



Plum Lines

The quarterly journal of The Wodehouse Society

Vol. 18 No 1

Spring 1998

P. G. WODEHOUSE: LYRICIST

By W. F. Richardson

A talk delivered at the Chicago convention of the Wodehouse Society, October, 1997. Will Richardson, a new acquaintance for most of us at the convention, is a New Zealand classical scholar who is co-authoring a book with President Dan Garrison. Most of us know that Plum was a prominent musical comedy lyricist in the early part of the century. Fewer of us know how excellent he was. I'm indebted to David Jasen for the rare theatrical ephemera that illustrate this article. They are copied from his *The Theatre of P.G. Wodehouse*, Batsford, London, 1979. Lara Cazalet, the soloist for several of the songs discussed here, is, of course, Plum's great-granddaughter. She is an accomplished performer and was a very welcome guest at the convention. — OM

I first encountered the name P. G. Wodehouse, not on the title page of a novel, but at the top of the published words and music of a song. It was one of the songs from the 1927 musical *Showboat*. The music for this show was written by Jerome Kern and the lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II; but at the top of the song called "Bill," and only on this one, the sheet music said: "Words by Oscar Hammerstein II and P. G. Wodehouse." That aroused my curiosity; and this paper is the result.

Among the first things that I discovered was that this was by no means the only lyric Plum ever composed; in fact his first lyric to be actually performed on stage was written as far back as 1904 when he was 23 years old. The Donaldson biography lists 25 shows for which he provided one or more lyrics; they range over a period from 1904–1928, and this was clearly his most active and successful period at this type of writing. But he

did not stop then, for in 1971 at the age of 90 he was still enthusiastically composing lyrics and writing to Guy Bolton about them. This was an activity which he enjoyed and which was an important part of his very long life.

I then made another discovery—that among those competent to judge, his reputation as a lyric writer, especially in the nineteen-twenties, was second to none. Frances Donaldson notes in her biography that "Guy Bolton insisted again and again in conversation with me that 'Plum was the tops'" and confirmatory evidence appears in her collection of his letters, where it is recorded that on his 80th birthday Plum received a telegram which said: "On this happy day I wish to thank you on behalf of Larry Hart, Oscar Hammerstein and myself for all you taught us through the years." It was signed Richard Rodgers;



Sheet music from the 23-year-old Plum's first theatrical work, "soured slightly," as David says, "by an initial mistake."

and this tribute involving three of the greatest names in American musical theatre made it clear that Guy Bolton was not exaggerating.

It was by now obvious that Plum had not merely written lyrics but had made a genuine and valuable contribution to the art of writing them. That suggested the next stage in my search: what exactly was his contribution? What was it that he had taught Lorenz Hart and others to do? These questions were much more difficult to answer. I noted, for instance, one writer's reference to Plum as "the most forgotten and underappreciated of the major lyricists," and after a while I was able to confirm from my own experience that critical assessment of him as a lyric writer is indeed almost completely lacking. But I did find a useful remark in a 1996 biography of the greatest of them all, Ira Gershwin, in which the author wrote that "Ira, along with other nascent lyricists, looked to the English writer P. G. Wodehouse, who demonstrated that song lyrics, even when the music came first, could sparkle with as much wit as light verse." It was the bit about "even when the music came first" that showed me where I must start: I must first set Plum in his proper place in the history of writing words for musical shows.

Fortunately, I had a well defined starting-point. It is widely accepted that the most important founding event in the history of American musical theatre was the New York production in 1879 of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*: one writer comments that "its success was phenomenal by any criteria [and] demonstrated to American writers and managers the artistic and commercial possibilities of artfully conceived, coherent musical plays." It was therefore with particular interest that I read the anecdote in Wodehouse's *Bring on the Girls* about his visit to the house of Sir William Gilbert for lunch in June 1903 — only a year before Plum got his first lyric performed on the musical stage — for it links Plum with the man who helped to start it all.

When Gilbert and Sullivan were composing their shows they followed an invariable system: Gilbert wrote the book and lyrics and, when the whole thing was complete, passed it on to Sullivan to compose the music. This was the standard method for the period: composers were used to taking words and setting them (i.e. to music). It meant that the lyric writer was free to compose artistically finished poems to be transformed into songs for the various characters in the work. For instance, in *The Mikado* there is a young bride who expresses her resolve to surpass in beauty everybody else at the wedding in the following formal poem:

The sun, whose rays
are all ablaze
with ever-living glory,
does not deny
his majesty —
he scorns to tell a story!
He don't exclaim,
'I blush for shame,
so kindly be indulgent.'
But, fierce and bold,
in fiery gold
he glories all effulgent!

I mean to rule the earth
as he the sky —
we really know our worth
the sun and I!

Observe his flame,
that placid dame,
the moon's Celestial Highness;
there's not a trace
upon her face
of diffidence or shyness:
she borrows light
that, through the night,
mankind may all acclaim her!
And, truth to tell,
she lights up well,
so I, for one, don't blame her!

Ah, pray make no mistake,
we are not shy;
we're very wide awake,
the moon and I!

This stands as a poem in its own right, and it inspired Sullivan to set it to one of his most famous tunes.

One person, however, was not entirely happy with this arrangement: the composer, who felt irksomely restricted by having to work to a format already rigidly laid down by the previously-composed lyrics. And around the turn of the century a revolutionary idea developed: maybe it would be possible to compose songs the other way round, writing the music first and then fitting words to it. In the notes to a collection of his lyrics first published in 1949 Oscar Hammerstein II made some interesting suggestions as to how this idea arose: it came partly, he said, from the practice of translating foreign shows for performance on the American stage, and partly from the rising popularity of dance music, in which the music manifestly had prece-

dence over the lyric. But the important thing for our purposes is that Plum always wrote in this way, and was thus the first of the great lyricists to prove that it actually was possible, and that the resultant songs would serve just as well as those composed in the traditional fashion. He received the respect of the later lyricists of the American stage because it was he more than anyone who taught them how to do it; and in fact two of the great names mentioned earlier, Ira Gershwin and Lorenz Hart, always wrote their lyrics for music



Sheet music from a Bolton-Wodehouse-Kern show of 1917—three months in New York, five years on the road.

that had already been composed. And Plum actually preferred to do it like this. He once remarked: "If I write a lyric without having to fit it to a tune, I always make it too much like a set of light verse, much too regular in metre. I think you get the best results by giving the composer his head and having the lyricist follow him." This made him, incidentally, the ideal collaborator with Jerome Kern, who always insisted on writing the

music first and once it was written would never under any circumstances agree to alter it.

In reading and appreciating Plum's lyrics it is of the first importance to remember that this is how they were composed; for this method of composition meant that it was now the lyricist who was in a straitjacket created for him by the composer. Irving Berlin made it sound easy in one of his lyrics:

He sent his melody
across the sea to Italy
and vino;
they wrote some words to fit
that catchy bit and christened it
The Piccolino.

But in fact it was a bit like doing a crossword puzzle, for three things had to be kept in mind: the words must exactly fit the tune, with grammatical phrases matching the length of the musical phrases, they must say something appropriate to the character in the show who is singing them, and they must not pose any articulation

problems for the singer (that is, for instance, they must not contain any awkward consonant clusters which might trip up the performer's tongue). It was Plum who first showed how to achieve this and produce something poetical into the bargain.

Here, by contrast with the one from *The Mikado* that we had earlier, is a song that was written in this way. This one was written for a revue called *Miss 1917*; Jerome wrote the music and then passed it on to Plum to supply words. It is called "Go, Little Boat" and is now regarded as one of the two best songs in the show.

(Lara Cazalet sings "Go, Little Boat")

In order to make a critical assessment of this lyric, which is from Plum's early period, we must strip it of its music; and in doing this we need to remember that the words were never intended to stand on their own: they exist only because the music existed before them, and if the music is taken away the words lose the reason for



The good people of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, were attracted to *Oh, Boy* by this poster in 1917.

their existence. However, if we are to make some assessment of Plum's achievement as a lyricist we cannot avoid doing this. So here are the words:

Soft, softly as over the water we creep,
winds seem to sigh.
Dark, dark is the night and the world is asleep:
wakeful am I.
Slow, slow though the river may flow,
soon, soon I shall be
safe, safe in the harbour, where someone, I know,
waits for me.
Go little boat, serenely gliding;
over the silver water riding.
Naught but the stars I see,
shining above:
flow river, carry me
to him I love.
Go little boat, serenely gliding.
Love at the helm your course is guiding.
Fair winds to hasten you may fortune send,
till I come safe to journey's end.
Ah!

The first thing that strikes one here is the simplicity of the language: "serenely" is the only word in it of more than two syllables. This is a feature for which Plum was famous as a lyric writer. There is also for the most part a refreshing lack of conscious poetic technique or "artiness." Only in two lines near the end has the necessity of the rhyme forced him to make a poetic inversion: "Love at the helm your course is guiding" and, worse, "Fair winds to hasten you may fortune send." Ira Gershwin considered that such inversions had no place in a song lyric, and later in his career Plum would probably have agreed with him. Their presence here reminds us firstly that this lyric comes from a fairly early stage in Plum's career, and secondly that he was in any case a pioneer in this type of composition, laying a foundation upon which others might later build. It is interesting that in the Gilbert lyric from *The Mikado* quoted earlier there are no such inversions.

Bereft of its music this lyric has other curious features. There is, for example the irritating series of repetitions in the first section: soft, soft(ly); dark, dark; slow, slow and so on. These make no sense until the words are fitted to their music, in which all the phrases in this first section begin with a single long note followed by a series of short ones; Plum has chosen this verbal method of pointing up this feature of the melody, and because of this the repetitions come across as quite natural when the song is sung. There is a similar reason for what may strike the poetic ear as irregularities in the metre of the written lyric. Take the short lines in the

first section: four syllables, four syllables, five syllables, three syllables. This makes an interesting contrast again with the lyric from *The Mikado*, in which the metre is exactly regular right through. But the apparent irregularity in Plum's lyric is once again due to the music; it is because the composer, having exactly duplicated in lines 3 and 4 the metrical format of lines 1 and 2, deliberately alters it in the last two couplets. In the music the first two couplets occupy four bars; the third couplet, too, occupies four bars, but the number of notes and hence the note values are different, and the lyric faithfully reflects this. In the fourth couplet the music returns to the original structure, but there is a held note on the word "know" that takes up one of the four notes in the last line—hence only three syllables in the lyric, which again faithfully reflects the music. The same phenomenon causes what seems on the printed page to be a sudden change of metre in the last two lines of the second part; the composer has again been very careful not to repeat what he had written earlier, and Plum has faithfully followed him.



The "Go, Little Boat" show. A lavish production with huge expenses, it closed after 48 performances.

Another criterion that must be applied in assessing a song lyric is singability: does it contain anything that will make things difficult for the performer? Here one looks particularly for awkward consonant clusters that might trip up the performer's tongue. In this respect Plum has achieved a triumphant success, for there is only one place in the lyric that is even slightly suspect from this point of view, and that is in the second line, where the "d" followed by two separate "s"s is a little difficult to get your tongue round. Again, there is only one place where the natural accent of the lyric does not match that of the music, and that is in the line "to him I love"; these words when spoken are naturally accented on the second and fourth words, but the music requires the singer to accent the first and fourth. Another point that one checks is that there should be no close vowels on high notes: on a high note

it is much easier to sing “ah” than “ee.” Here the high notes at the end of the music are given to the “Ah!” that the singer holds over the last few bars; it looks very odd on the printed page, but makes perfect sense when the music is added. Overall, although we have made a few minor criticisms of this lyric, it would be regarded as a most promising performance, strongly suggesting that even finer achievements would come later.

So now we shall move on to 1924 and the show *Sitting Pretty*, the last of the Bolton-Wodehouse-Kern musicals. Plum has now had six years’ more experience at setting words to Kern’s music, and he has now mastered some difficult linguistic tricks. He can, for example, do triple rhymes (as when you rhyme “history” with “mystery”); we find the following lines in the opening scene:

Why, he shouldn’t get sore if I
start taking a whirl
at trying to glorify
the American girl!

Ira Gershwin recalled that “Wodehouse once told me that the greatest challenge (and greatest worry) to him in lyric writing was to come across a section of a tune requiring three double rhymes.” Elsewhere in this opening chorus Plum pulls three *triple* rhymes out of his box of tricks:

To play all day about this garden would not weary us;
it’s full of shrubberies all shady and mysterious;
but if we’re caught inside, the penalties are serious.

And just look at the linguistic virtuosity (including more triple rhymes) in the opening lines of this lyric from later in the show (the lyric’s title is “Bongo on the Congo”):

Beneath the silver Afric moon
a few miles south of Cameroon,
there lies the haven which you ought to seek:
where cassowaries take their ease
up in the coca-cola trees
while crocodiles sit crocking in the creek.
Though on some nearby barren height
the heat’s two hundred Fahrenheit,
down in the valley it is nice and cool.
And yet, I don’t know why it is,
the girls of all varieties
wear little but a freckle as a rule.

Ira Gershwin recalled that this was one that fired his

ambition. In a show called *TipToes* in 1925 he wrote a trio called “These Charming People”; he printed the lyric in his *Lyrics on Several Occasions*, and commented “I liked the trio ‘These Charming People,’ which seemed to amuse the audience. Up to then I’d often wondered if I could do a comedy trio like the ones P. G. Wodehouse used to come up with—‘Bongo on the Congo’ for instance.” So once again Plum appears as the teacher of the great lyricists who were to follow him.

Lastly we move on again to 1927 and *Showboat*. Kern was the composer of this, his finest work; this time his lyric writer was Oscar Hammerstein II. One of the characters in *Showboat* is a singer called Julie LaVerne,

who early in the piece sings one of the show’s most famous songs, “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man of Mine.” The performer engaged for this role was a singer named Helen Morgan, and at a fairly late stage before the New York opening Kern realised that her voice was so exciting that she deserved another song all to herself in the second act.

He also realised that he knew the very song to suit her; and at that point something of a drama be-



“Bongo on the Congo” and “The Enchanted Train” would alone have justified this show.

gan, for the song he had in mind was one that he had composed many years ago and which had a lyric, not by Oscar Hammerstein II, but by Plum. Eventually the problems were overcome (at least for the moment—there were ramifications later which we haven’t time to go into) and the song was used in the show; and Helen Morgan’s performance of it was such that she made it into a standard and its lyric became Plum’s most famous lyric. Because of this we need to spend a little time looking at it, and then we’ll ask our singer to end the session by singing it for us.

The song was originally written for a show called *Oh, Lady! Lady!!*, which opened in New York on 1 February 1918. The plot of this show narrated how one Mollie Farrington married a certain Willoughby French (“Bill”) despite her mother’s objections and a variety of other obstacles, and in this song, which Mollie was supposed to sing to her mother, she says basically: “He



may not strike you as much of a catch, but I love him and that's that." The music, as usual with Kern and Wodehouse, came first, and one critic noted that it has "a singularly elusive undercurrent of sadness that Wodehouse caught and perpetuated in his lyric." But the song was eventually not used in *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* mainly because the actor playing Willoughby French was a dashing and handsome man who simply wasn't like the Bill described in the song. So Kern put it into his trunk and brought it out again two years later for a show called *Sally*; but again it was not used, this time because it did not suit the voice of the actress who would have had to sing it. It ended up in *Showboat*, as we know.

Now, it is well known that Plum later complained that Oscar Hammerstein II changed "about three words" in the lyric of "Bill" for the purposes of *Showboat*, and hence that the lyric as it stands in the score of *Showboat* is not exactly what Plum originally wrote. Tracking down the *original* form of the lyric was not easy. As printed in the score of *Showboat* the song has two parts, of which the second (consisting of verse + chorus) repeats the music—but not the words—of the first (also consisting of verse + chorus). In her biography of Plum, Frances Donaldson prints what she implies (but does not actually state) is the original form of

the lyric: it consists of only the first part and has some noticeable differences from the *Showboat* text. She does not point out that she lifted the words she quotes straight from *Bring on the Girls*, where Plum and Guy Bolton quoted them as part of an anecdote involving Flo Ziegfeld. But here is the point: the lyric as quoted there and reproduced in the Donaldson biography cannot be sung to the tune it is supposed to go with, for two whole lines are missing from the verse section. Not only that but, although the second verse and chorus did not appear at all in *Bring on the Girls*, I was sure that they too were originally Plum's, or largely his, because they include a little trick that he used again elsewhere. It occurs in the lines

He isn't tall and straight and slim,
and he dresses far worse than Ted or Jim.

Ted and Jim are not characters in *Showboat* or either of the other shows that the song was proposed for; they are simply two familiar names brought in to epitomise the common man (and also, of course, to rhyme with "slim"), and Plum does exactly the same thing but on a larger scale in a lyric from another show, *Oh Boy!* (1917). One of the leading ladies is singing about man-hunting and the sort of man she particularly hopes to catch:

Ev'rywhere you go,
men are useful, so
just collect them when you find them.
Catch twenty:
that's plenty.
I don't think you need more.
If they say you flirt,
don't be feeling hurt.
That's a way they have; don't mind them.
They tell us they're jealous,
but that's what men are for.

At the op'ra
I like to be with Freddie.
To a musical show
I go with Joe.
I like to dance with Ted,
and golf with Dick or Ned.
And at the races
and other lively places
Sam and Eddie are fun.
But I'm pining
till there comes in my direction
one combining
ev'ry masculine perfection,
who'll be Eddie
and Joe and Dick and Sam and Freddie

and Neddie and Teddie
rolled in one.

And the song is in fact called “Rolled into One.”

I was therefore sure that the lyric quoted in the Donaldson biography from *Bring on the Girls* was not in fact Plum’s original lyric, which was actually twice as long as the lyric that appears there; and yet we have Plum’s own word for it that the lyric that now appears in *Showboat* is not exactly his either, as Oscar Hammerstein II had made changes to it. I might never have discovered what the original lyric actually said had not a CD called “Broadway Showstoppers” been issued in 1992. One of the tracks on this features the original 1918 version of “Bill,” with the genuine original lyric printed in the accompanying booklet. It turns out that, in adopting the song for *Showboat* Kern did something he virtually never did—he actually made a change in his original melody, and this necessitated a change in the lyric. As Oscar Hammerstein II was his lyricist for this show it was he who was asked to make the necessary change in the words. The change affected only two bars of the music, near the beginning of the chorus section; but it made quite a difference to the words, as Kern changed three long notes in his original melody to eleven short ones. So where in the original lyric (which you are about to hear) the singer sings “of all the men,” in the *Showboat* lyric the words say “You’d meet him on the street and never notice him”; and in the corresponding place the second time through you’ll hear the singer sing “a motorcar” where Oscar Hammerstein’s lyric has “He hasn’t got a thing that I can brag about.” So now here is the song in its original form, with Plum’s original lyric intact—one of the very few live performances it has received since 1918.

(Lara Cazalet sings “Bill”)

I used to dream that I would discover
The perfect lover some day
I knew I’d recognize him
If ever he came ’round my way.
I always used to fancy then
He’d be one of the godlike kind of men
With a giant brain and a noble head
Like the heroes bold in the books I read;

But along came Bill,
who’s quite the opposite
of all the men in story books.
In grace and looks

I know that Apollo
would beat him all hollow.
And I can’t explain,
it’s surely not his brain
that makes me thrill.
I love him because he’s wonderful,
because he’s just old Bill.

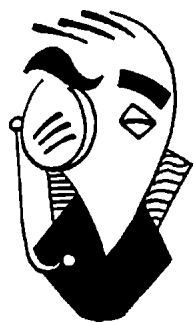
He can’t play golf or tennis or polo,
Or sing a solo, or row.
He isn’t half as handsome
As dozens of men that I know.
He isn’t tall and straight or slim,
And he dresses far worse than Ted or Jim;
And I can’t explain why he should be just
The one, one man in the world for me;

He’s just my Bill,
he has no gifts at all;
a motor car he cannot steer,
and it seems clear
whenever he dances
his partner takes chances.
And I can’t explain,
it’s surely not his brain
that makes me thrill.
I love him because he’s—I don’t know—
Because he’s just my Bill.

REMSENBURG HOUSE FOR SALE

The house in Remsenburg on Long Island, where Plum and Ethel Wodehouse lived for so many years, is on the market, and \$750,000 is all it takes to make the house your home. The Wodehouses were living on Park Avenue in New York City when they bought the house in 1952. They used it as a summer home until they moved there permanently in 1955. At one time the property consisted of twelve acres, affording plenty of privacy in an already private village. The house, goal of several of our pilgrimages, has I believe undergone only a few modifications since the death of Plum in 1975 and Ethel in 1984. If you’re a prospective buyer, call Reynolds Realty, Inc., 98-100 Main St., Westhampton Beach, New York 11978, phone (516) 288-1050. And let us drop in for a visit.

—OM

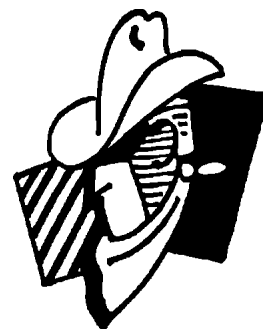


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Gone To Texas

CONVENTION '99

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The historic Wyndham Warwick is our official TWS *Gone To Texas* CONVENTION '99 hotel. Register by April 30, '99 have a chance to win a free stay at the Wyndham Warwick during the convention!

— *Gone To Texas* — what does it mean?

In America, in the years before and shortly after the Civil War, one could be jailed for indebtedness. Likewise, one could be jailed for breaking the law in any of a variety of ways, as remains true today. However, in those halcyon days of old, if one made it to the Texas border, the law was stymied. There was no extradition from Texas. Today, the historian or genealogist may find in court records the simple notation GTT. This was an abbreviation for Gone to Texas.

There will be games:

Cricket (TWS style)
Sling-shots & Brazil nuts
Pot the Bending Baxter

There will be festivities:

Party Friday night & Saturday night
Rodeo and a play (still being planned)
Daughters of the B
The English Speaking Union binge (being planned)

There will be improving books:

Booksellers & members books offered for sale
(bring your "extra" books)

There will be Friday day trips:

NASA & Space Center Houston
San Jacinto & other historic sights
Paddle boat trip on the bayou

There will be intellectual stimulation:

Videos of Wodehouse movies, TV shows of golf & Mulliner stories and little-known
rest. Do you have a video you would like to share with TWS? Contact Brad Frank, (713) 526-7263

There will be inspirational beauty:

Chapters tables – if you are in a chapter, bring information about the deeds and doings of your group.

Plan now to close up shop and light out for Houston in 1999.

IONICUS

Pauline Blanc, Pam Bruxner, Donald Daniel, and Jan Kaufmansent items from various newspapers about the recent death of Ionicus. The following account is a collation. —OM

Ionicus, the artist and illustrator who died January 28 at the age of 84, was known outside his professional work by his real name of Joshua Armitage; his best-known work evoked the comic world of P. G. Wodehouse.



Ionicus

Blandings. "I don't want to appear big-headed, but I believe Penguin thought I got it right," he said.

He provided 58 covers for Penguin Books' Wodehouse paperback series, and these resulted in further commissions, including a request to provide 12 watercolours for the walls of the United Oxford and Cambridge University Club in London.

Joshua Armitage, known to his friends as Jos, was born on September 26, 1913 and lived at Hoylake, a seaside town at the tip of the Wirral peninsula, near Liverpool, all his life.

It was during his naval service in the Second World War that he sent off his first batch of cartoons to *Punch*, and one was accepted—earning him four guineas. It depicted two music critics walking past a concert hall where a notice announced: Tonight—Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. One critic says to the other: "Talk about plugging—that's the third time in 12 months they have played Beethoven's Fifth!"

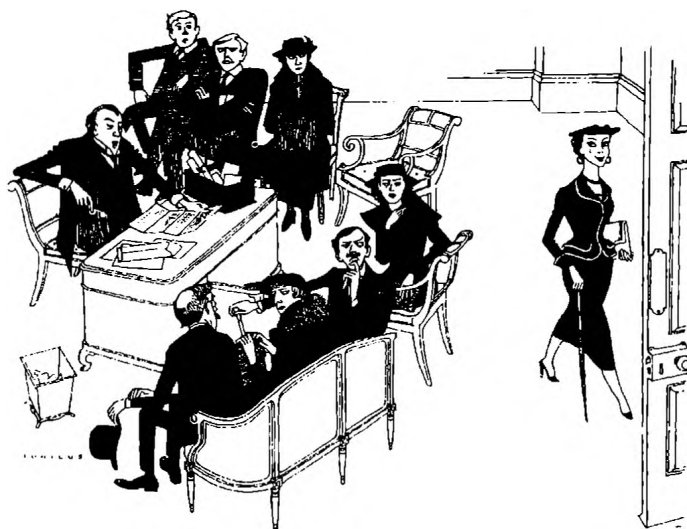
That first publication determined Armitage's choice of penname, derived from the Ionic columns of the hall. The cheque was considerably more than his weekly

Armitage contributed cartoons and drawings to *Punch* for more than 40 years, and provided cover designs and text illustrations for nearly 400 books. But he was noted above all for his interpretations of such much-loved characters of Wodehouse's stories as Bertie Wooster, Jeeves, Gussie Fink-Nottle, Lord Emsworth, his butler Beach, and his prize pig Empress of

income before the war, and he was filled with optimism for the future. "But I discovered," he said later, "that it was not that easy."

After 1950 Armitage spend his life working freelance, his drawing board propped up on a table in the front room of his home in a quiet suburban road near the sea front at Hoylake.

Armitage was particularly pleased to be asked to draw a bird's-eye view of Blandings Castle and its surrounding Shropshire countryside for Wodehouse's last, uncompleted novel, *Sunset at Blandings*.



"So much for the bulk of the estate; now for the residue."

Another side of Ionicus—probably a *Punch* cartoon, date unknown.

"I regard the entire personnel of the ensembles of our musical comedy theatres as—if you will forgive me being Victorian for a moment—painted hussies."

"They've got to paint."

"Well, they needn't huss. And they needn't ensnare my son."

Heavy Weather, 1933

HINGHAM AND THE WODEHOUSES

By Norman Murphy

Wendell Verrill has discovered a curious fact about the east window of St. Andrew's Church (c. 1359) in Hingham, Norfolk, England: the glass for the window was made in Germany in the 1500s and bought in Holland in 1813 by Lord Wodehouse, Lord of the Manor. "What relation, if any," asks Wendell, "would this Wodehouse have with PGW?" For answer I turned to Norman Murphy, the man than whom, in these matters, there is surely none whomer. Here is his response. —OM

Yes, it is the same family. Whenever you see the spelling *Wodehouse* it is *always* the Wodehouses of Norfolk. When the family got its knighthood the royal clerks couldn't spell (nobody could in those days), but the family were unable to change it to normal *Woodehouse* thereafter because they were stuck with the Royal grant of arms and the misspelling thereon. That is why quite a few of our aristocratic names are spelt so oddly.

To be accurate, the 1813 Lord Wodehouse was PG's great-grandfather's brother. The family were knights up to 1611. (I can't resist adding that they got the knighthood for valor at Agincourt like Uncle Fred's forebear, the Twistleton who "snapped into it with his hair in a braid and was the life and soul at the battle of Agincourt.") They got a baronetcy in 1611 and your 1813 chap was made up to baron, i.e. Lord Wodehouse, in 1797. He died in 1834.

His younger brother was Philip, whose son fought at Waterloo and whose widow PG and brothers used to holiday with at Powick in Worcestershire. [Norman notes in his *In Search of Blandings* that PGW "was perhaps the last man to be able to say that his grandfather fought at Waterloo." —OM]

Get a map of England and look for Norwich in the east. Eight miles south-west of Norwich is Wymondham, ancestral Wodehouse home. A couple of miles west of Wymondham is Kimberley, which is the name the Lord Wodehouse took when made up to earl in 1866, i.e., Earl of Kimberley. Hingham is the next village west of Kimberley. It was probably then on land owned by Lord Wodehouse.

Kimberley in South Africa is named after the first earl, and various places around the world are named after other members of the family who conquered, discovered, or captured them. For example, why does the Hawaiian state flag have a Union Jack on it? Because the British Minister to Hawaii in 1892-94 put it

there before we let the USA have it—and who he? James Hay Wodehouse, PG's cousin, that who he.

If you want to see who, what, and where the Wodehouses were, try your nearest big library for Burke's Peerage, NOT Debrett, and look up Kimberley, Earl of—and every one of them is there.

MORE ACROSTIC SOLVERS

In the previous issue I neglected to mention several people who solved the Wodehouse acrostic. They are Sue Marra Byham, Daniel Love Glazer, and Margaret and Mary McDonald. My apologies to all of them for my carelessness—I hope they have not decided that I, like Sir Jasper ffinch-ffarrowmere, am a ffiend.

—OM

FINANCIAL REPORT, 1997

By Tom Wainwright, Treasurer

Balance, December 31, 1996		\$5144.03
Income		
Dues and fees	\$14,479.90	
Interest	20.75	
Total income		14,510.65
Expenses		
Plum Lines production and mailing	\$13,246.75	
Correspondence: postage, back issues, telephone	779.13	
Total expenses		14,025.88
Balance, December 31, 1997		\$5,628.80

HEINEMAN AUCTION

Word has arrived from numerous sources that there will be an auction of the late Jimmy Heineman's priceless Wodehouse collection on Friday, June 26, 1998 (the date having been changed recently from June 15). It will take place at Sotheby's, 1334 York Ave. at 72nd Street, in New York City. A catalog for the auction material may be ordered by calling (800) 444-3709 and asking for Catalog #7151, the Heineman/Wodehouse catalog. Price of the catalog is \$38, payable by credit card only. Web site address is <http://www.sothebys.com> The auction will be open to the public.

Jimmy's is probably the finest collection of Wodehousiana in the known universe, and a great many of us are saddened to see it dispersed after his years of enthusiastic and expensive collecting.

Plummies headed for the auction will gather in New York on June 26, and if you'd like to join the group, get in touch with Auntie. Tony Ring, himself the owner of an impressive Wodehouse collection, had originally planned to bid by telephone from the comfort of his home in England, but now finds that he must be in Zimbabwe that day, which has created a bit of a sticky wicket for him. We wish him all sorts of success, and we encourage any member with a few extra pennies to attend and be successful also. —AD and OM

PGW BOOKS FOR SALE

All of the following are first American editions; dust jackets noted if present; prices include shipping within the United States.

1. Meet Mr. Mulliner, 1928. A near fine copy. \$35.
2. Money for Nothing, 1928. A very good copy. \$30.
3. Mr. Mulliner Speaking, 1929. A very good copy. \$30.
4. Big Money, 1931. A very good copy. \$30.
5. Hot Water, 1932. A good copy. \$20.
6. Laughing Gas, 1936. Near fine in very good DJ which says "second edition" on the inside front flap. \$65.
7. Eggs, Beans and Crumpets, 1940. Near fine in very good DJ. \$100.
8. Nothing Serious, 1951. A near fine copy. \$25.
9. The Butler Did It, 1957. Near fine in near fine DJ. \$35.

A PERSONNET

By John Fletcher

(Any word beginning with "s" may be preceded by a silent "p" as the reader wishes.)

Shall we compare him to a summer's day?
Our Comrade will the better scintillate.
Rough Baxter shakes the budding loves of May,
And summer's silence does occasionally grate.
Sometimes too bright the celestial monocle shines,
And often goes his gold complexion cold;
And many a fine day overcast declines.
But prattle, inconsequential, ever bold,
Wit, studied impertinence, shall not fade.
Success has never spoiled him. He shows
He wanders not in Lady Constance' shade
When in four volumes, year by year, he grows.
So long as men can read and eyes can see,
So long lives Wodehouse, who gives life to thee.



This was one of the poems—and one of the cleverest—read at the Chicago convention. —OM

WODEHOUSIAN

Members of our society have debated how to spell the word that means "of or belonging to Wodehouse"—there are the "Wodehousean" and "Wodehousian" schools. In matters of spelling, consistency for the reader is more important than freedom for the writer. Consistency and a concern for the widest accommodation require the spelling most common in good usage.

What is that spelling? Current reference works (*Oxford English Dictionary*, *Second Edition*, *Fowler's* third, etc.) indicate that for proper names the suffix "ian" clearly predominates. For example, "Wodehousian" appears in *OED2* with several supporting quotations, but "Wodehousean" does not appear at all. The "ian" derives historically from Latin through French to English. For words of Greek origin "ean" is common, but "Wodehouse" is not Greek. Note that in this case these reference works are not arbiters, merely reporters of usage. "Wodehousian" will henceforth be the spelling in *Plum Lines*. —OM

CHAPTERS CORNER

Three cheers and many thanks to the members of the Chicago Accident Syndicate, hosts of a superb convention last October! Putting such a meeting together is not an easy task, but the C.A.S. met the challenge with a great deal of panache and an attention to detail that boggled the mind. From the choice of the Intercontinental Hotel down to the bagful of goodies that was passed out, all Plummies in attendance were treated like royalty and enjoyed themselves like Drones. Our gratitude and applause go out especially to chief organizers Dan and Tina Garrison, Susan Jewell, and Jon Lellenberg, who were ably assisted by Kathy Lewis and a score of other Syndicators. The entire crew pitched in with diligence and enthusiasm to make a memorable weekend. Congratulations, C.A.S. !

Congratulations are also due to the Drone Rangers of Texas, who won the brass ring for 1999. As we totter on the edge of the millennium, the D.R.s will attempt to follow Chicago's jolly good act in their home territory of Houston. Much good luck to them—we look forward to what Houston will have to offer us!

And now it is Auntie's pleasure to announce the establishment of two new chapters, one formed just prior to the convention, and one formed just after. In no particular order, they are:

The Angler's Rest is the name of the new Seattle chapter, founded by Susan Collicott with the able assistance of Meredith Kelley, otherwise known as Lady Terry Cobbold. They have been busily recruiting new members in the greater Seattle area, and by this time their first organizational meeting will have long since been held, no doubt, to resounding success. I am told that their future newsletter will be dubbed *Fish Tails*.

The Soup & Fish Club in Virginia has been meeting the first Friday of every month for, I believe, the past several months now. Favorite doings have included watching *Damsel In Distress*, starring Fred Astaire with Burns and Allen, and meetings at which favorite quotes were shared.

Meanwhile, there are stirrings afoot to form a chapter in the South Florida region, tentatively entitled The

Royal Palm Drones of Miami. No more information is on hand, but Auntie will keep you informed.

Chapters: Send me your newsletters, announcements, reports, etc., so that we may keep abreast of your doings. Auntie would also like to request that if there has been any change in contact information for any of the currently established chapters, please let her know. Updated chapter information will be published in the next issue of *Plum Lines*.

In current chapter news, the Drone Rangers in Texas had the good fortune to host a post-convention visit from Tony Ring, Scripture Knowledge Master Extraordinaire, who delighted the group with a talk at their October meeting. Tony's topic was "A Recap of Serial Killers," a paper-in-progress concerning the magazine serialization of Wodehouse novels. As always, we will look forward to the final product of Tony's mighty pen, which never fails to enlighten and entertain us. Meanwhile, the Drone Rangers held their annual party in celebration of Wodehouse this past February, this time at an historic old fire house in Houston. Top notch food, drink, and fun abounded as our southernmost Drones played their unique versions of gowf and knocking off top hats with "brazil nuts" (nerf balls). It was noted on PGW-Net that "As parties go, this one was tops. The only sorely missed element was a swimming pool with swinging rings, but one may not have everything." We hope the Drone Rangers will rectify this error in 1999!

The latest issues of the Blandings Castle newsletter featured articles on Doug and Margaret Stow, who do beautiful letterpress printing, and on Marilyn MacGregor, TWS's beloved corresponding secretary and one of the soundest eggs known to humankind. For many years Doug and Margaret have been generous providers of hand-printed Wodehousian memorabilia at TWS events, including the memento especially created for the 1997 convention in Chicago. The quality of their work never fails to impress, and their generosity has given many a Plummie much joy over the years. Thank you, Doug and Margaret!

Marilyn, meanwhile, is the one person all new members of TWS hear from first. She is renowned not only for her devotion to Plum and the interests of our society, but also for her expertise in all things Sherlockian. In fact, the talk she gave in Chicago discussed the relationship between Wodehouse and Sherlock Holmes. Her tribute in the chapter newsletter, *The Argus Intelligencer and Wheat Growers Gazette*, was glowing indeed, and could only begin to do justice to this extraordinary Plummie who is held in the highest esteem by all. Tally-ho, Marilyn!

—AD

PAPERWEIGHTS

David McDonough writes: "I recently came across a re-issue of Plum's *The Purloined Paperweight*, published by — this is true — The Paperweight Press, an arm of the International Paperweight Society in Santa Cruz, California. It contains a foreword all about paperweights in which it is pointed out that Plum was wrong in referring to paperweights as eighteenth century items. They are actually nineteenth, says Lawrence H. Selman, who seems to be to the paperweight world what Gussie Fink-Nottle is to newts."

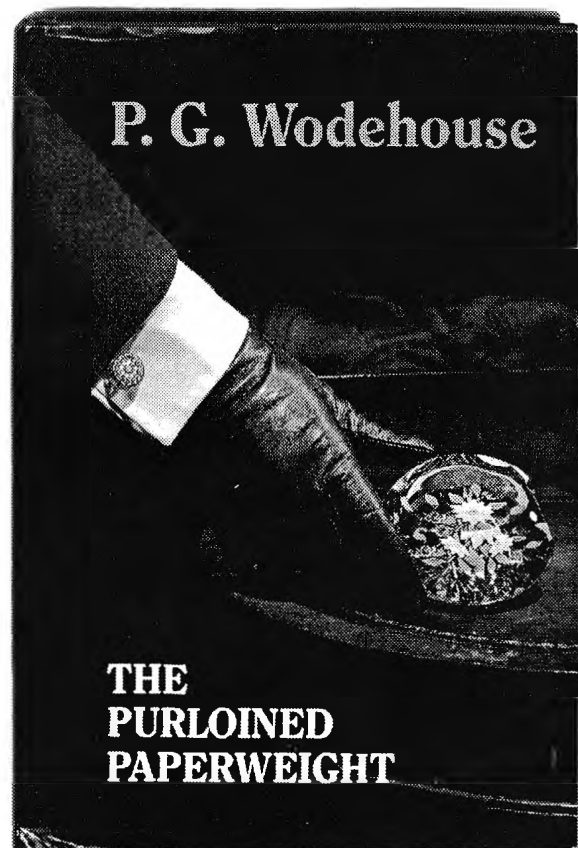
I can add what we ace reporters refer to as a personal angle. Several years ago, drawn by advertisements in *The New Yorker*, I approached the paperweight shop of Lawrence H. Selman in Santa Cruz (I live six miles away), expecting to look over his trifling wares as if I were choosing a loaf of bread. The door was locked. Only after I had stood outside and been briefly appraised by someone inside was the door unlocked. I quickly understood why. Even with my vast wealth I could not have bought many of the gorgeous, gleaming paperweights displayed in the locked cabinets ranged around the room. I left the place slightly awed and in possession of a copy of *The Purloined Paperweight*, published, sure enough, by The Paperweight Press. (Note the "paperweight" cuff-link on the dust jacket.)

David is right: Lawrence H. Selman is surely the Fink-Nottle of the paperweight world, the emperor of the glassy globes. A momentary frown from Lawrence H., and a reputation lies in ruins; a discreet smile, and a career blossoms. He may even do these things while laughing down from lazy eyelids and flicking a speck of dust from the irreproachable Mechlin lace at his wrists.

But wait. There's more. Sometime later, looking for a mailing service for *Plum Lines*, I approached the office of Complete Mailing Service in Santa Cruz. The door was unlocked, and I began a business relationship with a highly competent mailing service. Then I discovered that it too was owned by Lawrence H. Selman. It seems that most of his worldwide business is conducted by mail, and such was the volume of his mailings that he had set up a separate mailing operation and later opened it to all comers.

Well, dear hearts, we are one (or many) of those comers, and Lawrence H. Selman, at some remove, has been mailing *Plum Lines* for four years.

—OM



OH GOD, OH MONTREAL!

David Landman notes that "There has been some buzz in cyberspace recently about the source of the line 'Oh God, oh Montreal!' which Mortimer Bayliss ejaculates on the second page of *The Butler Did It* (*Something Fishy*, UK). It comes from 'A Psalm of Montreal' written by Samuel Butler, the 19th century novelist, who often recited the poem and gave it to friends. For reasons that escape me, the poem has been extensively anthologized in Oxford and Faber collections of comic, satiric, and light verse. I suppose it's one of those jokes that you had to have been there to appreciate. Maybe it was the way Butler recited it — like an Old Testament prophet perhaps. Maybe he wore false whiskers.

"The poem deplores the failure of a Montreal museum to put on public display a cast of an ancient Greek figure, the Discobolus — classic but 'vulgar.' Each stanza ends with the lament quoted by Mortimer Bayliss."

PLUM NETTED IN MOSCOW

By Kevin O'Flynn, staff writer, *Moscow Times*

This article is reprinted from *The Moscow Times* of March 12, 1998. Its subject, Mikhail Kuzmenko, is a regular contributor to PGW-Net and alt.fan.Wodehouse. Amusing letters from Mr. Kuzmenko were read at the Chicago convention. —AD

To his fellow lecturers in the Mechanics and Mathematics Department of Moscow State University, he is known as plain old Mikhail Kuzmenko. But in his free time Kuzmenko transforms into Sir Watkyn Bassett, the stuffy English aristocrat created by novelist P.G. Wodehouse.

Wodehouse's comic novels, depicting the foppish, feather-brained aristocrats of 1920s England, were outlawed by Soviet censors who thought his characters might corrupt readers' minds. Now, though, Kuzmenko is leading a high-tech comeback through his online P.G. Wodehouse Society.

Kuzmenko fell in love with P. G. Wodehouse's writing three years ago after seeing a television series based on the author's best-known characters, Jeeves and Wooster.

"I bought a couple of books," said Kuzmenko "And I began to communicate [on the web] with people from around the world and found out about societies, admirers, web pages...and decided to create my own page devoted to Wodehouse in Russia."

Since it was set up in 1996, Kuzmenko's web site (mech.math.msu.su/~gmk/pgw.htm) has registered 36,000 hits. It features the covers of most of Wodehouse's books translated into Russian, information on where to buy books and videos in Russia, and even a picture of Wodehouse's gravestone.

Kuzmenko's society is not quite ready to compete with others around the world. There have been no Russian meetings like the Chicago convention last year.

"It's not a formal society, it's a virtual one. Those who want to consider themselves a member can," said Kuzmenko. "We haven't got that many...because [people] didn't know about him. He wasn't translated because he didn't write about the life of the poor, the hard life of the workers, like Dickens. He wrote about aristocrats."

Wodehouse was published in the Soviet Union for a brief time in the 1920s because his humorous stories of upper class frivolity were considered satirical, present day translator Natalya Trauberg said.

Trauberg remembers her father being a fan. "My father and his friends worked in the cinema. In those days, they were considered eccentric, which was very un-Soviet. Then they became very unhappy, which was very Soviet. They loved Wodehouse very much," she said. "They loved him not because he was very satirical, but because they passionately wanted to be like the Drones. They dreamed about that kind of life."

Translations dried up, though, after a newspaper article denounced Wodehouse as decadent.

It is not known for certain why the authorities changed their minds about Wodehouse, but perhaps a golfing short story published in 1922 had something to do with it.

"The Clicking of Cuthbert" tells of Vladimir Brusiloff, a Russian novelist who "specialized in gray studies of hopeless misery where nothing happened till page 380, when the moujik decided to commit suicide."

In the story, Brusiloff regales Cuthbert, a golfing fanatic, with tales of his foursome match against Lenin and Trotsky:

"Someone in the crowd he tries to assassinate Lenin with rewolvers—you know that is our great national sport, trying to assassinate Lenin with rewolvers—and the bang puts Trotsky off his stroke and we win the hole and match and I clean up three hundred and ninety-six thousand rubles, or fifteen shillings in your money. Some gameovitch!"

Even though copies of Wodehouse's books were hard to find, Trauberg, who has also translated G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, became a fan after she was given a Wodehouse book in English more than 50 years ago.

"I fell in love with him in 1946 when I was a student" she said. "I think he's the best writer you can find for our country. He gives you freedom and comfort... exactly what Russians are completely lacking."

"It is an excellent thing that women should be encouraged to take up golf. There are, I admit, certain drawbacks attendant on their presence on the links. I shall not readily forget the occasion on which a low, raking drive of mine at the eleventh struck the ladies' tee-box squarely and came back and stunned my caddie, causing me to lose stroke and distance."

"The Rough Stuff", 1922

NEWTIST COLONIES

Marilyn MacGregor found this item in an English newspaper whose name, phone number, and shoe size I have misplaced.

Three dew-ponds in the South Downs are to be restored by National Trust warden Charlie Cain in a bid to save the great crested newt and other protected species.

The population of great crested newts in the South Downs has fallen dramatically, and restoring some of the area's ancient dew-ponds could be the answer.

The ponds are a good habitat for the newt, but because people have been dumping goldfish and carp into them, the newt population has fallen drastically over the past 20 years.

Farming communities once scoured out the 50-foot-wide saucers of earth, lined them with clay and straw and waited for them to fill up with rain.

Today, only a few dozen dew-ponds remain in the Downs and only about a third of these are watertight. The existing ponds are home to a variety of rare amphibians and other species, including the great crested newt. To restore the dew-ponds, Charlie will be using the original methods which created them. He is aiming to re-create the traditional pond linings using information from agricultural historians.

THANK YOU, JEEVES IN LA

A dramatized version of one of Plum's best stories will be presented in the Los Angeles area in mid June. "Featuring," says the advance publicity, "Hizzoner Richard Riordan as blustering American millionaire J. Washburn Stoker. (Don't worry, the Mayor's not quitting his day job!)" It should be a night to remember.

The bash will be presented by L.A. Theatre Works at 8:00 p.m. on June 17, 18, 19, and 20 at The Doubletree Guest Suites, 1707 Fourth Street, Santa Monica. Ticket prices range from \$27 to \$33. For information or to order tickets, call (310) 827-0889, fax (310) 827-4949, or write L.A. Theatre Works Box Office, 681 Venice Blvd., Venice CA 90291.

The company will use the highly successful adaptation made by Mark Richard for his City Lit Company in Chicago.



Is this the Monster from Twenty Thousand Fathoms? No, it's Charlie Cain, who says "I am always happiest amongst my newts."

SAYERS AND WODEHOUSE

William Sarjeant writes: All those who delight in the writings of the late Dorothy L. Sayers have been given a fresh, unexpected pleasure—the publication of her novel *Thrones, Dominations*. This was begun by Sayers in the early 1930s, but never completed. That task has been done admirably by Jill Paton Walsh and the result just published by Hodder and Stoughton [and by St. Martin's in the US]. For us Wodehousians, a noteworthy passage occurs on p. 36:

Peter, feeling that [Miss Mango] should be encouraged, had consulted with the probation officer and got her work with a dressmaker, where she had done very well. In the September of his engagement... he had sought out Miss Mango, and brought her home on approval...[N]ow here she was in Audley Square, accompanied by a whole library of manuals on etiquette and the complete works of Mr. P. G. Wodehouse whom, not without justice, she took seriously as an infallible guide to high life above and below stairs.

I am not sure whether Ms. Sayers or Ms. Paton Walsh—or both of them—composed that passage, but I feel it expresses an admirable percipience!

MY CONTRIBUTION TO WODEHOUSE SCHOLARSHIP

By Curtis Armstrong

Golly, as the Master himself might have put it, what a thrill it was to find oneself quoted in Michael Dirda's excellent piece in the Winter 1997 issue of *Plum Lines*, "Wodehouse and the critics." For those of you who may have missed it (catching up, as you may have been, on your Kafka and Proust), Mr. Dirda's article focused on Wodehouse as perceived by critics great and small and there, amid the scintillating bon-mots and penetrating criticisms of such commentators as Maugham, Orwell, Jason, Dudley Edwards and Waugh, appeared the following sentence: "In yet another learned disquisition, Curtis Armstrong maintains that the opening sentences to *The Code of the Woosters* deliver the biggest, if subtlest, laugh right off. 'I reached a hand from under the blankets and rang the bell for Jeeves. "Good morning, Jeeves." "Good evening, sir." ' " (I would point out that Mr. Dirda mistakenly inverted the last two sentences of the quote, but under the circumstances such carping is unseemly.)

After recovering from the shock of seeing myself quoted in print, I did what anyone else would have done in my position: rushed to the dictionary to find out what "disquisition" means. As I feared, it is a noun meaning "an elaborate exposition of the results of one's inquiries." Now, as tempting as it may be to allow people to labor under the misapprehension that I am an author of learned disquisitions, I feel compelled to admit that I am guilty of no such thing. While bowing to none in my admiration for Wodehouse and possessing a more than passing acquaintance with the canon, "learned" is not a word I would use in relation to myself, let alone "disquisition." "Another," maybe.

But I can see how the misunderstanding arose. In what was a truly learned disquisition (I have now used this word five times, so it belongs to me), Elliott Milstein quoted me in his essay "On The Opening Sentences of the Novels of P. G. Wodehouse." Mr. Dirda, reading Mr. Milstein's exegesis, probably assumed the author was quoting some hoary scholar; now practically forgotten, living in dreamy and undisturbed obscurity. The truth is even less interesting.

Well I remember, it was in the latter days of September, and the equinoctial gales had set in with exceptional violence. The phone rang and it was this same Milstein. Always more learned than I, he was slaving away disquisitionally on his paper and was calling for

my opinion. I remember telling him that I had always thought the opening sentences of *Code of the Woosters* were the real Tabasco and that, I'm sorry to say, was the extent of my contribution to Wodehousian scholarship—until now! Due to one of those strange coincidences that happen so often in literary criticism, a Wodehouse letter has come into my hands which addresses three points raised in Mr. Dirda's article, namely (a) what was Wodehouse's favorite among his books, (b) Wodehouse's view of critics in general, and (c) the proposed 1955 novel featuring all of Wodehouse's greatest characters in one book.

The letter, written on July 24, 1958 from Remsenberg to a Mr. Simmons (not G. G. Simmons, surely?), begins "How awfully sporting of you to defy that ass on the *Daily Telegraph* by buying *Cocktail Time*! I'm so glad you liked it so much. *I must say I thought it the best constructed of any of my books*, [my italics] but reviewers never notice that sort of thing." Airily dismissive as Wodehouse could be of reviewers, he was clearly keeping his eye on them, for he continues, "The book was published over here today and there is a glowing notice in the *New York Herald Tribune*. And my publisher has just rung up to say there is even an better one in the *Sunday Tribune* next Sunday, which seems promising." Simmons had apparently brought up the idea of an all-star Wodehouse novel, for Wodehouse says, "Yes, I wish I could do a book of the sort you speak of in your letter. The only trouble with those all-star casts is that it is difficult to give each of the principal actors a big enough part. But," he concludes, "I must certainly try to think up something along those lines." He then says, "My next book will be a book of short stories. I have ten good ones, but I really need eleven, to make the book nice and fat, and I can't seem to get an idea for another. However, there is plenty of time and something may emerge." In spite of Plum's efforts, *A Few Quick Ones* was published the following year with only ten stories.

So there you have it—my contribution to Wodehouse scholarship. Since much of Mr. Dirda's article is devoted to which books are favorites among the critics quoted, I would like to submit my nominations. In my youth, *Right Ho, Jeeves* seemed to me the apogee of Wodehouse's books, with *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* running a close second. Now in youthful middle age, *Summer Lightning* brings home the Silver Medal every time. But my heart will always belong to the first Wodehouse I ever read, *Very Good, Jeeves*.

I may not be learned, but I know what I like.

"MISUNDERSTOOD" IN TWO VERSIONS

By Jay Weiss

David Jasen found Wodehouse's story, "Misunderstood," in the English *Nash's Magazine* of May, 1910, and reprinted it in his *Uncollected Wodehouse* of 1976. He either didn't know about, or chose not to use, another, somewhat longer and considerably more earthy version of the piece that appeared in the same month, May, 1910, in *The Burr Mcintosh Monthly* of New York. I recently found a copy of this magazine and immediately set to work comparing the contrasting ways Wodehouse approached his American and his British audiences.

In *Nash's* version, the protagonist, Mr. James ("Spider") Buffin launches into action, with a sand-bag, almost immediately, in the second paragraph of the story. For his presumably less delicate American readers, Plum provided several hundred introductory words to explain why Mr. Buffin was resorting to violence. At a nightclub, Buffin had remarked that a friend of one Robert "Nigger" Sloan, "De goil in de pink skoit," had two left feet. Mr. Sloan objected, or remonstrated as Plum would say, again when Buffin addressed him as "Nig."

"A stranger who called him coon," Wodehouse explained, "was more than asking for trouble." So, even though Mr. Sloan had himself just employed a racial slur by referring to a passing customer as a wop, he exploded when the same thing happened to him. He bit his tormenter in the cheek, thus anticipating Mike Tyson's tactics by almost a century. Buffin fought back by "seizing a beer-mug," which he "bumped...on Mr. Sloan's skull."

For his English readers, Wodehouse omitted this racy expository material entirely. Except for changing sand-bag to black-jack, Clerkenwell to the Bowery, and the Tube to Grand Central Station from the beginning of the action to the conclusion, Plum offered readers on both sides of the Atlantic precisely the same story.

When I discovered this previously unknown United States version of "Misunderstood" a few months ago, I wondered why Wodehouse dispensed with the street language and the ethnic insults for his English audience. He didn't always edit them out. Careful readers have noted traces of endemic upper class English racial and religious prejudice slipping, occasionally, into Plum's work. As Bill Blood, the Wodehouse Society founder, wrote to me in a 1983 letter, Plum "was basi-

cally a gentle, kind, human being incapable of hate." But, Blood said, he didn't "think Plum was completely free of the antisemitism of his class and time."

In 1928, for example, Wodehouse wrote, in *Money for Nothing*,

"That man," said John, indicating Mr. Baermann, looks like a Jewish black beetle."

"Doesn't he?" she said. "I don't know where they can have dug him up from."

In the Mulliner short story, "The Castaways", Jacob Schnellenhamer, president of the Perfecto-Zizzbaum movie studio, responds passionately to an injudicious request from two employees. "... he could not have been more moved. His eyes bulged and his nose drooped like the trunk of an elephant which has been refused a peanut."

In *Big Money*, "Mostyn hit Kohn on the beezer, I remember, and God knows there was plenty of it to hit."

And, finally, Plum reported in *Over Seventy* that, "One of the first things you notice if you live in New York is that there are far too many pigeons about. There are also far too many Puerto Ricans, if it comes to that..."

Pretty slim pickings from Plum's enormous body of work. So, Robert A. Hall, the Cornell linguistics professor and one-time Wodehouse Society president, might have been right, if we overlook the exceptions noted, when he replied, fervently, to the question he posed in the title of his essay, "Was Wodehouse Anti-Jewish?" by saying "...the answer is therefore NO!, to be printed in the largest capitals available on my typewriter."

But that doesn't answer my question: "Why was the English 'Misunderstood' far more—how shall I put it?—politically correct than its American cousin?"



The "earthy" version of this dance-hall scene also appears in Chapter 18 of *Psmith Journalist*, first published in *The Captain* of October 1909–February 1910, slightly earlier than the short stories. The Psmith version may thus have been the original.

The McIlvaine bibliography does not list *The Burr Mcintosh Monthly* among the publications where Plum's work appeared.

—OM

A FEW QUICK ONES

The Saturday Evening Post published original Wodehouse stories for fifty-two years. Dan Cohen notes that "the nostalgia publication that calls itself by the same name" has been republishing some of the old stories lately. A recent issue featured, as its only fiction, PGW's 1940 short story, "Tee for Two," which, as you cannot avoid concluding, is one of the golfing stories. Original illustrations were included.

Is buttlng on its way back? *The New York Times* reports, by way of Jan Kaufman, that another school for the endangered species opened in January of this year at Cirencester Park, an 18th century English estate. The establishment will, in eight weeks, and for \$5,000 each, produce fifteen butlers, able to cope with e-mail as well as tarnished silver. Each will be a model of a modern major butler.

Psmith lives! John Baesch discovered that a Levenston Psmith has written *Lords of the Chase: Tales of the Shires and Beyond*, on the social and physical perils of fox-hunting in England a century ago. Mr. Psmith is an Englishman, if we can judge by his subject and the location of his publisher, Wordpecker.

William Hardwick notes that a new book by Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now*, pays tribute to Our Hero as follows: "...had Wodehouse died in 1918, he would have been remembered not as a British novelist but as the first great lyricist of the American musical." The reviewer describes the book thus: "This is as unblinkerd a history of musicals as has ever been written. Mr Steyn loves the form to bits, but is hilariously aware of the bits." It sounds worth reading. The book is published by Faber in England and apparently has no American publisher yet.

David Landman found, in a recent *Boston Globe*, the obituary of a certain General B'Smith, and notes that there are extant in Massachusetts an Elaine B'Smith, a John B'Smith, and a Kevin B'Smith. "I suppose," he muses, "it wouldn't be proper to call them and ask if the 'B' is silent like the first B in BBB gun."

Our 1997 convention bash yielded a windfall in the way of event publicity for TWS. On October 1 the *Chicago Tribune* published an article by Charles Leroux, "Sweet Home, Jeeves," with an á propos subtitle of "Chicago hosts convention celebrating the late humor-

ist P.G. Wodehouse and his immortal caste of dysfunctional aristocrats." Two days after we all slithered down the drainpipe and departed Chicago for life in the so-called real world, an article entitled "Poor Gussie Fink-Nottle: He's Still Stuck in Red Tights" appeared in the Arts in America section of *The New York Times* (October 7, 1997). The article featured a photograph of Anne Cotton as Lady Bassett, firing her elephant gun. This prompted Anne's local paper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, to call her for an interview, and the result was an article in the *Gazette*.

Dan Cohen writes: In Maureen Dowd's column in today's *New York Times* (December 31), we find the sentence: "It makes you wonder, as P.G. Wodehouse said, if man really is God's last word." I'm not sure where, or in what context Plum used that phrase, but it is nice to see the name getting around. Which leads us to ask the question: Where, exactly, did Plum use that phrase?

Murray Wilson notes that several times, when Plum wanted to imply that the movements of a nervous character were convulsive and uncontrolled, he described them as like those of an adagio dancer. But adagio dancing is always slow and graceful. Murray wonders why some editor didn't catch this error. All the evidence indicates that Plum accepted editorial suggestions with gratitude and adagio-like grace.

David McDonough writes: Perusing the *Encyclopedia of Associations* the other day, I noticed that TWS finally has an updated listing. For the last ten years, we have been referred to as a group of eccentric academics, membership of twelve people, with which is incorporated the Llama Appreciation Society, mailing address Uzbekistan.

Finally this year the truth emerges. But there is a fly in the ointment. We are now listed as a group of 700 souls. Which means that although in quantity we far outstrip such leper colonies as the societies devoted to (among others), Agatha Christie, Boccaccio, Tolkien, Shaw, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Dante, Evelyn Waugh, Goethe and Zane Grey, we lag badly in the race compared to Dickens, Byron, Jane Austen (well, she gets all those movies), Keats, Shelley, Twain, Melville, and Shakespeare.

Well, of course, Shakespeare, don't you know. But Keats? Shelley? ("You know your Shelley, Bertie." "Oh, am I?") Come, come! Is this the Wodehouse spirit? Let us pull up our socks and attempt to outdistance some of these blighters in membership! Else we should someday find ourselves falling even lower in attendance than

those sub-humans who worship Lord Alfred and his Maud—those who, since they like to sit outdoors upon the grass and read “The Lady Of Shalott” aloud, have become known as the Lawn Tennyson Association.

Word has just filtered through to this remote outpost that D. R. Benson died last fall. He was the editor of several collections of Wodehouse stories on golf, crime, and animals. With Jimmy Heineman he edited the fairly monumental *P. G. Wodehouse: A Centennial Celebration, 1881–1981* for the Pierpont Morgan Library. I believe he produced books on other subjects too.

OM and AD

The Oldest Member and Aunt Dahlia

ANTARCTICA!

Marilyn MacGregor, our intrepid membership secretary and demon recruiter, can relax at last: our new member Cherie Ude has begun a two year stay in Antarctica and the Wodehouse Society may now boast of at least one member on every continent on earth.

How did it happen? David McDonough pointed out in 1995 that we had a member on every continent except Antarctica. A year or so ago one of Marilyn’s friends casually mentioned that he had “returned from Antarctica last week.” Unfortunately it was his last trip there, so Marilyn began using every conversational opening to search for someone else going as far south as anyone can go.

First hope came through friends of a friend, who knew someone about to leave for Antarctica. That traveler took along a recruiting packet. No business has resulted to date, but the packet may yet snaffle a new member.

But then! TWS members Bill and Melissa Carpenter learned that their friend Cherie Ude was headed for Penguin Land, signed her up, obtained her future address, and TWS can boast that, as Sherwin-Williams Paints used to advertise, “We cover the earth.”

Naturally, Cherie has not only the prestige of being the first and only member on an entire continent, but the responsibility for recruiting another member before she leaves.

So, Houston—prepare. Marilyn will surely head for NASA any moment now, recruiting packet in hand, to sign up somebody on MIR. Wouldn’t that have tickled PGW? Today Antarctica, tomorrow the universe!

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

By David Landman

(who says he should have been doing his income tax instead of writing these limericks)

The code that bedeviled poor Wooster,
(A *preux chevalier* there’s none *preux*-ster),
Held extracting a fly
From a maidenly eye,
Was as good as having seduced her.

A shipping tycoon name of Worplesdon,
Whose behavior was always *de troplesdon*,
Set the mark up ten pegs
Shouting “Eggs! Damn all eggs!”
Such behaviour’s quite over the Torpelsdon!

Sir Bertram deWooster said gaily
As he rode to the Agincourt melec
“If I meet with the Dolphin
“I’ll teach him some golfin’
“And take a divot with my banjolele.”

the modern sweet singer of saskatoon
when writing a ballad, a masque, or a tune
finds meter and rhyme not half as sublime
as free verse which runs

a
t
h
w
a
r
t
the puce paradigms
of glory
(and besides, hunting rhyme is a task jejune).

Maiden Eggsford, 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,” 1936

DRONES CLUB TIES

After the publication of the last issue of *Plum Lines*, several sharp-eyed readers wrote to point out that although we promised in the convention story to tell you how to order the handsome new Drones Club ties from David MacKenzie, we neglected to include that valuable information. The editors apologize for this oversight and hasten to make amends.

The ties—beautiful and quite oojah-cum-spiff—have broad diagonal stripes of brilliant red and black separated by narrow stripes of gold. The label on my tie proclaims “Ben Silver/Charleston London/Pure English Silk.” Sorry, but no lady-like equivalent (scarf, etc.) is available. —OM

PUBLIC SCHOOL HOUSES

In the last issue of *Plum Lines* Phil Ayers asked a question regarding *The Head of Kay's*—to wit, “did boys have any choice about the house they lived in, could they change houses at will, and could a master require a boy to change houses without his consent?” We received three responses to this question.

—AD

The first is from John Fletcher:

Boys could try to influence their parents in choosing a house, but once their parents (called their “people” in the slang of the system) had agreed with a housemaster to send their son, the boys themselves had no choice. The housemaster was a vice-parent, he wrote termly reports to the parents, the house was the boys’ adoptive home, they were supposed to spend about 18 hours out of 24 in it or devoted to it, they knew (in my time) few people in other houses whereas they knew everyone in their own house, and it would be as offensive to ask to change houses at school as to ask to change families in the holidays. There is also the administrative aspect of whether there would be room in the house of their choice. Much of this is implied in chapter 1 of *The Head of Kay's*:

“I believe Fenn has an awful time at Kay’s,” said Jimmy Silver, “...I wish I’d known my people were sending young Billy there. I’d have warned them. I only told them not to sling him in here. I had no idea they’d have picked Kay’s”.

“Fenn was telling me the other day,” said Kennedy, “that being in Kay’s had spoiled his whole time at the school. He always wanted to come to Blackburn’s, only there wasn’t room that particular term.”

Could a master require a boy to change houses without his consent? I have never known it to happen. In this book it happens by the decision of the headmaster, but still seems absurd without parental approval, which could have been easily obtained but isn’t. The fact that Fenn hears about the decision, probably taken in the holidays or even at the end of the previous term, only on the first day of the new term from another boy (Silver), suggests the adults in this story lack all the qualities of leadership. I believe things have improved somewhat now.

The second response is from Murray Wilson:

I did not attend a boarding school, but the “House” system was used in the typical British secondary day school, both for boys and girls. The schools were of

course not coed.

The pupil had absolutely no say as to which house he would belong. In my school each Form (Grade in the USA) consisted of four classes and each was in a different House. So there were four Houses and each was named after a notable Briton: Wellington, Sidney, Burke and Newton. It was a mercy they were not named after the housemasters, for mine was Mr. Smellie.

About the possibility of “borrowing” a pupil I have no knowledge. If he was a useful member of his House the housemaster would not be likely to agree to a swap, House competition was taken too seriously. Perhaps someone who did go to one of the right schools will be able to give you a more definitive answer.

The third response is from Alexander Wighton:

My late father packed me off in autumn 1944 to one of the Scottish public schools—namely Strathallan School, Forgardenny, Perthshire, as a fulltime boarder. Here I stayed until the end of the 1948 school year.

The school was composed of four houses. Each house had its own housemaster and range of prefects. My first three years were spent as an inmate of Nicol House. I had no say in the matter whatsoever. We were all expected to render full loyalty, etc. to our respective houses.

With my 1947 end-of-term report addressed to my father was a letter from the Headmaster to the effect that I was being transferred to Simpson House for my 1947-1948 (final) year at Strathallan School.

Referring to Phil Ayers’s question, at least at Strathallan School, no boy could be “borrowed” by one house from another to the best of my recollection. The placement of boys in the various houses was, I think, the sole prerogative of the Headmaster in consultation with the four respective housemasters. The age grouping of the boys in each of the four houses would be similar. I would imagine the sports prowess in rugby, cricket, and other athletics would be assessed in each individual’s case in order to strike a fair balance in the school’s interhouse sports leagues. As at Dulwich, the inter-house sports rivalry was keen.

Obviously there is a variation in the house systems in public school in Scotland and England with which I am not familiar. Since my Strathallan days girls have been admitted!

PUDDLE-JUMPING INTO LAUGHING GAS

A review by Richard Morrissey

The past few years have seen a large number of dramatic adaptations of P. G. Wodehouse's work, from British television's *Jeeves and Wooster* and *Heavy Weather* to the competing musicals *By Jeeves!* and *Betting on Bertie*. But it is extremely rare to see a stage adaptation of one of Wodehouse's very few fantasies. Still, that's exactly what happened in Cambridge, Massachusetts in May of last year: *Laughing Gas*, Wodehouse's 1936 novel about a titled Drone and a Hollywood child actor who switch bodies, was turned into a musical by the Puddlejump Players.

And who, you may well ask, are the Puddlejump Players? Well, according to the program, they "began in 1994 when a group of children decided they wanted to 'do a show.' ... This year the Puddlejump Players is composed of children from 4 to 15 years of age. They all work together to bring fun and innovative theater to audiences of every age."

When I read about *Laughing Gas* in a Boston newspaper, the concept of child actors doing a play based on a PGW novel about child actors had a certain charm. So, accompanied by fellow NEWT Aunt Dahlia, I got directions and we headed out to Cambridge. We knew we were in for an offbeat experience the moment we entered, to be handed our programs by a young woman who was nursing a baby at the same time. But the location, a community center devoted to multiculturalism, looked promising, and the stage and program did indicate some familiarity with the Master's other works. And the performers, if not yet up to Hollywood standards, did a remarkable job, especially given their ages.

Like the novel, the play is narrated by Reggie Havershot, a Drones Club member as rich as Bertie Wooster and not quite as bright, who, also like Bertie, makes his first visit to America on behalf of the family's older generation to "bail out" a wandering cousin. On the train to Hollywood, Reggie falls head-over-heels for actress April June, and she's equally besotted with him (or, more accurately, with his title and his money).

But then, during a visit to a dentist, Reggie has an out-of-body experience due to his anesthesia (hence the title) that switches his mind into the body of child actor Joey Cooley, and Joey's mind into Reggie's body. (Not a particularly convincing explanation, but more so than other books and movies using the same basic idea, from the 19th-century novel *Vice Versa* to Mary Rogers' relatively recent *Freaky Friday*.) Thus Reggie experiences the life of a Hollywood child star from the constricted inside, through further developments culminating in a kidnapping that, like most of Wodehouse's characters' schemes, does not turn out as anticipated.

One drawback of *Laughing Gas*, the play, was the director's decision to make it into a musical. Granted that most composers would be at a disadvantage alongside such giants as Jerome Kern, but the producers had the further handicap of setting new lyrics to existing tunes. Restricted to songs in the public domain and/or whose writers didn't particularly care, the adapters made the best of limited material. The body-switch itself was creatively staged with a song set to the melody of "Tea for Two," and the Michigan Mothers' chorus made a genuine show-stopper out of "Joey Cooley, Here We Come," an entirely appropriate reworking of "California, Here We Come."

Although limited by the age of the players and the small budget, *Laughing Gas* the play made optimum use of its opportunities and remained altogether faithful to the Master's original. In that regard, one can only wish other Wodehouse adaptations were as successful.



Young Thos, poisoning the bucket for an instant, discharged its contents. And old Mr. Anstruther received the entire consignment. In one second, without any previous training or upbringing, he had become the wettest man in Worcestershire.

"The Love that Purifies", 1930

WOLFGANG AMADEUS WODEHOUSE

By Lloyd Rose, *Washington Post* staff writer

What with the fierce rush of modern life and all, this article is a couple of issues late, but we're printing it anyway for its Insights and Judicious Praise—always welcome commodities. —OM

Around 10 years ago, when the late Edward Duke brought his one-man P.G. Wodehouse show, *Jeeves Takes Charge*, to Washington, I took a music-loving friend who had never read Wodehouse to see it. I won't say he went grudgingly, but I'd seen him more excited. When it was over, he was quiet for a few moments, then said, "It's like Mozart." And of course, though the comparison had never occurred to me, he was right.

A Wodehouse show is in town again, and this time the music is courtesy of Andrew Lloyd Webber. *By Jeeves!*, which opened last night at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater, is a resurrected effort. Around 20 years ago, Lloyd Webber and English playwright Alan Ayckbourn launched the show, which ran 5 1/2 hours on its first run-through. It was cut by opening night to three hours, but still collapsed under its own weight, a flop. In the intervening two decades, Lloyd Webber cannibalized the score for a few tunes ("Another Suitcase in Another Hall" was one) but never gave up the idea that the show could be made to work. He finally convinced Ayckbourn, who redid the book from scratch, and the result was welcomed last year on the London stage.

A Wodehouse musical is an irresistible idea for a number of reasons, the chief one being that Wodehouse himself wrote the books for several early musical comedies. Referring to their basic farce plots, he also described his novels and stories as "musical comedies without the music." In the Jeeves stories, for example, Bertie or one of his equally dim friends gets into a scrape and the calamities multiply geometrically. The wrong people end up in the wrong bedrooms or shoving the wrong person into the wrong body of water or singing the wrong song at a ghastly village fete or betting on the wrong preacher in the Sermon Handicap.

In most of Wodehouse's work it would be impossible for the resulting mess to be straightened out in any realistic way, so it is solved by Jeeves *ex machina*. Whether throwing a raincoat over an enraged swan or using cats to save Bertie from having to marry the formidable Honoria Glossop, Jeeves always comes

through with the perfect solution to any contretemps.

Wodehouse was extraordinarily prolific (more than 90 books) and had an extraordinarily long career (72 years). Nonetheless, all of his work feels as if it takes place in an impossibly sunny 1920s world where the First World War seems hardly to have happened. His protagonists included con men and well-meaning bourgeois lads, but the stars of the Jeeves tales are idle young upper-class idiots who spend their days at the club and the racetrack and fall for the wrong young women. As soon as Jeeves comes to work for Bertie, he saves him from the clutches of Lady Florence Craye, who has taken him in hand and plans to make him read Nietzsche. "You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir," Jeeves explains. "He is fundamentally unsound."

In their way, Wodehouse's tales uphold the tradition of English pastoral, a genre that idealized the countryside over the city. Arguably, the great pastoral works of this century are children's books, *The Wind in the Willows* and the Pooh stories. Wodehouse hardly wrote children's stories, but many, if not most, of Bertie's adventures take place at grand country homes complete with spacious grounds, handy, fall-into-able bodies of water, and the occasional island on which someone can be marooned with an angry swan. The weather is almost always lovely, the gardens always abloom. Aunts, either benevolent or malignant, run these kingdoms, and servants keep food appearing on the table almost magically three times a day. Women are an alarming, unwelcome intrusion. In short, this is as much a boyhood paradise as the Mississippi of Mark Twain, with the tamed but nonetheless seemingly limitless lawns and gardens standing in for the Mississippi and Jim replaced by Jeeves.

The comic tradition of the clever servant who protects the hapless master goes way, way back in Western literature. You find it in Roman New Comedy (the genre that provided the plot for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) in the 3rd to 2nd centuries B.C. You find it with Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. You find it with Huck and Jim. You find a spin on it in the Sherlock Holmes stories. The formula can take confused forms: For example, Holmes is smart and Watson the slow one when it comes to deduction, but Watson is more emotionally solid, the sensible foil to Holmes's neurotic genius. Generally, however, the

roles divide so that the servant is down-to-earth, often a peasant or man of the people, and the master high-strung, a bit lost in the clouds, sometimes a child or a madman. "Madman" is perhaps the nicest description people, even his friends, apply to Bertie.

Yet in spite of the stories' stagily mechanical plots and Wodehouse's own experience writing for the theater, there have not been many really successful dramatizations of his work, which the British have been adapting to television for years. (The most recent television Bertie and Jeeves are Hugh Laurie and the rather-too-young Stephen Fry.) Played out, the plots are a little creaky and slow, and the dialogue that made you laugh out loud as you read it sounds strangely flat. The problem is that nine-tenths of the humor of Wodehouse's stories is in the narration. Here is Bertie's description of one of his friends:

"This Gussie, then, was a fish-faced pal of mine who, on reaching man's estate, had buried himself in the country and devoted himself entirely to the study of newts, keeping the little chaps in a glass tank and observing their habits with a sedulous eye. A confirmed recluse you would have called him, if you had happened to know the word, and you would have been right. By all the ruling of the form book, a less promising prospect for the whispering of tender words into shell-like ears and the subsequent purchase of platinum ring and license for wedding it would have seemed impossible to discover in a month of Sundays. But Love will find a way."

Everything else aside, this is breathtakingly written. The supple, graceful, near-impossible-seeming twists of that penultimate sentence are the work of a great prose stylist. The cliché "exquisitely calibrated" regains its resonance and truth when applied to Wodehouse's writing. The comparison to Mozart is extreme, but not unreasonable. And also like Mozart, Wodehouse proved that a work of art without shadows can still be a work of genius.

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He isn't a frightfully hot writer. I don't suppose he makes enough out of a novel to keep a midget in doughnuts for a week. Not a really healthy midget.

The Luck of the Bodkins, 1935

TALES OF WRYKYN AND ELSEWHERE

In "Something new" in the last *Plum Lines*, I listed and described two new and praiseworthy Wodehouse books, collections of his early stories edited, separately, by John Fletcher and David Jasen. I made just one teensy mistake in that whole page: I didn't tell you the name of John Fletcher's book, thus making it practically impossible to order. '

When I was preparing the last issue I planned to include in the article a picture of the book jacket, which displays the title prominently. I found at the last moment that the picture would not reproduce well and removed it from the page, forgetting its crucial function. Apparently I was depending on some occult process to transmit the book title to readers of *Plum Lines*.

John Fletcher is a blameless, indeed admirable, publisher, friend, host, and fellow hiker, and I done him wrong. The sobbing you hear faintly in the distance is your editor, overcome with remorse. —OM

FREDDIE IN HOLLYWOOD

We all know what a splash Freddie Threepwood made in the world of Donaldson's *Dog Joy*. Few of us, I suppose, know that he also found employment in Hollywood. Francine Kitts presents evidence from a most unlikely source. She writes as follows:

An article entitled "Legalese" in a recent issue of *Business Law* magazine gave this Plummie a jolt. The focus of the article is on schedules and exhibits to agreements. Boring, you may think, but when the employment agreement is between the Hon. Freddie Threepwood and the Perfecto Zizzbaum Motion Picture Co. it takes on a whole new life!

Did Freddie become Chief Nodder or only the assistant operator of the wind machine? Alas, we must wait for the next installment to find out.

AN IRRELEVANT GENIUS

By J. Peder Zane

Beth Carroll found this column in the Raleigh, North Carolina *News & Observer* of November 9, 1997. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the author.

After years of close reading and noggin-numbing Agymnastics, I am pleased to announce discovery of the key, the *sine qua non* if you will, to appreciating the works of P.G. Wodehouse, the English comedic writer. It is a controversial theory, if that's the word I want, certain to chill the spine of every pedant, literary critic, and book reviewer who pads his account deconstructing the deeper meaning, the politics, and purpose of literature. The key is this: One must simply *read* one of Wodehouse's books for the scales to fall from the eyes and complete satisfaction to ensue. The payoff is immediate in the warm flow of some of the finest and funniest sentences ever crafted. Consider...

"She was definitely the sort of girl who puts her hands over a husband's eyes, as he is crawling into breakfast with a morning head, and says: 'Guess who?'"

And, "When I was introduced to him as the man who was to marry his daughter, he just stared for a moment and said, 'What?'"

And, "I am Lord Tilbury," said his lordship, looking like a man unveiling a statue of himself.

I can see you now feeling for the car keys, mapping the shortest route to your nearest book shop. Now shove off. My work is done.

Sadly, my editor and I don't see eye to eye on this. She keeps sputtering on about "space to fill" and the impossibility of booking what we call an "ad to fill" at this late hour, so necessity being the mother and all, I will carry on, with a stiff upper lip, of course.

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (1881-1975) published about 96 books during his life (of course). These include...the best, and wisest, golf stories ever. Love, he offers, in "A Woman is Only a Woman" (1922) might improve a golfer's game, "or it may not. But if he finds that there is any danger that it may not—if the object of his affection is not the kind of girl who will listen to him with cheerful sympathy through the long evening, while he tells her, illustrating stance and grip and swing with the kitchen poker, each detail of the day's round—then, I say unhesitatingly, he had better leave it alone. Love has had a lot of press agenting from the oldest times; but there are higher, nobler things than love. A

woman is only a woman, but a hefty drive is a slosh."

But Wodehouse's greatest achievement is his novels and stories featuring Bertie Wooster and his gentleman's gentleman, Jeeves. It is art of the highest order, if by art we mean not that which captures life in all its facets—especially the solipsistic malaise, ennui, and *malheur* that is de rigueur in modern fiction—but the distillation of unencumbered joy that is one of its highest purposes. Wodehouse captured joy like nobody's business.

Wodehouse is insistently irrelevant. His characters are chiefly English aristocrats as idle as they are rich. He offers little sex, profanity, or violence and, like a good sitcom, every hurdle is cleared in the allotted space, thanks to Jeeves's large brain—he eats plenty of fish, you know. Yet, within the confines of pure escapism, his work stands on equal with our century's darker giants—Faulkner, Joyce, Proust, and Pynchon.

He accomplished this by handling the English language like a sushi chef with a slab of raw tuna; his grand farces, especially *The Mating Season* and *Thank You, Jeeves*, are animated by the deepest human feeling. It is nothing less than The Code of the Woosters, to wit: "Never let a pal down." This idea might seem dated in our self-involved times, but in the pages of Wodehouse, where honor, loyalty, and duty fuel madcap adventures, it is irrepressibly eternal.

If the tone of this piece seems a little too cheery, let me rectify that. I do harbor one serious complaint. Wodehouse once said, "I've been a writer since I was six years old. I'm not sure what I did before that, just goofing off, I guess." To think we could have had more. For that I can never forgive him.

"You love her?"

"Madly."

"And how do you find it affects your game?"

"I've started shanking a bit."

The Oldest Member nodded.

"I'm sorry, but not surprised. Either that or missing short putts is what generally happens on these occasions. I doubt if golfers ought to fall in love. I have known it to cost men ten shots in a medal round."

"Scratch Man," 1959

SOMETHING NEW

William Hardwick found a notice about a recent collection of Plum's cricket writings. It's called *Wodehouse at the Wicket*, and the editor is Murray Hedgecock. The English *Daily Telegraph* reviewer says "it's a treasure trove of scribblings, drawings, score sheets and rare photographs (such as Boris Karloff keeping wicket for Hollywood CC)." The book is published by Hutchinson in England, where the price is £12.99.

The Audio Book Collection in Bath, England, offers twenty Wodehouse books on tape, all unabridged and "expertly read by respected actors" such as Ian Carmichael, Richard Briers, and Jonathan Cecil. Most of the recordings are of novels, including all the favorites. Prices range from £9.95 to £15.95 (about US\$16.60 to US\$26.60), plus postage and packing. Credit cards are accepted. To obtain more information or an order form, write to The Audio Book Collection, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX, or call (from within the UK) Customer Services at 01225 443400. The company is offering a 10% introductory discount for members of the P. G. Wodehouse Society (UK) and may do the same for our members too, if you ask for it. Note for members in the US: Americans can play British audio tapes without difficulty. British and American audio formats are the same.

THE PRINCE OR BETTY?

Bill Metros has acquired a first edition of *The Prince and Betty* with an unusual alteration on the front of its dust jacket. The jacket includes two prominent portrait-type color drawings, one of the Prince and one of—you guessed it!—Betty. The usual arrangement of the pictures is apparently the one shown in the McIlvaine bibliography, with Him above and to the right, Her below and to the left. Bill's copy has the pictures reversed, with Her above and Him below. "How," asks Bill, "come?" The jacket fronts are otherwise identical in every detail. Small changes in dust jackets are common, but this one is major and looks pointless. Are there more such copies floating around out there, or does Bill have the only one on the planet? —OM

OLDEST NON-MEMBER

Frances LaRosa, of Horsham, Pennsylvania, is not only one of our newest members, but occupies a special niche in the pantheon of our august society: she may be our Oldest Non-Member. Frances attended the first meeting of the society and (sob!) did not join. Here's her account of what happened:

I was reading the local paper one day in the fall of 1979 when the name Sir Pelham Wodehouse caught my eye. I have been a devoted fan since the age of sixteen so the article immediately intrigued me. It included a picture of Captain Blood with his plans to begin a Wodehouse society. Obtaining his phone number, I called and promised to come to the first meeting. It was on a Sunday afternoon, and I took my two sisters, who are also Wodehouse fans. There may have been a dozen people at the meeting, all somewhat older than we were.

Captain Blood spent the meeting explaining that he wanted to see this group become a national or even an international literary society. We, being skeptical youngsters, did not see how this was possible. We did attend the second meeting, but it was more of the same discussion about the future. There were no bread-rolls to be thrown! At our ages we were too impatient for the fun to begin, so we did not attend another meeting.

Several weeks ago, surfing the Internet in search of Wodehouse fans, I was astonished to see that Captain Blood's dream had come true. And I humbly joined the group eighteen years late, older and I hope wiser.

We are delighted to welcome Frances back into our little group of earnest thinkers. We wish for her many happy years of bread-roll throwing. —OM

OH, KAY!

Norman Murphy reported (alas, months ago) that a doughty band of English Wodehouse fans attended an excellent production of *Oh, Kay!* at the Barbican in London last August. The musical was one of the best of the Bolton-Wodehouse-Gershwin shows, and this presentation did it full justice. Even without scenery and costumes, the show delighted the Englishers, the Swedishers, and the two Americaners (David and Elizabeth Landman) in attendance.

FOGGY DAY

Carolyn Pokrivchak happily reports that something good may be busting loose in the way of Wodehouse drama. Many of us are familiar with the 1937 movie *A Damsel in Distress*, featuring Fred Astaire with Burns and Allen, and George Gershwin's music. Almost nothing Wodehousian but the title survived in the movie.

The Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada, now says that it was Gershwin's idea to make a musical out of Plum's novel. But the Hollywood result was quite different from Gershwin's conception. "Our *Foggy Day*," says the festival management, "is the stage version that we think Gershwin had in mind... We have adapted the original novel..."

Foggy Day will feature such Gershwin classics as "Nice Work If You Can Get It," "A Foggy Day In London Town," and "Love Is Here To Stay."

Previews for *Foggy Day* will begin on May 3 and the production will run through November 1, along with plays by Shaw, Kaufman and Hart, Wilde, Fry, and others.

If you have attended the Shaw Festival, you know that they put on some pretty nifty theatrical productions. The festival festivates (is that a word?) in Niagara-

on-the-Lake, Ontario, only two hours from the Shakespeare Festival running concurrently in Stratford. Both include a variety of fringe activities and are I'm told, well worth a visit.

For information, phone (800) 511-7429 or (905) 468-2172. Carolyn has been to both festivals and says she will be happy to talk to anybody who wants more information. If you are such an anybody, you can call Carolyn at (610) 253-4194.

—AD

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Dues are \$20 per year.

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