



Plum Lines

A Quarterly Publication of The Wodehouse Society

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WCY+10

Notes from Plum

Bill Claghorn writes: "At the time I found my copy of *William Tell Told Again* in a used book store, I had no prior indication that such a book had ever been written. It is only more recently that the name appears on any lists." The McIlvaine bibliography says the first English edition was published November, 1904, when Plum was barely 23, and there were four undated reissues. There was one American edition, December 1904, with no reissues. It was Plum's fifth book and fourth novel.

P. G. WODEHOUSE
REMBENBURG, LONG ISLAND

July 13.1958

Dear Mr Claghorn.

Wancy you having got hold of a William Tell Told Again! It was written over fifty years ago at the time when I was game to write anything that would help pay the rent. If I remember, they sent me the pictures and gave me ten pounds for writing a story round them!

My books for boys - all published by A & C Black, 4 Soho Square, London W - are:-

The Pothunters
Tales of St Austin's
The Gold Bat
The Head of Kay's
The White Feather
Mike
Pamith In The City
Pamith Journalist
A Prefest's Uncle

but I don't think they are still in print.

The White Hope, if I remember, was the pulp magazine serial title of the book subsequently published over here as *Their Mutual Child* and in England as *The Coming Of Bill*. It's not one of the ones I'm proud of.

Yours sincerely

P.G. Wodehouse

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Wodehouse on Jeeves

Franklin Axe, one of the original members of the Wodehouse Society, sends along this short piece on the origin of Jeeves. It was printed to accompany a 1964 Caedmon audio tape entitled "Jeeves" read by Terry-Thomas, and I have a vague notion that I have read it elsewhere too. In any case, it's Wodehouse on Jeeves, and what could be better reading?

I have often been asked whether Jeeves was "drawn" from anyone. The answer is Yes and No, for while I had no actual individual model he has some of the characteristics of half a dozen butlers I knew in my youth. As a child I lived on the fringe of the butler belt. As a youth I was a prominent pest in houses where butlers were maintained. And later I employed butlers. So it might be said that I have never gone off the butler standard. (Though I cannot point out too strongly that Jeeves is not a butler, he is a gentleman's personal gentleman. Nevertheless, he is *like* a butler. And he has butler blood in him, for his Uncle Charlie Silversmith has been a butler for years.)

I find it curious, now that I have written so much about him, to recall how softly and undramatically Jeeves entered my little world. Characteristically, he did not thrust himself forward. On that occasion he spoke just two lines—a bit part if there ever was one. The first was "Mr. Gregson to see you, sir." At this point—early 1916—Bertie Wooster hogged the entire show and I never looked on Jeeves as anything but one of the extras, a nonentity who might consider himself lucky if he got even two lines. I was only when I was writing a thing called "The Artistic Career of Corky"—late 1916—that he respectfully elbowed Bertie to one side and took charge.

Nobody has ever called Bertram Wooster one of our brightest minds, and he and his friend Corky—who had even less of what it takes to solve life's difficulties—were faced by a major problem. Being a conscientious artist, I simply could not let either of them have a brilliant idea for solving it, and yet somebody had to have one or the story could not be written. In the upshot the chap who had the brilliant idea was me. Why

not, I said to myself, groom this bit player Jeeves for stardom? Why not, I said, still soliloquizing, make him a bird with a terrific brain who comes to Bertie's rescue whenever the latter gets in a jam? "Eureka!" I would have cried, only I didn't want to steal Archimedes' stuff, and I got down to it without delay.

"Jeeves," says Bertie on page four of "The Artistic Career of Corky," "we want your advice. And from now on," he might have added, "you get equal billing."

I have now written eight novels and thirty-nine Jeeves short stories, and though carpers may say that enough is enough and cavillers back them up in this opinion I doubt that I shall ever be able to fight against the urge to write Jeeves novels and Jeeves short stories. People keep telling me that there are no Jeeveses in England now and that Bertie Wooster is probably trying to make do with a woman who comes in Tuesdays and Fridays to clean up and wash the dishes, but I shall ignore them. It is no good them trying to cure me. I am hooked.

Silver pig

Marilyn MacGregor recently found a silver pig pin that seems a perfect symbol of the Empress of Blandings. What's that? You say the Empress is black? Not always. Marilyn directs your attention to the last paragraph of *Heavy Weather*:

The Empress turned on her side and closed her eyes with a contented little sigh. The moon beamed down upon her noble form. It looked like a silver medal.

I've printed the advertisement full size.

Pig Pin



Hand cast in
antique sterling silver,
14K gold with two
ruby eyes. Gift boxed.
Silver \$40 #SP105
Gold \$285 #GP515

Actual Size

Plumtree & Smith, Ltd.
3958 Northlake Blvd., Dept. II #243
Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410
407-687-2457 Visa-MC-Check-Money Order

Jewkes, Jukes, and William

In the Summer issue of *Plum Lines* I commented on the coincidence of having two pipe organ builders—one in England, one in Australia—in our society. How did they, separately, ever hear of us? Well, silly me. Paul in England told Peter in Australia while he (Peter) was in England visiting him (Paul). All straight? Peter Jewkes informed me of this fact in a letter which continues as follows:

As to what the correlation between pipe organ builders and Society members is, I fear you are right in supposing that only Jeeves could identify the cause, and then only after a substantial serving of Dover Sole for the enhancement of his already prodigious grey cells. Training as an organ builder does provide ample opportunity to become infected by Wodehouseitis during the long hours spent “holding notes” at various cathedral organs whilst the organ tuner works inside—I think I must have read at least 40 novels during that time.

Might I also have the opportunity to bewail publicly our beloved Plum's evident persecution of my family (cf *Plum Lines*, Summer 1991, page 2, Jukes being the uncorrupted form of the name.). I cannot accurately recall, but I think that it is in *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* [1972] that the local telephone exchange staff is referred to as being “recruited from the Worcestershire branch of the Jukes family.” The final insult is in another unrecalled title wherein there appears a Constable Jukes, of singular flatfootedness. Perhaps the Wodehouse Society readers may be able to provide these actual references—at least there would be some recompense for a life spent with an oft misspelt and mispronounced surname.

Plum also used the name for four other characters, as these entries in Dan Garrison's *Who's Who in Wodehouse* show:

Otis (or Arthur) Jukes, rival of Rollo (or Ralph) Bingham in golf and love in “The Long Hole” (1921).

Rosie Jukes, disqualified finisher in the Girl's Egg and Spoon Race in “The Purity of the Turf” (1922).

Alfred Jukes, a superior golfer in “There's Always Golf” (1936), runner-up in champion golf match at beginning of “Excelsior” (1948).

Cyril Jukes is a foul-weather golfer who plays during a blizzard at the opening of “Feet of Clay” (1950).

Plum's use of the name thus extended over at least 30 years, from 1921 to 1950, and if Peter is right about *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*, at least 52 years. A remarkable use of the same name for a series of minor and unrelated characters, none of them notably stupid.

According to *The Origin of English Surnames* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980), Jukes and Jewkes as surnames were derived from Breton personal names of followers of William the Conqueror. Now Bertie Wooster, you recall, was fond of remembering with a great deal of modest pride that one of his ancestors “came over with the Conqueror.” Move over, Bertie. It's time to share your pride of place with a Jukes.

Peter, Paul, and a pipe organ. Let me see... they could....well, they could start a church.

\$\$\$\$ and ££££

President Phil Ayers says our New York convention had some last-minute expenses that could not be foreseen and were not covered by the fees we sent him before the convention. **Phil says the deficit will be covered if each of us who attended the convention will send a \$20 donation to the society treasurer:**

The squarest man, deposited suddenly in New York and faced with the prospect of earning his living there, is likely to quail for a moment. New York is not like other cities. London greets the stranger with a sleepy grunt. Paris giggles. New York howls.

The Prince and Betty

Margaret Slythe: a tribute

Margaret Slythe retired in June 1991 as Head of Library of Dulwich College, Plum's public school in London. Many of us remember with gratitude her invaluable work in arranging the visit of the Wodehouse Pilgrims to Dulwich in 1989. Her interest in P.G. Wodehouse and his stories has largely contributed to making Dulwich College a center of Wodehouse archives and activity. I can't do better than reprint the following tribute, slightly edited, from the Summer 1991 issue of *The Alleynian*, the magazine of Dulwich College. Alex Hemming, an Old Alleynian, sent me the article. Margaret is indeed, as Alex says in his cover letter to me, "a great lady."

Margaret Slythe was appointed as Head of Library and began a remarkable decade of service to Dulwich, in May, 1981. The interviewing Committee had been impressed not only by her professional background, as researcher and librarian to Lord (Kenneth) Clark for twenty years, but also by her imaginative and radical approach to a College Library that was in urgent need of refurbishment and reform.

Their confidence was amply and swiftly vindicated. The Library was extensively redesigned, both upstairs and downstairs, in close co-operation with the College architect. The Archive [with a great many Wodehouse papers]—one of her special concerns—was established upstairs and began at once to play a more prominent role in Dulwich's affairs, inside the College and far beyond it; the most modern equipment was installed to protect our inheritance of precious books and documents. [I've heard unofficially that the archival material is worth several million pounds...OM]

1981 was a golden year in the Library's history. Lady Wodehouse, widow of PGW, who provided the basis for his Memorial Study four years previously, had made possible the refurbishment, by a generous bequest; and the transformed Library was christened the Wodehouse

Library and declared open by (Sir) Edward Cazalet, QC, PGW's grandson. These were developments of the utmost importance for Dulwich, under-used by boys of all ages; now it was a joy to enter, and the atmosphere changed steadily for the better. The Library and its surroundings had become in every sense the centre of the College life. Her influence on senior boys, who found her an exceptionally approachable member of (a still largely male) staff, and on junior boys, whose induction to the Library she undertook most seriously, was widespread and profound.

It is less easy, but equally important, to pay just tribute to Margaret's personal contribution to the quality of life at the College over these 10 years. Margaret was, of course, passionately concerned that boys should learn to use books, to respect the knowledge they impart, to appreciate the privilege of resources, and the skills of resource deployment. Yet she also touched the lives of countless boys outside the specific library context. There is distress, loneliness, despair even, in any large community; hopes to be kindled, and ambitions to be fanned into life. Many parents are profoundly grateful to Margaret for the haven, and for the wise counsel which, with her priceless sensitivity to what people needed, she provided for their sons.

Perhaps it was in her sheer wisdom (an attribute not widely or lightly applied) that Margaret's most profound contribution to Dulwich is to be remembered. Fastidious in the best sense, great of heart as of mind, her wisdom was a precious element in Dulwich College in this decade of its history, and we are all enormously in her debt.

We wish her well, and her family, for the next stage of her life, which without any doubt will be as active and fruitful as these memorable ten years have been.

David Emms
Master of Dulwich College 1975–1986

There are several million inhabitants of New York. Not all of them eke out a precarious livelihood by murdering one another....

Psmith Journalist

Of yo-yos and diabolos

Charles Gould forwards an amusing and scholarly correspondence he has had with Harry Golgar, a collector of School Stories. Their letters follow.

Dear Mr. Gould:

I enclose herewith xeroxes of the opening page of Chapter 20 of *Mike and Psmith*, Meredith 1969, and of the opening page of the same chapter in *Enter Psmith*, Macmillan 1935. Please note the curious discrepancy in the name of the game that Psmith is playing, and in phrases forming the context.

According to the [Oxford English Dictionary] Supplement (I don't have the new edition incorporating all supplements), "diabolo" is first mentioned in 1907. It consists in "balancing and spinning a double-headed top on a string (which is supported on two sticks), throwing it into the air, and catching it again." According to the same OED supplement, the "yo-yo," originating in the Philippines, is first mentioned in a Philippines periodical in 1915, which remarks that "a patent was recently secured upon {it} by a firm in the United States." I may add autobiographically that when the yo-yo showed up in Macon, Georgia (admittedly a provincial backwater) in the 1920s, it was a new toy that no one had ever heard of before.

The yo-yo inserted in the U.S. in 1969 into the 1909 *Mike and Psmith* is therefore an anachronism. Who perpetrated this fraud, and why? My guess would be the American publisher, seeking unscrupulously (and surely without authorization from P.G.W.??) to increase sales on the American market.

Thought you might be interested in this world-shaking discovery. I'll be pleased if you can devote a footnote to it, as a contribution to the Advancement of Humane Letters, in the next issue of the Bulletin of the Wodehouse Society, or whatever you call it.

Yours sincerely,
Harry Golgar

Dear Mr. Golgar:

Thank you very much for your most amusing and interesting letter relative to diabolo and the yo-yo. This is surely one of the dustiest corners of Wodehouse scholarship.

Your perfectly logical attempt to pin the anachronistic yo-yo on the American publisher of *Mike and Psmith*, however, has a snag in it. *Mike and Psmith*, the second half of *Mike*, published in 1935 as *Enter Psmith*, was first published not in America by Meredith in 1969, but in London by Herbert Jenkins in 1953; and in that edition we find...not diabolo but the yo-yo, introduced not by an American editor but by an Englishman. Or, perhaps, Wodehouse himself, glancing over the proofs of this new issue of an old book, came upon "diabolo" and asked himself, What the hell? Is anybody going to remember that game from my youth, dating back to the San Francisco Earthquake or Gutenberg's invention of the printing press? Probably not, he might have concluded, and with a stroke of the pencil altered history.

As, I believe, so often happens.

With best wishes,

Yours,
Charles E. Gould, Jr.

Conversation in the Subway is impossible. The ingenious gentlemen who constructed it started with the object of making it noisy. Not ordinarily noisy, like a ton of coal falling on to a sheet of tin, but really noisy....a subway train in motion suggests a prolonged dynamite explosion blended with the voice of some great cataract.

Psmith Journalist

New members

A few quick ones

Maria Sensale says that a newly formed Boston chapter of our society will meet for the first time on December 14, 1991. That's great news—let us hear from you nascent Bostonians. A rumor is abroad that a new group is forming in New York City too. Both of these pleasant developments are taking place because of the New York convention, I believe. Hooray for everybody!

In the Autumn issue my finger slipped twice on the keyboard, with odd results. In the first case "bridegroom" came out "bridgegrrrom." John Hannah kindly calls it a "splendid term." "It's a perfect name," he says, "for some of the people who have sat opposite me at the bridge table and murmured their reactions to my leads away from kings."

John asks if Wodehouse ever coined words. Not as far as I know. Does anyone know better?

The other finger-slip occurred in Mindi Reid's poem "A Sense of Lack" and turned her "deus ex machina" into my "deux ex machina." "Could you please tell the gang," she says, "that I'm really not Mrs. Malaprop's American cousin?"

This issue of *Plum Lines* looks, I hope, a little neater, a little more controlled, than past issues. The improvements are due to a new computer and new software. I can even print an em-dash! If you care about such things, the new typeface is Palatino: 11/13 for text, 24 for headlines. When I learn more about the new machinery you should see still more improvement.



The Oldest Member

Information and new memberships
Marilyn MacGregor

Dues payments and address changes
Tom Wainwright

Editorial contributions
Ed Ratcliffe, OM

All quotations from P.G. Wodehouse
are reprinted by permission of the
Trustees of the Wodehouse estate.

Broadway, the Great White Way, the longest,
straightest, brightest, wickedest street in the
world.

Psmith Journalist

Captain William Blood A note of thanks

It is with deep regret that I inform you of the death of Captain William Blood. He died peacefully in his sleep at his home in New Britain, Pennsylvania, on October 7, 1991. He was 84 years old.

Bill Blood was the founder and several times president of the Wodehouse Society. He was editor of *Plum Lines* from the beginning of the society in 1980 until 1987. He and his wife Mary were the society in its formative period: he produced the newsletter and arranged the conventions, she handled dues and the membership list, and they both recruited new members.

Bill retired as editor of *Plum Lines* on reaching his eightieth birthday, but continued his service to the society, as president, for two years beyond that time—a full measure of devotion.

In recent years Bill led a seminar on Wodehouse at Delaware Valley College near his home in eastern Pennsylvania.

Bill was born in Portland, Oregon, and became a career officer in the U.S. Air Force, retiring with the rank of captain in 1957. After moving to New Britain he was a justice of the peace for several years.

In addition to his wife Mary he is survived by a son, David, of Nashville, Tennessee; a granddaughter; and a sister, Gertrude Blood, of California.

I remember the first time I met Bill, at our 1987 convention in San Francisco. He was a small, slender man, very neat and well dressed, with an erect and military bearing, and a twinkle in his eye. (Jan Kaufman says he was the only person she has ever met who really did have a twinkle in his eye.) He reminded me of an elderly Galahad Threepwood. He had the driest wit, and possibly the quickest wit, I have ever known. He was a gentleman, and a man to be reckoned with in any company. The Wodehouse Society exists because of his work and his devotion to P.G. Wodehouse and his stories.

The announcement of Bill's death was a sad note in our otherwise happy convention. We extend our sympathy to his family in their loss. We shall miss him greatly.

Mrs. Alexandra Siebert, of Remsenburg, Long Island, was a neighbor and close friend of the Wodehouses for many years. She, her daughter, and a friend were our gracious hostesses in Remsenburg at the recent convention. (See the convention account elsewhere in this issue.) We sent her a floral bouquet in thanks, and I received the following note in return.

The Wodehouse Society

Dear Members,

Your beautiful bouquet gave me a glad surprise! When the man delivered it I asked him, "Are you sure that's for me?"

"Oh yes," he answered me, "your full name is on it!"

"Well it isn't my birthday," I replied.

Then on opening the small envelope attached, I saw it was from you all. And I do thank you so very much.

I happen to be very fond of flowers and this bouquet seems to have a great variety of beautiful flowers—ones that I have never seen before.

It was a great pleasure remembering the Wodehouses because they were my friends. I'm so glad you enjoyed your visit.

With warmest wishes to you all,

Yours sincerely,

Alexandra Siebert

Ah, New York, New York! The center of the universe.

Angel Cake

Fans of P. G. Wodehouse will be delighted by the news that James Hogg has happened upon Lord Emsworth's personal copy of *The Care of the Pig* by Augustus Whiffle and that he has edited it to a manageable size.

Pigs are of course a subject to be treated with the utmost seriousness and, in the case of this volume, with something akin to reverence. Happily, James Hogg is never less than scrupulous in ensuring that weighty matters, such as the Irish method of persuading reluctant pigs up a gangplank (which is to drive them in the opposite direction), are carefully recorded for the general reader. Lord Emsworth's marginal scribbles are also included, and record such intimacies as his heartfelt praise of the Empress of Blandings, his champion sow, for restoring sanity to the disordered world of Blandings Castle.

Accompanied by line drawings, this volume will be welcomed by lovers both of P. G. Wodehouse and of pigs.

James Hogg is a television journalist who has reported for *24 Hours*, *Nationwide* and *Newsnight*. He has contributed to *Country Living* and *Jazz Express*. He lives in Hertfordshire.

October 198 x 129mm 144 pages

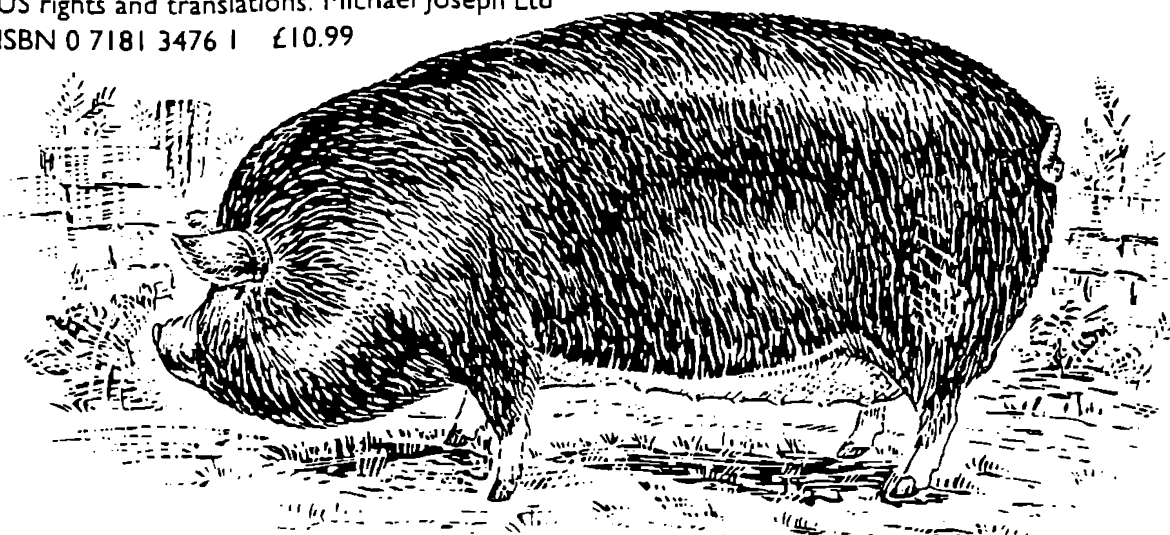
Illustrations: line drawings

US rights and translations: Michael Joseph Ltd

ISBN 0 7181 3476 1 £10.99

LORD EMSWORTH'S ANNOTATED WHIFFLE James Hogg

Rob Kooy in Holland sent this flyer to Len Lawson, and it is all I know about the book. My local bookstore says many, perhaps all, Michael Joseph titles are available in the U.S. from Viking Penguin. I haven't tried to order the book....OM



Something New

Len Lawson

Matt Richards is the person who sent me the item on *Frivolity Unbound* published in the Autumn *Plum Lines*—and whose name I promptly forgot.

Bill Horn, who thinks a forged letter will save his life, has put us on to a good thing. *Hodge Podge Two: Another Commonplace Book* by J. Bryan III, was published by Atheneum and is remaindered by Edward Hamilton, Falls Village CT 06031-5000. The book is a marvelous collection of quotes and anecdotes including, of course, a few by PGW. You can get it for \$4.95 + \$3.00 shipping and handling + sales tax in Connecticut. Order no. 880809.

Dolores Robinson, who walked away from the convention with a bottle of champagne thanks to her editing skills, found "Aunt Agatha Takes the Count" in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* for July, 1991.

Jon Lellenberg reports on a recording called *Silver Linings: Songs by Jerome Kern* (Arabesque 6515 from Caedmon, 1984. Price unknown.) PGW wrote several of the lyrics, including "A Little Bungalow in Quogue," which we saw performed via videotape at the convention. Joan Morris sings and is accompanied by William Balcom. My local dealer was unable to get it. A not quite so local dealer is working on it.

Charles Bishop discovered "Wodehouse a la Carte" by Charles Gould in the August issue of *Firsts: Collecting Modern First Editions*. It is a nice article on collecting PGW first editions.

Rob Kooy has sent me a flyer announcing *Lord Emsworth's Annotated Whiffle* by James Hogg. (Michael Joseph Ltd., £10.99) This is purported to be an edited edition of Lord Emsworth's personal copy with his marginal notes included. [See a copy of the flyer in this issue....O.M.]

Barnes & Noble offers a new collection of

PGW stories called *Plum's Peaches*, edited by D.R. Benson. There are 15 stories, all dealing with the fair sex being fair and otherwise. This book is uniform with *Tales from the Drones Club*, but, of course, a different size, with another new dust jacket illustration by Jeff Fisher. Published by International Polygonics Limited, 1991. Order no. 01734680, \$14.95.

Barnes & Noble is still offering *Who's Who in Wodehouse* by Daniel Garrison. If you don't yet have this one, get it now. No. 1603919, \$7.95. There is a \$4.95 shipping and insurance charge per order, and add sales tax if delivered to MA, MN, NJ, NY, PA, CT, or CA. [In the trackless jungle of Wodehouse stories there is no better guide than this book...OM]

Bill Norman has been frantically seeking PGW on video cassette. He has discovered *A Damsel in Distress* which he got from Movies Unlimited, 6736 Castor Ave., Philadelphia PA 19149, for \$19.95 + \$4.50 shipping and handling + sales tax for PA. Also available from Blackhawk Films, 5959 Triumph Street, Commerce CA 90040-1688 for \$17.88 + \$3.95 shipping and handling + sales tax for CA.

The Golf Omnibus is a new two-cassette, three hour package of six golf stories, read by Simon Caudell, from the BBC Audio Collection. Order from The Mind's Eye, Box 1060, Petaluma CA 94953, for \$14.95 + \$3.50 shipping and handling + sales tax for CA.

This company also offers in the same kind of packaging "Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit" dramatized, with Michael Hordern and Richard Briers, and *Summer Lightning*, read by Ian Carmichael, at the same price. All three for \$39.95 + \$5.00 shipping and handling + sales tax in CA.

A Man of Means by P.G. Wodehouse and C.H. Bovrill was serialized as six short stories in *Strand Magazine* in 1914 and *Pictorial Review* in 1916 but never published in book form until now. John Fletcher, TWS, has published it in a limited edition of 200 copies through Porpoise Books. The English price is £50. The edition was published

PGW on CD-ROM

Len Lawson

more than two months ago and may be scarce already. Write to Porpoise Books, 68 Altwood Road, Maidenhead SL6 4PZ, England to order a copy.

Jan Kaufman—you surely didn't think she would miss an issue—as well as Bill Norman and others have called my attention to the Jeeves and Wooster video tapes. They are among the top five sellers from Masterpiece Theater. Order from Signals, WGBH Educational Foundation, 1000 Westgate Drive, St. Paul MN 55114. \$49.85 + \$7.25 shipping and handling. Contains all five episodes of the first series.

Fritz Menschaar sends word that Strand Book Store is offering five of the New Autograph Editions by Hutchinson for \$5.95 each. They are *Psmith in the City*, *Meet Mr. Mulliner*, *Summer Lightning*, *Ukridge*, and *Uncle Fred in the Springtime*. They also offer *The Golf Omnibus* for \$8.95. Order from Strand at 828 Broadway, New York NY 10003. Shipping and handling is \$3.00 per order + sales tax for New Yorkers.

I hear of *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Citadel Press, \$10.95 trade paperback) everywhere. It contains Plum's "From a Detective's Notebook," in which Adrian Mulliner demonstrates beyond all doubt that Sherlock Holmes was Professor Moriarty.

At the New York convention I proposed that the society embark on the task of making a CD-ROM containing all of PGW's books. The response was encouraging so I am now making the same proposal to the society at large. I am interested in arguments pro and con and I would like to hear from those who would be interested in working on such a project.

For those of you who are a trifle fogged, a CD-ROM is a storage device for data, used with computers in much the same way magnetic tapes, floppy disks and hard disks are used. A CD-ROM has the same appearance as those audio CDs that are currently in vogue. The advantage they have over other storage devices is that they hold enormous amounts in data in a small space and are relatively inexpensive to produce. [The 16 large volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary are contained on one-half of a CD-ROM....OM]

Why bother doing such a thing? Part of our charter as members of the society is to spread the word and encourage others to read the works of P.G. Wodehouse. Libraries are very active in the CD-ROM arena, and exposing librarians to PGW is exposing the general public. Equally important is the usefulness of such a tool to researchers. We have barely scratched the surface in our scholarly investigation of PGW. Having all the works on a computer would be a powerful tool and would encourage those who feel the task of investigating the works is too formidable.

To keep costs down, I would like to see us put the stories into a computer ourselves. The mastering and production of the CD-ROMs will have to be contracted out, but we should be able to do the initial work. I would like to hear from those who would help in such a project. Perhaps some of you already have some of the stories on your computer. Let me know if you are willing to help, if you have access to a computer, and if so what your computer equipment is.

The Wodehouse Society: Convention '91

The latest and possibly the happiest gathering of Wodehousians took place at the Sheraton Park Avenue Hotel, New York City, October 11 and 12, 1991

Our story is told by three eyewitnesses, three sturdy burghers of extraordinary probity: **Toni Rudersdorf**, **Mark (Catsmeat) Lasswell**, and **Ed Ratcliffe**. All set? Here we go!

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10

Toni:

New Yorkers must be the world's friendliest people. From the apple-cheeked policeman who directed me to our hotel, to the agile waiters delivering more crusty rolls while bread flurries flew about their upper slopes, they all endeavored to give satisfaction.

Arriving on Thursday evening well in advance of Florence Cunningham, alter ego of the notorious Dolly Molloy, with whom I was slated to share my room, I found a good hiding place for my jewels and was nonchalantly juggling the apples in a bowl of oriental design that appeared to have a microphone in its base, when that woman of fatal charm oiled through the door. Before I could say "Let's have a snootful," our room was bristling with Ed and Missy Ratcliffe, Len and Shirley Lawson, Phil Ayers, Bob Griffin, Tony Ring and Jan Kaufman. This was clearly an executive meeting and as Len

and I were soon to be executized ourselves, we thought to observe these brilliant thinkers who had gotten us where we were, with the bouillon sloshing about our ankles. Len demonstrated his vision as future president when he suggested that he and I (soon to be vice president) should meet a couple of times a year, at society expense of course, to discuss society business somewhere between our homes in Texas and California where deep thinking goes on—perhaps Las Vegas would do.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11

Toni:

Next morning was one of those bright, brisk mornings full of promise and good will. We were off to Remsenburg, Long Island, to visit the town where Wodehouse lived his last 33 years. The bus pulled up in front of the hotel and everybody piled on board—everybody but me. I knew Elliot Milstein was even then prodding a cab driver in the back and urging him not to be so shy with the accelerator. Elliot's plane from Detroit had set down at JFK thirty minutes ago and with youthful optimism he was racing to Manhattan to join us on our pilgrimage to Remsenburg. I had sworn to throw myself under the wheels of the bus if the driver tried anything funny, like driving

off before Elliot arrived.

As I waited, the courteous and efficient doorman cleared his throat and inquired, "So you're a literary society, eh?" "Ah yes," I replied, and went on to tell him in a few well chosen words about Plum. "Well," he said when I paused for breath, "I think that's admirable, writing all those books. Here I am 43 and I haven't written anything so far. Except unless you count some love letters, that is." A man straight from the bar parlour of the Angler's Rest.

Well, I tell you, if Elliot hadn't chosen that moment to come flying round the corner, I'd have been stuck for words. How can a simple woman from Texas cope with doormen who say such wonderful things? I suppose that is why the extra large tip was invented.

Mark:

9:25 A.M. We board bus outside Sheraton Park Avenue Hotel for pilgrimage to Remsenburg. Our demographics: retirement-age couples; men in their 30's and 40's wearing beards and all married to women who look like schoolteachers; several single men, few single women. Many conventioners from California; one couple from Australia. Several from England. Two women from the Philippines. A few double-agent members of Sherlock Holmes societies in our midst. No sign of Isaac Asimov, Robert Bork or the Queen Mother—TWS members all.

9:26 A.M. Our group may be overly reliant on tweed.

9:29 A.M. I sit across the aisle from man in late 30's. He wears a cheerful expression, red and white striped shirt, white pants, bow tie and red socks. Resembles Bertie Wooster during one of his brief rebellions against Jeeves's sartorial tyranny.

9:30 A.M. Note with relief that bow-tied neighbor is alone in dressing eccentrically for the occasion. Had entertained ghastly vision of entire troupe attired in Edwardian costume.

9:47 A.M. Turns out Woosterish neighbor is not a member of the society at all; he's just along for the ride with a friend. His usual attire? Says he's a former instructor at Dulwich College,

Wodehouse's preparatory school in London, but has read only one Wodehouse book. Upon hearing I am a reporter, he says, "Do you read *The New Yorker*? It mystifies me. What on earth can they be thinking of?" I leap at opportunity to describe resonant letter Wodehouse wrote in 1940's about *The New Yorker*: "I buy it weekly, but it's been a long time since I found anything in it worth reading. I think what I hate most are the stories....And what price those Letters from Czechoslovakia and other places? And those yards of stuff about shops? And the profiles of dull people you've never heard of? I think you are darned lucky if only the wrapper arrives."

Toni:

Later, my husband Bill asked me what route we took to Remsenburg and what towns we saw. I could not remember. Every one of us forty five travelers had things to say. We talked, we sang, and some of us let out pig-hoey calls. We passed a couple of school buses full of children on an outing and my heart bled for the poor little blighters. They waved back when we waved to them and I could detect envy in every flick of those little wrists.

Mark:

10:17 A.M. "Hallo-allo-allo"—first Woosterism of the day arises from the seats in the front of the bus.

Ed:

President Phil Ayers announced as we approached Remsenburg that we would not be allowed to go through the former Wodehouse home and that Mrs. Alexandra Siebert could meet with only a few of us. The first news was expected, the second was disappointing. Mrs. Siebert had been a neighbor and close friend of the Wodehouses for years and would surely have some interesting stories about them. (See *Plum Lines*, Spring and Summer issues 1990.) Phil said that at her age she did not feel up to encountering our thundering herd.

Remsenburg is a pleasant little town (in England a village) with no businesses, no sidewalks, lots of broad lawns and sheltering trees. As the bus pulled to a stop at the head of Basket

Neck Lane — surprise! There was Mrs. Siebert waiting for us, smiling and ready to lead us down the tree-lined lane and into the house. And that's just what she did, chatting amiably with Wodehouse worshippers all the way. As we neared the holy ground some of us advocated removing our shoes and a fringe element even suggested that we approach on our knees. But cooler heads prevailed and the neighbors probably thought we were normal.

The house is smaller and less grand than I had expected for one chosen by Ethel: a comfortable rambling frame house set back a little from the lane, surrounded by lawns and trees, with daytime rooms downstairs and bedrooms, behind dormer windows, above.

As we approached the front door we were greeted with the excited yipping of a small dog, just as if Plum were at home. The housekeeper scooped up the dog, opened the door, and invited us in—the owners were away. Elliot Milstein claimed that he had arranged the visit by telling them that he had to come to clip the parrot's claws. There *was* a parrot, which threw out, surely, a general invitation to join it in a nut. But I doubt Elliot's story—no one smelled of iodoform.

Mrs. Siebert led us through the house, explaining that it had been considerably altered since Ethel Wodehouse died in 1984. But the general arrangement remains: entry hall, large living room with fireplace, a sun room, a kitchen, several small rooms and bath in the rear, and the bedrooms upstairs. Plum's study, a small room just behind the living room, is now a child's bedroom. I thought, as I poked my head in at the door, that there ought to be a plaque somewhere.

Mark:

11:11 A.M. Sotto voice arguments over where the study used to be.

11:13 A.M. TWS members routinely refer to Wodehouse by nickname, Plum. Or Plummie.

11:22 A.M. Tour ends by pool [installed by later owner] in backyard. Contemplate grudge that existed for years between Wooster and fellow Drones Club member Tuppy Glossop. As Bertie describes it in "The Ordeal of Young Tuppy," his friend "betted me one night at the Drones that I wouldn't swing myself across the swimming-bath by the ropes and rings and then,

with almost inconceivable treachery, went and looped back the last ring, causing me to drop into the fluid and ruin one of the nattiest suits of dress-clothes in London."

11:23 A.M. Resolve not to ask anyone about ropes and rings even though I have never been sure how they would be useful at a "swimming-bath." Question not obscure enough. *Plum Lines*, the Wodehouse newsletter, recently established that when Bertie remarks on one occasion that his Aunt Dahlia could make a good living "calling the cattle home across the Sands of Dee," he is referring to line in poem by 19th century author and clergyman Charles Kingsley.

11:24 A.M. Note another gaping hole in mastery of Wodehouse lore: Never heard "Sonny Boy" despite its central role in Beefy Bingham's clean, bright entertainment in "Jeeves and the Song of Songs."

12:09 P.M. Walking back along Basket Neck Lane to cemetery at its head, I fall into conversation with Barry Phelps, a British writer whose collection of rare Wodehouse books is on permanent loan to Dulwich College. He has just finished a Wodehouse biography, he tells me, and his agent is shopping for publishers.

12:14 P.M. As we arrive at the Wodehouse gravesite, Mr. Phelps is heaping scorn on the author's biographers. A TWS member overhears and agreeably says, "I think the definitive Wodehouse biography has yet to be written." Mr. Phelps shoots him an eye that could open a clam across a crowded room and says, "It has just been completed."

Ed:

Plum and Ethel are buried near a hedge at one side of the village cemetery. The large granite headstone, designed by Ethel, lists four book titles, the names and dates of Plum and Ethel, and the line "He gave joy to countless people." Cameras clicked madly. Margaret Slythe laid flowers on the graves.

To say that New York came up to its advance billing would be the baldest of understatements. Being there was like being in heaven, without going to all the bother and expense of dying.

P.G. Wodehouse

Mark:

12:19 P.M. Watching members treading gingerly near the headstone, Mr. Phelps dryly mentions that Wodehouse was cremated. And he notes that one of the book titles on headstone, Blanding's Castle, shouldn't have an apostrophe. (To be fair, it *has* been copy edited—someone plugged hole with stone implant.)

Ed:

From the cemetery we went into the small white Presbyterian chapel at its head, where Mrs. Siebert, her daughter Joy, and a friend, Frances Graham, had provided an excellent tea for us, and stood about happily browsing and sluicing. And talking—this was a talking crew. We talked with Mrs. Siebert, with her daughter, with her friend, with Margaret Zbrozek, Ethel's housekeeper after Plum's death, and with each other. Mrs. Siebert had two special items on display for us. The first was Plum's teacup and saucer, glazed white earthenware with bright colors. "Very large," she explained, "so he wouldn't have to get it refilled so often." The other was the beautiful green dress Ethel wore to Plum's 90th birthday celebration in New York City in 1981.

Mark:

12:53 P.M. A man I've noticed on the trip, very tall and using a cane, sits down beside me. A TWS member approaches him.

"How's Bertie Wooster doing?"

"He's running, but not well," the man replies. He has an English accent.

"He's getting a little old for that, isn't he?"

"I suppose so." They both laugh. Mystified.

12:54 P.M. Ask the man what they were talking about. "Bertie Wooster, the race horse," he says, extending a hand. "Jim Earl, racing correspondent for *Plum Lines*." The horse Wooster is a big stakes competitor easily distinguished in a crowded field by the white blaze on its head and a solitary white fetlock. Jeeves would have approved.

2:07 P.M. Bus arrives at Bide-A-Wee Pet Adoption center in nearby Westhampton. Formerly called the P.G. Wodehouse Shelter, named for its dog-loving patron. Large pet cemetery studded with hundreds of headstones, some

considerably less modest than those in the cemetery we just left. Epitaphs: "Tuffy Gangi, Mother's Little Fatsy Pants," "Blue Love Pigeon, To Know Her Was to Love Her."

Ed:

After considerable search we found the simple headstone naming six of the Wodehouse pets. None of the names was familiar to me. No cutsey inscriptions and no animal portraits, so common on other headstones.

Mark:

2:14 P.M. Talk to Margaret Slythe during ride back to Manhattan. Ms. Slythe retired in August from Dulwich College, where she taught art history and was archivist of Wodehouse collection. Says she's happy to be on this trip "because the people here just love Wodehouse for the pleasure he gives."

Ed:

Our reception Friday evening at the Sheraton Park Avenue Hotel, in a crowded room with an open bar, was neither scholarly nor particularly dignified, but it was a lot of fun. Meeting old friends and getting acquainted with new ones, laughing and talking about dozens and dozens of funny and innocent stories—how could we have more fun? It occurred to me that if Plum could have been there he most certainly would *not* have been there, in a big noisy crowded room. But I wish he could know he was the cause of all our pleasure.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12

Toni:

On Saturday morning we gathered in our millions [Toni is close....it was about 115] and got down to business. The Drones Club of New York lavished upon us gifts of silver earrings or cuff links, bearing on one of the pair the coat of arms of the Woosters and on the other the coat of arms of the ancient and honorable house of Emsworth. One ought to be able to pawn them quite easily for turf investments.

Ed:

Doug and Margaret Stow had printed two beautiful little letterpress booklets for each of us: a convention program and a collection of Wodehouse quotes about New York.

The public rooms of our hotel lived up to their advance billing as "consciously attempting to simulate the ambience and decor of an English gentlemen's private club." Lots of civilized hush and dark walnut paneling.

Our meeting room was graced by a nearly life-size enlargement of the famous Lowe caricature of Plum and by an oil portrait of the Empress of Blandings, perhaps one quarter life-size, mounted, fittingly, in an elaborate gold frame. Both were provided by Jimmy Heineman.

Our business meeting kind of whizzed by. In an arrangement that had been shamelessly pre-cooked by President Phil Ayers and was heartily endorsed by everyone present, Len Lawson rapidly became our new president, Toni Rudersdorf our new vice-president, and Edward Whitaker our new archivist. (In case you're wondering about that last office, the archivist is in charge of *The Tome*, a ponderous volume that is the official scrapbook of our activities. Former president Bill Blood bought it at a flea market for 50¢. It's an impressive thing and our only attempt at respectability.) Tom Wainwright continues unabated as treasurer and keeper of the membership list. (Phil Ayers: "I vouch for the treasurer, but if anyone would like to look at the books I'm sure he's had time to juggle them by now.") Marilyn MacGregor continues, unabashed, to correspond with new and prospective members. Ed Ratcliffe continues, in spite of all efforts to dislodge him, as editor of *Plum Lines*.

Peter Schwed, Plum's American editor for twenty five years, was elevated from mere membership to honorary membership in our society in recognition of his services to English literature.

One of our copies of the new Wodehouse bibliography by McIlvaine, Heinemann, and crew was donated to the Doylestown Library in Pennsylvania in memory of Bill Blood, who died less than a week before our convention. Bill was the founder of our society and its prime mover for years. (See his obituary elsewhere in this issue.)

Mark:

9:30 A.M. Welcome by Gerald Gold in the Mary Hill Room of the Sheraton. Mr. Gold tells us he is the head crumpet of the New York Drones Club. The 16-year-old club meets quarterly for dinner that concludes with ritual re-enactment of a Drones Club bread fight.

Ed:

Jerry Gold remarked—surely with Gussie Fink-Nottle in mind—"Everyone's been forcing orange juice on me." He also mentioned the silver ear rings and cuff links the Drones Club gave us. "They will not be available," said Jerry, "in any souvenir shop in Manhattan." Pause. "Until Monday."

Jan Kaufman's talk on "Wodehouse and Hollywood" led off the morning's festivities. Jan's slides and entertaining comments evoked the Hollywood that Plum knew in the early and middle Thirties when he wrote scripts for MGM. Jan used a number of illustrations from Len Lawson's voluminous collection of PGW magazine stories of the Thirties. Describing one of Ethel's parties, Plum wrote that he "went up to the bedroom at 5 p.m. to read Somerset Maugham, came down at 8 p.m. for dinner. The perfect host, they sometimes call me."

Lee Davis, who has lived near Remsenburg for many years, reminisced about his friendship with Wodehouse and Guy Bolton, Plum's closest friend and theatrical collaborator, who lived nearby. Lee's father was Plum's physician. Lee recalled the time in 1974 when Wodehouse, then 93, asked whether he was physically up to a trip to London to receive his forthcoming knighthood. "Yes, if you want a one-way trip," Dr. Davis replied. Plum did not go.

Lee's talk was followed by the showing of a videotape of a Swedish singer performing Plum's song "A Little Bungalow in Quogue." She was entertaining in ways she did not intend.

Mark:

11:13 A.M. Elliott Milstein presents paper on opening lines of Wodehouse novels. Mr.

Milstein runs a pharmaceutical company in Detroit. Wears spats and loafers. Jeeves would not have approved.

11:16 A.M. Grateful to Mr. Milstein for reading *Luck of the Bodkins* opener: "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."

1:30 P.M. Charles Gould, English teacher at Kent School in Connecticut, presents his paper on the influence of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekov on Wodehouse. Mr. Gould finds heretofore undetected currents of Russian despair coursing through the Wodehouse oeuvre.

Ed:

Norman Murphy's Dulwich Valley Players performed his original skit "Lord Emsworth and the Fate Worse than Death" in which the ninth Earl faced the dread prospect of matrimony. Saved, of course, by Galahad's cleverness and utter lack of ethical standards. The players were Norman as Galahad, his wife Charlotte as Lady Constance, daughter Helen as narrator, Tom Wainwright as Beach, and Ed Ratcliffe as Lord Emsworth. Tremendous applause.

David Jasen reviewed the theatrical career of P.G. Wodehouse and discussed its pervasive influence on his novels and short stories. The theater, he said, was the foundation of his successful career in fiction.

Toni Rudersdorf discussed Bertie and Jeeves as examples of the chivalric knight, or hero, and his squire, or "wily lad." She pointed out that Bertie stuck to the chivalric code like glue and was a true hero, while Jeeves, whom we admire as brainy and superior, might not have made a mark on his own, but needed someone like Bertie (or some heroic cause) to bring out his best.

A panel consisting of Lee Davis, Charles Gould, and David Jasen answered questions and led a wide-ranging discussion on topics Wodehousian.

Mark:

4:00 P.M. During question and answer period, someone asks for explanation of ropes and rings over the Drones Club pool. Norman Murphy, retired British army colonel and generally acknowledged leading Wodehouse expert (and author of *In Search of Blandings*) jumps up from his seat—he has been an antic presence in the room all day—and explains the mystery away: A private club in London installed swimming-bath in 1884, later covered it with false floor so room could also be used as a gym. Olympic swimmer and Hollywood Tarzan Johnny Weismuller visited club in 1930's. Putting on a show, he stayed underwater for five minutes, Col. Murphy said, and then grabbed one of the rings used for gymnastics and swung from one to the other across the room like the king of the jungle. Librettist Guy Bolton, Wodehouse's longtime musical comedy collaborator, witnessed scene and told Wodehouse about it.

4:03 P.M. Col. Murphy sits down to awed applause. (He imparted plummy nuggets all day long.)

6:30 P.M. Reception with open bar at hotel. "Whiskey and s." a TWS member orders from uncomprehending bartender. Mixed by Jeeves, it is Bertie's preferred tissue restorer.

6:45 P.M. Conventioneer's name tag: Ken Fink-Nottle. Like judge in "Without the Option," I am strongly inclined to think Fink-Nottle is an assumed and fictitious name. (Bertie and Oliver Sipperley are arrested for events surrounding attempted theft of a policeman's helmet; Sippy has presence of mind to give name "Leon Trotzky" to avoid scandal in morning papers.)

Ed:

We had populated the dining room and were ready for the banquet when another Norman Murphy skit erupted in our midst, this

To see the Subway in its most characteristic mood one must travel on it during the rush hour, when its patrons are packed into the carriages in one solid jam by muscular guards and policemen, shoving in a manner reminiscent of a Rugby football scrum.

Psmith Journalist

one put on by the Drones Club. Jeeves persuades Lord Emsworth to make a speech, relieving Bertie of the burden and mollifying his Aunt Agatha. Ned Crabbe directed and was Emsworth, Owen Quattlebaum was Jeeves, Tom Holland was Bertie, and Emily Klein Aunt Agatha. A hilarious and high spirited performance, wildly applauded.

Mark:

7:43 P.M. During salad course, I leave to make a phone call in lobby.

7:46 P.M. As I open door to return to room, half a dinner roll bounces off my chest. On way to seat, notice several more pieces of crust arcing across room.

7:51 P.M. Dinner conversation continues; frequency of attacks increases. Having seen the source of one shot in my direction, I wait for him to return to conversation while I roll a chunk of bread in my hand, forming it into a largish pellet. Note that New York Drones Club is being shown a few things about spontaneity.

7:52 P.M. I drill him in collarbone. The spoon hanging off his nose drops neatly into his lap. [My wife, usually a caryatid-like pillar of the community, had a spoon hanging off *her* nose too...Ed]

8:08 P.M. Sniping replaced by raw power as a nearby table persuades waiters, under a hail of baked goods, to bring them more rolls.

8:13 P.M. Launch my longest attempt—across three tables—to catch archivist Slythe unawares. Shot whizzes past her and lodges in stiff hair of woman sitting next to her.

8:19 P.M. Waiters no longer in evidence. Incoming bread grazes wick of candle on table and puts out flame.

8:22 P.M. Men in full evening dress grope under chairs for spent ammunition.

8:28 P.M. Waiters retake the room, armed with main course. Strategy succeeds. Artillery ends as abruptly as it began.

Ed:

President Phil Ayers announced that he had received greetings from Edward Cazalet,

It is hard to astonish the waiters at a New York restaurant.

The Prince and Betty

Plum's grandson, and from Anthony Verity, Master of Dulwich College, with good wishes for the convention and their regrets that they could not attend.

When Elliot Milstein read his paper on the first lines of Wodehouse novels that afternoon, he offered lists of the lines to his audience. He noted that the lists included a number of typos, and invented on the spot the Grate Typo Contast, with a prize for the person who had found the most typos. The banquet came and went, a thirsty hush fell upon the crowd, and Elliot presented a bottle of champagne to Dolores (Hawk-Eye) Robinson.

Richard Scrimgeour gave us an off-the-cuff history of typographical errors and revealed to the world that Wodehouse had written Shakespeare. Thus becoming, if my count is accurate, the 37th person to do so.

Margaret Slythe, just retired as librarian at Dulwich College, described the Dulwich that Plum knew in the 1890s, the minute-by-minute schedule laid down for students, and his many activities, intellectual and athletic. She noted Plum's leadership in many of these activities and asked, "Where was that shy Wodehouse we hear so much about?" She presented to our society a portfolio of photographs of the school from that time.

Peter Schwed, Plum's American editor for many years, recalled the times they worked together. "He said little, but you basked in the warmth of his presence and his obvious enjoyment of simply being in your company. He would listen with clear appreciation if you told him something funny, but he saved his humor for his stories....At one of Florenz Ziegfeld's parties, he said, the champagne flowed like glue. That was one of the very few funny things I ever heard Plum say....He hardly ever needed to be edited....I never saw a more amenable author."

Mark:

8:57 P.M. Peter Schwed introduces surprise guest, esteemed lawyer Charles Rembar. While no doubt an effective courtroom advocate, unlikely Mr. Rembar ever tried to hold attention of roomful of logy justices who had relaxed before dinner at an open bar reception and were

dreaming of putting their feet up and icing shoulders of throwing arms.

Ed:

Mr. Rembar set out to answer the question, Who is Jeeves? Why would a man of his intelligence and education be content as a manservant? His answer was simple but explosive: Jeeves is Bertie's father. Bertie's mother was a "high-born lady" whose identity has been successfully concealed, and Bertie was the natural son of these two. Jeeves, aware quite early that Bertie needed all the care he could get, undertook to provide that care. The thesis had been advanced before, but never with such force and conviction. Next time I get a parking ticket I want Mr. Rembar to represent me. They'll never take me alive!

Mark:

9:15 P.M. Mr. Rembar sits down to wild applause.

9:22 P.M. In the lobby, just outside banquet room where waiters are picking up larger pieces of bread on the floor and putting them in piles on deserted tables, TWS member Marc Levine, a mathematician from Boston, begins to play the piano. A crowd gathers around and slowly picks up the melody. It is, I soon discover, "Sonny Boy."

Toni:

When that failed to click we took a run at "Anything Goes," "Bill" and "A Foggy Day in London Town." We returned to "Sonny Boy" until Marc fell panting from the piano bench and could not be bribed to return, not even for ready money.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13

Ed:

Breakfast at our convention hotel differed from an orgy in several respects, one being the air of restful quiet that hung over the scene after the buoyant night before.

Most of us headed for airports later that morning. For those who remained, Norman Murphy led a walking tour of

Plum's New York, visiting among other places the Little Church Around the Corner on 29th Street where Plum and Ethel were married in 1914.

Even such a treat couldn't put off the inevitable; the convention was over, and I believe everyone was a little sad at its ending. It was just a lot of fun—I don't know when I've had more. As Edward Whittaker wrote, "We had an extra special (can't describe it) GOOD time!" John Kareores deserves the last word. Sometime during the banquet he said "We're having such a good time, we've already begun to reminisce."

Our first thanks must go to Mrs. Alexandra Siebert who, with her daughter and a friend, arranged our wonderful visit in Remsenburg. It was a very special event for us, and we are most grateful.

President Phil Ayers deserves most of the credit for arranging the convention. He lives on the West Coast and was given "much information, aid, comfort, and support" by Jimmy Heineman and Jerry Gold of the New York Drones Club, to whom he is almost pathetically grateful.

The Drones also deserve our thanks for all they did to make us welcome, and for those nifty silver souvenirs of a happy weekend.

Vivian Swift made what must have been an exhausting tour of less expensive hotels and reported her results in *Plum Lines*, enabling many of us to avoid bankruptcy.

Francine Kitts provided information about buses and trains that made our trip to Remsenburg pleasant and inexpensive.

Most of all we are grateful to Pelham Grenville Wodehouse. He does indeed "give joy to countless people." We are lucky to be counted among the countless.

Mark Lasswell's story is reprinted by permission of *The New York Observer*, where Mark is senior editor.

P.G. Wodehouse

The Last of the Great Russians

Charles E. Gould, Jr.

Charles delivered this paper at our convention at the Sheraton Park Avenue Hotel, New York City, October 12, 1991. There was a good deal of rolling in the aisles helpless with mirth while he read his introduction. If your response is less extreme it is only because you cannot hear Charles's masterful delivery. But he had something serious to say too.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Wodehouse Society:

My presence before this stately gathering reminds me of the story of the English schoolmaster who, for some reason, was invited to speak on his special subject at Cambridge University. The Cambridge don who invited him mentioned discreetly in his letter that there would be an honorarium of fifty pounds, and asked for a prompt reply. The schoolmaster sent a wire, with all convenient speed: "Delighted to accept your most kind invitation. Do you require the fifty pounds in advance?" On that basis, I can assure you that this is not going to be a very scholarly address. Not very scholarly myself, I have been for twenty years at Kent School the cause of but indifferent scholarship in others, the general attitude of my pupils being one that P.G. Wodehouse would have shared himself: if we humor this haggard wreck for a time, he will let us go out and play in the sunshine. It's not, of course, that I don't know a lot. I do. I know an awful lot. But I can't remember much of it, and my lips get so tired these days when I try to read that it's difficult to try to keep up with what I've forgotten. Mostly, I can't even remember what I've forgotten, and turning to a book just compounds the difficulty. As the immortal Groucho Marx once observed, outside of a dog, a book is man's

best friend; inside of a dog, it's too dark to read. I do recall, however, that in the first scene of *Hamlet*, a moderately funny play by Shakespeare, the Elizebethan Wodehouse, the guard Marcellus says to his fellow-guard Bernardo, or perhaps actually Bernardo says to Marcellus, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" And as I see you whispering much the same question to your neighbor, though of course it's only a bit after noon, the best advice I can offer is printed on the label of the jar of mayonnaise in my refrigerator at home: keep cool, but don't freeze.

To these prefatory prayers I must add an apology for my *not* appearing again tonight: a schoolmaster's life, if you can call it a life, is not his own, and it was only by the most shameless aggrandizement of my scholarly attainments that I was able to get leave to attend this festival at all. "Pleath, Thir," I lisped in my humblest Third-Form numbers to the Headmaster, "May I beg leave to address the Convention in New York?" "And on what do you intend to address them, may I make bold to inquire?" said he. "On my two flat feet," I did not have the courage to reply.

But my brain works like lightning: it flashes for a bit, and then there follows a great but harmless noise. "I shall address them," I said, "on a topic long nurtured in the crannied walls of my mind, a thought which, if not entirely original, has flitted oft across the pale parabola of my pedagogical joy, a thought whose wild fruition it has ever been my study to observe, a thought which has perched upon the lintel of my brain like Poe's raven yelling 'Nevermore,' a thought which yearns for the most delicate disrobing, like

Patience on a monument, smiling at grief." "The imbecile Gould is driveling again," cracked the Head, much like a latter-day Aubrey Upjohn having caught me tucking into his tin of sugared biscuits. "Get on," he suggested. "Then by your leave, Thir," I thaid—I mean said—I shall address the convention of the Wodehouse Society on the subject of the influence of Dostoyevski, Tolstoi and Chekov on the works of P.G. Wodehouse, and I shall entitle my address, by your leave, Thir, or Sir, P.G. Wodehouse: The Last of the Great Russians.'" And that, as you now perceive with growing dismay, is where we are, and you recall with full-grown dismay the lyric Wodehouse wrote for Oh, Lady, Lady! in 1918: "There was I, and there was you, three thousand miles apart." And you wonder how you could be so unlucky as to be sitting here now.

Of course, it goes without saying that I, a teacher of English lit. and comp., don't know enough about The Great Russians to join a food line in Omsk. I wonder about the not-so-great lesser Russians, of whom I know even less. But I am here to tell you this: Wodehouse wrote one novel so sociological in its overtone, undertone and half-tones, so bad-tempered in its plot and rhetoric, that a copy of it left beneath the bough of The Cherry Orchard, with or without the proverbial jug of wine, would put him in the mainstream of the Sorry-to-Intrude-but-Grandfather-Has-Just-Hanged-Himself-in-the-Barn-Again school of fiction. That novel is *If I Were You*, and for the next three hours it is my modest plan to discuss it.

Now, actually, it should come as no surprise to this distinguished audience that so highly derivative and prolific a writer as P.G. Wodehouse should have at least once fallen beneath the sombre, powerful Russian influence. He himself acknowledged it, you recall, in the Preface to *The Heart of a Goof*, as early as 1926:

The thoughtful reader, comparing this book with "The Clicking of Cuthbert" will, no doubt, be struck by the poignant depth of feeling which pervades the present volume like the scent of muddy shoes in a locker room; and it may be that he will conclude that, like so many English writers, I have

fallen under the spell of the great Russians.

Disingenuously disclaiming this, he goes on to say that "it is, of course, true that my style owes much to Dostoevsky," and even four years earlier, in the aforementioned "Clicking of Cuthbert," we have objective testimony to the darker side of Wodehouse's literary achievement:

Vladimir Brusiloff proceeded to sum up: No novelists any good except me. Sovietski—yah! Nastikoff—bah! I spit me of zem all. No novelists anywhere any good except me. P.G. Wodehouse and Tolstoi not bad. Not good, but not bad. No novelists any good except me.'

Vladimir Brusiloff, you remember,

specialized in grey studies of hopeless misery, where nothing happened till page three hundred and eighty, when the moujik decided to commit suicide,

and his acceptance of Wodehouse as "not bad" is not to be lightly dismissed. Less than a decade later, Wodehouse fulfilled the promise which Brusiloff evidently saw in him, with *If I Were You*, a novel which, though running to only 304 pages in the American edition, is a grey study of hopeless misery in which nothing really happens at all.

Let's look first at the plot, and then glance at character and style. The plot is old and tired, cold and hard like a picnic egg. David Jasen tells us in the bibliography that it was derived from Antsey's *Vice Versa*, and Wodehouse and Bolton then turned it into a play called *Who's Who?* But we had already seen it—and so had Wodehouse—in the *Maenaechmi* of Plautus and in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Mr. Wetherby, the lawyer in *If I Were You*, reminds us that

This changing of one baby for another of greater rank has been the basis of a hundred Family Herald novelettes, and is such a stock situation of melodrama that the late W.S. Gilbert satirized it in his poem, "The Baby's Vengeance."

Gilbert even *used* it, in *HMS Pinafore* and *The Gondoliers*. As Dr. Robert Hall points out, it has a

"very obvious" three act structure; and unlike most of the plots of Wodehouse, over which he took such pains, this one must have practically written itself, leaving him more time to study the sombre effects on his characters of guilt, misery, and unsweetened gin.

But for those of you who have not lately looked into this, the most rancid of Wodehouse's attacks on humanity, let me summarize, just to show how easy it is: The Fifth Earl of Droitwich and Syd Price, a barber, were switched in their infancy by their nurse, Ma Price. "She's a nasty old thing, and she drinks too much," we are told in Chapter 1, while in Chapter 2 we read: "She's a ghastly female. And the son's worse. A highly septic little bounder." Now, grown to man's estate, the earl is engaged to Violet Waddington, described in Chapter 16 as "a loathsome girl," who rejects him in his changeling role as barber while he, seeing his error, falls in love with Polly Brown, the barber's assistant and, an American, the only decent woman in the whole book. At the same time, the barber becomes sick of being a changeling earl, especially when he learns that as the barber he can own the rights to the patent hair restorer *Derma Vitalis*; and Ma Price, variously influenced by alcohol, religion and omens of cats and ladders eventually withdraws her testimony and Syd goes back to the barber shop and Tony, now again the Earl of Droitwich, marries Polly Brown. The only thing that *happens* throughout the whole tale—unlikely even, or *particularly*, by Wodehouse standards—is that the hero discovers he was engaged to the wrong girl.

It's hard to believe that this bad-tempered, virtually plotless three-act novel is the immediate predecessor to *Hot Water*, one of Wodehouse's most light-hearted, extravagantly and skilfully plotted and funniest novels; but it is, and Mr. Jasen records that Wodehouse was working on them at the same time, or at least had started work on *Hot Water* while *If I Were You* neared completion. Note that exactly the same thing happens in *Hot Water*: rejected, like the Earl of Droitwich for his decent impulses, by Lady Beatrice Bracken, a snob and a manipulator like Violet Waddington, Packy Franklin discovers that

he was engaged to the wrong girl and falls in love with Jane Opal, the American girl of his dreams. But while the same thing happens, plot, character, style and tone are all markedly different. By the time he got through *Hot Water*, Wodehouse had worked the Russians out of his system. There is much more action in *Hot Water*: there are at least two sub-plots interwoven with the main plot, involving the Vicomte de Blissac, Soup Slattery, Mrs. Gedge's jewels, Mr. Gedge's quite reasonable desire not to be made ambassador to France, and Senator Opal's "copperizing" letter. Because there is so much action, this novel—fantastic and romantic as it is—seems much more *believable* than the static reworking of the old changeling plot. In *If I Were You*, there is nothing resembling a sub-plot at all.

Years ago Barry Phelps remarked that there is only one truly bitchy woman in Wodehouse, she being the Princess von und zu Dwornitzchek, the wicked step-mother in *Summer Moonshine*. But she's nothing to Violet Waddington, who even Wodehouse says at one point was "a girl nobody seemed to like much." Ma Price is referred to as "that awful old woman," a "yowling old nuisance," and one who gives Lady Bassinger "the creeps." There is no language like that in *Hot Water*, nor in any other Wodehouse novel I know. Lady Beatrice Bracken, Florence Craye and numerous other snobbish and *quasi*-intellectual girls who want to mold the souls of their young men are allowed in character to mock themselves, as are Nannie Bruce in *Cocktail Time* and Nurse Wilks in "Portrait of a Disciplinarian," both old nuisances if ever there was one but never portrayed by Wodehouse as such. Even Slingsby the butler has a darker aura, grotesquely conscious of his station in a way that a Beach or a Silversmith would never be, without making himself as funny as Wodehouse allows Binstead and Spink to do. His level of repartee is to call Syd "an impudent young 'ound," and to tell Ma Price, when she says she fears bad luck because she broke a mirror that morning, that she shouldn't have looked in it. These characters are *humorous* in the literal sense of that word: they are governed by overgrowths of humors, inner complexions, most of them bilious: they are laughable, perhaps, but they are not really very

funny. "'She's a garrulous old fool,' said Sir Herbert shortly, 'and in her present condition goodness knows what she might say to the servants'" is the dialogue not of the sunny and effervescent Wodehouse that we hear behind Bertie's description of Aunt Agatha as wearing barbed wire next the skin, or of Mr. Gedge's thought that before marrying him his wife might have been a lion tamer, but of the sunny and effervescent Wodehouse with Dostoyevsky on his mind.

A glance through Richard Usborne's *Wodehouse Nuggets*, the only concordance to date of Wodehouse nifties, turns up only five selections from *If I Were You*, an astonishingly small number from a novel of the decade that produced *Very Good, Jeeves*, *Big Money*, *Heavy Weather* and *The Code of the Woosters*, to name but a few that Mr. Usborne richly mines—astonishingly small, until we remember the unaccountable but unmistakable debt that Wodehouse was working off to his eastern predecessors; and even they are macabre, gray, and atypically grotesque, the rainy Sunday in St. Petersburg as opposed to the Shropshire sunshine:

We just happened to be sitting in a cemetery, and I asked her how she would like to see her name on my tombstone.

Slingsby loomed in the doorway like a dignified cloudbank.

She went out into the Park to look at rabbits. Never seen one before. Not running about, that is, with all its insides in it.

The bottle had that subtly grim look of champagne which had been bought at a public house.

The horse kicked me. Three times in the same place. Blimey, if I sat now, I'd leave a hoof-print.

Each of these nuggets is a little tarnished, as from exposure to an evening with Raskolnikov. Even the line about the butler has nothing in it of the sprightly rhetoric of the justly more famous, "Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes": the latter is pure poetry, a double metaphor which conveys at once an image of Beach's appearance and his attitude, whereas the former is a mere

simile without any particular interest or reverberation: it's just a description.

Like James Rodman, the mystery writer who turns mushy in the environment of Honey-suckle Cottage, left to him by his Aunt Leila J. Pinckney the sentimental novelist, Wodehouse throughout *If I Were You* seems to be writing in an uncharacteristic mood, coming perilously close to purveying what as a writer he normally avoided above all else: a message, that being that there is something to class distinctions after all, and that we, like Syd Price and his dreadful mother, forget that to our own distress. That mood is reflected in his characterizations, most of which are openly satirical, in his rhetoric, which is unusually leaden, and in his taking up a plot which had no freshness left after Henry Fielding got through with it in *Tom Jones* in 1749. What there was in the private life of the man to render him susceptible to the powerful impression upon his imagination of his great Russian forbears, I must leave to Mr. Jasen and other biographers to discover; but of that powerful impression there can be no serious critical doubt whatever, as, in conclusion, examination of a couple of passages—chosen almost at random from among many possibilities—will prove.

Let me read first the conclusion of Chapter 23 of *If I Were You*, in which Ma Price, confronted by Sir Herbert, Lady Lydia, the butler Slingsby and the lawyer Mr. Wetherby, decides that she will not sign the paper stating that her son Syd Price is not, after all, the rightful Earl of Droitwich.

Ma Price rose and approached the desk. It stood by the window, and through the window, as she advanced, her eyes fell on the pleasant lawn and shrubberies without. And suddenly, as if riveted by some sinister sight, they glared intently. She had picked up the pen. She now threw it from her with a clatter.

'Coo!' she cried.

Sir Herbert jumped.

"What the devil is it now?" he demanded irritably.

Ma Price turned and faced them resolutely. The sight she had just seen had brought it home to her that she had been all wrong in her diagnosis of the black cat. It had been sent to warn her—yes, but to warn her against signing the paper. Otherwise, why, as her fingers clutched the pen, should this other portent have been presented, as if for good measure?

'I'm not going to sign!'

'What!'

'I'm not!'

'Why not?' cried Lady Julia.

Ma Price pointed dramatically at the window.

'I just seen a magpie!'

We turn now, by way of comparison, to a passage near the end of Chapter VII, Book Nine, of *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky:

Mitya got up and went to the window. The rain lashed against the little greenish panes of the window. He could see the muddy road just below the window, and further away, in the rainy mist, a row of poor, black, dismal huts, looking even blacker and poorer in the rain. Mitya thought of Phoebus the golden haired, and how he had meant to shoot himself at his first ray. 'Perhaps it would be even better on a morning like this,' he thought with a smile, and suddenly, flinging his hands downwards, he turned to his torturers.

It's all right there, isn't it? In both passages, we have a character in possession of a secret, confronted by lawyers and other unfriendly people, who, looking through a window, a symbolic act of new perception, sees in an image of nature an omen which, in controverting a previous anti-thetical omen, leads to a change of heart which in turn results in a *peripeteia*, a change in direction of plot. Mitya's dismal huts and rainy mist are Ma Price's magpie, his Apollo her black cat.

Dostoyevsky's masterpiece was published in 1880, the year before Wodehouse was born; but we need not engage in the bootless or fruitless quest of proving that Wodehouse was familiar

with this and other passages from it—though, of course, he undoubtedly was. It is sufficient to recognize that betwixt the points of these mighty opposites, these two giants of twentieth-century fiction, between Mitya and Ma Price there fall such mighty archetypes as the window, the magpie and the mist, upon which literature is made.

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