

The quarterly journal of The Wodehouse Society

Volume 35 Number 1 Spring 2014

The Frustrations of a Proven Successful Playwright

BY TONY RING

Tony's talk at the convention resulted in a global clamor for more information about Wodehouse's involvement in nonmusical theatre. Fortunately, his book on the subject (Second Row, Grand Circle) is now available; read on for details. Tony would like to thank Tina Woelke and Allan Devitt for rendering sterling assistance in bringing Wodehouse's quotations to life during the presentation at the convention.

IT IS COMMON knowledge that in 1917, Wodehouse enjoyed a record of success in the musical theatre which has not, as far as I am aware, been equalled before or since. Six new shows incorporating his lyrics opened on Broadway, and for a magic fortnight in the fall he actually had five original shows in production simultaneously.

But this talk is not about his contribution to musical theatre. This talk is restricted to the nonmusical theatre—or, as I shall refer to it, his straight plays. And although this record is less impressive, it remains somewhat uncommon to be credited with three new plays being presented simultaneously on London's West End stage, as he was in late 1928 with *The Play's the Thing*, *Her Cardboard Lover*, and *A Damsel in Distress*. They were part of his most consistent period of stage success with straight plays in London and New York—between 1926 and 1930 he had seven new plays in one country or the other (including two in both), all of which passed the first hurdle of one hundred performances.

A significant feature of his success is that each of the three plays mentioned used a different method of collaboration with another writer. For *The Play's the Thing*, Wodehouse was provided with a precise translation of the original Molnár Hungarian text, and his job was to make it attractive to the American public. For *Her Cardboard Lover*, he significantly improved an English-language adaptation by Valerie Wyngate of another East European play, which had failed in its first run. And the adaptation of one of his own books, *A Damsel in Distress*, was conducted with his friend Ian Hay, already a successful playwright in his own right.

By collaborating, he did not need to write a play from scratch by himself, and his other hits, such as *Good Morning, Bill*; *Leave It to Psmith*; *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*; and *Candlelight* each featured one of these types of arrangement.

One of Wodehouse's most successful plays in the long term has been *Good Morning, Bill*, which is still staged in the U.K. every few years on the amateur or semiprofessional circuit. He even found sufficient mileage in the play to create a separate one-act playlet of about 25 minutes for inclusion in a program on the West End variety stage two



*Tony Ring
toddles at
the Chicago
convention.
(photo by
Barbara
Combs)*

years after the original play closed. He also converted it into the 1932 novel *Doctor Sally*.

This play incorporated some one-liners of the fairly obvious variety. In the following two examples, do bear in mind that Bill is in love with Sally, who is a doctor, and has been called to see him under false pretenses. In the first, she is conducting an examination and using a stethoscope:

SALLY: Now tell me about your sex-life.

BILL: Well, naturally I have had experiences, like other men. I admit it. There have been women in my life.

SALLY (*at stethoscope*): Say ninety-nine.

BILL: Not half as many as that.

In the second he is expressing frustration because of her unwillingness to let him speak romantically:

BILL: Tonight shall decide which of us two is the strongest.

SALLY: Stronger. Didn't they teach you that at school? Even when insulting a woman, always be grammatical.

In the U.S., *The Play's the Thing* has probably been Wodehouse's most successful play, although it failed in England. Indeed, it was showing in a small theatre in New York at the time this talk was presented in Chicago. Aware that the citizens of each country have a reputation for a certain individuality in their ability to speak foreign languages, he created speeches for one character, Almady, which required him to learn in one morning a series of French names. In the play, the fictional Almady was a suave and experienced actor who had behaved badly to the female star and had to be taught a lesson. Wodehouse knew that if the names were pronounced correctly by the actor, the theatre would erupt with applause; if erroneously, with sympathetic laughter—so it was a “win-win” moment:

When I married you, who were you? A nobody. Your father, Brigadier-General Pierre Jean Bourmond de la Seconde-Chaumière-Rambouillet fell in battle at Grande-Lagruyère Sur Marne. . . . I gave you name, rank, and wealth such as you had never dreamed of. You became Madame La Countess du Veyrier de la Grande Contumace Saint Emilion. I bestowed upon you not only my estates in Pardubien-Grand-Amanoir, but also my two castles in Challenges-Debicourt de la Romanée and at

Rivalieux-Quandamouzières Sur Vantera-aux Alpes Maritimes.

You might also care to note that both *Good Morning, Bill* and *The Play's the Thing* were subjected to the blue pencil of the censor before they could be performed in England. In my view, probably the most moving exchange between Bill and Sally in *Good Morning, Bill*—lasting several pages in the original text—had to be excised, as did another comic scene between the second love interests towards the end of the play.

I have always been surprised that Wodehouse did not reincorporate these scenes into the novel of the play. I would speculate that he novelized the play (which was published as a serial for *Collier's* in 1931 before the book appeared in 1932) while twiddling his thumbs in Hollywood. There he could obtain access to the published edition of *Good Morning, Bill*, but it is unlikely that he would have retained a copy of the original script submitted to the censor, and he certainly would not have had access to it in California.

After the war, Wodehouse never returned to the U.K., and when he reached New York in 1947, he found the theatrical scene had changed almost beyond recognition. Where before the war the audiences wanted to be entertained, now it seemed to him they were more interested in despair and the bleaker side of life. I suspect that most Wodehouseans are aware that despair was not a subject on which Plum was a specialist.

He also faced two immediate problems with his fiction writing on his arrival in New York. First, he had five unpublished novels which at a minimum would not have all appeared for at least three years. Second, the magazines, which were his main outlets for short stories, had either shut down or changed the style and length of story which they would accept. As he had no direct knowledge of the contemporary English market, and was uncertain how his work would be received there anyway, he was in a dilemma as to what to write.

While Plum and Ethel were kicking their heels in Paris at the end of the war, pending a decision on when they would be able to leave France, Ethel had urged him to break the mold by writing a play on his own. He accepted the challenge and adapted his own novel *Spring Fever*, which he had completed in 1943 but which would not be published as a book in either the U.K. or the U.S. until 1948. The story of his experiences in trying to create a satisfactory play and get it staged is enough to make any putative playwright despair!

The first we know about the project comes from a letter to his friend Bill Townend in June 1945, when Wodehouse was still in Paris:

It is coming out very well, but as always the agony of telling a story purely in dialogue and having to compress it and keep the action in one spot is perfectly frightful. I have written the first scene of act one half a dozen times and it isn't right yet. . . . The curse of a play is that you can't give people's thoughts.

He also let Guy Bolton know what he was doing, but did not ask for his help at this stage:

It has been a frightful sweat, as I have had to rewrite the first scene of act one nine times, each time getting it a little more simplified. I hear your voice saying "never give an audience too much to think of at one time," which I believe is the whole secret of play writing, and I keep shedding things from the novel which I began by believing essential.

He finished a first draft of the play very quickly—by the end of August 1945—but realised it was likely to be more appropriate for the London stage than for New York. Nevertheless, he told Bolton on October 1 of that year, "I shall send my play over to George Abbott [an American producer with whom he had worked], but only with limited hopes. I don't think my stuff is sexy enough for the New York stage. On the other hand, the story is good and funny and the characters amusing so it may get by. I think it has a better chance in London."

But before he did so, he reworked the play quite significantly, as he described to fellow writer Denis Mackail: "I have finished my play and was just going to send it off, when I suddenly saw that a great improvement could be effected by a complete rewriting of most of the first act and all the second."

Wodehouse was not unduly disappointed when he heard that George Abbott could not use the play. He invited Bolton to look at the script and offer suggestions, but Bolton does not appear to have responded at this time. He also wrote to Mackail, commenting that he could "never get a funny plot without having somebody pretend to be somebody else, and apparently that is poison to the New York audience."

The play was put in abeyance for over a year before Wodehouse got what he thought—wrongly as it turned out—was a eureka moment. He eliminated the need for impersonation and lamented: "I can't imagine why I tied myself into such knots in the first place, except that I always do seem to run to these complicated plots."

I have to cut short what is a very long story. Suffice it to say that at least fourteen drafts of the play were

written over a five-year period—under four different titles—of which I have seen five, including the last, *Kilroy Was There*. Between them, they were sent out to at least sixteen different producers or actors; the star part changed from a male character to a female and back again; production was expected to begin shortly more than once with major stars all but promised; but even after Guy Bolton had tried to help, the project died a long, lingering death.

There were two consolations. The plot of *Spring Fever* changed so dramatically during the rewriting process that Wodehouse was able to create an entirely different novel, *The Old Reliable*, from the remains. And in 1954, the town of Ashburton, in Devon, England, staged a world premiere of the seventh draft with the name *Joy in the Morning*. It enjoyed a run of four nights, and the income raised was used to find the cash to line the roof of the theatre, constructed eight years earlier from a disused barn, and to improve its heating.

How did they get an unpublished Wodehouse script? Because Mr. Arthur Thomson, from Teignmouth in Devon, had carried on a friendship by letter with Plum since 1910. Wodehouse sent him the script as a gift.

Because of his fame as a witty writer, and bearing in mind his track record on stage before the war, Wodehouse started being asked to adapt plays which producers felt had potential but which were either not right as they stood or had failed during tryout runs. In 1949, for instance, *The House on the Cliff* had failed in New Haven and Philadelphia, and Wodehouse was asked to rewrite it for a 1950 production. He did so, but although his version, now called *Nothing Serious*, toured half a dozen towns in New England, it was not sufficiently successful to reach Broadway.

Also in 1949, he was invited to revise a play originally entitled *Lavender Gloves* which had been written by Ellsworth Prouty (E. P.) Conkle, an American university professor whose students at one time included Tennessee Williams. Conkle was principally known as a writer of one-act plays, many of which had been published. Wodehouse described the play to Guy Bolton as "a thriller which is no earthly good as it stands but has a fine central idea," and wrote that he was "turning it into a comedy thriller for Jack Wildberg and Sidney Harmon."

A thriller it was certainly intended to be—the main thrust of the plot being an attempt by Burmese headhunters to come to England to acquire an example of a very rare human head for their leader's collection. The main problem was that the head was still attached to its live owner's body. The title Wodehouse gave it was *Keep Your Head*.

Wodehouse completed his revisions and the play was tried out in Brighton (successfully) and in Nottingham (less so). The producers brought in further writers, changed the title to *Don't Lose Your Head*, cut out anything resembling Wodehousean humor, and altered the starring role to that of a character for which they engaged a comedian of the lowest rank. The resulting horror was reviewed in the *Times* (London): "We watch its death throes throughout the third act in what must surely be one of the longest and dullest dénouements in the whole of theatrical history."

Wodehouse was appalled at what they had done to his script. He had another look at his version, making further changes and sending it off for a production in Bermuda. Unfortunately, he fell ill and could not attend rehearsals or be on hand to make any minor adjustments that might be required. After the show had closed in Bermuda, Wodehouse wrote to Townend:

The play in Bermuda did very well, but I gather that it isn't right. But with these stock try-outs you never can tell whether it is the play or the actors that made the thing seem not right. In this one, for instance, they only had six rehearsals and people kept forgetting their lines.

Perhaps a sample of Wodehouse's exchanges would not come amiss. Maisie is one of the main love interests:

MAISIE: This is the fourth time I've broken off the engagement. The first time was three seconds after I'd said I would marry him.
POP: Three seconds?
MAISIE: That must be a record. European, anyway. He kissed me and forgot he had a cigarette in his mouth.

Here, the object under scrutiny is a shrunken human head, which one of the villains has on his watch chain:

CONNOR: Who was Tankerdine? A big, red-faced man who came to Luang Ho a couple of years ago with a caravan, selling mechanical toys. This is Tankerdine. (He exhibits the charm on his watch chain.)
BOSE: Really? May I look? Well, well. But is it not a little rash, wearing him on your watch chain?
CONNOR: I suppose it is. But I do like to be dressy.

I can never resist a little political incorrectness between friends, so here's another comment from Maisie: "Wives are like cigars. They're never so good if you let them go out."

He and Guy Bolton then tried to write a Jeeves play with, as Wodehouse suggested to Bolton, a lot of sex in it, in the hope that New York would like it.

The play which emerged after the usual several versions had been written, again with different titles and in one case as a musical, was entitled *Come On, Jeeves*. Bertie Wooster did not appear as a character, and the play did not appear on London's West End or anywhere in the USA, but it has become the most frequently presented Wodehouse play in the U.K., presumably because of the marketability of the name Jeeves in the title. His role as butler to the 9th Earl of Towcester includes acting as the Earl's "bookie's clerk" when he seeks his fortune at the races. Casts love doing the play.

When it had been rewritten as the novel *Ring for Jeeves*, the British publisher took the precaution of writing to the present holder of an official position held by one of the characters, the chief constable of Northamptonshire, the county in which you will find Towcester, to check that he had no objection to the use of the title of a public official. The chief constable sent an indignant reply and said he was placing the matter in the hands of his solicitor. As a result, in the U.K. book version, Lord Towcester became Lord Rowcester, and Northamptonshire became Southmoltonshire.

The publishers were evidently spooked by the reply, for they also made a precautionary change to the name of the store where one character was a shopwalker, from Harrods to Harridges. (All the original names were retained in the American version of the book, *The Return of Jeeves*.)

As this was a collaborative venture with Guy Bolton, it is difficult to be sure which parts of the dialogue were Plum's. The first example comes from the 9th Earl: "This girl can speak French with both hands." The second is from Rory Carmoyle's wife Monica, and has more of a flavor of Guy Bolton's creativity: "My motto is 'Love and Let Love'—with the one stipulation that people who love in glass houses should breathe on the windows."

And the third is an exchange between Jeeves and Captain Biggar, an African white hunter, when the hunter is trying to trace a motor car with a number (license) plate which he believed he remembered as having been driven by the 9th Earl.

BIGGAR: I can stand without fear in the path of an oncoming rhino, and why? Because I

know I can get him in that one vulnerable spot before he's within sixty paces.

JEEVES: I concede that you may have trained your eyes for that purpose, but, poorly informed as I am on the subject, I do not believe that rhinoceri are equipped with number plates.

The last play to which I will refer was Wodehouse's only real postwar success, and it was a true joint venture with Guy Bolton, for they prepared the adaptation together and took a financial stake in the management.

While in Paris in 1943, Wodehouse had seen a production of *N'écoutez pas, Mesdames* by Sacha Guitry, and made a mental note that it would be suitable for adaptation for London and New York. He mentioned it to Bolton, and on a visit to Europe in early 1947, Bolton acquired the English-language rights, including the right to adapt the play. He arranged for it to be produced in 1948 at the St. James's Theatre in London, where its run of 219 performances as *Don't Listen, Ladies* was one of Wodehouse's biggest straight play hits.

Because of Wodehouse's concern that the wartime furor for which he had been responsible might damage the play's commercial prospects, the publicity in London referred to the play as being adapted by Stephen Powys and Guy Bolton. ("Stephen Powys" had actually been a pseudonym used twice before by Bolton and his wife in prewar days, for the plays *Wise Tomorrow* and *Three Blind Mice*.) One wonders what would have been the effect on audience numbers if the ruse had not been adopted.

There was little plot in the play by Wodehouse standards, and it was a very wordy effort. Again it is not certain which of the writers was responsible for individual nifties, but I would back Plum for this one: "If your wife has a lover, you should accept it as one accepts bad weather or the income tax. Minor misfortunes that only dull people talk about."

But these two sound to me more like Guy Bolton: "Some men decorate their home with old masters and others with old mistresses;" and "Women—the pretty ones—they're like photographs. There's always some poor fool who treasures the negative while the clever boys are sharing the prints between them."

Finally, here's one which Plum modified for *Come On, Jeeves*: "For myself, I've had enough of love à la carte. I'm quite ready to settle down to the table d'hôte."

Both Bolton and Wodehouse were convinced that the play was right for Broadway, and they arranged a production with Jack Buchanan taking the leading role. They took the precaution of booking a week's tryout

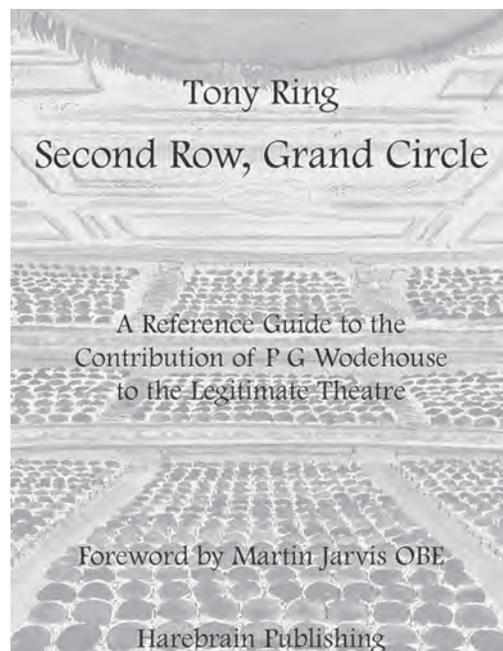
with the new cast in Brighton, before the cast sailed on the *Queen Mary*. Weather conditions prevented her sailing on time, so the Brighton run was extended for a week.

But perhaps that was a sign of the disaster awaiting them. Sacha Guitry was believed in America to have Nazi sympathies, and the columnist Walter Winchell attacked the mere fact of the production even before it opened. As his column was very influential, the New York production expired after fifteen performances.

But Wodehouse would not be Wodehouse without an optimistic angle. When he wrote to Bill Townend with the news, he added the following note:

There is a silver lining. Francis Lister, star of the London company, has got double pneumonia and we were on the point of closing the show. But now Jack Buchanan, not having to play in New York, will return to London and open in it on Monday, and this ought to mean a big jump in the business there.

Wodehouse's career in the straight theatre was bumpy in the extreme, with many peaks and troughs. You can read much more about those I have mentioned, together with information on all his other projects, in *Second Row, Grand Circle*, which is almost certainly the finest book on the subject, if only because there is no other.



Tony Ring's study of Wodehouse's nonmusical theatre, *Second Row, Grand Circle*

Wedding Bells and Perfect Nonsense: Bertie and Jeeves Reimagined—Twice!

BY ELLIOTT MILSTEIN

IF YOU'RE like me (and if you are reading this journal you are probably a lot like me), you too looked forward to the publication of Sebastian Faulks's *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells* with a combination of excitement and trepidation. Excitement because it is always exciting when there is something new to read in the Wodehouse world. Trepidation because, well, a new Bertie and Jeeves novel by someone other than Wodehouse? Really? Any painter out there up to redoing the Mona Lisa while we're at it?

It's not just that Wodehouse was one of those one-of-a-kind geniuses whom writers, no matter how lovingly, simply should not attempt to imitate. Even if one were to do a creditable job—and I will say at the outset that Faulks has done a creditable job—what's the point? Wodehouse has given us fifteen Bertie and Jeeves books which, taken together, have covered an awful lot of ground. Why bother with a pale imitation when the originals are so vivid and plentiful?

Faulks anticipates this question and answers it in the introduction. Hinting at encouragement, if not an outright invitation, from the Wodehouse Estate, he says they hope “that a new novel may help to bring the characters of Jeeves and Bertie to a younger readership.”

Well, the chap does have a point. As a group, we Wodehouseans are, let's face it, getting a tad long in the tooth. Bung a brick into any Wodehouse gathering and you are much more likely (say, conservatively at 100 to 8) to hit a septuagenarian than a Gen-Xer.

But is this the way to do it? I will say that Faulks's opus has some enjoyable moments and is a book I would in fact recommend to an experienced Wodehousean (i.e., someone who can handle this material without getting fooled into thinking he or she is reading the real thing), but as an invitation to the uninitiated, I must consider it at best worthless and at worst likely to have the opposite outcome than the one intended.

Now, I am not one of those purists out there (say, 50% of the people who will read this article) who feel that any recreation of Wodehouse that does not follow the plot and dialogue exactly as it appears in the originals is a travesty. In fact, I give quite a bit of license to any adaptation on stage or screen. The fact that one is moving from the printed page to a medium involving flesh and blood necessitates revision—not just because “the medium is the message” but because other artists

now stand between you and the work. When you are reading the original, you and Plum are the only ones in the room. So when I tell you that I actually liked Peter O'Toole's Lord Emsworth in *Heavy Weather*, you will see just how far I am willing to go.

But there is the rub with Faulks's book: It's not a movie, it's a book. There is no change of medium to divert you from the fact that you are not actually reading the original. So when the missteps occur—as they inevitably must—it is all the more jarring.

All that being said, I must say that I did find the book diverting, and not just in the same way as I did *Scream for Jeeves* and other similar pastiches. Faulks really did recapture the world and the cadence of Wodehouse. With its creative twists and turns, his plot, though not quite up to Wodehouse's best, would not have embarrassed the Master had he constructed it.

The problem, as always in these situations, is the language. While we revel in the world of Wodehouse and frolic with his characters, it is the words upon which they are constructed that are the heart of his genius. Faulks brings a shadow of that style to the page, but nothing close to the original. When asked why he called Wodehouse the Master, Evelyn Waugh was said to have replied that anyone who could “produce on average three uniquely brilliant and original similes to every page” deserves the title. I believe Faulks may have constructed three in the whole book. Maybe. And none that comes even close to “Jeeves lugged my purple socks out of the drawer as if he were a vegetarian fishing a caterpillar out of his salad,” just to quote one of thousands.

That being said, there were a number of elements I did enjoy. I thought the cricket game was a terrific idea and very well done. I thought the reference to Jeeves's recently departed celebrated relation was a beautiful touch that not many would appreciate. I also thought the level of manipulation and control Jeeves had over the events was quite true to the Plum spirit, well-executed and cleverly revealed when the time came.

And unlike some whom I have seen posting comments on the internet, I had no problem whatever with the ending. True, it took us in a completely different direction than *Much Obligated, Jeeves and Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* were taking us, but it was not “irreverent” or “ridiculous” as I have seen some describe it. Actually I

thought it a very nicely constructed alternate universe. It gave closure to the series in a way that Wodehouse could never and would never have done.

In fact, the whole book had an air of closure. It reminded me of finales of long-running sitcoms, like the last *Mary Tyler Moore Show* or the last *Seinfeld*. Not by any means the best or funniest episodes of the series, but they weren't meant to be. The point was to tie up all the loose ends, bring back some old cast members for a sentimental last bow (that does nothing to enhance the plot but brings a smile and maybe a tear to the loyal fan) and provide an ending that admits to no sequel. The actors can move on with their lives and careers knowing that, with the possible exception of a reunion show in 25 years, they are pretty much done with that!

And, in the end, that is why the book is a failure at its stated purpose. Who out there saw the last episode of *Seinfeld* as their first episode and said "Wow, I really need see this show!"? Anyone reading this book as their first Jeeves will probably feel that there really isn't any point in reading the others now that they know how it ends. And if they *did* go on to read, say, *Thank You, Jeeves*, they would be sorely perplexed.

I'll summarize by saying that, where *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells* is very much worth a Wodehousean's time, it will most likely fail to bring a new generation to Wodehouse. However, *Jeeves and Wooster in Perfect Nonsense* will most certainly succeed. This, my friends, is the way to adapt Wodehouse. *The Code of the Woosters* is the central nugget of the story, and much of the original dialogue survives and translates well to the stage. (That has not always been true with other stage productions.) And yet *Perfect Nonsense* is wrapped in a completely original construct which brings a whole new opportunity for humor and sight gags (not to mention actual slapstick) woven seamlessly and joyfully into the original material.

The conceit of the play is that Bertie was telling his story to some chums at the Drones the other night and some Egg or Bean said to him, "You know, you do that rather well. You should go on the stage." So he decides to do that, and we are the audience that gets to see his one-man show. It cleverly answers the key dilemma in adapting Jeeves and Wooster to a performance art, viz., how to include the best part, the narrative. In this production we have a perfectly natural situation whereby Bertie can step out of the scene and directly address the audience.

Of course, he starts to muck it up within the first three minutes and Jeeves has to come bail him out, so now the one-man show involves two men and ultimately three when Jeeves brings his friend and colleague

Seppings. The whole setup gives some wonderful, creative, and hysterical use of set and costume. It also provides a terrific opportunity for three great actors to go to town. Some of the funniest stuff in the show is when all three actors are on stage and they realize they need to bring another character on. Hilarity ensues each time they resolve this dilemma, with the final one being absolutely brilliant. From the staging perspective, the show is a gem of purest ray.

And the performances at the Duke of York's Theatre in London were spectacular. Matthew Macfadyen as Jeeves (as well as Sir Watkyn Bassett, Gussie Fink-Nottle, Madeline Bassett, and Stiffy Byng) was a tour de force, and Mark Hadfield as Seppings, Spode, and Aunt Dahlia fairly chewed to bits what there was of scenery. (Oh yes, a lot of fun is had with the scenery, too!) Unfortunately, Stephen Mangan, who was getting nearly unanimous praise for his performance as Bertie, was stricken low with pneumonia earlier in the week, and the performance I saw had the understudy, Edward Hancock. I was hoping it would be a *42nd Street* moment when a star is born and everyone is running around saying, "Good Lord, he was better than the star," but I am afraid it was not to be. It was clear he was still struggling a bit with the lines—actually ruining some jewels with missed timing—and of course there will always be the long shadow of Hugh Laurie to deal with when anyone takes on this role. But I will say that by the second act, his goofy, open idiot grin and loopy laugh began to grow on me and his other business—for example, his discomfort in confronting Sir Watkyn Bassett with the news that he wishes to marry Stiffy Byng—was spot on and left me in stitches.

Best of all, a quick look around the theatre showed a fairly youngish crowd, and careful eavesdropping by your correspondent revealed a group rather evenly split between aficionados and neophytes.

While a play does not have the breadth and reach of a novel, being available to no more than a few hundred people a night while a novel can quickly sell to many thousands or more, this play is likely to do more for the cause than Faulks's novel, thus helping Wodehouse, as Waugh so memorably put it, "release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own." With more reimaginings like *Perfect Nonsense*, this should be equally true for a long time to come.

His mouth opened and shut like that of a goldfish which sees another goldfish nip in and get away with the ant's egg which it had been earmarking for itself.

The Code of the Woosters (1938)

Wodehouse's *Phrases and Notes*

BY NORMAN MURPHY

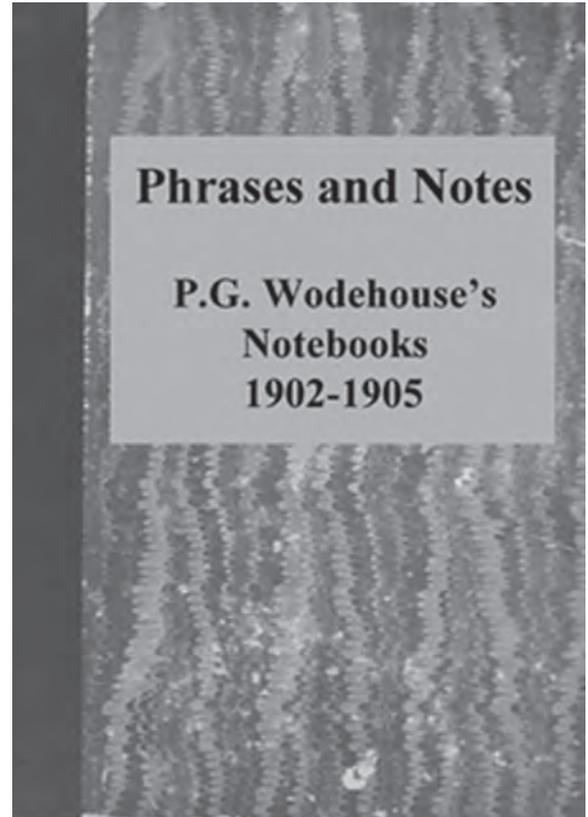
IN HIS LAST term at Dulwich in 1900, when Wodehouse learned to his dismay that he was to enter the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank rather than go to Oxford, he wrote to his friend "Jimmy" George: "So I will have two years to establish myself on a pinnacle of fame as a writer." This was a bold statement for a schoolboy and shows a determination not usually associated with Wodehouse. But he meant every word. From the day he joined the bank in September 1900, he spent his evenings writing. Articles on schools were interspersed with short comic pieces, and it seems likely that by May 1902 he realized he needed to organize his work.

Today, we would classify *Phrases & Notes* as a commonplace book. Once seen in many households, these were essentially scrapbooks of recipes, lines of poetry, bright ideas, or whatever caught the imagination of the writer. In this case, Wodehouse scribbled down notes of conversations, funny remarks he had heard, anecdotes from bus drivers and policemen, the artless prattle of the young Bowes-Lyons girls—anything that might come in useful.

The money he got for his writing seems laughable today—half a crown here, five shillings there—but it added up. After nearly a year as a freelancer after he left the bank, he achieved the security of regular employment at the *Globe* at three guineas (£3.3) a week. But because the *Globe* needed him only for two hours each morning, he continued submitting material elsewhere and still found his notebooks useful for developing ideas for his expanding market.

The three extant notebooks come to an end in late 1905, although Wodehouse continued to refer back to them in 1906. Why did they stop then? Perhaps because he had developed a assured market: In late 1905 his stories were appearing in both the *Strand* in London and *Pearson's Magazine* in New York.

With the publication of *Phrases and Notes*, which I have transcribed and annotated with the kind permission of the Wodehouse Estate, we can learn the sources behind PGW's early writing. I found the notes and the comments on his friends and acquaintances fascinating. I hope you do, too.



Phrases and Notes: P. G. Wodehouse's Notebooks, 1902-1905 has just been published under Norman's imprint of Popgood & Groolley and is available for purchase. The price is £12 (US\$20) plus postage and handling.



On the question of whether Bingo Little was ethically justified in bringing his baby into the club and standing it a milk straight in the smoking-room, opinion at the Drones was sharply divided. A Bean with dark circles under his eyes said that it was not the sort of thing a chap wanted to see suddenly when he looked in for a drop of something to correct a slight queasiness after an exacting night. A more charitable Egg argued that as the child was presumably coming up for election later on, it was as well for it to get to know the members. A Pieface thought that if Bingo did let the young thug loose on the premises, he ought at least to give the committee a personal guarantee for all hats, coats and umbrellas.

"Sonny Boy" (1939)

God and Bertie Wooster

BY JOSEPH BOTTUM

Mary Lou Mockus, a Chicago media consultant and member of the Chicago Accident Syndicate, found this. It first appeared as a foreword to the Trinity Forum Reading series publication Joy Cometh in the Morning, which included "Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend." An adaptation was then published in First Things, from which we gratefully reprint it, abridged and edited.

SUPPOSE THAT words were all you had. Suppose the great edifice of Western civilization had collapsed—all its certainties and aspirations smashed. Suppose it was 1919, and you were living in what the poet T. S. Eliot in one of his sour moods called the Waste Land, and words were all you had: lines from lost poems, refrains from forgotten songs—fragments, only fragments, to shout against the ruins. What would you do?

You could work yourself into a lather, I suppose, muttering as you trudge the sidewalks and pinning passing strangers against shop windows to explain that Nietzsche had been right all along: The Christian social order has been a flop from the beginning, and the sooner we stamp out the last of it, the better. Then again, you could order some whiskey and drink yourself into a stupor. There are dozens of ways to deal with the situation, each as ineffective as the last.

But in those dark days of the twentieth century, there was at least one man who had the intelligence and sheer persevering goofiness simply to ignore the whole mess by writing books like *Leave It to Psmith*, *Young Men in Spats*, and *My Man Jeeves*.

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse—"Plum," as he was called by his friends—wrote more than fifty novels, over three hundred short stories, and some twenty-odd plays: a total of ninety-seven books before his death in 1975. And the curious thing is that probably not a single one of them converted a soul, turned a tide, or saved a battle.

They were perfect words, of course. "She looked as if she had been poured into her clothes and had forgotten to say 'when.'" Or "Into the face of the young man who sat on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes there had crept a look of furtive shame, the shifty, hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French."

P. G. Wodehouse tossed off such lines as though he'd gotten a discount from a cousin who dealt them wholesale. Wodehouse rarely wrote anything except light romantic comedy: "musical comedy without

music," as he once described it. And that genre of literature doesn't carry the burden of civilization very far. But within this minor genre, the twentieth century saw a writer with diction that belongs in the class of Shakespeare and very few others in the history of English literature.

There's something rather disturbing about this fact. I mean, Shakespeare clearly didn't mind dabbling in romantic comedy—try *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. But on other days he'd try to work up plays with more meat on their bones. Wodehouse never sought more than a story light enough on its feet to dance to the evanescent burble of his prose: "Though he scorned and loathed her, he was annoyed to discover that he loved her still. He would have liked to bounce a brick on Prudence Whittaker's head, and yet, at the same time, he would have liked—rather better, as a matter of fact—to crush her to him and cover her face with burning kisses. The whole situation was very complex."

Once you start quoting like this from Wodehouse, it's hard to stop. The prose is almost depressingly perfect—depressingly, that is, for all of us who realize we'll never match it in our own writing. His favorite character, Bertie Wooster, says of Madeline Bassett: "She holds the view that the stars are God's daisy chain, that rabbits are gnomes in attendance on the Fairy Queen, and that every time a fairy blows its wee nose a baby is born, which, as we know, is not the case."

That "as we know" is an untouchable moment of prose. Meanwhile, "Dunstable is a man who sticks at nothing and would walk ten miles in the snow to chisel an orphan out of tuppence." And "I turned to Aunt Agatha, whose demeanor was now rather like that of one who, picking daisies on the railway, has just caught the down express in the small of the back." On and on the examples go, never a word out of place—and never a one of those words aimed at any purpose but Wodehouse's own light comedy.

Except that in the sheer insouciance of their failure to be important, they came to be very important indeed. Maybe P. G. Wodehouse matters precisely because he was willing not to matter. Maybe we should take seriously the fact that a major English literary talent of the twentieth century was content to use his perfect prose for no purpose greater than the construction of pleasant farces and the buzz of language as it passes through an Edwardian fantasy world of stern aunts, sippy girls, and young men in spats.

Still, there was something in those ninety-seven books that the twentieth century needed. You can't say modern times lacked serious fiction or biting satire or

experimental poetry. You can't say the world was short on big ideas or intellectual politics. But maybe we were a little deficient in laughter during the twentieth century. Maybe we still are.

"Jeeves Takes Charge" begins with Bertie Wooster engaged to Florence Craye, an intellectual who insists on Bertie reading books with titles like *Types of Ethical Theory*. This isn't the young man's cup of tea, of course, but Bertie is besotted. And so Jeeves must ensure the engagement is broken off. "It was her intention to start you almost immediately on Nietzsche," Jeeves explains at the story's end. "You would not like Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound."

And that's the point. Nietzsche is fundamentally unsound for reasons that will occur to the theologically minded. But here is another telling proof of his unsoundness: Bertie Wooster, one of the great innocents in literature, wouldn't like reading him at all. The best answer to Nietzsche we've managed to come up with is the prose of P. G. Wodehouse.

One could consider the role of joy in the thoughts of Christian thinkers. "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God," as Karl Barth remarked. In *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper explained that leisure is "an attitude of contemplative 'celebration' which draws its vitality from affirmation," and "to celebrate means to proclaim, in a setting different from the ordinary everyday, our approval of the world as such."

As it happens, Bertie Wooster and his friends have little in their lives except leisure. They use it mostly in pursuit, or avoidance, of the young women they meet—which is only incidentally what Pieper had in mind when he declared leisure the basis of culture; civilization can run only so far on light comedy. But there is clearly some kind of celebration going on, and the result is the grace of laughter for the reader. Wodehouse's stories hint at what made David dance before the Ark of his God who gave joy to his youth. And something in his pages suggest "the living God, Who giveth us richly all things to enjoy."

It's hard to say quite what that something is. Wodehouse may be our best answer to Nietzsche, but it isn't entirely clear how *Young Men in Spats* trumps *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. But suppose that laughter offers blessed escape for a while from the terrible mattering that possessed modern times. Suppose that [we survive] best not when trying to respond to the relentless thud with which secular history marches, but when [we dance] a little. Wodehouse titled one of his best novels *Joy in the Morning*, from Psalm 30, which Jeeves quotes: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the

morning." Joy does come in the morning, and laughter from reading P. G. Wodehouse. That's a small grace, but a real one.

Wodehouse made an enormous amount of money from his writing, averaging over \$100,000 a year in the 1920s. But he was a shy, unimpressive figure who dressed in worn clothes and was known among his acquaintances as one of the dullest conversationalists in captivity. All he did was work, spending the morning editing the previous day's writing and the afternoon penning new material. Flaubert talked of being a slave to his art. Wodehouse actually lived it. "I haven't got any violent feelings about anything," he once told an interviewer. "I just love writing."

He was born in England in 1881, the son of a British colonial officer in Hong Kong and burdened with family names he hated. "At the font I remember protesting vigorously when the clergyman uttered them," Wodehouse later wrote, "but he stuck to his point. 'Be that as it may,' he said firmly, having waited for a lull, 'I name thee Pelham Grenville.'" His mother carried the infant Pelham Grenville out to China to join his father but within a few years shipped him back to England with his older brothers to be cared for by a succession of aunts. ("In this life," he would go on to write, "it is not aunts that matter, but the courage that one brings to them"—and add, "It is no use telling me that there are bad aunts and good aunts. At the core they are all alike. Sooner or later out pops the cloven hoof.")

School came as a relief, and he loved his time at Dulwich College. But his family lacked the money to send him to Oxford and found him a job as a clerk at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in London. Advancement involved a posting to the colonies, and Wodehouse was determined to become a writer. After a spate of magazine stories and poems, his first book appeared in 1902, he left the bank, and by 1904 he had established himself as a writer.

Regular trips to America soon followed, and in 1914 Wodehouse met and married Ethel Newton, a widow, in New York. Ethel and Plum had a curious marriage, but she provided him what he needed, taking over the practical concerns, leaving him to write. And write he did, making so much money that the American tax authorities and the British Inland Revenue united to dig as much as possible out of Wodehouse's international royalties. That may have been what drove him abroad in 1934, when he and Ethel settled in France.

Six years later, Hitler's blitzkrieg swept through, picking up Wodehouse along the way—or, as he explained, "Young men, starting out in life, have often

asked me, ‘How can I become an internee?’ Well, there are several methods. My own way was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there until the Germans came along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest.”

Unfortunately, he offered that explanation on a shortwave broadcast to America sponsored by the Nazis. A clever German publicity agent, apparently realizing what a naïf they had captured, procured Wodehouse’s transfer from internment to a hotel in Berlin and talked him into making five comic presentations for his American fans in the days before the United States had entered the war. The reaction in the London was volcanic, as the BBC and the *Daily Mirror* spewed outrage at his apparent treason. It was the worst mistake of his career—but perhaps a predictable one, for he seemed to live only for his writing, and the England he created in his fiction was as imaginary a place as Tolkien’s Middle Earth.

Wodehouse was advised not to return to England after Germany surrendered. “I made an ass of myself and must pay the penalty,” he acknowledged in 1945. So he moved to New York, eventually settling on Long Island until the British forgave him enough to award him a knighthood in 1975, two months before he died.

A number of writers known for their religious interests have praised Wodehouse. Hilaire Belloc, for instance, called him the “best writer of our time, the best living writer of English, and the head of my profession.” But I have always thought they did so more as writers than as religious thinkers. When professional scribblers run their eyes over a page of P. G. Wodehouse, they see how good he is: The more you know about how prose gets created, the more he seems unmatched.

Evelyn Waugh once offered an explicitly religious reading of the stories. “For Mr. Wodehouse,” he claimed, “there has been no Fall of Man; no ‘aboriginal calamity.’ His characters have never tasted the forbidden fruit. They are still in Eden.”

That sounds, at first, like so much blather. Wodehousian characters are Edenic only if all light comedies, if all stories with happy endings, take place sometime before the serpent appears in the Book of Genesis.

P. G. Wodehouse’s plots could be fiendishly complicated, but they boil down to: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gains girl again. A Bertie Wooster story often stands the pattern on its head—boy is happily free, boy mutton-headedly gets entangled with a beautiful but disastrous girl before boy manages somehow to wriggle free:

But while equipped with eyes like twin stars, hair ruddier than the cherry, oomph, *espièglerie* and all the fixings, this B. Wickham had also the disposition and general outlook on life of a ticking bomb. In her society you always had the uneasy feeling that something was likely to go off at any moment with a pop. . . .

“Miss Wickham, sir,” Jeeves had once said to me warningly at the time when the fever was at its height, “lacks seriousness. She is volatile and frivolous. I would always hesitate to recommend a young lady with quite such a vivid shade of red hair.”

His judgments were sound. I have already mentioned how with her subtle wiles this girl induced me to sneak into Sir Roderick Glossop’s sleeping apartment and apply the darning needle to his hot-water bottle—and that was comparatively mild going for her. In a word, Roberta, daughter of Lady Wickham of Skeldings Hall, Herts, and the late Sir Cuthbert, was pure dynamite, and better kept at a distance by all those who aimed at leading a peaceful life.

But a Bertie and Jeeves story is still a farce—a musical without the music—and it doesn’t escape the angel with the flaming sword who blocks the return to Eden.

And yet, on second thought, there may actually be a sort of fall that Wodehouse’s characters never suffer. It’s not the “aboriginal calamity” of Adam and Eve; not even that amiable peer, Lord Emsworth, entirely dodges original sin. Nonetheless, the characters do somehow manage to sidestep rather neatly most of the unpleasantness of the twentieth century. If Bertie Wooster had ever really existed, he would (as George Orwell pointed out) have died on the Somme in 1916 along with most of the rest of his Edwardian chums.

Of course, Bertie Wooster didn’t really exist, and the world he inhabits bore little contact with English reality before World War I and even less contact with reality as the years went on. Even the occasional topical reference—see the 1965 story “Bingo Bans the Bomb”—doesn’t move P. G. Wodehouse’s characters any closer to the real world, for they live only in a magical country of linguistic construction. They buzz and prattle for talk is their life and their meaning.

“It is pretty generally recognized in the circles in which he moves that Bertram Wooster is not a man who lightly throws in the towel and admits defeat,” Wodehouse begins a typical Bertie’s first-person narration. “Beneath the thingummies of what-d’you-

call-it, his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his proud spirit, they have to pull their socks up and make a special effort.”

A metaphor from boxing slides into a deliberately mangled quotation from W. E. Henley’s poem “Invictus”—into which mangle are inserted not just one but two meaningless verbal inflators: “wind and weather permitting” and “as a rule.” That leads to a dribble from *Hamlet*, the tone of which is immediately deflated with the slang of “pull their socks up.”

But even pulling the writing apart this way doesn’t fully reveal what Wodehouse does in his prose. You’ll sometimes see him praised for the wide range of his literary references. Don’t believe it. A volley here and there at something highbrow is taken by Jeeves for comic effect, but not often. Wodehouse’s references—particularly in the first person with which Bertie Wooster narrates his stories—are almost entirely from the Edwardian schoolboy canon: the Bible and Shakespeare, the Anglican hymns sung in British public schools, Victorian parlor poetry, a few popular songs from the 1880s, Kipling, and the Bible and Shakespeare once again. Twentieth-century schooling let much of this once-shared set of references fall away, which is why Wodehouse’s stories sometimes seem to readers more learned than they actually are.

Open references to religion are rare. There are a few classic Bertie-and-Jeeves stories that rely on religious situations, particularly “The Great Sermon Handicap.” And then there are the tales told by Mr. Mulliner about the rise of his nephew Augustine, a delicate, pale cleric, through the hierarchy of the Anglican Church as it squabbles about orphreys and chasubles.

But Wodehouse’s stories are never openly religious. They exist in an Edwardian fantasy world that simply assumes the presence of the clergy and the Church. His books avoid as much as possible the whole of the twentieth century’s events—its fall, its horror, its wasteland. In his ninety-seven volumes, Europe’s ancient Christian culture hasn’t collapsed into meaninglessness, leaving us only fragments to shore against our ruins.

Take a look at such perfect stories as “Uncle Fred Flits By” or “Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend.” Words were all that P. G. Wodehouse had, and in one sense he squandered them on nothing more than light comedy.

In another sense, he found with his writing something worth more than words can say: a small, happy spot kept bright in a world that seemed to be darkening around it. Surely that’s enough for one man.

Jeeves and the Aunts

BY CHARLES E. GOULD, JR.

I HAD swallowed the welcoming cup of tea and was ready to embrace the toothsome kipper or egg and b., not to mention the toast and marmalade ever ready at the hand of Jeeves, when I sadly heard the strange early piping of voices in the sitting room.

“Dahlia, I am ever dismayed by your tolerance of Bertie. He is a vapid and feckless footnote to the family’s Debrett, yet you continually support him, even allowing your Anatole to feed him on pie and the flesh of animals slain in anger.”

“He contributed to *Milady’s Boudoir*, Agatha, and he has more than once entertained your intolerable son Thos., whom he took to a Shakespeare play at the Old Vic. Were Shakespeare not dead, we could not say who suffered the more. And in the matter of Angela’s shark he made, as you may recall, a supreme sacrifice, saying that his place was by my side.”

“Dahlia, if men were dominoes, Bertie would be the double-blank. I insist that he meet Miss Mcbreairty for lunch tomorrow at the Savoy Grill. She is most attractive, has a degree in law, and has a sense of humor that might match our nephew’s witlessness. She knows all about fiefs and socages and mulcting people: just Bertie’s cup of tea.”

I trembled like an aspirin, as the fellow said, and goggled Jeeves like an ostrich goggling a brass doorknob as he entered with the breakfast tray. “You heard, Jeeves?”

“Yes, sir. The voice of Mrs. Travers traverses the sands of Dee, while Lady Agatha’s is akin to the wolf’s at full moon.”

“But what am to do, Jeeves? Can’t you come up with something in the way of an avant-garde?”

“If I might make the suggestion, sir, the term for which you are groping is ‘avaunt.’ It means ‘begone’ or ‘go away, aunt.’ The word is archaic, but on occasion we have to have archaic and eat it, too. Perhaps another slice of buttered toast, sir?”

As I entered it, Aunt Dahlia in a maroon dressing-gown rose from the chair in which she had been sitting and fixed me with a blazing eye, struggling for utterance.

“Well!” she said, choking on the word like a Pekingese on a chump chop too large for its frail strength. After which, speech failing her, she merely stood and gargled.

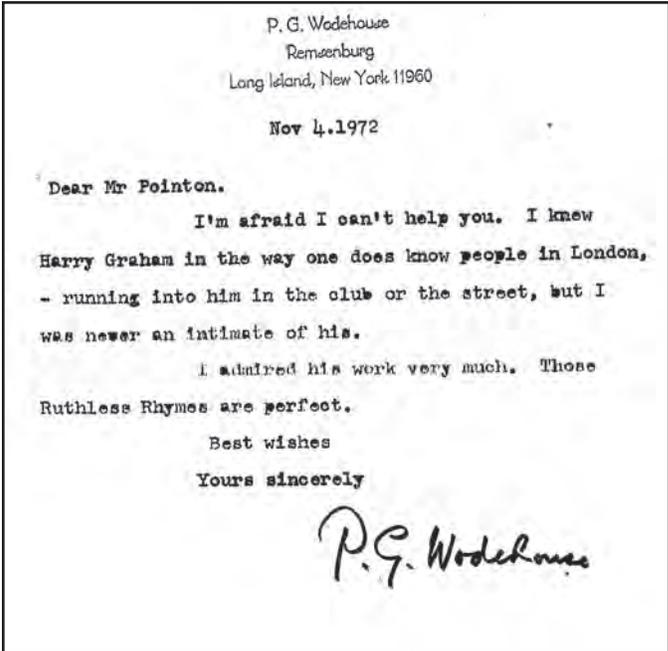
Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit (1954)

Plum, Her Majesty, and Me

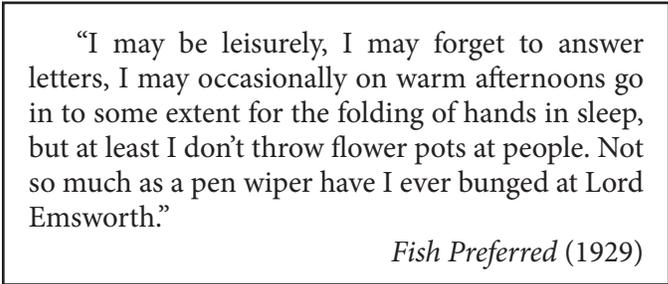
AT The Wodehouse Society convention in Chicago in October, we were privileged to have Michael Pointon speak to us about “Plum, Her Majesty, and Me,” an account of a very special day in 1988.

Mr. Pointon worked for several years in film publicity and advertising before becoming a musician. He made the transition to writer/broadcaster and worked on many BBC radio series ranging from show business subjects to jazz. He has brought to life various documentaries and profiles on other subjects including Samuel Beckett and S. J. Perelman.

Michael’s Wodehouse connection began when he started collecting Plum’s works after being inspired by Dennis Price’s portrayal of Jeeves in the 1960s BBC TV version. He was responsible for the first long-playing record of interviews with Wodehouse and adaptations of several of the Oldest Member stories for the BBC. He corresponded with Plum for years, eventually gaining agreement to allow a commemorative plaque on Wodehouse’s between-the-wars London home at 17 Dunraven Street (formerly Norfolk Street); see the letter below. The plaque was not placed until well after Wodehouse’s death, but its commemoration in June 1988 was quite the event. In his convention talk, Michael shared memories of that day and of the Queen Mother, who spoke affectionately of Wodehouse.



Another of Wodehouse’s letters to Michael Pointon, on the subject of English writer Harry Graham

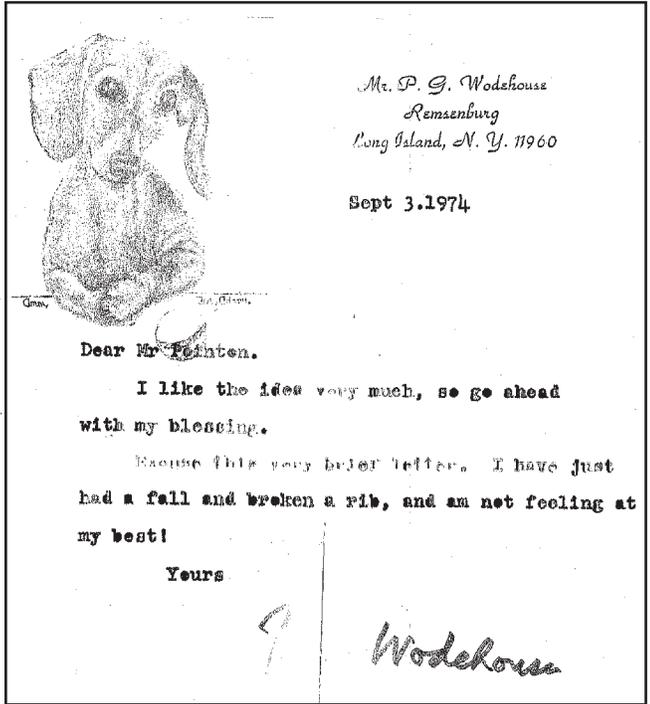


Additional Perspective on Faulks’s Novel

FROM OLIVER FERGUSON: ASIDE FROM the ironic inversion (noted by Elizabeth Lowry) between Bertie and his gentleman’s gentleman—a departure necessitated and justified by the demands of Faulks’s intricate plot—readers familiar with Bertie, Jeeves, and company will find *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells* in accord with their expectations. Faulks gets the basics just right. This is the easy part. Happily, he has also succeeded in achieving the difficult part of his undertaking, avoiding both a close imitation and a parody of Wodehouse’s glorious style.

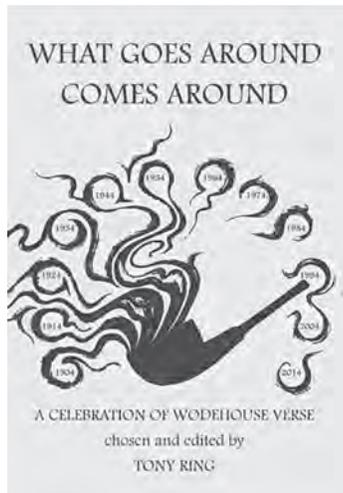
[*Spoiler Alert!*] Purists may object to the radically unorthodox conclusion of Faulks’s novel. For me, it is a melancholy but appropriate recognition that Bertie’s and Jeeves’s saga has truly ended.

It’s pleasant to learn that Faulks is a knowledgeable Wodehouse admirer. Considering his own excellent novels, this is not surprising.



Wodehouse’s reply to Michael Pointon’s proposal for the commemorative plaque

What Goes Around Comes Around



Tony Ring's new celebration of Wodehouse verse is now available for your Wodehouse bookshelf. Please see below for details of how to procure your copy.

FROM HAREBRAIN PUBLISHING—aka Tony Ring—comes word that *What Goes Around Comes Around: A Celebration of Wodehouse Verse* is now available for purchase.

The hundred Wodehouse verses in the book have been selected by Tony as a fair representation of the breadth of subject matter about which PGW wrote, including sport, entertainment, politics, crime, food, and romance. The majority date back over a century, and very few are to be found in general anthologies. A few verses of later origin have been included to ensure that this work is fully representative.

Eric Midwinter and Tony have provided notes where they might assist the reader in understanding the context in which the verse was written. There is a foreword by *Times* (London) diarist and U.K. Society member Patrick Kidd.

Spymaster Bertie?!

MAX POKRIVCHAK had his own take on Ben Macintyre's book *Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies*. In the Summer 2013 *Plum Lines*, **Todd Morning** summarized Macintyre's study of Johann "Johnny" Jebsen, who apparently fed the Germans disinformation. From *Double Cross*: "Jebsen told Popov that . . . he had become acquainted with the great English writer P. G. Wodehouse. With his monocle and silk cravat, Jebsen now looked like an oddly Germanic version of Bertie Wooster."

After reading that passage, Max postulated that, had the Nazis read more Wodehouse, they'd have certainly known that Jebsen's intelligence was faulty!

Not So Good, Jeeves: A Tragedy of Error

BY OLIVER FERGUSON

LORD BYRON tells us that "We learn from Horace, Homer sometimes sleeps." Does this assertion mitigate the unhappy fact that on one occasion the Master also erred?

To introduce a friend to the pleasures of PGW, I lent him my copy of the Penguin collection entitled *Life with Jeeves*. He returned it with a query: Why had I written the marginal note "Young" at the phrase "Tired Nature's sweet restorer" in "The Inferiority Complex of Old Sippy?"

The reason is that the quotation is from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and not, as Bertie supposed and Jeeves confirmed, by Shakespeare. The error is puzzling. It is altogether in character for Bertie not to know that the quotation was from Edward Young. But Jeeves? And his authority? Unthinkable!

Frustrated in my effort to discover some deeply hidden irony that would account for the blunder, I can only suggest—not to excuse but to explain—that the error most likely derives from Macbeth's "sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care."

This tragic lapse notwithstanding, my report ends on a happy note. My friend now has the proper regard for Wodehouse. He especially admires Bertie's "If you're going to do a thing you might just as well pop right at it and get it over." In "Jeeves and the Yule-Tide Spirit," he considers the version of Macbeth's maxim "If it were done when 'tis done 'twere well it were done quickly" precisely on target!

Prairie Home Plumming

ON APRIL 12, Maria Jette and Dan Chouinard will be performing during a live presentation of *A Prairie Home Companion* at Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd Street, New York City. Advance sales are a thing of the past, but you may still be able to get to the show. You may visit <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/tickets/2014/0412.shtml> for more information. Garrison Keillor has mentioned this show to Maria as “when you and Dan come on and do your Wodehouse,” so we expect to hear a tune or two from the upcoming new Wodehouse CD (see the Winter 2013 *Plum Lines*). It’s certainly worth giving support to Maria and Dan, considering the great pleasure they’ve given us at our conventions and through their Wodehouse recordings.

In related news, the new CD is not quite yet “in the can.” There’s been a remarkable series of unfortunate events that have prolonged the recording and production process, such that the duo expects to have the CD out in very early April. There’s been the polar vortex and minus double-digits impeding travel, extended runs of other performances, and now a fractured leg that has resulted in Maria nicknaming herself Hopalong Jette. Despite it all, they are forging ahead, and no doubt the tribulations of the process will lead to a supreme product.

When the Good Songs Went to Juilliard

ON JANUARY 15, New Yorkers were treated to a performance of *The Land Where the Good Songs Go*, a celebration of P. G. Wodehouse’s collaborations with Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter. According to the Juilliard website announcement, the evening featured seven singers from Juilliard’s Ellen and James S. Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts and a multitalented fellow named Greg Utzig, who performed on guitar, mandolin, ukulele, and banjo.

The New York Festival of Song coproduced the show. NYFOS artistic director Steven Blier said, “This is a show I did in 2001–2 in London, New York, and Washington, D.C. I love the elegance of Jerome Kern’s music and the wit of P. G. Wodehouse’s lyrics—old-fashioned in style, but eternal in their depiction of courtship. I thought the singers would enjoy the music hall feel of the songs, the touch of vaudeville, and the invitation to comic invention. . . . The way the material straddles America (Kern) and England (Wodehouse) is a continual source of allure.”

Wodehouse for the Ages

BY JILL COOPER-ROBINSON

IS IT true that Wodehouse characters never age? Is it true that, as Usborne said, “All his recurrent characters remain at their same age”? I contend that this is not true, but the reason Usborne and others are susceptible to such a belief is that Wodehouse’s characters age slowly and so, like other very slow movement, you simply don’t notice it while it’s happening.

An equally curious and related observation is that Wodehouse books don’t acknowledge the passage of time; his plots are stuck in a thirty-year period corresponding roughly to the reign of Edward VII (beginning 1901 and officially ending 1910 but actually lingering through the ’20s or even ’30s). Well, to this I say “Hah!” We can settle this argument right now.

I don’t recall anyone ever complaining that Jane Austen’s work was too Georgian or Dickens’s too Victorian! But it’s categorically not true. For instance, Plum refers to the late twentieth-century behaviorist Dr. Joyce Brothers (*The Girl in Blue*), a television droning away in the background of a pub (“The Right Approach”), the market crash of the ’30s (*Galahad at Blandings*), protest marches (*Aunts Aren’t Gentlemen*), the bikini (“Bingo Bans the Bomb”), and the panty girdle (*The Return of Jeeves*). I ask you, would anyone talk about a panty girdle who didn’t acknowledge the passage of time? Contrast this with Dickens. The steam-powered automobile was invented in the late 1700s, and the horseless carriage was a fact of life while Dickens was writing, yet nary a mention.

So, having dispensed with that debate, let’s turn our attention to the primary matter at hand.

Wodehouse himself admits that he didn’t carefully consider the ages of his characters when they made their first appearances. To his credit, he could hardly have anticipated that they would warrant continual encores over three-quarters of a century. Let’s take a look at my theory of “Aging the Wodehouse Way” and see how the age problems disappear.

If you reckon Wodehouse’s career of recurrent characters to have begun in earnest in 1906 with Ukridge (*Love Among the Chickens*), and that he was still writing until the day he died in 1975, this gives him an astonishingly productive reign of almost seventy years. Many of his best-loved characters are onstage repeatedly throughout this time. (One notable exception is Psmith, who sadly disappears too soon and for whom Plum once contemplated a further career as a lawyer. I regret that he did not pursue this idea. Just

imagine the mischief the brilliant Psmith could have carried out among those unscrupulous gladiators.)

Most of Wodehouse's players are part of the generation either marginally older than himself or of the one just younger than himself, both of which missed the First World War (as did Wodehouse himself due chronic vision problems). This shared timespan gives him the intimacy necessary to embroil his characters in adventures familiar to him, chronologically and culturally.

Some of Wodehouse's best-known characters are Ukridge, Psmith, Mike, Bertie and his pals, the Threepwoods, and so on. They most certainly age, but that is not to say they necessarily mature. Part of their use to PGW, and certainly part of their charm for us, is that they do not always learn from their mistakes. How could they? By and large these are people who are tied to a perpetual childhood by endless bailouts, inherited money, faithful minders, tenured jobs, and so on.

But back to their aging. My hypothesis accounts for a real but slow accretion of years, and it takes into account two generally accepted givens: (1) recognition of the different rates of aging among various species of living things, and (2) the biblical average of threescore years and ten as the still-average life expectancy.

The idea of characters in a different dimension (i.e., in books) aging as different species is no more outrageous than reckoning the very real differences between, say, Pekinese years, parrot years, and human years. We're all familiar with the "dog years" concept of aging: If a Peke ages the equivalent of five or six people years for every calendar year, then the Peke who died after fifteen or so human years might be said to have an equivalent human age in their seventies or eighties. Plum's characters, conversely, age more like one of his parrots—some of his characters are onstage for 65–75 years of our calendar time, but I contend that they only age approximately a third of that in "PG" years.

So divide by three the number of years between the publication date of their first appearance and the publication date of the story you are reading, add this to the original (guesstimate) ages of our favorites when they make their debut, and—voila! You have their current approximate age. While we don't always have textual proof of their starting and ending "PG" ages, the point here (while decidedly all in fun) is that, by my formula, they have not lived to an unreasonable age in the slowed-down timeframe of the canon. Kind of an Einsteinian thing, what? The more illuminated the writing, the slower the characters age in relation to those of us in "real" life. So, let's look at some of the key characters.

For Ukridge's first appearance in 1906 (*Love Among the Chickens*), we'll say he was about nineteen years old. His last appearance in 1935 ("The Come-back of Battling Billson") was 29 years later. One-third of 29 calendar years is about ten PG years. Add a decade to his original nineteen years of age, and we'll make Ukridge 29 in 1935. Perfectly acceptable, I'd say.

Psmith's first appearance was in 1909 (*Mike*) and we'll guess that he was sixteen or seventeen. He last appeared in *Leave It to Psmith* in 1923. One-third of fourteen calendar years is four or five PG years. Therefore, Psmith is 22 PG years old in his last novel.

Bertie, well, for his first appearance we'll make him a dashing nineteen or twenty years old ("The Artistic Career of Corky," 1916). His last appearance in *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* was in 1974. One-third difference between these two (58 people years) is a mere nineteen PG years. Therefore, in his last appearance, Bertie is on the cusp of forty PG years old. Quite reasonable, don't you think?

Aunt Agatha, while ageless in her ability to terrorize Bertie, was perhaps a mere forty years old in her first appearance in 1915's "Extricating Young Gussie." When she last appeared in 1974 (*Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*), the difference was sixty calendar years, but only twenty in PG years, making Agatha a sprightly sixty in PG time when last we see her.

Gussie Fink-Nottle shows up in 1934 in *Right Ho, Jeeves* at an age of about 25. By *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, in 1963, he's about thirty calendar years older but has only aged ten PG years. So, he's about 34 or 35 and, even for a newt lover, quite old enough to marry.

Bingo Little appears in several stories in 1922. The veteran of many romances, he finally settles down in "Bingo and the Little Woman" (*The Inimitable Jeeves*) with the redoubtable Rosie M. Banks to a lifetime of domestic bliss, leavened by moments of drama due to his predilection for spending housekeeping money on the ponies. He is almost exactly the same age as Bertie, which makes him about 21 PG years of age in 1922. The first appearance of his son, Algernon Aubrey Little, is in 1939's "Sonny Boy," when we'd expect, by applying my computation, that Bingo is about 26 or 27.

Bingo's baby brings up an interesting point. Allowing for individual differences between two like specimens, does this system correspond to the activities we might expect of a person at any given age? The answer: Yes, it does. Thus, Bingo at 26 is ripe for fatherhood—well, as ripe as Bingo could ever be.

Clarence Threepwood, Lord Emsworth, first appeared in *Something Fresh/Something New* in 1915, and was referred to then as "in his 50s." So, let's say he's

about 55. He appears next in *Summer Lightning* in 1929. Almost fifteen calendar years have lapsed between these books, which, divided by three, gives you five. So, we'd guess by my system that he is approximately sixty in PG years. In fact, Wodehouse refers to him at this point as "about 60." By *Sunset at Blandings* in 1977, 48 calendar years have passed since *Summer Lightning*, but only sixteen PG years. This puts him at about 76, which is still certainly young enough to be masterful.

We have no idea of the relative ages of the twelve Threepwood siblings, dead or alive. But Gally is, of necessity, Clarence's junior (else he'd be the earl), so let's say he's at most two years younger. Not surprisingly he continues to be two years Clarence's junior, so in *Sunset at Blandings* he is about 74.

Beach has been at Blandings for eighteen years when Connie finally hatches a plot to use his age as an excuse to rid herself of this troublesome impediment to full dictatorial power. Gally describes himself and Beach as friends since they were in their forties, so he's about Gally's age. If Beach arrived when he had the gravitas befitting a butler of middle age, he might have been in his fifties. Now, he might be in his late sixties, but since we see no evidence of his slowing down except as necessitated by his ponderous weight, he is likely to continue as an ally to Clarence and Gally for some years yet.

Freddie makes his first appearance in 1915 in the aforementioned *Something Fresh/Something New*. He is but a callow youth then, probably in his late teens, and thinks he is in love. By 1924, in "The Custody of the Pumpkin," he would be three PG years older (equivalent to nine years of real-time difference), so he's 22 years old when he marries biscuit heiress Aggie Donaldson. By 1950's "Birth of a Salesman," we're told that Freddie has been with Donaldson for three years. The difference between twenty-four and fifty is twenty-six calendar years, or approximately eight PG years, so Freddie is now thirty years old. Freddie's best friend Bingo may be a father in his twenties, but Freddie in his thirties is still childless. However, this is of no account since neither he nor any of his children are likely to inherit. Anyway, Aggie Donaldson is a modern, spirited, independent woman, and Freddie himself is consumed by business affairs. So, what's the hurry?

Let's check out the Molloys, sometimes known (among other aliases) as Soapy and Dolly. They're first encountered in *Sam the Sudden* in 1925 when Dolly is "young and stylish" and her age is likely mid-twenties. By *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* in 1972, she would be (in PG years) just coming into her prime at forty or so. She married an older man in Soapy, who might be

in his early forties in 1925 and still in possession of the perfect gravitas necessary to instill confidence in his oil stocks. By 1972, he'd be about 59-ish and still with the health and energy to pitch a deal.

Finally, the one and only, the Empress. She makes her debut in "Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!" (1927) and is still in charge at Blandings in *Sunset at Blandings* in 1977. She tots up at least fifty calendar years, which means about seventeen years added to her probable age of two or three when adopted into the family by Clarence in '27. This makes her at most merely twenty or so in P(i)G years. Since pigs can easily live a quarter of a century or so—especially when pampered—we might anticipate several more hefty years of happiness ahead for the Empress.

Are there anomalies? Of course. Having painted himself into a bit of a corner at the outset with regard to ages, Wodehouse thereafter is generally cagey, with caveats to age descriptions such as "about," "like," "early-mid-late," and so on. He does play fast and loose with the ages of Clarence and Gally, but that seems to be a rarity. And notice there is a difference between Wodehouse's description of Freddie's career as a biscuit king of three years and my PG reckoning of eight years. However, such anomalies are to be expected since, to quote Gally in *Summer Lightning* (1929), "After all, the exact date isn't important, it's the facts that matter."

Wodehouse never claims these accounts are necessarily in chronological order. Therefore we can consider that some of the stories are out of chronological order compared to the publication dates of the books they appear in. Seen this way, other anomalies may be explained. Surely, like irregular French verbs, which exist merely to prove the rule of irregularity, these anomalies do not break the system.

Well, we've whiled away a few perfectly good minutes of our time on this bit of fun. So, do we care about any of this? I think yes, because this business of his characters not aging and of settings unrealistically frozen in time have the ring of implied criticism. Using my method of "Aging the Wodehouse Way" makes a mockery of such whining.

Wally found his despondency magically dispelled. It was extraordinary how the mere sight of Jill could make the world a different place. It was true the sun had been shining before her arrival, but in a flabby, weak-minded way, not with the brilliance it had acquired immediately he heard her voice.

Jill the Reckless (1921)

Chapters Corner

WHAT IS YOUR chapter up to these days? We welcome you to use this column to tell the Wodehouse world about your chapter's activities. Chapter representatives, please send all info to the editor, Gary Hall (see back page). If you're not a member of a local chapter but would like to attend a meeting or become a member, please get in touch with the contact person listed.

Anglers' Rest
(Seattle and vicinity)
Contact: Susan Collicott



WHAT HO, what ho! The Anglers' Rest met on February 22 at the Elephant & Castle in downtown Seattle. Plans were for us to browse and sluice, show off recent purchases, discuss Wodehouse and other authors, and tell tales from the Wodehouse convention this past October.

We also planned to discuss the big news that the 2015 convention will be held right here in Seattle! We will share information soon and provide information about how you can help make it a success. Feel free to contact me with any questions about the chapter, upcoming meetings, or the 2015 convention!

Birmingham Banjolele Band
(Birmingham, Alabama, and vicinity)
Contact: Caralyn Campbell



Blandings Castle Chapter
(Greater San Francisco Bay area)
Contact: Ed and Missy Ratcliffe



The Broadway Special
(New York City and vicinity)

Contact: Amy Plofker



THE SPECIAL had a wealth of seasonal celebrations, from autumn's mellow fruitfulness to winter's cups of kindness. The days had grown short in September when we returned to Central Park to have a go at the watery parts of the world for a third time. Lunch was procured at a new café perched on a knoll in the park, and we then dodged marathoners-in-training, bicyclists, and flocks of families to reach our gondola and rowboats without mishap. After some highly satisfactory paddling in the splendid sunshine, several Specialists repaired to the Conservatory Pond to reminisce about Stuart Little's small boat race there. Floating on a stream of consciousness, we engaged in a metaphysical chat about *Moby Dick*. We are nothing if not eclectic in our literary pursuits.

Alas, there was no advance notice to arrange a theater party for *The Play's the Thing*, as spotted by the eagle-eyed Lee Ballinger in early October. The Storm Theater, a new-to-us company in Manhattan, scheduled performances for two weeks in October, dates that were unusually busy for the Special, what with the Chicago shindig and Plum birthday parties. We gathered again at The Players on Gramercy Park on October 25 to hear reports of the toddlin' town events and to salute the Master with various spirits and sweets. With the onset of the holidays, we decided to close the 2013 calendar on December 6 by reading "Another Christmas Carol" and "The Juice of an Orange," thereby investigating the dietary restrictions plaguing two Mulliners. The gustatory lessons learned therein encouraged us in the usual browsing and sluicing portion of the program—indeed, we were predisposed to restore the tissues with relish and plenty of carbo-loading.

The new year brought the promise of true Broadway specials, first on January 15 when we were delighted to receive twenty complimentary tickets to the New York Festival of Song reprise of the beloved CD *The Land Where the Good Songs Go*, a concert presented at the Juilliard School of Music. (You may find more information on page 15.)

Our own Festival of Song occurred on February 16 when we returned to Luceil Carroll's lovely Castle in the Air for a sixth annual gala replete with warbling, nibbling, swilling, and Ron Roullier tickling the grand piano. On April 12, we'll be out in full force to support

the guest headliners at Town Hall's presentation of *A Prairie Home Companion*. You heard 'em in Chicago! You heard 'em in Detroit and St. Paul! You even heard 'em at the The Players! And now Maria Jette and Dan Chouinard will be nationwide on the air with their genial host, Garrison Keillor. For P. G. Wodehouse, and for the Broadway Special, New York City is truly our city of dreams.

Capital! Capital!

(Washington, D.C., and vicinity)

Contact: Scott Daniels



The CapCaps gather for a sunny photo.

ON JANUARY 26, the CapCaps met to share tasty food and spirits, and, of course, the spirit of Plum. Our guest, Ken Clevenger, spoke entertainingly about the various venues in which Plum's works are presented around the world. 'Twas a jolly evening with friends!

Chapter One

(Greater Philadelphia area)

Contact: Herb Moskowitz



THE JANUARY MEETING was quieter than usual, due to diminished attendance. Several members were in the grip of *la grippe* or a similar nasty cold. Nevertheless, we carried on with new Plummie Steve Weintraub and with the "Grand Wodehouse Quote Challenge."

The day's moderator, Bob Nissenbaum (5th Earl of Droitwich), was one of the members in sick bay, but he sent quite a few quotes to president Herb Moskowitz (Vladimir Brusiloff) to present to the company. Some of the quotes entered in the challenge were:

"He looked haggard and careworn, like a Borgia who has suddenly remembered that he has forgotten to shove cyanide in the consommé, and the dinner gong due any moment." (*Carry On, Jeeves*)

"I can't stand Paris. I hate the place. Full of people talking French, which is a thing I bar. It always seems to me so affected." (*Big Money*)

"It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them." ("The Man Upstairs")

"It isn't often that Aunt Dahlia lets her angry passions rise, but when she does, strong men climb trees and pull them up after them." (*Right Ho, Jeeves*)

"The head gardener was standing gazing at the moss like a high priest of some ancient religion about to stick the gaff into the human sacrifice." ("Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend")

The winner by acclamation was Laura O'Neill, who selected "I don't hate in the plural." This phrase was Plum's response to a request after World War II that he declare he hated all the Nazis. Her prize was a copy of "The Great Sermon Handicap" in several languages (including Sanskrit), donated by David Mackenzie.

Laura had another quote from Wodehouse, but it is always ascribed to Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes never said, "Elementary, my dear Watson" in Doyle's stories. The phrase, written for the stage, was first used in print by Wodehouse in 1910 in *Psmith, Journalist*.

Society vice president Bob Rains (Oily Carlisle) brought jars of plum jam left over from the convention for those who hadn't bought enough in Chicago.

The next meeting is to be held on March 23, 2014 (pending approval by the management). Chapter One will compare *A Damsel in Distress* with the 1937 Hollywood film of the same name. See you then—toodle-pip!

Chicago Accident Syndicate

(Chicago and thereabouts)

Contact: Daniel & Tina Garrison



THE CHICAGO Accident Syndicate met on December 8 at Dan and Tina Garrison's house in Evanston for our post-convention indulgence. Tina reported a few statistics on the convention at the Senior Conservative.

There were 187 registrations resulting in 170 attending, 257 room nights at the Club by 76 parties attending. After some readings from PGW, assorted door prizes were given out by the ever-alert Syndicate chair Cathy Lewis, including the tea cozy hat won by John Coats.



Chicago Accident Syndicate member John Coats adorned by the tea cozy hat.

The Clients of Adrian Mulliner
 (For enthusiasts of both PGW and Sherlock Holmes)
 Contact: Elaine Coppola



"The Riddle of the Hunted Hound" takes the stage.

A JUNIOR BLOODSTAIN took place at the Roosevelt Hotel, New York City, on Saturday, January 18, 2014, during the annual Baker Street Irregulars weekend. It featured another premiere performance of a Gayle Lange Puhl work. "The Riddle of the Hunted Hound" was staged (without rehearsal) with a dramatic reader for each of the characters and a puppeteer for each puppet (custom-made by Ken Vogel). The story in

a nutshell: Bingo Little's wife purchases a huge hound for her husband; Bingo's wife then goes away on a trip; the hound vanishes; Bingo enlists Sherlock Holmes to find the hound before his wife returns. Nearly thirty Wodehousians/Sherlockians participated in the playlet or were in the genial audience.

The Denver of the Secret Nine
 (Denver and vicinity)
 Contact: Jennifer Petkus

The Drone Rangers
 (Houston and vicinity)
 Contact: Carey Tynan



The Flying Pigs
 (Cincinnati area and elsewhere)
 Contact: Susan Brokaw



Friends of the Fifth Earl of Ickenham
 (Buffalo, New York, and vicinity)
 Contact: Laura Loehr

The Mottled Oyster Club / Jellied Eels
 (San Antonio and South Texas)
 Contact: Lynette Poss



The New England Wodehouse Thingummy Society (NEWTS)
 (Boston and New England)
 Contact: David Landman

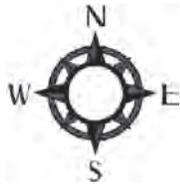


FLASH! A surprise palace coup ousted David Landman from his presidency and installed John Fahey in the robes of office—a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt and jeans with mystic tears at the knees. Also swept away in the coup was Jean Wilson's custodianship of the NEWTS's vast holdings in cash and Silver River Preferred stock. Roberta Towner assumed the office of treasurer and promised a strict account of the hefty sums disbursed for golf tees and extra cummerbunds.

The Northwodes

(St. Paul, Minneapolis, and vicinity)

Contact: Kristine Fowler



The Orange Plums

(Orange County, California)

Contact: Lia Hansen

ON NOVEMBER 2, we met at Mimi's Cafe in Yorba Linda. We were to have read "The Metropolitan Touch." We did discuss the story for a few minutes, but since we are still in the "getting to know you" stage, our conversation soon ranged wide of the topic. And we're so glad it did! One of our members, Carol Knox, told us about her 1996 trip to England, where she met up with other Wodehouse fans and had quite an experience:

I am delighted to report about my very first trip to Europe in October/November 1996. It was a Wodehouse Pilgrimage and I hope that some of the people who attended with me are reading this report. I also hope that I don't remember too many things incorrectly!

I flew over from L.A. alone and was able to get to Victoria Station on the train. I waited there to meet the rest of the people arriving that day. We were wearing pink mums, if I remember correctly. This was before cell phones, so it was a bit of fun looking for each other in that vast station. Our group met and took the Tube to our hotel near Earls Court, the Hotel Oliver. I had a wonderful, if tiny, single room. A group of four of us then climbed to the top of a double-decker bus and rode all around London, just to do it. That was so much fun for a first-timer like me.

Our first formal gathering was at Porters Restaurant at Covent Garden. I remember quite a large group at this dinner, and it was my first traditional English meal.

The next day we met the famous Norman Murphy, who took us on a wonderful walking tour of Wodehouse highlights around the city. Then we had a rare treat: tea at the National Liberal Club. When I mention this to my current British friends, they certainly raise an eyebrow. What I remember about the tea was the fancy foods, the butler service, and the display of British Prime Minister history.

I cannot neglect to mention our visit to Shaw Farm, where Sir Edward Cazalet lived with his family. His daughter Lara was there and sang for us. What an experience! We also got to see some rare PGW family treasures. I remember finding a coin in the driveway and handing it to Sir Edward, who gave me a kiss on the cheek as a thank-you.

We also ventured further afield to Dulwich and Guildford. We visited vintage bookshops (looking for rare PGW treasures), had a drink at the Sherlock Holmes Pub, and saw *By Jeeves* at the Lyric Theatre. I was able to snag a poster which I have framed in my office.

I remember the warm hospitality. That trip will always be very special to me.

ON DECEMBER 7, we met at a British pub in Santa Ana called The Olde Ship. It's a very authentic pub with good food. We enjoyed fish and chips, curry, and a bacon sarnie accompanied by a right cuppa tea, and some of us followed the whole mess with Christmas pudding. We made a racket with our Christmas crackers and wore our paper crowns proudly. We did manage to discuss the chosen story, "Jeeves and the Yule-Tide Spirit," for a bit. A thoroughly good time.

ON JANUARY 4, we met at The Olde Ship in Santa Ana. We had read "Ruth in Exile" and were talking about the main character, Ruth, who was described as being an American. "Hold on a bit," said one of our members, "Ruth is British." We discovered that we had read two versions of the same story. We found an article and chart prepared by Neil Midkiff that explained the two versions of the story and the difference in the texts. So, we all say thanks very much to Mr. Midkiff for this wonderful resource (which you can find at <http://home.earthlink.net/~nmidkiff/pgw/story.html>).

I would say that the Orange Plums are off to a great start. Our group is still very small, but we do enjoy each other's company. We have found that beyond sharing an appreciation for the works of PGW, we have many other interests in common. We look forward to meeting other Wodehousians who might be lurking in the shopping malls or coffee bars of Orange County and ask them to join us on the first Saturday of each month at the Olde Ship British Pub in Santa Ana at 2 PM.

The Pale Parabolites

(Toronto and vicinity)

Contact: George Vanderburgh



The Perfecto-Zizzbaum Motion Picture Corporation
(Los Angeles and vicinity)
Contact: Karen Shotting



DURING A VERY festive December holiday gathering at the Huntington Rose Garden Tea Room, amid browsing and sluicing of copious amounts of tea, sandwiches, fruit, cheeses, caviar, salads, and sweets, our merry band found time to discuss our favorite Wodehouse stories and quotes. Gloria continued her holiday tradition of introducing a bit of John Mortimer into the discussion and read us an excerpt from “Rumpole and the Christmas Break,” in which the murder victim is one Honoria Glossop, professor of comparative religion at William Morris University in East London. After eating our fill, we made the pious pilgrimage to the second floor of the the Huntington Art Gallery and its silver collection to gaze, or sneer, depending upon one’s inclination, at the eighteenth-century cow creamer. We meandered about the various collections, then took a turn about the main portrait gallery to view, inter alia, Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of Sarah Siddons.

The Executive Committee of the Perfecto-Zizzbaum Motion Picture Corporation (viz., the members who attended the revelry) determined that it would be in the best interests of the corporation, its officers, directors, members, guests, invitees, and all who enjoy Wodehouse, to discuss the following during the first quarter of 2014:

January: One of PGW’s earliest novels, the school story *Mike at Wrykyn*. (Malcolm Muggeridge, speaking to George Orwell in 1944, recalled that Wodehouse had told him he considered his best book to be *Mike*.)

February: Two short stories: a perennial Valentine’s Day favorite, “Honeysuckle Cottage,” and, because of its similar treatment of a house’s atmospheric influence upon its inhabitants, “The Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court.”

March: A further inquiry into the affairs of Mike Jackson and his friendship with the inimitable Psmith, *Mike and Psmith* (the second half of the aforementioned *Mike*).

As always, a quorum will be any two people willing to talk about P. G. Wodehouse, whether or not said individuals are, or have been at any time, a member of PZMPCo. (Collaring strangers in the street and bringing them to the light is not required but is encouraged.)

We continue to ponder the question of what the deuce the members of our group should be called.

Melissa Aaron (nom de plum Gertrude Butterwick) dubbed us “The Noddors” many a long year ago, but we’re not sure that’s entirely satisfactory. We are open to suggestions.

We meet the second Sunday of each month at 12:30 PM. We meet at Book Alley, 1252 East Colorado Blvd, Pasadena, California. Please contact Karen Shotting or join our Yahoo! or Facebook Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PZMPCo/> and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373160529399825/>, respectively, for more information on upcoming readings and occasional changes of schedule and venue.

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



The Pittsburgh Millionaires Club
(Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)



ON JANUARY 19, five Millionaires laid aside their big business cares and gathered together to read aloud “The Fiery Wooing of Mordred.” The distinguished company debated the legal ramifications of urging a firebug guest to smoke in his bedchamber while writing bad poetry (“lips, hips, ships?”) and throwing the results into the convenient wastepaper basket. Is this arson or pure fatheadedness? No definite conclusion resulted, and the Millionaires disbanded in order to make another killing on the stock market. They all agree that every little bit added to what you’ve got makes just a little bit more!

The Portland Greater Wodehouse Society (PGWs)
(Portland, Oregon and vicinity)
Contact: Carol James



The Right Honourable Knights of Sir Philip Sidney
(Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
Contact: Jelle Otten

ON NOVEMBER 22, several Honourable Knights welcomed two Wodehouse lovers from the United

States at Mulliner's Wijnlokaal in Amsterdam. They were Natalie Kaufman and Davis Whiteman from Columbia, South Carolina. Natalie and David were visiting Amsterdam for the 27th IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam). Both are professors of political science at the University of South Carolina (USC). The reason for their attendance was to choose appropriate documentary films to be shown in USC classes and art cinemas. Wil Brouwer, Josepha Olsthoorn, Peter Nieuwenhuizen, and Jelle Otten gave the two Americans a hearty welcome.

At our regular meeting on February 15 in Mulliner's Wijnbar, we welcomed Wodehousean James Hawking from Philadelphia. He was wrapped in an orange coat that you often see worn by Dutch supporters at sporting events.

Vikas Sonak told us about his trip to and through India. He visited several Indian Wodehouse Societies, including those in Mumbai, New Delhi, and Bangalore. According to Vikas, Wodehouse is very popular in India among young people. Unlike in other countries, you can find Wodehouse books in India at open-air bookstands and in railway stations.

Ronald Brenner delivered a lecture entitled "Wodehouse Shy and Misanthropic, How's That?" He explained that Plum was not as shy as he appeared, drawing much of his information from Barry Phelps's *P. G. Wodehouse: Man and Myth*. Ronald contended that Wodehouse did not dislike gentlemen's clubs and asked whether Wodehouse was a freemason. He provided several examples of freemason quotations in Plum's works. He concluded his lecture by describing Ethel's role in Wodehouse's life, stating that Ethel provided the situation where Plum could do the one thing he wanted to do: write magnificent stories and novels.

Monty Kraaijeveld then read from "Company for Gertrude," which he enjoys because of the beautiful descriptions of landscapes and nature.

You may recall that, one year ago, the Honourable Knights had a translation contest of the song lyrics of "Bill." Jelle Caro won the contest. Now the results of the three best Dutch translations have been published in a book entitled *Bill*, accompanied by an essay from Peter Nieuwenhuizen about the genesis of the lyric. Also in the booklet are sheet-music versions of the song and illustrations of playbills of the musicals *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* and *Show Boat*. Tony Ring had been very helpful in the procurement of the booklet's illustrations.

After the traditional cock-and-bull contest (won by Ans Olie), the Knights paid attention to the subject of Wodehouse and World War I (1914–18). James Hawking read Wodehouse's essay "The Pleasures of

Duelling in Germany," which was published in *Vanity Fair* in December 1915. The essay can be found at http://madameulalie.org/vfus/The_Pleasures_of_Duelling_in_Germany.html.

The Size 14 Hat Club
(Halifax, Nova Scotia)
Contact: Jill Robinson



Spotted on PGWnet

AS WE LIKE to remind our readers, PGWnet (the Wodehouse email forum) continues to be a wonderful font of wisdom, humor, research, and Wodehousean nuggets. Some of the latest items include Wodehouse's descriptions of laughter, including "She had a penetrating sort of laugh. Rather like a train going into a tunnel," or "Honorina, you see, is one of those robust, dynamic girls with the muscles of a welterweight and a laugh like a squadron of cavalry charging over a tin bridge," or "'Charawck!' chuckled Aunt Elizabeth from her basket, in that beastly cynical, satirical way which has made her so disliked by all right-thinking people." There are many more: "Monty laughed like a squeaking slate-pencil"; "Beastly laugh he'd got—like glue pouring out of a jug"; "a gurgling scream not unlike a coloratura choking on a fish-bone."

For some additional examples (and a lot more to boot), **Arthur Robinson** suggests round 242 of the online quiz on the U.K. society website, at <http://www.pgwodehousesociety.org.uk/qq241250.htm>.

An additional PGWnet topic of discussion recently was "Wodehouse expletives deleted." **Ian Michaud** refers us to the U.K. society's archives at <http://www.pgwodehousesociety.org.uk/qq351360.htm> for many examples. At the same time, in a string referring to Sam's use of ungentlemanly cursing (from *Sam the Sudden*), Ian says that he "prefers to think that Sam appropriated the invective perfected by Sir John Falstaff, who was heard to exclaim, 'Away you scullion! You rampallian! You fustilarian! I'll tickle your catastrophe!' I suspect that would have done a much better job of scalding Lord Tilbury than anything Sam picked up from the crew of a tramp steamer."

Other recent topics include many opinions on the new season of BBC's *Blandings*, thoughts on Sebastian Faulks's *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells*, and a many other topics of Wodehousean interest. Give it a try! Visit wodehouse.org and click on the PGWNET button to get started.

Convention Corrections

OUR CONVENTION issue, like a fishbowl-sized margarita, is a bit of fun but challenging to complete. In the process, your loyal editor and Apprentice Oldest Member snafued it. Herewith are the known corrections; please adjust your issue accordingly.

Scott Daniels was not the scribe for the Chicago architecture tour; that honor fell instead to . . . well, we're not entirely sure. Having canvassed some of the attendees and scribes, we have not yet located the author. So, please speak up, whoever put that piece together, so we can properly give kudos.

Next, we must point out that the second-place amateur-class prize for the Fiendish Quiz does not belong to James Hockley—it goes instead to James Hawking. The latter James wrote to us that “this was roughly my equivalent of Bertie’s Scripture Prize,” so we must trumpet loudly and clearly that he, indeed, would have won the silver medal in that class for the FQ if we were to have given out medals. Medal or not, James Hawking for all history, will hold that distinct honor.

The snail was on the wing and the lark on the thorn—or, rather, the other way round—and God was in His heaven and all right with the world.

And presently the eyes closed, the muscles relaxed, the breathing became soft and regular, and sleep which does something which has slipped my mind to the something sleeve of care poured over me in a healing wave.

The Code of the Woosters (1938)

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We appreciate your articles, research, Quick Ones, tales of My First Time, and other observations. Send them to Gary Hall via e-mail or snail mail at the address above. Deadlines are February 1, May 1, August 1, November 1. If you have something that might miss the deadline, let me know and we'll work something out.

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