose rhythm that mattered. Those endless parentheses, unspooling from comma to comma, gave his digressive, long sentences a wonderful feeling of leisure and control . . . The last master of the subordinate clause."

Sunday mornings won't be the same any more.

*Editor's note: Alistair Cooke, a broadcasting icon in both the United Kingdom and the United States, died on March 30, 2004. He was a devoted fan of P. G. Wodehouse.*

# Guilty by Inference

BY NORMAN MURPHY

*The April 1962 issue of The New Yorker contained an article on P. G. Wodehouse entitled "Beyond a Joke," by Anthony Lane. While the article is largely complimentary about its subject, Norman felt that Mr. Lane's conclusions were so offensive they required a response, which follows.*  
—Ed.

I have now read Mr. Lane's piece a dozen times, and I am still bewildered. Does he really believe Wodehouse brainwashed himself into behaving as his fictional creations did? Does he really believe that Wodehouse consciously and deliberately "did the dirty work for a nation run by genocidal Spodes"? Doesn't he know that the talks Wodehouse broadcast were originally given to his fellow inmates in Tost, who found them highly amusing and anti-German? Doesn't he know that Wodehouse would have been released anyway on his 60th birthday, as many of his fellow internees were? Has Lane ever read the transcripts of the broadcasts?

Mr. Lane clearly admires Wodehouse as a writer, but he goes on to conduct a brutal character assassination. He says that the German Foreign Office "requested" that "Wodehouse travel to Berlin and give a few talks on the subject of his incarceration. This he did." Lane acknowledges that the "broadcasts themselves are free of treachery" but goes on to stress the outcry they caused, especially as Wodehouse "was staying, with the Germans' consent, at the Hotel Adlon, in Berlin."

Mr. Lane clearly did not bother to check, or did not want to check, information that has been in the public domain for years: that Wodehouse was approached to make the broadcasts *after* he had been released from Tost; that he did so to let his friends in America know he was alive and well and only after being assured by an old friend that a broadcast to a then-neutral country was perfectly in order; and that he had little choice about staying at the Adlon Hotel. The German Foreign Office put him there, and it is understood that he paid his bill with Ethel's jewelry and royalties from such neutral countries as Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Mr. Lane mentions the interview by the British security services and at least repeats Muggeridge's perceptive remark that Wodehouse "never seemed to hate anyone. . . . Such a temperament unfits him to be a good citizen in the mid-twentieth century." Yet he follows this with the nastiest example of guilt by implication I have read in a long, long time. Wodehouse's

statement that he found it hard to hate anybody leads Lane to say: "This suggests a man swimming in the milk of human kindness, but charity loses its appeal when you consider that Tost—'Camp was really great fun,' as he wrote to a friend—lay barely more than thirty miles from Auschwitz."

The implication is appalling and blithely ignores the hard facts that, firstly, Wodehouse was in an internment camp, unable to rove at will around the countryside and would have had no knowledge of other camps in the area. Secondly, Auschwitz was a camp set up about the same time as Tost for Polish prisoners of war and did not become an extermination camp for Jews until 1942, a year after Wodehouse had left Tost. It also ignores the fact that, until 1945, no one really believed the reports about Auschwitz and Belsen; they were just too horrific. And the "Camp was really great fun" comment is not too outrageous when one remembers he was moved by the friendship and kindness of his fellow inmates and was trying to make light of the hardships he and they suffered.

But then Mr. Lane, after admitting that Wodehouse had committed no crime, goes off into fantasy: "This was a man so drunk on a verbal cocktail of his devising . . . that he regarded the world through a cockeyed benevolent blur." This extraordinary remark is a tribute to Wodehouse's skill as a writer rather than to Mr. Lane's intelligence. Most of us realised Wodehouse was making fun of the world around him; Lane clearly does not.

Some years ago I was asked to look at a manuscript submitted by an earnest Swedish gentleman who knew his Wodehouse but, unfortunately, had little knowledge of the English language. When Bertie Wooster "smoked a thoughtful cigarette," his comment was that Wodehouse had committed a grave error since a cigarette could not think. He clearly did not know of the figure of speech known as the transferred epithet. I fear Mr. Lane displays the same level of ignorance. He believes that immersion in Wodehouse brings about an inversion of accepted social values; that golf, cocktails, and spats become more important than love, marriage, or world affairs. He follows this with the extraordinary suggestion that Wodehouse had come to believe his fictional world was real and says, "Wodehouse . . . barely noticed that he was consorting with Fascists." I suggest he had little choice. They were his captors; he could not evade consorting with them.

Mr. Lane mentions Wodehouse's satire of Mosley in Roderick Spode and his Black Shorts, but goes on to say that this mild satire is not enough. He finishes with the moralistic statement that simply seeking

the quiet life, the desire to be innocent “can dwindle into the loneliness of the bigot.” The loneliness of the innocent, of the persecuted, of the misunderstood I can understand, but the “loneliness of the bigot”? I cannot reconcile this with what I have read and learned of Wodehouse over 40 years.

Mr. Lane suggests the books Wodehouse wrote during the Second World War were so well written because “they have so much actual unpleasantness to fend off.” There was a far simpler reason. Wodehouse had more time, whether he liked it or not, to do what he did best: to prune, to amend, to polish.

I fear that, like the Swedish gentleman I mentioned above, Mr. Lane has missed the point by a long, long way. He admits that if the talks had been given on the BBC, they would have been taken for British stoicism, but claims the same talks broadcast to a neutral country made him a Nazi stooge. He overlooks something often forgotten: British POWs had made broadcasts under Red Cross arrangements to reassure their families they were alive and well. Wodehouse was simply trying to reassure his friends in neutral America, and he spoke of his internment with courage and with humour.

I still cannot understand how Mr. Lane’s mind works.

## Rocky Mountain Wodes



Linda Adam-Hall and Gary Hall, our erstwhile *Plum Lines* layout team and neo-Coloradoans, recently discovered that the High School of Gilpin County, Colorado, had decided to perform *Anything Goes* as their spring musical. Linda and Gary ventured forth and found an earnest cast and crew, under the direction of a Ms. Peggy Miller. Despite a misbehaving moon and a vanishing mustache or two, the Halls heard no Tough Eggs in the back of the auditorium. They commend the Gilpinites on keeping Wodehouse alive in the mountains. In addition, Gary noticed that the Open Stage Theatre of Fort Collins, Colorado, has scheduled a run of the P. G. Wodehouse adaptation of Hungarian playwright Ferenc Molnar’s *The Play’s the Thing* in September of this year. The Colorado contingent of TWS is already plotting attendance; more news to come.

## Chapters Corner

CONDUCTED BY SUSAN COHEN

It’s fun being with other fans, and it’s fun reading about what other fans are doing. So please use this column to tell the world—the Wodehouse world, that is—about your chapter’s activities, zany and otherwise. Representatives of chapters, please send all info to me, Rosie M. Banks, otherwise known as Susan Cohen. Anyone reading this who is not a member of a local chapter but would like to attend a meeting or become a member should get in touch with the contact person listed.

Anglers’ Rest  
(Seattle and vicinity)  
Contact: Susan Collicott  
Phone:  
e-mail:

There was an enjoyable gathering of the Anglers’ Rest on April 24. Several new people showed up to join in the laughter and tributes to Plum. Once again the Irish pub atmosphere at Kell’s by the Pike Place Market was welcoming and comfortable. The Kell’s own ale was quite good, too.

Blandings Castle Chapter  
(greater San Francisco Bay Area)  
Newsletter: *The Argus Intelligencer and Wheat Growers Gazette*  
Contact: Jan Kaufman, president  
e-mail:

Even Uncle Fred would have considered our visit to *The Cabaret Girl* show on May 5 as pleasant and instructive. “Whoop-de-oodle-do” and “Come Shimmy With Me” were positively infectious songs. The cast did a particularly good job of enunciating Wodehouse’s clever lyrics. After the show, when we got together outside the theater for a photograph, the cast—so much admired by us for their lively singing and jazzy dancing—came out in their street clothes and jumped into the photograph with us. We then walked a couple of blocks in the sunshine to the Elephant and Castle, where, 24 strong, we drank beer and had pub

fare, such as fish and chips dipped in a beer batter and Guinness Irish Stew.

It was great fun having Tony and Elaine Ring from England with us, as well as Phil Ayers and Florence Cunningham from the Seattle area and Amy Plofker, TWS membership manager, from Connecticut. We were also very pleased to meet a longtime Blandings Castle member, Mary Lattimore from Davis, at the show, and we hope she'll join us again soon.

Tony Ring posed a wicked question: What is the connection between Wodehouse and Tennessee Williams? None of us could answer. I'm not going to give you the answer either, so you'll have to do a lot of research or apply to Tony to find out what the connection is.

The Broadway Special  
(New York City and vicinity)  
Contact: Philip Shreffler  
e-mail:

The Broadway Special sponsored the East Coast Binge in May; see our report on pages 22-23.

Capital! Capital!  
(Washington, D.C., and vicinity)  
Contact: Jeff Peterson  
Phone:  
e-mail:

On April 27 members of Capital! Capital! met over roast beef and horseradish to hear Ken Clevenger's enthusiastic presentation on "Wodehouse as a Gastronomer." Ken had to explain, for the more Bertie-like, less Jeevesian-minded among the group, that a gastronomer is not only a "lover of good food" but one "with a serious interest in the art or science of good eating and culinary customs or style." Ken selected quotes to illustrate how the master's fiction was "replete with, if not redolent of, food and dining as the subject that pushes the plot along, illuminates the essential character of the several actors, sets them in scenes perfectly suited to their action, and, along the way, invokes some of the most vivid mental images ever created in the English language." The quoted excerpts ran from Bingo Little on racetrack picnics to Bertie on the "smoked offerings" of Anatole. Our favorite line? "To attract attention in the dining-room of the

Senior Conservative Club between the hours of one and two-thirty, you have to be a mutton chop, not an Earl," from *Something Fresh*. Capital! Capital! members enthusiastically urged Ken to adapt his presentation for publication in *Plum Lines*.

Chapter One  
(greater Philadelphia area)  
Contact: Susan Cohen  
Phone:  
e-mail:

At our March meeting, Hal Lynch gave a delightful talk on forerunners of Wodehouse, starting with Plautus. Peasmarch, as Hal is known in Chapter One circles, originally read Plautus in Latin, proving that even in Latin you can get a laugh. Hal went on to discuss Oscar Wilde, whose characters could have been founding fathers of the Drones Club, and Saki, whose Clovis was a kind of sinister Drone. For his talk, Peasmarch was awarded an official TWS tie, a gift from Karen Byrne; it originally belonged to her husband Ed Whittaker. The tie, gleaming in plum and gold, looked quite dazzling on Peasmarch. We said a sad farewell to Karen, who is moving back to Spokane, Washington. We will miss her very much, and we wish her the best, knowing that the East Coast TWS's loss is the West Coast TWS's gain.

On April 24 Chapter One celebrated its 10th anniversary at McGillin's Olde Ale House, Philadelphia's oldest tavern. This was a special occasion indeed. A dartboard turned McGillin's into the Anglers' Rest; '20s music upped the ambience. Dan Cohen, Chapter One's Cyril Waddelsey-Davenport, wore his gorilla costume, as promised, and did a fine imitation of a chicken laying an egg during the read-aloud of "The Reverent Wooing of Archibald." Dan wasn't the only one in costume. Lots of others came dressed as their noms as well. Karen Ruef looked splendid in her '20s clothes. Our Empress of Blandings, Roz Kushner, was very smart and stylish in her piggy bedroom slippers. Whatever we may be, no one can accuse the Chaps of being boring.

Good browsing, good sluicing, and good chatting eventually dissolved into sentimental sloshing, as we looked through Chapter One photo albums, tenderly cradled souvenirs of our past, and read media accounts of our successes. I mean, 10 years, hey, what? Chapter One has held bimonthly meetings for a solid decade, sponsored a binge, and hosted a TWS convention: hot

stuff! We decided to repeat this party again on our 20th anniversary.

Our next meeting will be Sunday, September 19, 1:00 P.M., Dark Horse Restaurant, Philly. I am happy to announce that the Free Library of Philadelphia has booked Oxford University author Robert McCrum, author of a pending new biography of Wodehouse, as guest speaker on the evening of Thursday, December 16. Chapter One will attend en masse. If you do not live in Philly but would like to join us for the McCrum event, please get in touch with me.

The Chicago Accident Syndicate  
(Chicago and thereabouts)  
Contact: Daniel & Tina Garrison  
Phone:  
e-mail:

This chapter holds bimonthly meetings with a wide range of activities. Sometimes members of the Syndicate meet in each other's homes to enjoy a potluck supper and read Wodehouse. Sometimes they meet in an Irish pub where there's good browsing and sluicing. They enjoy theater outings followed by dinner at a restaurant, and every time City Lit does a Wodehouse production they are in the audience. They go to the Chicago Botanical Gardens to stroll through the English garden there, while reading excerpts from Wodehouse. They play miniature golf together and have one grand croquet game every year.

The Clients of Adrian Mulliner  
(for enthusiasts of both PGW and Sherlock Holmes)  
Contact: Marilyn MacGregor  
Phone:

The Drone Rangers  
(Houston and vicinity)  
Newsletter: *DroneStar*, edited by Carey Tynan  
Contact: Toni Rudersdorf  
Phone  
e-mail:

Every other month we meet and discuss a Wodehouse book we have all read. These "book meetings" are held at the Barnes and Noble Town & Country at 7:00 P.M. On alternate months we meet for dinner. To receive a *DroneStar* and join the Drone Rangers,

contact Toni Rudersdorf and she will tell you where to send your membership fee, which is \$15. If you plan to visit Houston, we hope you can attend a book meeting or dinner meeting while you're here.

The Mottled Oyster Club  
(San Antonio and South Texas)  
Contact: James P. Robinson III  
Phone:  
e-mail:

The San Antonio and South Texas chapter is still officially known as the Mottled Oysters. However, unofficially the Mottled Oysters have developed into two tracks of bimonthly meetings. Certain meetings (designated Mottled Oyster meetings) are held at a local bookstore (usually Barnes & Noble on Loop 410); other meetings (designated Jellied Eel meetings) are held at local restaurants. Mottled Oyster and Jellied Eel meetings are held on alternate months (with occasional lapses). On July 8 (8:00 P.M.) at Barnes and Noble, the Mottled Oyster meeting will center on "The Adventures of Sally." August 12 (7:00 P.M.) will find the Jellied Eel foregathering at Crumpets (3920 Harry Wurzbach) to talk about *Something Fresh*. It is further anticipated that Barnes & Noble will see the Mottled Oyster on September 9, discussing *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. All and sundry are welcome at every meeting.

The New England Wodehouse Thingummy Society  
(NEWTS)  
(Boston and elsewhere in New England)  
Contact: Anne Cotton, president  
Phone:  
e-mail:

The NEWTS had a marvelous Nottle (gathering of newts) at Ravi and Indu's home in Bedford, Massachusetts. We passed up a chance to go watch a cricket game, as the day was showery and a warm house full of food was too tempting. But at least we finally read "The Metropolitan Touch" (in which Jeeves and Bertie do their best to untangle Bingo Little from one of his affairs of the heart; all ends well, of course). Our next gathering will be in mid-August, chez Tom and Lisa Dorward. Visiting the local cricket club to watch it in action will have to wait till a sunnier day.

The Northwodes  
(St. Paul, Minneapolis, and vicinity)  
Contact: Kristine Fowler  
Phone:  
e-mail:

The Northwodes, augmented by a few welcome newcomers, gathered on May Day at a venerable local establishment with the stated intention of celebrating the Kentucky Derby. Much to the Head Gardener's surprise, the focus of the meeting turned out to be the presentation to her of a magnum of champagne and champagne flutes, given for services rendered to the chapter and accompanied by flattering and funny addresses. (No one actually drank a May Queen, but the passage was never more appropriate.) The recipient expressed her thanks for this very generous gift, protesting that it was undeserved: After all, organizing opportunities to hobnob with such congenial folk can hardly be counted as work. She promised that the plotters will have plenty of opportunity for applying their evident skill in organization and keeping a discreet silence re future chapter activities. The group did eventually get around to watching the Derby, which once again demonstrated that we would all have lost our quarterly allowances if given the chance. The next gathering will be sometime in August; contact Kris Fowler for details, so she can feel she is earning her keep.

The Pale Parabolites  
(Toronto and vicinity)  
Contact: Peter M. Nixon  
e-mail:

The Pale Parabolites . . . those who are seeking the Pale Parabola of Joy . . . whatever that may be. The Pale Parabolites' motto is *nil admirari*. Like the Empress of Blandings, the Pale Parabolites take things as they come and marvel at nothing.

The Pelikan Club  
(Kansas City and vicinity)  
Contact: Sallie Hobbs

The Perfecto-Zizzbaum Motion Picture Corporation  
(Los Angeles and vicinity)  
Contact: Melissa D. Aaron  
e-mail:

We meet at 12:30 p.m. on the second Sunday of every month at Vroman's Bookstore, 695 E. Colorado St., Pasadena, often as not, following up our meetings with tea at the Chado Tea Room. This spring we discussed stories by the Master where animals play a central role, such as "Something Squishy," "The Story of Webster," and "Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey." We celebrate our fourth anniversary this June. On June 27–July 2 the San Diego Vintage Dancers are putting on a Vintage Dance Week in Claremont, California, with a Ragtime Dance, a tea and croquet party, and a Jazz Age party on board the *Queen Mary*. One of the performers will be Ian Whitcomb, a ukulele/banjolele player and a big Plum fan; another will be Pat Tamburro and his accordion of many delights, something those of you from Toronto may remember. There may be stand-alone tickets available for the *Queen Mary* party. To be kept fully informed about our chapter and its activities, check our web page at <http://www.lahacal.org>, under P. G. Wodehouse Society, and subscribe to our e-mailing list.

The Pickering Motor Company  
(Detroit and vicinity)  
Contact: Elliott Milstein  
e-mail:

The Size 14 HAT CLUB  
(Halifax, Nova Scotia)  
Contact: Jill Robinson  
e-mail:

The Soup & Fish Club  
(northern Virginia area)  
Contact: Deborah Dillard  
Phone:  
e-mail:

## The East Coast Binge

BY PHILIP SHREFFLER

Thanks to a great deal of planning and hard work, the East Coast Wodehouse Binge—held May 14–16, 2004, and sponsored by The Broadway Special of New York—was universally proclaimed oojah-cum-spiff. Organizers Amy Plofker (the Special's vice president, who arranged the Binge's events) and M. E. Rich (our

Miss Postlethwaite, who handled lodging and catering) can rest on their laurels now, but only if they stand on their heads, upon which the crowns have been placed in gratitude.

The faithful began to converge on Manhattan on Friday night, some of the out-of-towners ensconcing themselves amidst the art deco splendor of the Gramercy Park Hotel, gathering later for impromptu dining.

But the real fun began on Saturday morning with a special tour of the New Amsterdam Theatre, built early last century and the stage for no fewer than five Plum musicals. Bingers in attendance heard a complete history of the theatre—from its Ziegfeld Follies glory days to its decline into a porno palace and its subsequent rebirth, together with chilling anecdotes of Olive, the actress whose restless ghost haunts the stage and wings (and who has been seen *recently*). The greatest revelation, however, was that during the Teens and Twenties Florenz Ziegfeld conducted a nightclub review on the roof of the New Amsterdam called the Midnight Follies: the source, we have no doubt, of Wodehouse's Frolics on the Roof.

There was just time for a quick luncheon before almost 50 Wodehousians made for the MainStage of the 14th Street YMCA for a performance of the first Kern-Bolton-Wodehouse collaboration, *Have a Heart* (which opened in January 1917). A thin plot by any standard, concerning the amatory entanglements of three couples, was buoyed upward by charming songs including the show's title number as well as "Napoleon," "Honeymoon Hotel," and the insertion of the show-stopping "Let's Build a Little Bungalow in Quogue" (from 1917's *The Riviera Girl*). The production was so good that the actors' holding reading scripts in their hands just didn't matter.

Immediately following *Have a Heart*, the assembled company ankled the few blocks to Paul



*M. E. Rich and Philip Shreffler in their Broadway Specials.*

and Jimmy's Restaurant for the evening's cocktails and dinner, at which no bread rolls were hurled but during which sprightly conversation among veteran and neophyte Wodehousians sparkled. And there were enviable door prizes too, the most coveted, a copy of *The Complete Lyrics of P. G. Wodehouse*, going to Elizabeth Landman, who didn't complain.

On Sunday morning a species of tryout of the "New York Wodehouse Walk," based on Norman Murphy's notes, was undertaken, well attended and enjoyed by all. It featured a tour of Greenwich Village Wodehousian sites, ably led by Dave Rabinowitz, and then a guided tour of the Little Church Around the Corner. The Little Church reported that they *did* manage to raise enough money to repair the crumbling north wall (upon which hangs the plaque to PGW), and it looked fine to us that day.

Plummies in the vicinity of the Atlantic seaboard may take solace in the fact that, in off-years between national conventions, the East Coast Binge still thrives to provide Wodehousian fellowship, improving activities, and hangovers that require Jeeves's attention.

*Philip, president of The Broadway Special, emceed the Saturday night dinner. I'm told 46 Wodehousians attended the weekend's activities. —Ed.*

## "Your Need Is Greater than Mine"

BY BEN JENSON

Readers of *Plum Lines* (Spring 2004) may be interested and amused by a gloss on the excellent accounts by Charles Gould and Dennis Chitty of Wodehouse's capacity to retread sayings from his youth in the mouths of Bertie or Jeeves.

This particular gloss is on the one (from *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*) in which Bertie invites Aunt Dahlia to have "first go" at a "tankard of the old familiar juice," saying, "Your need is greater than mine, as whoever-it-was said to the stretcher case." Gould reports that the source of the mangled saying was Sir Philip Sidney, who was reported to have said it to a soldier dying on the field of battle in 1586.

I don't want anyone to think that the following is something I knew going in. If I were that encyclopedic, I would lose all my friends. Nor do I have the mind to look up something like this. Rather it was a lucky coincidence while reading literary anecdotes at the time. (Hmmm, I'll have to be careful about what I read . . .)

This is from *Curiosities of Literature* by Isaac Disraeli, Benjamin's father, who lived for half the 18th century and half the 19th and so is writing some time after the event, and slightly before Wodehouse's time. It concerns the execution of Sir Walter Raleigh:

In going from the prison to the scaffold, among others who were pressing hard to see him, one old man, whose head was bald, came very far forward, insomuch that Raleigh noticed him, and asked, "Whether he would have ought of him?" The old man answered, "Nothing but to see him, and to pray to God for him." Raleigh replied, "I thank thee, good friend and I am sorry I have no better thing to return thee for thy good will," Observing his bald head, he continued, "but take this nightcap, (which was a very rich wrought one that he wore) for thou hast more need of it now than I. . . ."

Now, the execution took place in 1618, some 30 years after Sidney. Is it possible that Raleigh read the biography of Sidney and . . . well, great minds do run in . . . hmmm, who was it that said that?

So did Raleigh know of the quotation? Moreover, did either biographer know for sure what either man said?

What we can be sure of is that Wodehouse, probably along with all other English schoolboys before him (or since?) knew either or both could have said it. The intriguing question (even though he refers to the "stretcher") is whether Plum would prefer the one with the pathos or the one with the wit.

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# Volunteer Officers

President of The Wodehouse Society:  
Jan Kaufman

Membership Manager (new-member inquiries, dues payment, changes in contact information) and now Treasurer:  
Amy Plofker

<http://www.wodehouse.org/inquiry/>

Editor Emeritus: Ed Ratcliffe

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