

"...(His) humor has that inspired kind of absurdity that lies close to the borderland of sanity and sweet reasonableness." ... Spectator.

An Eyewitness Account of the THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE WODEHOUSE SOCIETY:

We feel free to report to our members that the Convention was a success. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Robert (Bob) Hall, Jr., retiring president of TWS, and Professor Sally McConnell-Ginet, Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics, Cornell University, the facilities of Morrill Hall and Statler Inn were made available to us.

Our morning and afternoon sessions (interrupted by a.m. coffee and doughnuts and p.m. tea and cakes) were devoted to the presentation of two papers by Father James Carruth, TWS, our representative in Zimbabwe, and another by Walter S. White, TWS, of Chevy Chase, MD. A business meeting culminated in the election of Florence Cunningham, TWS, of Kent, WA, as our president for 1985-1987.

We had been welcomed on behalf of the University by Dr. Katherine K. Gottschalk, who revealed her own interest in Plum as an outstanding exponent of our glorious language.

Members who attended - all 24 of us - registered our attendance in THE TOME, which was examined with reverence and awe, as befitted this more or less accurate history of our Society.

Our display table featured a copy of Thank You, Jeeves on cassette tapes contained in a case resembling an octavo volume suitable for your book-shelf. Playing time six hours, full-length novel. Recorded Books, 6306 Aaron Lane, Clinton, MD 20735, produced TYJ and three other PGW stories. Ask for a catalog.

Two tapes of short stories read at meetings of Wodehouseans (NOT YET PLUMMIES!) in Nevada City, CA (see our August issue) were displayed. Write to The Joyful Arts Production Asso., 14618 Tyler Foote Road, Nevada City, CA 95959 for details.

Also shown were the latest catalogues received from Charles E. Gould, Jr., TWS, and Barry Phelps, TWS. By the way, in his 104th Birthday Catalogue, October 15, 1985, Charles offers a facsimile edition of the By the Way Book, now being printed in England for James H. Heineman, Inc, NY. **THIS IS THE ONLY EDITION OF THIS BOOK PUBLISHED SINCE 1908, and only three copies of the original edition are known to be extant.** Order now to receive delivery before Christmas; with the book you will be billed for something like \$36., U.S., of course. And if you'd like a hand-crafted slipcase, it must be ordered at the same time as the book. \$10. will be added to your book bill.


...AND SPEAKING OF AVAILABLE BOOKS.. Robert A. Hall, Jr., President-Emeritus of TWS, has recently issued Papers on Wodehouse, Linguistica, Ithaca, NY, 1985, at \$7.95 (U.S.), postpaid. Three volumes of his short stories, many based on characters in PGW stories, may be purchased as a set of three volumes at \$25. (U.S.) postpaid.

PLUM LINES - Continued

Florence Cunningham, our new president, is a dedicated member of our Society. She is in demand in the Greater Seattle area as a speaker at clubs and social gatherings, her subject...when she can manage it...being P. G. Wodehouse. Those of us who met her at our Doylestown Convention in 1983 found her a personable, enthusiastic, competent individual. Those of us who know her are convinced that an excellent choice has been made.

NOTE: A careful review of the Jan 15th Membership List reveals that OM omitted the surname SHEERIN, which should have appeared after SCHWED and before SLYTHE! OM forthwith pulls his forelock and promises that he doesn't think it will happen again, and that it will be amended in our next ML. You just can't depend on secretarial help these days.... # # # # # # # #

Late flash: Just notified that several Los Angeles members and friends have decided to have regular quarterly meetings to read and discuss Plum and his works. Bravo!


The Oldest Member

The following paper was submitted by Father James Carruth, TWS,
and read at the Wodehouse Society Convention:

P. G. WODEHOUSE AND HUMAN RELATIONS

Rev. James A. Carruth

Dear Members of the Wodehouse Society and Guests,*

Let me wish you all a very happy meeting, what P.G.W. somewhere calls "a feast of wisdom and a flow of soul," interwoven with much wit and humor — or *humour*, for poor Brits. I am sure it will be quite enjoyable for you all, if I am correct in "gauging your latent potentialities." I hope it is a case of *rem acu tetigisti*, as Jeeves would say. I am also sorry I am not able to be present at your feast. So please accept this humble contribution to it. Many thanks.

I am indeed very pleased to comply with the welcome request of my good friend, Robert A. Hall, Jr., to send to this memorable meeting some of my meditations, as he expressed it, "on what P.G.W. has to tell mankind concerning human relations." I note too that your meeting is being held at prestigious Cornell, whose intelligence tests I took with fear and trembling in my Diploma in Education course, in case I should be classed with Lord Emsworth as an "up and coming jellyfish."

My qualifications? My only qualification, in my 73-plus more or less misspent years, is the time devoted during those years to reading and enjoying P.G.W.'s writings, a never-ending source of joy and consolation, peace and inspiration!

But I do think that P.G.W. has very much to tell mankind and us all, about two very important human relationships, namely humor and marriage. In fact, it seems to me that one complements the other, makes the other more enjoyable, and indeed makes life really worth living. Indeed, for most people, both are closely linked together — as P.G.W. would say, as Lord Emsworth with his pig. Take away the one, and the other is done. Even for me, a celibate priest, if I can get married people to see the funny side of things in their life together, then a better married life can be achieved. As Belloc somewhere says, "We should laugh at absurdities, for that means laughing at ourselves" — present company excepted.

Now first as regards humor: to me, P.G.W. is in the deep ever-flowing main stream of the divine and human tradition that humor belongs to the fulness of our humanity. In fact, without humor we are living a less human life. In the Bible itself there are many humorous sayings, and there is also "situational" humor. By this, I mean a building up of incompatible situations which is bound to lead to humor as the best and sometimes the only possible solution. The case comes to mind of how Bertie Wooster was ordered by one of his many bad aunts to steal the Silver Cow Creamer, and Spode's emphatic insistence that if he did steal it, "you will be beaten to a jelly." An impasse, and yet humorously solved by Jeeves' revelation about Spode's nefarious activities: "Just a minute, Spode, I happen to know all about Eulalie."

In what Christians call the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel recounts how the king, in Daniel's presence, praises his god Bel for eating the sacrificial meats

* Communication read at the meeting of The Wodehouse Society, October 19, 1985.

set out on his altar. "But Daniel laughed." He told the king to look at the floor and see on the ashes he had had sprinkled on the floor the marks of the footprints of those who had carried off the food. There are other examples, also, in the Old Testament, of this situational humor.

In the Christian New Testament there are also examples of humorous sayings and situational humor. When he looked up and saw the little and I think podgy civil servant, Zacchaeus, up the sycamore tree, Christ must have smiled when he invited him down to give him a business man's lunch in his house. He must have smiled on seeing Peter's expression of bewilderment when he told Peter to go to the lake and open the mouth of the first fish he caught and he'd find in its mouth a coin enough to pay the temple-tax for himself and Peter. Peter's mouth must have gaped open as much (if not more) than that of the poor fish, if only it had kept its mouth shut.

Owing to the importance of humor in life, I think it's a pity that there is no tradition of humor in our sermons in the West. We are so solemn in church, and we think it would be irreverent to laugh there. With the Africans it is different. When an African preaches to his people and tells them a story to illustrate his theme, he walks up and down, he acts the part, and when he tells a humorous story they all laugh aloud. And as he goes on with the funny side of it, they all laugh again. I did manage it once. Trying to tell the people to trust in Christ and not fear evil spirits, I said in their language "Evil spirits, I spit at you," and made as if to do so. "Evil spirits, I kick you." I happened to kick the portable reading desk, which began to wobble. Some laughed. "Evil spirits, get back to the pit of fire." There was laughter and applause, and one old grannie very powerfully and shrilly ululated. I think the point went home. When they do this ululating and screeching, as sometimes they do it, and at other moments of the Mass also, it always reminds me rather irreverently of a crack Scottish express train, "The Flying Scotsman," similarly screeching before speeding into a tunnel.

P.G.W., in his humor, is in line with nearly all great writers of fiction. Belloc, in "The Path to Rome," has the humorous story of the devil and the learned man. My own compatriot, Robert Burns, pokes fun at the devil and has a poem "An Address to the Devil," in which he says that "Some luckless hour will send him linking to your black pit. But faith, he'll turn a corner jinking [dodging] and cheat you yet." Sir Compton Mackenzie makes one of his characters tell the parish priest "You, Father, would be one too many for the devil." The priest replies "I wouldn't say I'd be able to knock him out, but I believe the referee might give me the verdict on points." To me, not only humorously very apt, but also theologically very sound.

Even before I came across P.G.W.'s references to Thomas Hardy, and how he could get hundreds of words from some simple mishap like falling downstairs, I used to wonder why I had to give lectures on this "prophet of doom" to my African students. I used to say, and still say, "Why don't examination boards set P.G.W.'s works for an English literature course and so give the students something of permanent value?" Perhaps Cornell University will be a pace-setter in this as it has been in many other fields.

Humor is so important in life and in human relations, and is of such a help in awkward situations. Your Presidents, such as Washington and Lincoln, had it, and so used it in such situations. Ex-President Ford had it when he said "I'm not a Lincoln, only a Ford." The great Prime Minister Winston Churchill had it. Of course you must remember that his mother was American! Once asked why he declared war on Japan in such a polite and formal way, he replied "You can be nice to a man, even when you're going to cut off his head." A lady member of Parliament once told

him he was drunk. He replied "I'm drunk, you're ugly. Tomorrow I'll be sober, but you ...". This latter reply was perhaps malicious. P.G.W.'s humor, as far as I know, is always clean and kindly, helpful, and hilarious, as in such remarks as "a policeman with nothing on his mind but his helmet"; "We can't all have roofs to our mouths" (à propos of a pig man so deprived); or "Making it clear to the meanest intelligence" — not of course to be taken to refer to the present company.

Perambulating Pope John ("Johnnie Walker" to us Scots) was noted for his humor. Perhaps that's why he was so loved. Once asked how many people worked in the Vatican, he replied "Oh, I suppose about half." An archbishop friend of mine once asked some of us the difference between a bishop and an archbishop. After some replies, he said "It's all in the arch," pointing to his now prominent corpulence! In fact, as I see it, a clergyman endears himself to his people by a joke at his own expense. Again, to come back to Pope John: at the opening of the recent Vatican Council, which did so much for all Christians, he said he must disagree with the "prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster." I think he'd have liked to say "To hell with the prophets of doom." And I think P.G.W. would have said, in Jeeves's words, "Most gratifying, Holy Father."

One final remark about P.G.W.'s humor is that he includes supernatural agencies in helping the good man to win through and get his lady-love. One of his characters wishes he could find out his benefactor and shake him by the hand, when, if I remember rightly, he protected this character from kiss the wrong girl and so escaping the vengeful J. W. Stoker wanting to "bat him with a shovel." I myself am really amazed at times how mine is on the spot and sometimes, in a humorous way, too, with a split-second sense of timing, doubtless perfected by countless centuries of persistence and practice on refractory mortals like myself.

So let us all be grateful to dear Sir P. G. Wodehouse, the perfect knight of humor, which is always for all, whether *humour* with u or *humor* without u.

The second great human relationship which runs through many of P.G.W.'s writings is the desirability and excellence of marriage. Again he is in the deep, ever-flowing main stream of the divine and human tradition that marriage belongs to the fulness of our humanity for most people. And he is in full agreement not only with the Bible, but with great writers of many races before Christ and down to our own days. It seems to me that P.G.W. is like a skillful preacher — he makes one want some good, because it is held up as something eminently worthwhile for all concerned. You members of this Wodehouse Society, and perhaps others not so fortunate, know how often he enables love-lorn swains to get the girl of their heart in the face of well-nigh insuperable obstacles. I think of Maudie Stubbs finally "running to earth" that "bulging baronet" Tubby Parsloe and finding that no obstacle existed to their long deferred marriage. So they married and lived happily ever after, as I hope to show in my continuation of *Pigs Have Wings*, and as W. S. Churchill said when he too was married to the girl of his heart. Again it is all good, clean humor stressing the value and worth of marriage, even though a wag once said "It is called matrimony, because the mater gets the money." Even gallant Sir Galahad, who loved and lost the only girl for him, was outstanding in helping his relations, godsons, and others to get the mate they longed for, in spite of (at times) "a pack of slaving aunts."

So here also it seems to me that P.G.W. has a great message, and a very topical one, for us, namely to value marriage, to work for it, to work at it, and above all to enjoy its unique communal character, a sign and symbol of the communal love of the three Divine Persons for each other. They, in their wisdom and love for us, said "It is not good for man to be alone. Let us make him a helpmate." Accordingly,

being a helpmate to each other is the divine idea for a happy marriage. It is also P.G.W.'s recipe for a happy marriage. In *Uncle Dynamite*, Pongo Twistleton says to his fiancée Sally Painter "Each helps each. It's the foundation of a happy married life," after she has pushed the policeman Harold Potter into the pond. History and experience proves P.G.W. right. The welfare of every state and every community depends on the happy and stable relationship of its married people. P.G.W. would surely say "Capital!".

In conclusion, perhaps I may be permitted to strike a personal note. For some time I had been wondering if P.G.W. was happily married, since he could seemingly go on and on, and excel and excel. There must have been great "logistic" and other support behind him! After his death, I wrote a letter of condolence to dear Lady Ethel, and she sent back such a kind reply. This led to a further exchange of letters, till she too was called to join her husband in the everlasting marriage feast described so eloquently in the closing pages of the New Testament. So it was now obvious to me that she was truly a devoted wife to her husband, and in this way she had obviously herself contributed much to her husband's epic and lasting contribution to our English language and culture. She was indeed a worthy helpmate to dear Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, and he in turn was likewise a worthy helpmate to dear Ethel, Lady Wodehouse. They are in everlasting remembrance.

So let us who survive be always grateful to P.G.W. for his wit and humor and for his ennobling writings on marriage conveyed in such a humorous and sprightly fashion, and to his helpmate, Lady Ethel, also, because they have shown us through their many-yearred great married life together what marriage is really all about. As Jeeves would have said, "Most gratifying."

(Rev.) James A. Carruth, M.A. Hons, Ed., Dipl. (ed.)