Plum Lines

VOL. 13 NO 3 THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE WODEHOUSE SOCIETY AUTUMN 1992

Notes from Plum

Here's another cat note from Plum to Marge Meisinger. Unlike the previous note, it has a distinctly literary reference. I should add that these notes were forwarded to me by Marilyn MacGregor.

Basket Neck Lane
Remsenburg, N. Y: 11960
November 11, 1972

Dear Mrs. Meisinger,

Thank you so much for your charming letter. It was so kind of you to remember my 91st birthday.

I feel quite honored to know you have named your cat "Pelham". My wife and I are such animal lovers, having several cats and two dogs but we never had the unique idea to name any after the characters I've written about. So you have one up on me!!

My latest book "Pearls, Girls & Monty Bodkin" was released last month in England. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to read it in the near future.

With all good wishes,

Most Sincerely,

P. G. Wodehouse

Contents

The Story of Otis

by P. G. Wodehouse

(News Item: Researchers at Michigan State University have discovered that hens are extremely sensitive to any form of discourtesy.)

Pity poor Otis Quackenbush:
His hens refused to lay for him.
This meant, of course, a marked decrease
In what's called take-home pay for him.
But as, irate, he moaned his fate
And started in to curse it, he
Met a man named Pott, who was
something hot
At Michigan University.

"Consider," said Pott, "That every hen,
Young, middle-aged or hoary, 'll
Be terribly hurt if your manner's curt
Or in any way dictatorial.
Why, often in the summer months
When you were feeling dry and hot
I've hear you speak quite crossly when
Conversing with a Wyandotte!

"Your clothes as well, they give an air
Of laissez-faire and messiness,
And if there's one thing hens demand
It's chic and vogue and dressiness.
That coverall you're wearing now:
It's muddy. Do you roll in it?
And worse than that, your old straw hat
Has got, I see, a hole in it.
No wonder that these fowls of yours
Are laying off and packing up.
Your speech and your deportment are
In urgent need of jacking up."

And Otis said "Egad! You're right!"
A new expression lit his eyes.
He had too much sense to take offense
When a friend saw fit to criticize.
"I see, old bean, just what you mean.
The wounds that gashed my breast have
healed.
My ways I'll mend and be a blend.
Of Brummel and Lord Chesterfield.

So now when Otis feeds his fowl,
He wears,—and very proper, too—
A morning coat, a monocle,
Striped trousers and a topper, too.
His mode of speech, once so abrupt,
He's disciplined until it is
Unlikely to shock a Plymouth Rock
And wound its sensibilities.
He now has kegs of splendid eggs
Of extra special quality,
And everything around the farm
Is joy and peace and jollity.
If ever farmer's heart was in
A constant gentle glow, 'tis his.
It teaches us a lesson, this
Experience of Otis's.

Jay Weiss found this poem of PGW's in the anthology *The Bedside Phoenix Nest* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1965). McIlvaine's bibliography says it also appeared in *Punch* in 1956 and in *The Saturday Review* in 1961. Plum was not a man to waste a perfectly good poem.

Information and new memberships
Marilyn MacGregor

Dues payments and address changes
Tom Wainwright

Editorial contributions
Ed Ratcliffe, OM

Dues are $15 per year.

But me no butts

by Dan Garrison

Norman "Emsworth" Donaldson, in San Diego, wrote me recently in shock and disbelief at a piece of language near the end of "Buried Treasure" (the third story in *The Crime Wave at Blandings*). What could The Master have meant when he wrote "Lord Bromborough had left his butt"?

After a sleepless night agonizing about Lord Bromborough's butt, I realized like Sherlock Holmes that the answer would be obvious to any child—any child, that is, with access to the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*^{2}].

You will recall that Lord Bromborough has been standing at the window of his breakfast room shying coffeepots and cottage loaves at young Brancepeth Mulliner in the gravel drive below. As the story ends, he leaves his post momentarily to re-arm himself with the remains of the kedgeree (acc. to Webster "a traditional English breakfast dish, a mixture of fish, rice, hard-boiled eggs, cream, and seasonings"), which he has only recently been shoveling into himself like a stevedore loading a grain ship. This ballistic scenario suggested a shooting metaphor that surfaces in "Lord Bromborough had left his butt."

Enter child with *OED*^{2}, greasy finger pointing to **butt** *sb.*^{4} 2c: "In grouse-shooting, a position either sunken or on the level ground, protected by a wall of bank of earth behind which the sportsman may stand and fire unobserved by the game." You may object that Lord Bromborough is not firing unobserved, and that he is in fact above his target, but these I dismiss as mere quibbles, Wodehouse having turned in his lunch bucket before *OED*^{2} came to light (this meaning does not appear in *OED*^{1}).

Now I don't know if this will satisfy everybody, but Donaldson raised a good question, and I send question and proposed answer to you for *Plum Lines*. If no one throws kedgeree at it, we can consider the matter settled.

It may be argued that the absence of Dan's definition of "butt" in the 1928 *OED*^{1} makes it doubtful whether Wodehouse could have had that definition in mind when he wrote "Buried Treasure", first published in 1936. But the word was used with that meaning at least as early as 1885, as shown by a quote in *OED*^{2}. —OM

On the turf with Bertie

Jim Earl, our racing correspondent, sends sad news about a recent effort by our favorite race horse, Bertie Wooster. The race, rather grandly named Rothmans Royals North South Challenge Series Handicap, or the 3:30 at Wolverhampton if you prefer, was "for three years old and upwards." Bertie is eight years old. Jim reports that the race turned out badly for man and beast:

> We went to Wolverhampton Races last Monday. Bertie Wooster was running but finished nowhere. The camel owes me a lot of money now, as I dutifully back him with a little every time he runs.

The slightly embittered tone of this message is understandable when you realize that Jim has been backing Bertie for most of Bertie's eight years, usually in a purely recreational, or non-profit, mode. We must applaud his loyalty, if not his judgment.

Jim includes a newspaper comment about the race: "Bertie Wooster is racing as though his exertions over the years are finally catching up with him. . . " Can't someone find a grandfather class for this horse to race in?

Bertie's jockey, for what it's worth, wears beige with maroon sleeves and a pink cap. I doubt if different colors would help.

> He was turning on the charm as if through the nozzle of a hose-pipe, and it was going all over her and she liked it.
> "Feet of Clay," *Nothing Serious*, 1950

Toodle-pip to a classic Jeeves and Wooster

By Joseph Connolly

Daniel Cohen sends along this informed review of present and past versions of Wodehouse stories on television and the big screen. The review is from the *London Times* of May 1, 1992 and is written by Joseph Connolly, author of *P. G. Wodehouse, an Illustrated Biography* (Thames & Hudson).

Granada Television's highly successful series "Jeeves and Wooster" reaches the end of its third series this Sunday, and so comfortably ensconced have Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie become in the title roles that a fourth series seems a strong likelihood. To a whole generation Fry and Laurie are Jeeves and Wooster. Indeed, apart from the 1960s series The World of Wooster, with Ian Carmichael and Dennis Price, few are aware of the existence of any other P. G. Wodehouse adaptations to the screen, big or small.

In fact, Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse—no great fan of film or television—was associated with the cinema and, latterly, the BBC, from the 1920s right up until his death in 1975. The reason was usually money; his lifelong devotion was to the printed word. To appreciate him fully, particularly in the case of the Jeeves stories, each syllable must be savoured, and no screen adaptation can come close.

Wodehouse knew this, and so do his fans: one man's Dogface Rainsby is another man's Barmy Fotheringay (pronounced Fungi) Phipps; confuse Stilton Cheesewright with Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright and you are done for.

That said, some film and television versions have been remarkably successful. But oddities abound: when, during the 1980s, I mounted a Wodehouse film season at the National Film Theatre, the earliest and strangest items I unearthed were a couple of silent shorts from 1924 adapted from the golf stories.

It was not until 1930 that the big Hollywood studios began to take an interest, MGM inviting Wodehouse to be a sort of writer in residence for six months, for the staggering salary of $2,000 a week. His talents were hardly called upon at all. In a typically guileless interview to the *Los Angeles Times*, he said: "I cannot see what they engaged me for. They were extremely nice to me, but I feel as if I have cheated them."

The hostility this interview aroused diminished over the years, Wodehouse soon being in a position to turn down a contract from Paramount and in 1936, take up another offer from MGM. Later, RKO offered him the chance to adapt his own novel, *A Damsel in Distress*, for the big screen.

Other loose adaptation of Wodehouse novels followed: *Thank You, Jeeves* (1936) featured David Niven, with the much-liked and very stylish Arthur Treacher as the gentleman's gentleman. *Step Lively, Jeeves* was released the following the year in order to capitalise on Treacher's success. *Piccadilly Jim* followed, with Robert Montgomery and Eric Blore, and then a diminishing trickle of less worthy attempts.

In the light of these less than triumphant sallies, Wodehouse rejected requests to bring his work to television for many years. Eventually, the BBC secured permission to produce *The World of Wooster*—a series of half-hour, black and white sitcoms. But was the all-important casting right?

Wodehouse said that Ian Carmichael came over only as a burlesque of Bertie and he found Dennis Price's Jeeves rather "pasty-faced"—but he also expressed the opposite view, so we can only assume that he was indifferent.

The programmes proved very popular, and an emboldened BBC went ahead with a fresh series called *Blandings Castle*, with an inspired casting of Sir Ralph Richardson as Lord Emsworth. This series is now almost unknown and its successor, Ukridge, starring Rodgers, unheard of.

So it was rather brave of the BBC to launch, in the mid-1970s, Wodehouse Playhouse, a series of plays starring John Alderton and Pauline Collins, not one of which featured the young master and his man servant. Wodehouse Playhouse ran for several very successful seasons.

The curresnt Jeeves and Wooster series

continued on bottom of next page

P. G. Wodehouse

Man and Myth

Barry Phelps's new biography, *P. G. Wodehouse, Man and Myth*, will appear in an English edition in October, according to its publisher, Constable. (Barry expects an American edition to follow in the near future.) Constable's announcement follows.

This book reveals for the first time the fascinating personality behind the myth that P. G. Wodehouse created for himself. Our finest humourous writer, creator of literary immortals such as Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves, projected the image of an amiable, unworldly recluse with just enough intelligence to open his mouth when he was hungry. A man with few close friends, bullied by his wife and with no understanding of, or interest in, money but blessed with a lucky ability to write sparkling humour.

Barry Phelps proves that Wodehouse was in fact a highly complex man who met and was friendly with many of the most talented, famous, and wealthy people of his time — from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to William Randolph Hearst and Evelyn Waugh. He was acutely intelligent, a shrewd observer of people and events and was bullied by his wife just to the extent that he wished and no more. He was obsessed with money from the day his father announced that the family finances would not allow him to go to Oxford to the day he died a multi-millionaire.

He was a prodigious worker who wrote ninety-eight books, all or part of forty musicals and plays, and over two hundred published lyrics — all of which continue to bring joy to millions of readers of readers, listeners, and viewers around the world.

A great deal of original research supports the author's judgements and he produces an abundance of new Wodehouse anecdotes. The book gives a full account of the misunderstanding over Wodehouse's wartime broadcasts from Germany to, the then, neutral United States of America. Mr. Phelps has written a book which sparkles with wit and insight, worthy of his subject.

Barry Phelps has worked as a journalistand in public relations. This is his first book.

R8 / 392 pages / 16 pages black and white illustrations / 0 09 471620 / £16.95 / October

---

The appearance of a new full-length biography is a major event in the Wodehouse world. Barry Phelps has long been interested in P. G. Wodehouse and his stories, and was for years an unusually well-informed dealer in his books. He is a man with opinions; I expect to find no pussy-footing in his book.

—OM

---

is the next and latest development, and it seems destined to be the most fondly remembered of all. Indeed, now that Fry's Jeeves has become less nauseatingly unctuous, and Laurie's Wooster does not goggle and croak quite so much, (for Bertie does have a brain, it's just terribly small), I believe that Wodehouse would have thoroughly approved of the entire caper—from soup to nuts.

Reactions to the *Jeeves and Wooster* series in our Wodehouse Society have varied widely, from the "It stinks" school of thought to the "It's great" camp. For me, all the Wodehouse characters exist, in the deepest and truest sense, only on the printed page. All other incarnations are deficient. But Wodehouse has so much to give us that, tho' much is taken, much abides (I made that up), and I enjoy what abides.

American audiences have been given no chance to see these later *Jeeves and Wooster* shows. Neither the commercial networks nor PBS have seen fit to import them. The only remedy for this desperate situation is for all of us to write and telephone our local stations and request more *Jeeves and Wooster*.

Bill Horn sends heartening news in this regard. His local PBS station says that WGBH in Boston, importer of the first series, is considering importing the second series for the coming season. —OM

What ho, St. Louisians!

by Gary Mueller

In the Spring 1992 issue of *Plum Lines*, I note that nearly one-third of the New Members are from the St. Louis area—no doubt the result of the charming account of the 1991 New York convention by Barbara (Half-Portion) Hertenstein that appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

This makes me wonder whether there is enough interest in PGW in the St. Louis area to warrant the formation of a St. Louis Chapter of the Wodehouse Society. Instead of having to wait two years from the next convention, maybe we could hold two or three meetings a year ourselves to tide us over until the next convention.

Anyone interested? If so, please write to me at:

And what ho to you, too, Upper-Midwesterners!

Bill Horn writes that "the incipient Upper Midwest Chapter" will become less incipient and a lot more real just about now—he hopes to hold the first meeting in August or September. If you live anywhere within traveling distance of Minneapolis, Bill wants to hear from you.

> Maiden Eggesford, like so many of our rural hamlets, is not at its best and brightest on a Sunday. When you have walked down the main street and looked at the Jubilee Watering Trough, there is nothing much to do except go home and then come out again and walk down the main street once more and take another look at the Jubilee Watering Trough.
>
> "Tried in the Furnace," *Young Men in Spats*, 1936

A few quick ones

Bill Horn notes that the expression "tiddly-om-pom-pom," a Wodehouse expression quoted in a recent article in *Plum Lines*, was also used by Pooh Bear in A. A. Milne's books. Bill asks whether Plum could have been "slyly getting at Milne for the latter's nastiness in regard to [Wodehouse's wartime] broadcasts?" Possibly. The only PGW story in which I know that that phrase was used is *Joy in the Morning*. The story was finished, according to Donaldson's biography, between July and November 1941, shortly after the broadcasts. By then Plum knew that he had been villified in the British press. One of those villifiers, according to Iain Sproat's *Wodehouse at War*, was A. A. Milne. If Plum knew this, his "tiddly" phrase may have been a response.

Barb Larkin writes: "I'm finally remembering to send you some tea that I got the last time I was in London. It's called 'Pelham' tea, from Whittard's—here's the description: 'Mr. Whittard's original pre-war recipe. China teas flavoured with Jasmine and Bergamot. An unusual and most refreshing cup.' I don't know if ths tea was actually named after PGW, but we can pretend!"

William Hardwick and Jim Earl send reviews of *Summer Lightning*, the Glasgow production so favorably described by Tony Ring elsewhere in this issue. The reviewers call the play "a constant delight, capturing all the sunlit innocence of Wodehouse's comic vision," and note that the story is told with "infectious warmth and wit." I'm feeling deprived. I wish the play could tour, or find a producer in America.

My apologies for the poorly printed June 1992 Membership List. The error slipped through our fingers unnoticed. An improved and updated list is included with this issue.

OM

The Oldest Member

Summer Lightning

A Production at Glasgow Citizens' First Theatre

21 February to 14 March 1992

by Tony Ring

Tony sent me this article in March. It just recently floated to the surface in the pile of papers accumulated on my desk in the last several months. —OM

On a Tuesday late in February, I found a *Times* review of a production of a new play, *Summer Lightning*, adapted from the PGW novel by Giles Havergal, senior director of the Glasgow Citizens' First Theatre. The review was good, and since Glasgow is only 400 or so miles away I phoned to check that they had seats. I also phoned Norman Murphy in Cumbria to see if he and his wife Charlotte fancied a quick trip across the border. Our plans went smoothly, and we were off to see the play on Friday, 6 March.

As always when I visit, Scotland was wet; raining when we arrived and not stopping until after we left. But any disappointment about the weather was more than compensated by the play. What a performance! The story of *Summer Lightning* is too long for all the intricacies to be included in any stage production, and the sensible decision was taken to eliminate the Baxter motif. Four actors and three actresses played all the parts, two of the actors having major double roles. One played Beach and Lord Emsworth (a compromise on size: the actor was tall, well-built, but not round); another Ronnie Fish and Galahad. Before you say that couldn't work, let me assure you it did.

One technique used quite a lot was to have the various characters turn to the audience and provide narrative, so retaining a lot of the verbal felicities which PGW wrote, and which traditional performances would omit. It slowed the play up a little, but gave us innumerable treats, and of course provided a better introduction to PGW's skill for those unfamiliar with his writing.

The Empress was played by a chickenwire and imitation leather mock-up, which in a rare technical error was painted pink. Galahad's monocle was correctly in the left eye per *Galahad at Blandings*, although *Full Moon* claims it should be in the right. All the cast played with enthusiastic joie de vivre, and when I had the opportunity of talking to some of them in a typical Glaswegian pub after the performance, Matthew Radford, who played Ronnie Galahad, said they were sad that there was only one week still to run. Normally, it seems, they would be itching to get on with a new production, but the cast had such fun doing it that they just wanted to carry on.

Another piece of technique which I gather was only added during rehearsal was the way they presented Parsloe-Parsloe's personality to the audience. He was only in the story for a very short time, and there was no time to develop character. So the actor taking that role barked. Except for a few key words, like "reminiscences" and "thousand pounds," he basically said "Woof" at various volumes and repeated it a different number of times. It may not sound clever, but it showed us the character's personality as Galahad wanted us to see it.

A number of the press reviews complained that the cast stumbled over accents from time to time. They still did this when I went, but it was to some degree a function of the multiple part playing. It did not detract from the performance as a whole. And the audience clearly were not concerned. They varied in age from teen to pension, but responded well and clapped hard. (The theatre holds more than 600 and there were 20 performances, so that is 12,000 people seeing the play.)

At the end of the performance I was taken backstage, then invited to join some of the cast for a pint or two of local beer. I was keen to hear whether the play might tour, or even have a run in London, but there was a reluctance to suggest this was possible. But we can hope. . . .

In summary, a memorable day, and a worthy addition to the list of productions of Wodehouse plays. I hope it will be recognised and accepted as such.

> She gave me the sort of look she would have given a leper she wasn't fond of.
>
> "Bramley is So Bracing," *Nothing Serious*, 1950

Wodehouse and Molnar

by Jay Weiss

P. G. Wodehouse collaborated, if that is the word I want, with Ferenc Molnar, Hungary's foremost playwright and premiere knocker on wood, to create *The Play's the Thing*, a great Broadway hit of 1926 *and* 1948. In a letter to Bill Townend, Plum referred to Molnar as a "friend."[1]

But did they really know each other? None of the biographers—Connolly, Donaldson, Green, Jasen, or even Wodehouse himself, in the role of memoirist—says a word about a relationship between the two.

They would have made a bizarre pair. Wodehouse was tall, utterly British, painfully shy, sexually inhibited in his private life as well as in his work, and devoted to the English notion of fair play. Molnar was shortish, quintessentially *Mitteleuropean*, a dedicated womanizer who wrote ribald bedroom farces, and burdened by an array of compulsive rituals that would have made Lady Macbeth seem an insouciant free spirit. They lived a taxi ride away from each other from 1947 until 1952 when Molnar died. We don't know whether either one of them ever got into that cab.

I began to speculate about the possible interplay between Plum and Ferenc when I serendipitously stumbled across an essay on Molnar in the anthology *Phoenix Nest* that I had purchased because it contained a copy of Plum's delightful poem, "The Story of Otis."

His friend and sometime translator, George Halasz, reported, originally in the *Saturday Review*, that some of Molnar's "superstitions were the usual ones, such as not starting anything on a Friday or on a 13th; still others were his private inventions—they [all] obeyed mysterious laws no one could ever fathom, and which he would not divulge for the world. For instance, he would knock on wood just like anybody else, but sometimes he would knock on top of the table, sometimes on the underside of a chair, sometimes only once, at other times thrice, and on occasion he would knock on an invisible wall in the air. A passionate card addict (he was known to have played for thirty-six hours at a stretch more than once in the Budapest Writer's Club), he would resort to the well-known tricks: cutting decks in fanciful ways, walking around his chair, etc., but he did all these things whether he was winning or losing, baffling his partners."

"He was devoted to the magic number '7' because the title of his first great success, *The Devil*, had seven letters in the original Hungarian. . .and because the play that followed it, with a six-letter title, was a dismal failure. . ."

Did Plum spend any time with this strange guy? If he did, why didn't he make use of Molnar's abundant quirks for, say, a Mulliner story? After all, Plum consistently complained that he needed plots to keep the furnace of his enormous talent stoked. Although the biographers don't help to answer these questions, there are hints in the magisterial McIlvaine bibliography. We learn from Plum's letter to Townend in February, 1948, that "'The Play's the Thing' is on the eve of being fixed. We have a management with the money and a star of whom Molnar approves."[3]

Aha! Plum got the word of Molnar's acquiescence, possibly from the nervous Hungarian himself. But wait. In an earlier letter to Townend we learn definitely that Molnar and Wodehouse knew each other. "Most of my friends are jews [sic]," Plum wrote Townend, "Scott Meredith [who had changed his name from Feldman], Ira Gershwin, Lengiel, Molnar, Oscar Hammerstein, Irving Berlin. . ."[4] And, of course, the May 24, 1948, *Life* magazine provides proof positive that Molnar and Wodehouse met at least once, face to face. On page 85 we see "Faye [Emerson] and the Six Wise Men of Broadway" who have contributed to the revival of The Play's the Thing. Two of the wise men are an urbane and contented looking Molnar, seated on the actress's right, and a beaming, boyish, bald Wodehouse standing directly behind the actress, who was married at the time to Elliott Roosevelt.

Did the worldly but compulsive Molnar chat with the retiring Wodehouse? If he did, how puzzled Wodehouse must have been. Halasz tells us that Molnar had a peculiar conversational style. If "someone mentioned act activity involving an element of danger, a trip, let's say—and it made no difference

whether it was a weekend excursion or a journey to London, a visit to the dentist, an impending opening night, or a wedding—Molnar would interrupt him, knock once, or several times, as per his arcane formulae, and mumble something like 'With God's help,' 'God willing,' or 'God be with you.' Considering that he was always surrounded by at least a dozen friends and sycophants, and that practically no conversation could be carried on without some reference and risk, as defined by Molnar, he often sounded like a pious woodpecker." What a pity a character like the wood-pecking Molnar never met a stutterer like the word blocking George Mulliner.

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse fans and scholars—most of us fall into one and, probably, both of those categories—know a lot about Plum's literary and comradely relationships with Bill Townend and Guy Bolton. Bolton shared with Plum the triumphs of the Princess Theater and was his dearest Long Island friend. Townend supplied the inspiration for the immortal Ukridge and from Dulwich days remained Plum's most trusted ally. The biographical and bibliographical studies about Wodehouse give us a rather complete picture of these relationships. We even know how he got along with Jerome Kern, who wrote the music to Plum's most memorable lyric, "Bill." (Not very well.)

But we really know nothing at all about that other highly successful collaboration, the one with Molnar. And it *was* highly successful, if not as enduring as the others. Clara Györgyey in her study, *Ferenc Molnar*, writes that *The Play's the Thing* "opened at the Henry Miller Theater in the brilliant adaptation of P. G. Wodehouse." She goes on to say, "The play is Molnar's most dazzling, most mercilessly cynical farce in which he surpasses his masters, Scribe, Sardou, and, to some extent, even Pirandello. . .The characterization is consummate; the theater folks are aided by a comic social secretary and a funny old butler, Dwornitschek, a worthy cousin of Shaw's William the waiter, or the adapter's Jeeves. The dialogues are sparkling and witty, adorned with subtle quips and blatant gags. Wodehouse's English version is as humorous as the original."

Plum did it again, thirty years later. "The American premiere [of Molnar's *Arthur*] in P. G. Wodehouse's brilliant adaption. . . took place on March 12, 1978, at a small off-Broadway theater," Györgyey writes. She doesn't give that kind of praise, or any kind of praise, to other Molnar translators and adapters, who were numerous, and included Oliver Herford and Edna St. Vincent Millay, not to mention George Halasz.

With such a rewarding meeting of the minds, it seems a shame we don't know anything at all about how Ferenc Molnar and Plum Wodehouse got along. Somewhere, some day, a determined Wodehouse or Molnar scholar may uncover just the missing letter or manuscript we need to fill in the blank. Knock on wood.

---

[1]Eileen McIlvaine, Louise Sherby, and James Heineman, *P. G. Wodehouse, A Comprehensive Bibliography and Checklist* (New York: James H. Heineman, 1990), N56.116

[2] George Halasz, "The Superstitions of Mr. Molnar, and How He Got Rid pf Them,"in *The Bedside Phoenix Nest*, ed. Martin Levin (New York: Ives Washburn, 1965), pp. 17-18.

[3] McIlvaine, op. cit., N56.123

[4] Ibid, N56.116

[5] G. Halasz, in Martin, op. cit., p. 18.

[6] Clara Györgyey, *Ferenc Molnar (Boston:* Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 125, 128.

[7] Györgyey, op. cit., p. 136.

Soapy and Dolly Molloy visit London and dine at Barribault's Hotel

The author and his traveling companion are members of the Society. They prefer to be anonymous. Soapy, incidentally, uses a most impressive letterhead: "Barribault's Hotel/Clarges Street, Mayfair/London SW1/Suites & Apartments/ Restaurant & Grillroom." —OM

"It's been a long time, sir," said the head hall porter as we arrived at the Stafford, our unchanging and very English hotel tucked away in St. James's Place, SW1, on May 23rd last. The flight across the Atlantic had been smooth and on time, immigration and customs at Heathrow had been a breeze, and we had soared into London through the light traffic of a Saturday morning. "About eighteen months, isn't it?" Colin continued.

"Just about," we confessed, with a foreboding of embarrassment: "We've been staying in clubs." How rash. An involuntary expression of horror and dismay came over Colin's face—what Jeeves, however imperturbable on the outside, no doubt felt when Bertie unfurled the Old Etonian spats as the latest addition to the Wooster wardrobe.

But clubs it had been: the In & Out, the East India & Devonshire, the Cavalry & Guards, and a few others, during a fallen-away period while we had immersed ourselves, as best we could, in the Clubland Heroes books, as Richard Usborne called them in his definitive study of the dashing tales of adventure and intrigue by John Buchan, Dornford Yates, and Sapper. Now it was back to the verities. This time we were in London with Wodehouse on our minds, and also Sherlock Holmes.

That still included clubs, of course, among other things. The next day, rested and refreshed, we sallied forth on a long walk through the West End which took us past quite a few Wodehouse sites. From St. James's Place to Piccadilly is just a few short blocks, with Dover Street rising one block to the left, the other side of Piccadilly. We had forgotten who first pointed out in Dover Street the obvious candidate for the Drones Club, but there it is still—four handsome stories of red brick and white window casings, surmounted by a row of dormer windows, situated a little below Brown's Hotel on the east side of the street. Across from it, we did our best to identify the shop under whose awning Eve Halliday sought shelter from a sudden shower—until the gallant Psmith, spotting her from a window of the club, rose, selected the Honourable Mr. Walderwick's umbrella from the rack, crossed the street, presented it to the startled girl with a bow, and returned without another word to the Drones (*Leave It to Psmith*). Our visit was taking place during one of London's worst droughts, and the episode was pleasant to visualize.

Around the corner from Dover Street is Berkeley Square, where Bertie Wooster lived. No famous figure in English literature has been more conveniently located with respect to his club, unless it was Mycroft Holmes, who lived directly across the street from the Diogenes in Pall Mall. Over the years Berkeley Square has suffered at the hands of real estate developers, and no longer has quite the same Mayfair eclat it possessed in Bertie's day. It may be that his Berkeley Mansions no longer exists. But if it does, could it have been the rather massive building on the northwest corner of the square? It had to be large enough to house all the neighbors who complained about Bertie playing the banjolele, and contemporary enough to suit a smart, modern man about town like himself.

From that corner, we walked deeper into the interior of Mayfair, to the Connaught Hotel at Carlos Place. We paused a moment to gaze upon its stately exterior and ornate entrance (here is something rather special, they declare, even for Mayfair), for we had plans to return later in the week. Beyond it lay Grosvenor Square, American country, with its modern U.S. Embassy occupying the entire western side of the square, statues of FDR and Ike scattered about, and buildings where wartime strategists planned the

invasion of Normandy and the liberation of Europe. Instead of lingering there, we turned west, and then south, descending geographically (but not socially) down Park Lane and across Hyde Park Corner to the white-hued precincts of Belgravia. And after working our way through streets made familiar to American audiences by "Upstairs, Downstairs," we came to Pont Street. Pont Street runs east and west from Belgravia into Chelsea, and it is surely the one street of London which Bertie avoided the most, for it was there that Aunt Agatha, "the Pest of Pont Street," lived.

Bertie would be brought up short by two things in Pont Street if he strolled down it today. The first, at 1 Pont Street, is Drones, a casually fashionable restaurant opened by David Niven's son in 1972. We stopped there for a refreshing lunch of cocktails, cold poached salmon, smoked chicken salad, and dry, crisp white wine. The room was cheered by sunbeams falling through a large skylight, and the clientele included one or two English families looking enough like Wodehouse characters to sustain the illusion. On the wall inside the front door, across from the small bar, were framed photographs of celebrities as infants. Some of them, like Noel Coward as the darlingest little girl, explain a lot. Up in the right-hand corner we found a framed letter from P. G. Wodehouse. He had written to young Niven upon the opening of Drones, remarking how pleased he was by its name, and how surprised to hear that next door was an establishment—the other thing that would startle Bertie—called Jeeves of Belgravia. Today it is across the street, and flourishing in this most top-drawer of London neighborhoods. A cleaners that picks up and delivers your laundry, it performs a range of select valet services with high quality, and the name is a tribute to the place that Wodehouse's characters have won in the public's imagination.

Some egg, bean, or crumpet was once struck dumb by spotting Bertie Wooster east of Leicester Square. Our foray the next day took us down the Strand between the Aldwych and Fleet Street, to the Wig & Pen, a dining club across from the Royal Courts of Justice which caters to the legal and press fraternities in the neighborhood. The Wig & Pen, with its cozy bar and intimate dining room, occupies the only house in the Strand to have escaped the Great Fire of 1666. The Fire's great diarist, Pepys, would surely approve of the use to which it is being put today. We spent a fine few hours there in the company of Richard Usborne, who had joined us for lunch, fulfilling a dream of years ever since we read his *Clubland Heroes* and *Wodehouse at Work*.

In fact, Mr. Usborne catered to our Sherlockian interests as well, for he had been one of the *Strand Magazine's* last sub-editors before George Newnes' great journal closed down for good in 1950. He reminisced about the *Strand* of his day, saying that while the editorial staff were keen after the war to resume publishing Wodehouse, a stern negative came down from the publisher, due to the evil name Wodehouse had been given over his radio broadcasts to America while an internee in Germany. Mr. Usborne talked about Wodehouse himself, and about his books, and about books about the books, with the highest praise for what Jimmy Heinemann is doing to preserve and promote Wodehousiana. We talked about the Clubland Heroes writers too, especially Dornford Yates, whom Mr. Usborne had fallen afoul of when he wrote about Yates's work in the '50s, and about the cruel streak that that gifted, and often humorous, writer, had had. "We all have a cruel streak somewhere," we murmured, as we pulled out a half dozen of Mr. Usborne's books that we had brought for him to inscribe: "Here's ours." Mr. Usborne complied, with a grace and charm that made this lunch one of the highlights of our visits to London.

Across the Strand up Chancery Lane lie the Silvervaults, an underground assembly of silver dealers, and we went there next at Dolly's urging to case the joint. Alas, it was too well vaulted and guarded for us to have a stab at it, at least this trip. (The same went for the crown jewels, when we went to see them at the Tower of London later in the week.) In none of the shops did we find a silver cow pitcher, but in one of them we found something else hard to pass up: an art deco cocktail shaker with small windows cut in the outer hull. When you rotated the inner hull to indicate one of the dozen or so cocktails' names engraved along the rims, its recipe

appeared in the windows. Many were the same ones drunk frequently today; a few were staples of Bertie's heyday in the '20s and '30s, like the Side Car and the Palm Beach. What would have made the shaker truly irresistible, of course, would have been the recipe for Jeeves's pick-me-up.

Lunch the next day was at the Naval & Military Club in Piccadilly, with Dame Jean Conan Doyle, daughter of the late Sir Arthur. To know Wodehouse, it helps to know Conan Doyle, for Plum draw a good deal of inspiration from his stories, and he knew and admired Conan Doyle greatly. One early publication, in 1903 when he broke away from banks and aunts, was in interview of the famous author on the subject of "Grit." Later, when Dame Jean was a teenager, she told us, her father took her along with him to lunch with Wodehouse. She was a great fan, and keen to meet him. What a surprise, she said, to find that the author of those hilarious stories wasn't fun at all in person; rather serious, in fact. But if she felt let down, Wodehouse never did by Conan Doyle. "I still revere his work as much as ever," he wrote in an April 28, 1925 letter in *Performing Flea* (he was having lunch with Conan Doyle that day, perhaps the very one Dame Jean attended): "I used to think it swell, and I still think it swell .... And apart from his work, I admire Doyle so much as a man. I should call him definitely a great man, and I don't imagine I'm the only one who thinks so. I love that solid, precise way he has of talking, like Sherlock Holmes." The Sherlockian "Higher Criticism" has pioneered one attractive approach to the study of the Wodehousian Canon, as Richard Usborne pointed out in "Three Good Books and a Query" (*After Hours with P. G. Wodehouse*).

On our final night in London, we went to the Connaught Hotel for dinner. And on the occasion of this little memoir, we wish to make out a new argument for the Connaught as Barribault's Hotel. Most authorities, it seems, prefer Claridge's Hotel, a few minutes' walk away, as the original of Barribault's. Norman Murphy does, and Richard Usborne immediately said Claridge's when we asked what he thought was the original of Barribault's Hotel. These are not opinions to be taken lightly. But after examining the evidence once again, we are not convinced. Yes, Claridge's is a Mayfair hotel of fame and splendor. But so is the Connaught, the focus, for example, of nine pages of adoring praise in Peter Mayle's new book, *Acquired Tastes* (Bantam, 1992). Yes, Wodehouse says that Barribault's is in Clarges Street, and that does recall the name Claridge's. But does not Clarges Street parallel Carlos Place, the Connaught's address? We think it may. Yes, references to a swirl in the lobby of Texas millionaires, duchesses with miniature poodles, and maharajahs (*Ice in the Bedroom, Plum Pie*) sound a bit more like Claridge's; but poodles arouse suspicions, because Claridge's has a strict "no dog" rule.

It would be dishonest not to admit that the suggestively ostentatious descriptions of the lobby of Barribault's, "the Mecca of the rich," sound like Claridge's, which, says *The London Encyclopædia* (Adler and Adler, 1986), "is well established as the London hotel most appropriately equipped to house the rich and the royal." But regardless, what makes Barribault's Barribault's is its restaurant. *It* is the real Mecca, drawing the characters of Wodehouse's stories thither time and time again. To identify Barribault's Hotel, you must make certain of the restaurant, and worry about the lobby later if you wish. For consider this, from *Uncle Dynamite:*

> "Barribault's," [Lord Ickenham] said to the driver, and Sally closed her eyes in a sort of ecstasy. A girl who as a rule dined sparingly in Soho, she found enchantment in the mere name of London's premier restaurant.

And this, from *Ice in the Bedroom:*

> There is something about lunch at a place like Barribault's that raises the spirits and stimulates the brain.

However acceptable the restaurant at Claridge's, the Connaught's is vastly more famous, for both its exquisite cooking and its quiet splendor as a place for the well-connected and the gently bred to sup. The Connaught's restaurant, declares *The London Encyclopædia*—silent on the subject of Claridge's restaurant—"is one of the best in London." Lunch especially at the Connaught is discussed by Londoners in tones of celestial reverence usually reserved for the better sort of miracles performed by the Deity.

It is to the Connaught, we believe, that Uncle Fred, and Galahad Threepwood, chose to take the sweet young things they befriended, to help them toward a successful conclusion of their romantic difficulties. (The night we were there, in fact, a gentleman of Uncle Fred's years was dining with a sweet young thing, seated discreetly where few other diners would notice them.) At night, the lamps throw a dreamy glow off the warm rich tones of the panelled walls; at lunchtime, sunlight streams in through the window along the walls, making every piece of china, silver, and crystal in the long room sparkle. The service there must be experienced to be appreciated, for no description of how the staff lays a gleaming-white new tablecloth upon the table, without disturbing anything on it, each time a blemish appears on the previous cloth, can do justice to this minor miracle of London life. The staff is virtually all French, and while waiters and wine stewards are eloquent in English, the only phrase heard from the bustling corps of busboys is "Thank you very much!" which they murmur to you on every possible occasion. By the time the wine is decanted and the entrée served, it is hard to resist the feeling that God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world, and you don't care whether the peasants outside live or die.

A skilled French chef is in charge of the Connaught's kitchen, which boasts a Michelin star. The menu is a striking compromise between French cooking and traditional English taste. (In all other ways, the Connaught is England Personified, tasteful, discreet, and well-bred. By contrast, Claridge's was remodeled in 1931 as an art deco palace, and makes you feel when you enter the lobby that you have suddenly stepped out of England and onto the set of a Joan Crawford movie.) Some items are clearly English, others just as clearly French. The one which most starkly symbolizes the compromise between French cooking and English taste set us both to giggling: kipper paté. We confess we did not try it. We had other appetizers that melted in the mouth, Lamb Wellington accompanied by a good claret, crême de cacao and kahlua soufflés for dessert, and very wonderful it all was too. It left us in "that comfortable state of repletion which Barribault's Hotel is always anxious to encourage in its clientele" (*Plum Pie*).

One more point, a very telling one. Please note that Barribault's had not only a dining room, but a separate Grill Room. It was there that Uncle Fred took Sally in *Uncle Dynamite* ("Ev. dress not oblig."), and there are other references to it in the Wodehousian Canon. The Connaught has a separate Grill Room. Claridge's does not. ("There are two dining rooms in the Connaught," says Peter Mayle in *Acquired Tastes:*,"and there is a certain amount of discussion about which of the two is the center of the universe.")

We fear the Wodehouse Society could not hold its biennial banquet at the Connaught. "I suppose one would be put on Barribault's blacklist if one were to throw a roll at a fellow customer," says Uncle Fred, regretfully, in *Ice in the Bedroom*. The Connaught honors the proprieties. We heard something from a London acquaintance which helps to narrow the choice between the Connaught and Claridge's as the original of Barribault's Hotel. Our friend manages a number of well-known writers, and likes to take his friends and business associates to the Connaught for lunch. One Sunday he invited a visiting New York publisher there, and was taken aback to see him arrive clad in a turtleneck and jacket. The headwaiter politely but firmly turned the publisher away, and he, rather than go eat elsewhere, returned to his own hotel to change into a suit and tie. A few days later, when our friend was at the Connaught again, the headwaiter apologized for having sent his guest back to change, and then said: "If I may ask, sir, where was your guest staying?"

"At Claridge's," answered our friend.

"Ah!" said the headwaiter, "And they let him go out like that?"

A vote for genius

by Robert Greving

Was P. G. Wodehouse a great writer; yea or nay? A question of no small import. Allow me to state my admittedly biased case for yea.

First, what is a "great writer"? Some preach, "A great writer addresses Great Issues—Love, Death, the Meaning of Life, the Current Exchange Rate. He plumbs the depths of human emotion, explores the range of mankind's experiences, probes the inner workings of the psyche. From these he forges an answer on the anvil of his soul." Having discoursed thus, these high priests of pretension take the *Code of the Woosters* and chuck it in the dust bin.

Not so fast. Granted, you seldom see B. Wooster, M. Mulliner, or C. Threepwood up late endeavoring to ascertain the Meaning of Life. (Psmith doesn't trouble himself with it, and Jeeves, I am sure, discovered it long ago.)

But that is not the point. We are not debating Wodehouse the philosopher, but Wodehouse the writer—the artisan of words. And Wodehouse the writer wove words into a tapestry of joy. He coupled verbs with nouns—spiced with the apropos adjective or adverb, and buttressed by a conjunction or two—in a top-notch manner.

Look at his plots. Not the cow-creamers lost, found, and stolen, or the engagements bumbled into and broken. No; look at their elegance. They have the breeziness of a tale told on the veranda on a summer's evening, with brandy and coffee. But nothing is wasted. Everything matters. If the Oldest Member mentions a caddy with a runny nose in paragraph the first, you can be certain, even if the urchin disappears for the nonce, he will appear later, and in a role that absolutely requires a caddy with a runny nose.

Relish the words and the phrases, crafted with precision and an giggle. Flip through a story and underline the parts that make you laugh, or make you say, "That's it!" Your pen will be busy.

Examples: "It was one of those still evenings you get in the summer, when you can hear a snail clear its throat a mile away." —"She fitted into my biggest armchair as if it had been built round her by someone who knew they were wearing armchairs tight about the hips that season."—"He had a voice that sounded as though he ate spinach with sand in it."—"The door opened and Gussie's head emerged cautiously, like that of a snail taking a look round after a thunderstorm."

Wodehouse conveyed the exact image, meaning, and nuance he wanted. That is a writer. He did this consistently, freshly, enchantingly, for seventy years, with no diminution in quality. That is a great writer.

Some, though, just can't stick it that a fellow who wrote humorously was a great writer. "Dash it," they say, "where are the tears, the bitterness, the angst?" I secretly feel these people just like to be depressed.

But what about this comedy wheeze? An English actor, whose name I cannot recall, said on his deathbed, "Dying is easy; comedy is difficult." Comedy is difficult because comedy depends upon timing. Timing is that "you had to be there" aspect. Be it written, spoken, or acted, no matter how uproariously funny something could be, it simply *won't* be if not delivered with timing.

Humorous writing is difficult because the writer must, by his words alone, control the timing with which the reader reads. The writer does not have a theatre, a screen, a set, or a person there. In time and space, the writer is separated from his audience more than any other entertainer.

Therefore, a humorous writer must have a perfect ear for the sound, rhythm, and pace of words, for their melody and harmony. A syllable too many or too few; the almost-right nuance instead of the right one; the bombast where the riposte is required; all kill a potentially humorous scene. Wodehouse had this literary perfect pitch paragraph after paragraph, story after story. That is genius.

Next time you read something of Plum's you find funny, change a word, or add a syllable. You might as well add a beat to a Strauss waltz.

"But," cry the prune-faced professors, "there is no meaning to Wodehouse. He is frivolous. He doesn't contribute to man's enrichment."

I can only reply by quoting Samuel

continued at bottom of next page

Something new

by Doug Stow

The most exciting news is the release of Barry Phelps's new biography of Wodehouse. See page 5 for details.

Barnes and Noble offers a cassette tape of the *Theatre Lyrics of P. G. Wodehouse* for $6.95. Their summer catalog also includes David Jasen's *Uncollected Wodehouse* for $6.95, and nine other titles including the fairly recent *Plum's Peaches* (short stories featuring Madeline Bassett and other women), *Lord Emsworth's Annotated Whiffle* and *Tales from the Drones Club.* All at reduced prices. Barnes and Noble, 126 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10011, phone (201) 767-7079.

The school stories are discussed in *English Schoolboy Stories* by Benjamin Watson, rare book librarian at the University of San Francisco. The flyer I have in front of me, graciously provided by Ann Whipple, TWS, says "biographical sketches are provided for most of the authors." The book can be obtained by writing to or calling:

Scarecrow Press
P O Box 4167
Metuchen NJ 08840
Phone: (800) 537-7107
Fax 908 548-5767

The price is $25.00. Shipping and handling is $2.50 in the U.S. ($3.50 overseas) for the first book and 50¢ for each additional book.

Send any news of anything new to:

Johnson, a man not noted for his tolerance of the frivolous: "Nay, sir, harmless pleasure is the highest praise. Pleasure is a word of dubious import; pleasure is in general dangerous, and pernicious to virtue; to be able therefore to furnish pleasure that is harmless, pleasure pure and unalloyed, is as great a power as man can possess." I mean to say, what?

New members

Corrections:

Marcello and Pat Truzzi live in Michigan. Their state was incorrectly listed in the June 1992 Membership List.

These corrections are included in the August 1992 Membership List.