



# Plum Lines

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## FRED PATZEL: PAVAROTTI OF THE PIGLOT

By David Landman

Norman Murphy's sensational disclosure at our Houston convention that there existed a real Fred Patzel behind the "Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!" story has led to this almost equally sensational discovery by David Landman. —OM

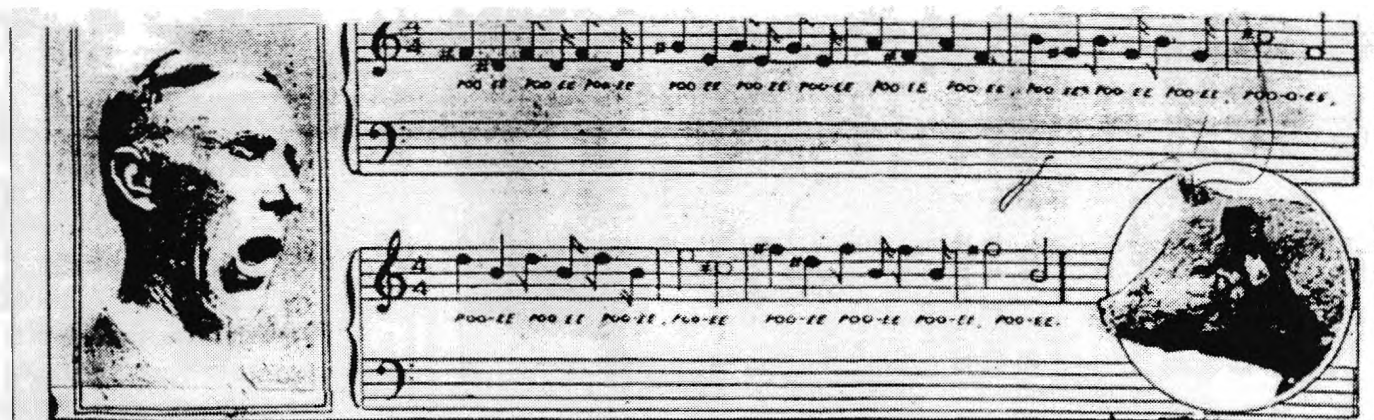
### A great voice as of a trumpet—*Revelations*

They are a crafty lot these British brass hats. Tempered in kopjes and zarebas at the far-flung corners of Empire, they are past-masters in the stealthy art of commando warfare. Deceptively cosmopolitan and suave, their silken manner conceals until too late the lightning strike of a cobra's mailed fist. The reader will, of course, have recognized that I speak of Col. N.T.P. Murphy, Ret.

What follows is an account of my sandbagging last October by Col. Murphy whilst returning in a van from a visit to San Jacinto Battlefield outside Houston—and its perplexing outcome.

From the rear a buttery voice warbled, "I say, David,

following my policy that everything in Wodehouse has a basis in fact, I note that James Belford, who, on the strength of his eponymous hog-call 'Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!' which stirs the languishing Empress to the trough when all else had failed and thereby wins Lord Emsworth's approval of his marriage to his niece Angela, explains that he had his masterword 'straight from the lips of Fred Patzel, the hog-calling champion of the Western States.' It will come as no surprise to anyone, I am sure," continued the voice, more marshmallowy than before, "that I know there really existed a Fred Patzel, but I can't remember where I saw the reference. Do you think, dear fellow, that in an idle moment you could track him down?"



From the New York World

#### MUSIC HATH CHARMS TO STIMULATE THE EMOTIONS OF THE HUNGRY HOG

And here we see Fred Patzel, winner of the world's heavyweight pig-calling championship, doing his stuff, together with a musical notation showing how he warbles the siren song that has made him the envy of the corn belt.

Fred Patzel and his hog call, with musical notation said to be his own, as printed in the *Literary Digest* of October 9, 1926.

At least that's what I think Col. Murphy said. One can never be sure. He might have been asking how it was possible the robust young blood he had seen in Boston four years earlier could have wizened so horribly in so short a time. I chose to credit the former likelihood.

"Righty-o," I tossed back airily, hoping the others wouldn't notice the gaff protruding from my gills. Murphy knew his man; the obsessive nature which made me as a boy so widely feared in scavenger races and Easter egg hunts would not let me rest until I had tracked the elusive Patzel to his lair. Nor did I suspect at the time that the vulpine Murphy had enlisted half a dozen other chumps in the same endeavor. That's his method. He sits like a spider with a prodigious memory at the center of a vast web while a legion of operatives ferret about in the sub-basements of libraries feeding him information. Why, with a system like that, anyone could be The Man Who Knows Everything—unless it was a woman.

I will spare the reader an account of my daily agonies until six months later, I finally ran Fred Patzel to ground just at the library's closing knell. The terror of those next few moments still brings a cold sweat to the brow: the librarians, who had already changed into stiletto heels, fish-net stockings and leather mini-skirts and were eager to be moonlighting, straining to drag me from the Xerox machine. I, in the gloomy knowledge that if I was forced to return the journal to the circulation desk uncopied, I would never see it again, simultaneously slotting quarters and beating them off with my free hand. I got my copy, and also, as I went bottom up down the marble steps to the pavement, a painful demonstration of what *ex libris* means to the rowdier sort of librarian.

This is what I discovered. On 10 September 1926 the world awoke to news that the challenge issued by "Foghorn" Hughie Henry, the Kansas City Stockyards' Goliath of the Gruntle, had been accepted by hog-callers of six states. Such titans as Swine-Songster Guy Bender, Baying Bob Warren, and Caruso of the Hog Belt Everett Dodd had thrown their cloth caps into the ring. But canny odds-makers knew that Hughie's chief competition would come from the Champion of Nebraska, Fred Patzel (pronounced Pay-tzel). Had not Patzel's prowess been featured in Ripley's "Believe It or Not": "Fred Patzel, champion hog-caller whose cry can be heard 5 miles"?

The contest was scheduled for September 11 (Super Trough Saturday) on neutral ground in Omaha. (Patzel stemmed from Madison.) The ground rules reflected how much hog-calling had been sophisticated in the Jazz Age: in the past, hog-calling contests had been held in the open where the winner was determined by the number of pigs that responded. This contest was to be held in the Omaha

City Auditorium and broadcast to thousands glued to crystal sets the length and breadth of America's heartland. As it was impractical to accommodate dozens of rooting hogs in a theatre, the snout-count method of scoring was abandoned. The contestants were to be judged on the subtler criteria of pitch and expression for a possible thirty points; resonance, worth an equal number of points; and honesty, sincerity, and heart appeal, which could gain twenty points. Volume, Patzel's strength, was valued at a mere twenty points. Speculation ran wild. With lung power devalued, could Patzel muster the pathos and bonhomie to trump Hughie's ace in the hole which was to enter the ring hungry, in the belief that only a hungry man can truly resonate with the inner being of a hungry hog?

### Fred Patzel Makes Horseshoe Turn in Middle of Street as Marshal Looks On.



Fred Patzel and part of his family—note his medal. (Those 1926 photocopy machines were primitive.)

When the contest ended, for a brief moment all middle-America held its breath, which, upon reflection, was not unusual for aficionados at a hog-calling contest. Then the winner was announced. We can do no better than to quote the glowing words of the *New York Sun*: "Upon the laurels of Fred Patzel of Nebraska there is no taint of blight or mildew. Fred has been crowned champion hog caller of the universe in a contest open to all pretenders. His triumph was honestly won by the best man." Fred Patzel reigned as hog-calling champion, not of the Western States as James Belford modestly claimed, but of the entire civilized universe! And here we should report that Patzel's master-call was not "Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!" as Wodehouse would have it. The lyric Patzel wrote to what was said to be his own musical notation of his call was, "Poo-ee, poo-ee, poo-ee," continuing the poo-ee motif unto the twentieth poo-ee.

There are a few incidental results of the contest which are worth reporting. Thomas M. Kilmartin of Griswold sued the city of Council Bluffs charging that one of his hogs leaped out of his truck and was killed when he heard Patzel's call being rebroadcast. (Unfortunately, according to Donald Patzel, Fred's son, no recording of his father's call remains.) Guides in Anchorage, Alaska, spurred by the popularity of the Omaha contest, organized a Moose Calling Contest in which each contestant was obliged to provide himself with a regulation sized birch bark or corrugated cardboard horn through which to interpret the cry of a moose cow for her mate.

Fred Patzel wallowed in his success. He won a gold medal and seven hundred dollars, which, translated into current buying power, is about the cost of a Stealth bomber. With part of the money he bought an overcoat—reluctantly. "Never wore an overcoat in my life," he protested, but Mrs. Patzel insisted. And fame brought with it privilege. Three days after his victory, Fred courted hubris by deliberately making an illegal U turn in his \$25 snorting billy on Madison's main street right in front of the town marshal by way of demonstrating his immunity from the law. The marshal endorsed Fred's boast by standing at the curb grinning his approval, proud of the recognition accorded him by Fred's cheery "Hello officer!" as he passed. The episode was reported in the local papers under the bold headline, "The Real Height of Fame: Fred Patzel Makes Horseshoe Turn in Middle of Street as Marshal Looks On."

In 1927 Fred Patzel was immortalized in Wodehouse's short story. In 1933 we have evidence his noble pipes had not thrown in the towel. Invited to demonstrate his call on a local radio station in Norfolk, Nebraska, "in order to give a little atmosphere to market reports," he blew out more than \$200 worth of tubes and put station WJAG off the air for three minutes. (This story was reported in

## Inspiration for Wodehouse

THE Madison farmer, who died several years ago, won a gold medal and seven hundred dollars in 1926 when he won the world's hog-calling championship in Omaha. He stopped traffic at Sixteenth and Farnam Streets when he stood on the corner and issued a demonstration "whooley!"



Patzel

Thereafter for a period of years he gave numerous demonstrations at fairs.

Such was his fame that Fred once figured in a short story by humorist P. G. Wodehouse. In the story, an English lord who professed to have learned the art of hog calling from "Fred Petzel, the champion," endeavored to teach it to his butler.

The butler insisted, "I do not call pigs, your Lordship."

But his Lordship's will prevailed. To imitate the Patzel call, he advised, one must "begin the 'hoo' in a low minor of two quarter notes in four-four time. From this build gradually to a higher note until at last the voice is soaring in full crescendo, reaching F sharp on the natural scale and dwelling for two retarded half-notes, then breaking into a shower of accidental grace notes.

"You need a voice that has been trained in the open prairie. You need a manly, sun-burned, wind-scorched voice, with a suggestion in it of the crackling of cornhusks and the whisper of evening breezes in the fodder."

\* \* \*

From Robert Morris' column in the *Omaha World-Herald* of February 7, 1967.

Robert Morris' *Omaha World-Herald* column and confirmed by Fred Patzel's son Donald in a recent telephone conversation.)

But, alas, fame is but for a season. By 1949 Fred was lamenting to an *Omaha World-Herald* columnist that "the art of hog calling" had vanished. And so had Fred's renown. When in 1967 it was suggested that the new pork processing plant in Madison be named "Patzel's Memorial Pork Packery" after the late champion, no one remembered his greater glory, and the plan was abandoned. Yet remembered he was. Ironically, it was as "the best darned

ditch digger in all of Madison County”—an inferior, threadbare immortality at best. “No sewer ever ran backward if he dug the ditch,” gushed Blue Hill lawyer Ralph F. Baird. “And families were consoled with the thought that their dear ones lay straight, level and true in their perfectly sculpted graves.” Of Fred’s clarion call that could have passed for the doomsday trump and brought those dear ones running back to the bosoms of their families, not a mention.

No statue of Patzel graces the Madison city square, lamented *Omaha World-Herald* columnist Robert Morris. We can only trust that there is a heaven reserved for porkers who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our morning rasher, and there, as the poet sings, “midst warbling choirs of seraphic swine,” gleams a golden statue of Fred Patzel.

The reader will recall that I earlier wrote that my pursuit of the elusive Patzel had yielded a “perplexing” outcome. Reprinted here are the concluding paragraphs of an editorial that appeared in the *New York Sun* of September 14, 1926 and was later reprinted with other accounts of Fred’s triumph from New York and Boston newspapers in the *Literary Digest* of October 9, 1926. You are invited to compare them with the description of James Belford’s hog-call at the climax of “Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!”

He begins his ‘Poo-ey’ in a low minor of two quarter notes in four-four time. From this he builds gradually to a higher note, until at last his voice is soaring in full crescendo, reaching F sharp on the natural scale and dwelling for two retarded half notes, then breaking into a shower of accidental grace notes.

... the voice must be trained out on the open prairie with tornadoes for sparring partners to give it robustness and strength. A manly, sunburned, wind scorched voice is absolutely indispensable.... it is a voice which should have within it a suggestion of the crackling of corn husks, the whisper of evening breezes in the fodder. Such vocal equipment belongs to Fred Patzel. That’s why he is champion.

The perplexity is this: why would Wodehouse risk lifting such a prominent passage from the *Sun’s* beautifully written editorial as the climax of his story less than a year after the anonymous editorial and its reprinting in the *Literary Digest* if it was his intention to deceive? “Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!” first appeared in *Liberty* of July 9, 1927 and *Strand Magazine* the following month. And why did no one call him on the wholesale borrowing? Could it be that Wodehouse’s use of Fred Patzel’s name and the *Sun’s* perhaps celebrated description of his call was intended and taken by all concerned as an homage to the Orpheus of the hog-lot, the once and future champion of the universe, Fred Patzel?

## CANNES BERTIE SPEAK NICE FRENCH?

By Tony Ring

You recall that young Bertie’s a Magdalen man  
And the idea of work left him cold.  
Though the subject he studied was never revealed  
I’ll try now if I might be so bold.

If you re-read the words that appear in the texts  
Of his French he knew more than a jot.  
And you’ll see from my choice of quotations below  
A *mot juste* with *sang-froid*’s what you got.

If the Code of the Woosters is *noblesse oblige*  
And he’d seek to be *preux chevalier*,  
When a lady upset him he’d be heard to sigh  
*Tout comprendre* and *c’est tout pardonner*.

An *amende honorable* he’d be likely to give  
To an aunt he’d annoyed, *faute de mieux*,  
And to calm himself down he’d go out with *ses gents*,  
*Son chapeau et whangee de monsieur*.

If the odd *objet d’art* became lost or *perdu*  
And Sir Watkyn and Spode were, *en masse*,  
On the trail in his *chambre* or *dans son armoire*  
You’d hear “*Voilà*, it’s just *une impasse*”.

At the Drones or at home he was never alone  
But from Jeeves he received most *critiques*,  
For when Bertie proposed an idea that went wrong  
He stuck firm with the same *idée fixe*.

You’ll find all these French words in the speech he was  
given  
Except one, which I’ve put in today.  
But I hope that I’ve proved what I argued at first:  
There’s no doubt Bertie took a B. A.

Challenge to the reader: What is the non-Bertie word or phrase Tony has inserted in this poem?

# DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

## Comments on the 1937 movie from a 1999 perspective, with source material

By Michael Skupin

A talk delivered at the Houston convention of the Wodehouse Society, October 1999. Mike is not only a movie maven, but a composer and performer, and he entertained us with those talents at the convention. Bill Rudersorf provided, via Mike, the rare "behind the scenes" photographs which illustrate this article. —OM

I have lost count of the number of times I have seen the movie adaptation of Wodehouse's *A Damsel in Distress*, yet my opinion of it today is the same as the first time I saw it: it is a rich film, containing beautiful songs and some of the greatest dance footage ever filmed (the "Fun House" sequence won its choreographer an Academy Award®, but there are other terpsichorean gems besides); it featured some of the most brilliant talents of the day, not only Plum, but songwriters George and Ira Gershwin, choreographer Hermes Pan, radio stars George Burns and Gracie Allen, and the incomparable Fred Astaire.

It had the makings of a masterpiece, but is flawed in a strange way, not by the presence of any of the above, but by an absence, that of Astaire's partner Ginger Rogers.

Rogers had arrived in Hollywood already a star from her Broadway successes, and continued to thrive as a singer and comedienne in the movies (*42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*). Then, abruptly, she became a dancer when the studio paired her with Astaire. Although her teenage title of charleston champion of Fort Worth, Texas, had been her only accolade in that area, she was scrappy, and rose to the challenge of matching Astaire (a dancing machine, workaholic, and perfectionist) step for step through a series of movies that brought the team fame (and, I predict, immortality). However, it is clear from the film they had just finished, *Shall We Dance?*, that Rogers was burned out: she looked gaunt, unhealthy, and so must have been relieved to temporarily part company with Astaire (she starring in *Stage Door*, he in *Damsel in Distress*). After the two ended their professional relationship for good in 1939 (with the exception of one reunion ten years later), she quickly won acclaim as an actress (non-dancing) in her own right, receiving a best actress Oscar® in 1942 for *Kitty Foyle*. In 1937, however, the important thing was the team, and Ginger was not at Fred's side; whoever pre-

sumed to step into her shoes could expect a cold welcome from the fans. Astaire put it succinctly in *Steps in Time*,

Any girl following Ginger at this point was on the spot . . .

As we will see, other actresses refused the part, and so the female lead devolved to a newcomer, which was a flaw for the film's first audience; to compensate, Burns and Allen were brought in, which is a flaw for us today. Although they proved to be excellent dancers, their jokes have not stood the test of time, and their exchanges clash with the Wodehouse dialogue.

A few words about the leading lady, Joan Fontaine, the target of much criticism. La Fontaine's great days would be years in the future: in 1937 she was an eighteen-year-old starlet with only a few roles behind her. To her credit, she played her acting part well, but the script forced her to dance, a lengthy pas de deux with the legendary Astaire, and the film's first audience did not forgive her terpsichorean shortcomings. They wanted Ginger. Pan composed a dance with Fontaine's limitations in mind, and coached her; and the reader may recall that Astaire was a master at making his partners look good: one recalls Paulette Goddard in *Second Chorus*, Red Skelton in *Three Little Words*, Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn* and *Blue Skies*, and in *Royal Wedding*—a ha-track! Still, the fans were not satisfied.

(For the record, I maintain that, although Fontaine may have not been up to Ginger Rogers' standards [she admittedly gets through the number only by the skin of her teeth], she was no worse than two or three other ladies that Astaire would later dance with, and she was nowhere near as downright bad as Betty Hutton would be in *Let's Dance*.)

Comparison of the plot of the movie with that of the novel is in-



Mike Skupin (Photo by Jan Wilson Kaufman)



teresting, but I do not propose to treat it in detail; suffice it to say that characters are merged, the story line and motivations are radically different, but the dialogue is largely intact. Sometimes a phrase will occur in the mouth of a different character from the original, but it is still there. A study of the nuts and bolts of the transfer from the printed page to the silver screen would be a fruitful one, but I leave it for another day.

I have said my say about *Damsel in Distress*. I now present some gleanings from my background research. First, Garson Kanin's recollections of the adulation that the Rogers-Astaire team evoked, from page 165 of *Together Again*:

I remember going to see *Top Hat* at the Radio City Music Hall on its opening day. Never before and never since have I seen an audience stand up and cheer at the end of a picture. A standing ovation for a movie? I sat through the picture twice and that evening insisted on going again and taking my brother with me. Twice for him too, which meant four times that day for me. The next evening I was back again. Only once through this time. Then I went back every single evening, each time taking a beloved friend and enjoying it anew through his or her eyes.

*Top Hat* was, unquestionably, a breakthrough, a milestone. The musical screen was growing up. This was a brand of sophistication new, not only to it, but to most of the musical shows on Broadway.



Early days in the preparation of the movie: Fred Astaire at the piano with George and Ira Gershwin.

Kanin also gives us, on page 166, a glimpse backstage:

One of the few joys of my being under contract with RKO in the late thirties was being on the lot while Astaire-Rogers pictures were being made. These were the studio's most important productions, and the best of everything was reserved for them.

Months before an Astaire-Rogers went into production, preparations were under way. A great sound stage would be set aside, and for weeks, whenever one walked by, one would see Fred Astaire in dapper rehearsal clothes, sweating it out with Hermes Pan. Early morning, late afternoon, often evening. A pianist and two creative artists digging, discovering, inventing, often astonishing even themselves.

Hermes Pan was a brilliant young Greek dancer and aspiring choreographer from Tennessee whose name was actually Hermes Panagiotopoulos, which he found unwieldy in the world of show business. He had approximately the same build, height, weight, and dimensions as Fred, which made it easy for Fred to work with him on choreography. The sound stage, while they were rehearsing, was full of blackboards, large and small, detailing the routines in the way that football coaches lay out plays.

After several weeks of preliminary preparation, there would be times when Hermes would be Ginger and Fred Fred and other times Fred would be Ginger and Hermes would be Fred. Finally, Ginger would make her appearance, and the whole process would begin again. Now props would be brought in: chairs, sofas, tables. Some weeks of this. Then rehearsals would continue in costume. And hairdress. Each day deepening and enriching the number. After a few months, the director would come in. Usually Mark Sandrich. And the camera ideas would begin. A couple of weeks later, the cameraman would be added to the working team. Finally, shooting would begin.

George Burns had much to say about our subject on pages 204-206 of *Gracie: A Love Story*.

The picture both Gracie and I enjoyed making the most was *Damsel in Distress*, a musical comedy starring Fred Astaire based on a P. G. Wodehouse story. RKO asked Paramount to lend us to that studio for this movie, and we really wanted to make it. It was the first film Astaire had done without Ginger Rogers in several years; the musical score had been written by George and Ira Gershwin—it was the last complete score George Gershwin had written before his death—and featured such wonderful songs as "A Foggy Day," and "Nice Work If You Can Get It," and it was to be directed by George Stevens. Paramount agreed, but before RKO signed us for the film they wanted us to dance for Fred Astaire and get his approval. That made me a little nervous. I was only a slightly better dancer than a singer and Astaire might well have been the greatest hoofer who ever lived. I knew Gracie could stay close to him; I wasn't sure I could.

Then I remembered a vaudeville team named Evans and Evans who used to do a popular act in which they danced with whisk



Now the music has words: Fred with Gracie Allen and George Burns.

brooms. I didn't know how good I'd look trying to keep pace with Fred Astaire, but I knew I'd be great compared to a whisk broom. So I invited one of the Evanses to come to California to teach the whisk-broom dance to me and Gracie.

We spent hours in our backyard next to the pool learning the dance. Not only did we get very good at it, we ended up with the cleanest pool deck in Southern California. When we demonstrated the dance for Fred Astaire, he not only hired us, he thought the brooms were so good he also put them in the picture. So Gracie and I ended up teaching Fred Astaire how to dance.

As we signed our contracts, all I could think about was how good this was going to be for our careers. Dancing with Astaire to music by the Gershwins, directed by George Stevens in a story by Wodehouse, playing real characters rather than doing four-minute segments as Burns and Allen. Not bad for two vaudeville comics. Gracie thought it was unbelievable too – the worst dancer in her family starring in a Fred Astaire movie.

Astaire was as nice as his screen image. In the picture we had to do an elaborate sequence that took place at an amusement park, during which we danced on a whirling turntable, over rolling barrels, down a slide, and finally in front of funhouse mirrors that distorted our images and cut off our bodies above the knees. Trying to dance on that turntable was like trying to dance on a rapidly spinning record. It was very tough and I think Fred was concerned about making Gracie and me comfortable. So on the first day of rehearsals, as Gracie trailed him around the turntable, he suddenly slipped and fell. I don't know if he did it on purpose or not, but I do know that Fred Astaire fell down more gracefully than I danced. Gracie helped him get up and we went back to work. But after that we were no longer worried about making mistakes—if Fred Astaire fell down, what could anyone possibly expect from Burns and Allen?

(We note parenthetically that Astaire would continue to put his partners at ease by deliberate mistakes, as with the young Audrey Hepburn, recorded on page 139 of the Harris biography:

Fred Astaire also tried to help. "We were getting ready to record the vocal track for their duet of 'S Wonderful,'" director Stanley Dornen recalled. "It was also Audrey's first time with Fred in front of a full orchestra, so she was very ill at ease and nervous, as anybody would be. I was in a mixing booth, and they were out on the stage, and she made a mistake, so I said, 'Hold it.' She said she was terribly sorry, and we started again. She made a mistake again, and this time she stopped and asked to start again. The third time we went through it, she made a mistake, and Fred jumped in and did something wrong on purpose. He said, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I've ruined it. Can we do it again?' It was so wonderful, and I'm not sure that she ever realized. He was so fabulous."

This in 1957.)

Burns continues on pages 206-207:

The dance at the amusement park was one of the most complex scenes ever filmed, requiring countless retakes. Gracie never complained, never said a single word; I think she was still amazed that the worst dancer in the entire family was performing with Fred Astaire.

By the end of the day we were exhausted. For a while we went to the screening of the dailies, the showing of the film we'd just shot, but one night I looked over at Gracie and she'd fallen asleep. I'd never seen her fall asleep in public before, even when I sang, so from that night on we always went right home at the conclusion of the day's shooting. That was probably the first time I realized that Gracie couldn't do everything.

Gracie did four or five dances with Fred Astaire, including the whisk-broom number, and made her sisters proud. Don't take my word for it, not while I'm holding a lit cigar, but *Time* magazine wrote, "Far more facile as an Astaire partner (than Joan Fontaine) is, of all people, rumpish Radio Duncie Gracie Allen." And a New York newspaper critic wrote, "Gracie and George go into several dance routines with Mr. Astaire, matching him step for step in one of the liveliest and merriest sequences in the picture. The gadgets...of the fun house are employed in one of the most unusual routines invented for the cinema. Miss Allen, moreover, is extremely pretty, and is quite as fetching, in spite of her loony sayings, as some of the glamour girls who could be mentioned."

At least I got better notices than the whisk brooms.

When the film came out, RKO suggested that theater owners promote it by putting mice in a cage in the lobby and advertising, "These waltzing mice are trying to imitate Fred Astaire and Burns and Allen doing 'The Fun

House Dance' from *Damsel in Distress*."

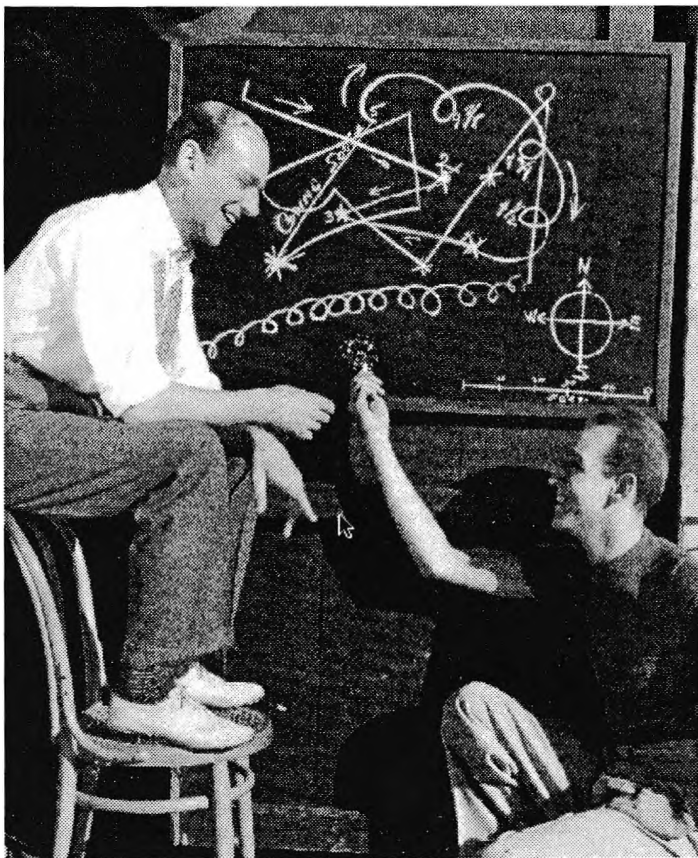
On the Fontaine question, we turn to pages 143-144 of the Bob Thomas biography of Astaire:

On December 3, 1936, George Gershwin wrote a friend in New York:

"The Astaire picture is practically finished and so far everybody is happy. The studio, realizing Gershwin can be lowbrow, has taken up their option on our contract for the next movie which, incidentally, will be minus Rogers. Fred has wanted to go it alone for a long time and he'll get his chance in the next picture."

The film was *A Damsel in Distress*, and it was George Stevens' turn to direct. RKO didn't want Fred Astaire to go it entirely alone, and the studio announced that Carole Lombard would play opposite him. Her salary would be \$200,000, a figure that infuriated Lela Rogers [Ginger's mother and frequent career advisor—MS]. Ginger, still under contract at a weekly salary, had been paid \$61,193.28 for *Swing Time*. Fred's salary for *A Damsel in Distress* was said to be \$250,000, but he was paid \$119,000 plus his usual percentage.

Carole Lombard dropped out, reasoning that she couldn't win as successor to Ginger. Alice Faye was considered, also Ida Lupino. Pandro Berman finally agreed to Joan Fontaine, who had the advantage of being under contract to RKO. She was also English and could fit the role of Lady Alyce of Torteigh Castle. Could she



No, it's not a diagram of a football play. It's a dance pattern devised by Fred Astaire and choreographer Hermes Pan.



The result of all those months of work: the incomparable Fred and the rather more comparable George and Grace in the fun house, making it look easy and fun.

dance? A little.

Fred accepted the casting with some trepidation. His fears grew when he tried a few steps with the eighteen-year-old actress. But she had studied ballet as a girl, and Fred and Hermes Pan believed they could fashion a duet or two with her modest talent.

"Before the film began," Miss Fontaine later recalled, "I took tap-dancing lessons from Ruby Keeler's brother, who came to the house each day with a portable wooden dance floor. Why these tap lessons, I never knew. I didn't have to do any tap steps in the film."

On pages 146-147, Thomas continues with more backstage "dirt," this time from director Stevens' perspective:

Late in life, George Stevens reminisced about *A Damsel in Distress*:

"Freddie's a great worrier, and he started worrying about Joan Fontaine. After I'd been shooting for about four weeks, Freddie and Pan Berman came down on the set and said, 'We're disturbed about Joan Fontaine. It seems to us we've got to make a change.'

"I said, 'If we take this girl out of this picture, she'll kill herself.' They said, 'Well, now, that's an exaggeration.' I said, 'It probably is. I'm not going to say, You can do it, but I'll be elsewhere. I'll just say one thing: "I'm going to stay here, and you're not going to do it." We've got to put her through this picture.'

"I can understand Freddie; he's a great artist. But Joan was a girl with problems; she cried and all that. So they went back and thought it over, and they came back with a plea for Ruby Keeler, somebody who could dance. I said, 'I'm not going to take this girl out of the picture.'

"Freddie said, 'Go ahead, let's make the goddamned picture.'



They were right: She was the wrong girl in the wrong spot. She never knew they wanted her out of the picture, or she would have collapsed."

Finally, on pages 90-91 of his Astaire tribute, Peter Carrick is worth citing for his ambivalence.

Fred's *Damsel in Distress*, meantime, turned out to be a sad experience because of the incomprehensible casting of Joan Fontaine opposite Astaire. Ruby Keeler was tipped for the part, so was Jessie Matthews, but it went finally to the up-and-coming Fontaine, recently signed by RKO. Theoretically, the film had everything to make it a winner – sound production and direction by Pandro Berman and George Stevens, immaculate dance and art direction from Hermes Pan and Van Nest Polglase, and also su-

except for that superlative Gershwin music. 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' quickly became an Astaire special and 'A Foggy Day' was destined to become one of the greatest popular music standards of all time.

Does Carrick like the movie, or doesn't he? Well, I certainly do. Does la Fontaine's short pas de deux ruin the whole film for Carrick? It doesn't ruin it for me. I think it's a fine movie, and that the problem is not Fontaine, but Burns and Allen. When I become king, I will command that some of the Burns and Allen dialogue be cut. I will also decree that the gratuitous scene where Keggs lip-synchs an operatic aria be omitted in toto. And I will order the whole movie colorized; and it will be the hit it was meant to be.

I end by saying that if my remarks inspire others to see *Damsel in Distress*, I will be well pleased.

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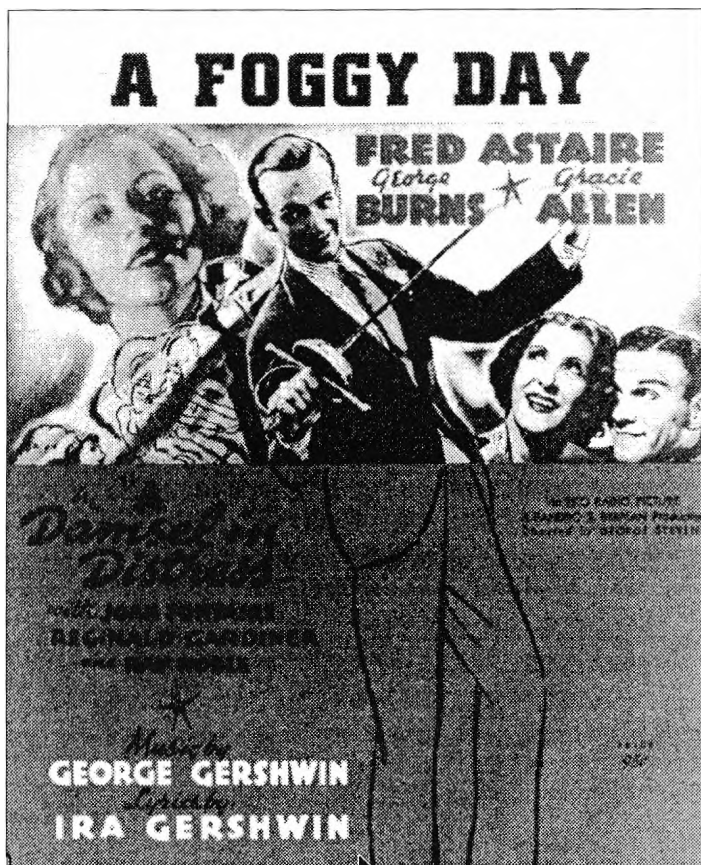
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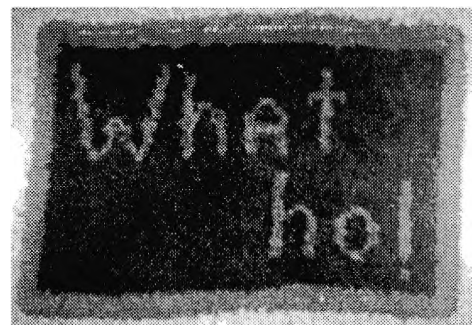
Cover of the sheet music for "A Foggy Day"

perb music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin. But the sad reality was that Joan Fontaine was not a singer, nor a dancer, and didn't possess the ability or experience at that time to showcase, as Ginger did, Astaire's polished talent. They had only one dance number but Miss Fontaine's inability to complement Fred's artistry was painfully and embarrassingly obvious, despite valiant 'paste-over' efforts by director George Stevens. It had its good points—a more soundly based P. G. Wodehouse script, effortless comedy performance from George Burns and Gracie Allen, and an Oscar went to dance director Hermes Pan – but this surely was one film which Astaire-Rogers fans might have wanted to forget –

## WHAT HO! DOORMAT

Father Richard "Stinker Pinker" Libby, back in his seminary days a couple of years ago, decorated the entrance to his dormitory room with this unique doormat. It is not, as the TV ads remind us, available in any store: it was made by his mother, Patsy Libby, also a TWS member. I wish we could show it to you in color: bright red lettering and bright red border, blazing out from a sober blue ground. It must have added a cheery note to the studious atmosphere of the seminary. We congratulate Patsy for making it, and Stinker for having such a mother.

—OM



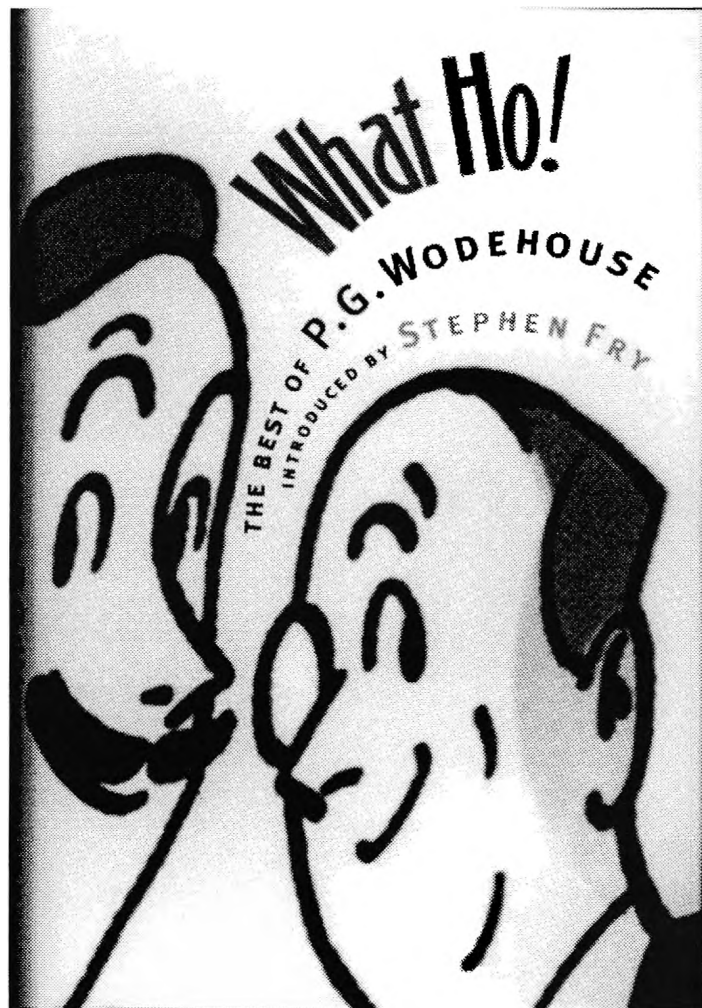
# WHAT HO!: THE BEST OF P. G. WODEHOUSE

We are pleased to report that *What Ho!: The Best of P. G. Wodehouse*, previously publicized in these pages, has hit the bookshelves at last. As you will recall, this is the anthology conceived by Dan and Susan Cohen and implemented by Tony Ring and the International Wodehouse Association to commemorate Wodehouse in the new millennium. Selections in the book, which were chosen by the publisher, Hutchinson/Random House Ltd. UK, include those short stories, passages from the novels, poems, lyrics, essays, and other material deemed to be among Plum's best by Wodehouse readers around the world, as per a poll of Wodehouse Society members in several countries. Our enjoyment of the book is considerably increased by Stephen Fry's magnificent introduction.

Since you (surely!) have all the canon already and may doubt that a mere collection is worth adding to your collection, it's worth noting that in this book, in addition to twenty-two short stories and six extracts from novels, there are fifteen other juicy items. Among them are several not previously published in book form and several, from private collections, previously unpublished. Even for Those Who Have All the Books, this book is worth having.

While no one book can ever encompass everybody's favorites, this one comes awfully close. It is a pippin of a tome, as those who have already received their copies can attest. Stu Shiffman wrote to PGW-Net: "This will be the logical alternative to *The Most of PG Wodehouse* or *The Week-end Wodehouse* for the place of honor on guestroom night-tables, bathroom reading shelves, or indeed any room of the house. It is also eminently suitable for lending to new prospects (always supposing that one could get it back once again—how often has this happened to you when you press a book on a friend and it disappears into eldritch corners of his or her homestead?)." And Dan Cohen noted: "It is the one Wodehouse book to be stranded with on a desert island or given to a friend who has never read Wodehouse before. We are trying to figure out a way of getting an American edition which will make it much easier to obtain in this country."

And therein lies the rub. At the present time, the book is available only in the UK. Those who have not yet ordered it can do so via the [www.amazon.com.uk](http://www.amazon.com.uk) web site. Those who prefer the more conventional method of ordering may obtain instructions by writing or calling Auntie (see masthead for address). Delay no longer—order your copy of *What Ho!* today! —AD and OM



Dust jacket of some book or other—can't remember its name.



Double-page spread at the beginning of the Jeeves section.

# NEW MAN IN THE ENGINE ROOM

## Who is who now

Aunt Dahlia's president's message in the Winter 1999 *Plum Lines* noted Tom Wainwright's desire to step down as treasurer and Erik Quick's volunteering to do the job, with thanks to both. Since then, it has become clear that the duties Tom carried out so well for so long are too much to ask one member to take on unassisted. Since Erik will be working on our legal and tax filing matters, the other officers agreed that the maintenance of the database and membership list should be handled by someone else. I've volunteered to take on the post.

Marilyn MacGregor will continue to deal with inquiries and new-member correspondence; I'll handle your address changes and update the membership list, and I'll receive your dues payments, update your membership expiration date, and send the checks off to be deposited.

## What happens to what

Telephone numbers and electronic mail addresses are included in our membership list primarily to allow members to communicate with each other. They are also handy if your issue of *Plum Lines* comes back with "no forwarding address" stamped on it and the officers need to contact you.

If you wish to have your phone and/or e-mail contacts in our database only, and not included in the printed membership list, request that this data be "unlisted"; the default is to print it. And don't worry about "spam." We don't have the time or inclination to broadcast e-mail messages or to dun you by phone or e-mail for renewals.

## How to live long and prosper

A few members have asked how the membership renewal process works. We will continue to use the brightly-colored "Dues are due" inserts with *Plum Lines* to ask for your dues once a year; we now give you a bit of advance warning as well. The new mailing labels carry a date code at the upper right; this is the *Plum Lines* issue with which your "Dues are due" notice will appear. (The spring issue is the first issue of each volume and year.) Thus a new member whose check arrived in February 2000 received the Spring 2000 issue as the first issue of the subscription; the dues notice will be inserted in the Winter

2000 issue, the fourth issue sent. As a matter of courtesy, we send a fifth issue with a "Dues are past due" notice if the renewal check is late, but a late-remitter's renewal *season* will not change; only the year is updated when you pay your annual dues.

We are now able to keep track of multi-year renewals, so if you've just had a good day at the dog races and would rather slip us a check for \$40, we can bump up your renewal date by two years and save you a stamp, check, and envelope next year.

## Another impostor at the Castle

In my capacity as keeper of the lists, I have taken the *ex officio* nom de Plum of "Bill Lister," thus joining Pongo (aka "Webster") in claiming a second nom with a literal interpretation of the surname. (On PGW-Net and alt.fan.wodehouse, I remain "George Bevan.")

## A FEW QUICK ONES

From Father Richard “Stinker Pinker” Libby comes the splendid news that a new chapter has been formed: “The Mottled Oyster Club of San Antonio has decided on a name and on a president (your humble curate, in fact).” Details about this “small but jocular band” to follow in a future “Chapters corner” column (about which see note on the last page of this issue).

Rhinehart Potts spotted a Wodehouse reference in the March 22, 1999 issue of *Forbes*. An article reporting a currency crisis remarks that “the IMF admitted in a January report . . . that mistakes were made. P. G. Wodehouse’s character Ukridge comes closer to my own assessment of the probability that IMF-style therapy could be successful: ‘about as much chance as a one-armed blind man in a dark room trying to shove a pound of melted butter into a wild cat’s left ear with a red-hot needle.’”

John Baesch relayed news of the February 18 sale of a private collection of PGW first editions. The Christie’s auction included rare copies of *Not George Washington* (1907), which sold for \$4,550, and *Love Among the Chickens* (1906), which fetched the top price of the day, a whopping \$5,000. In addition, a 1934 copy of *Very Good, Jeeves* was practically given away at \$2,800. Four of the top ten lots were sold to Americans. Francine Swift tells us that the seller was an engineering consultant from Southport, Lancs, who started his collection in 1975 with the purchase of a dozen first editions for £1.50 and added to it over the course of the next 25 years. The estimated sale value of the collection was \$66,000, but it sold for a royal \$110,000. Which shows that you really can collect when you collect.

March 10 was World Book Day, and to commemorate the event, a poll was published in Great Britain to report the nation’s all-time favorite authors. As Richard Vine noted on alt.fan.wodehouse, “Number 50 on the list was a certain W. Shakespeare of Stratford. But number 48 was Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse.” It is with utmost satisfaction that we reflect on Plum beating the Bard in any such survey—but only 48th??

Tony Ring and Joel Brattin report, separately, that the British Library is currently presenting an exhibit entitled “Chapter and Verse: 1000 Years of English Literature.” Among the items on display is the first page of the typescript, with pencilled corrections, of *Galahad at Blandings* (*The Brinksmanship of Galahad Threepwood*, US), and

one of the Low sketches from which the famous Low drawing was built up. A page of the typescript is reproduced in the catalog of the exhibit. The catalog, with color illustrations, is available from the British Library bookshop for £4.95 (e-mail bl-bookshop@bl.uk). The exhibit runs through October 15, 2000.

More news about the longed-for Wodehouse Playhouse videotapes: Chris Heather reported to PGW-Net that a friend of his who works at the BBC has confirmed that chances are very slim for getting the series released on videotape. Here’s why: “Video wasn’t around in the early 70s, so home video entertainment rights weren’t secured at the time. Going back later can sometimes mean vast sums to actors, scriptwriters, producers, musicians . . . and an unbelievable amount of time and hassle. Revenue from 200 sales wouldn’t cover the paper-clips, and decisions on video releases are always commercial ones. The good news is that most of the Wodehouse Playhouse programmes were shown recently on one of the BBC’s commercial cable/satellite channels, BBC Arena. If I spot them coming up again it might be worth a note to PGW-Net. This is much more practical than waiting for videos to come out!” Stay tuned for further developments.

Following up on the news (reported in the last *Plum Lines*) that Everyman Library has just begun the reissue of 80 Wodehouse books in hardback collectors’ editions, Tony Ring informs us that members of Wodehouse societies throughout the world will be offered a discount of 25% on all orders—not just the launch editions but the entire series (which will be published over a series of years). TWS members should be getting bookmarks marking this exciting series with this issue of *Plum Lines*. Tony says that the price will be £9.99 per volume before the discount, with added charges for postage and handling.

Charles Gould has been for years a leading source of books by and about Wodehouse. Dan Garrison wrote the extraordinarily useful *Who’s Who in Wodehouse*. “So,” I hear you asking, “what?” Well, in a recent catalog, Charles described Dan’s book as “the most useful, accurate, imaginative, intelligent, complete, amusing, and satisfactory reference book ever produced about anything.” Underpraise, I’d call it.

Charles’s address, for the not-yet-sufficiently-booked, is P. O. Box 543, Kent CT 06757, phone (860) 927-6074.

*AD and OM*

Aunt Dahlia and the Oldest Member

It is with a certain *je ne sais quoi* that we announce the addition of David Landman to the editorial staff of *Plum Lines*. David's name is no doubt already familiar to you, as it has appeared in our august journal numerous times (in particular, see page 1 of the current issue). David is a retired professor of English who spoke about PGW's song lyrics at the 1995 Boston convention. Here is how he described himself at that time:

Renowned in café society as the fellow with his back to the check, David Landman is a byword in easily impressed circles. A fairy purse left in his shoe convinced him that he was a prince traveling until he came into his realms. Accordingly, he burned his bridges before him and spent his early years expecting at any moment to click. It was thus his youth passed as unremarked as a boa constrictor moving through a pig until want threw him upon employment. In mid-life, with palms callused from grasping too many straws, he entered upon that last nobility of an infirm mind: teaching. . . He describes himself as "the sort of person one is slightly surprised to find alive at all." He is barely survived by his wife Elizabeth and six remarkably dependent children.

With such extraordinary talent staring us in the face, it was the work of a moment for OM and AD to form a conspiracy to recruit David to the staff. After several gin and tonics and a bit of arm-twisting, he only agreed to it after being told of the fame and glory that comes with the position. He has since entered into the fray with an enthusiastic roar that has breathed new life into his fellow editors. It is our hope, in fact, that he will help us to streamline and improve the current editorial process.

Among other worries, David's duties will entail his being the channel for almost all contributions to *Plum Lines*. From now on, we are requesting that all original articles, scholarly or humorous, be sent to David, whose address appears on the masthead. Cuttings from newspapers and magazines, as well as snippets for "A few quick ones" and "Something new" can continue to be sent to any one of the editors.

You will note that we do not refer to David by a nom de Plum. That is because he has not yet chosen one, nor can we think of the best moniker to give him in his new assignment. If any reader has an appropriate suggestion, do please bung it along. In the meantime, be sure to welcome and congratulate our new editor, who is now giving his all for a good cause.

—AD

In a recent edition of *Departures Magazine* (an American Express cardholders perk) John Karcos came across an article on Donald Steel, the great British golf architect, written by James Dodson. Excerpts follow.

I began by asking Steel if the very word "links" isn't the most misused and misunderstood term in golf. He laughed and nodded vigorously.

"I'm afraid so, it seems—and not only on your side of the ocean. In an older generation of Britons, for example, you'll hear all golf courses referred to as 'the links.' I think that harks back to P. G. Wodehouse whose golf stories did so much to popularize the game fifty or sixty years ago. He was always referring to 'the links' and I think over time that simply got absorbed into the general language of the game."

A true linksland, Steel reminded me, is an ode to geographic simplicity. Golf came from the sea roughly 400 years ago—possibly imported to Scottish shores as the Roman stick game *paganica* or the Dutch game *kolf*—and was played from its earliest days on windswept land that literally "linked" the village with the sea. "My definition of links," said Steel, "is the strip of land which links the sea with more fertile land, often set amongst dunes. The best terrain for golf is sand and that kind of land has minimal agricultural value—which makes such places ideal."



"What," I hear you asking, "does the *Oxford English Dictionary* have to say about this?" Well, it supports Steel's idea that a link is a strip of land near the shore, where golf is played: "b. *pl. (Sc.)* Comparatively level or gently undulating sandy ground near the seashore, covered with turf, coarse grass, etc. c. The land on which golf is played, often resembling that described in b." The earliest quote under "link" is dated 931.

But the *OED* does not support Steel's derivation of the word: "link" is our form of the "O[ld]E[nglish] *hlinc*, possibly a derivative, with *k* suffix, of the root *hlin-* to LEAN." What undulating ground has to do with a departure from the perpendicular is nowhere explained.

The earliest quote under "golf" is dated 1457. The earliest quote that mentions both golf and links is dated 1538, which means that golf land was called links nearly 400 years before Wodehouse played. Incidentally, the dedicatory quote in *The Clicking of Cuthbert* does not appear in the *OED*. The word "golf," says our revered authority, is "Of obscure origin."

—OM



# UNHAND THAT BUTLER!

By David McDonough

Regular contributor (and all-around good egg) David McDonough offers his thoughts on the continuing (and interminable) Ask Jeeves saga. Our thanks to the on-line magazine *Salon*, which originally published this article on January 11, 2000. —AD

The October news that Ask Jeeves, the online search engine, had signed up with Hollywood power mogul Michael Ovitz sent the company's stock soaring. Ask Jeeves uses as its trademark a well-fed cartoon butler with clasped hands and slightly obsequious smile, and the firm has plans to make his figure the focal point of the kind of aggressive licensing, merchandising and marketing campaign that Ovitz and his Artists Managing Group do so well. Books and cartoons featuring Jeeves have been mentioned.

There were hosannahs among the stockholders of Ask Jeeves that week, but among admirers of the author P. G. Wodehouse the news was greeted with rather less enthusiasm. Their position is that the character of Jeeves, the all-knowing servant, belongs irrevocably to his creator, Wodehouse, the prolific British humorist.

Wodehouse, who began his career at the turn of the century, wrote comic stories about amiable, vacuous, vaguely Edwardian young men who spent their days tossing rolls at each other at their London club, the Drones, their nights in nightclubs, and their weekends in country houses. In 1916, he needed a character to extricate his dim-witted hero, Bertie Wooster, from the light-headed predicaments in which he and his friends—whose collective IQ is well within double digits—invariably entangle themselves. In a flash of genius, Wodehouse decided to make Bertie's valet a mastermind.

He named him after Percy Jeeves, an English cricketer. Jeeves is there to bail Bertie out no matter what troubles he's getting into, or thinking of getting into: bad racing bet ("I should not advocate it, sir. The stable is not sanguine"), bad matrimonial plans ("I would always hesitate to recommend as a life's companion a young lady with such a vivid shade of red hair. Red hair, sir, is dangerous"), and especially, bad sartorial choice ("Not the blue with the faint red stripe, sir"). By the late '20s, Jeeves was firmly established. Wodehouse wrote his first Jeeves book in 1923, and his last in 1974 shortly before his death. In all, he produced 14 immensely popular books about the sagacious gentleman's gentleman.

Ask Jeeves does not have quite so long a pedigree. The

company was founded in 1996, and launched its consumer site in 1997, and in 1998 it launched its corporate question-asking service, which enables customers to ask specific questions of corporations, and includes among its clients Dell, Microsoft, Williams-Sonoma and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia.

For those who have not availed themselves of the service, the idea is this: you ask Jeeves a question in ordinary English (for example, "Who is the world's richest man?"). He then directs you to several variations of your question. You click on the one that comes the closest to your intent, which is itself linked to the appropriate Web site. In this case, you'll reach The Bill Gates Personal Wealth Clock.

That's how it works—ideally. ABCNEWS.com has noted that "Questions remain about how effective the service is in providing accurate answers to a wide range of questions." Many people assert, however, that they have had excellent results using Ask Jeeves; that is, if 10 responses to a question are given, usually, five of them link to helpful Web sites, and it is not a difficult task to ignore the inappropriate ones.

"Ask Jeeves is about making your life easier," says Heather Staples, vice-president of corporate communications for the company. "It allows you to ask questions in plain English and get answers to most frequently asked questions." She estimates that the site answers more than 2.5 million questions per day.

Ask Jeeves creators Garrett Gruener and David Warthen wanted a name that would stand out and convey what the search engine would do. "They knew they wanted a butler character," explains Staples, "so they thought about lots of different names for butlers, everything from Hudson to Cadbury, and they ended up with Jeeves." And had they read P.G. Wodehouse? Says Staples, "I would imagine that they had, but I don't know for a fact."

Tony Ring, a founder of the P. G. Wodehouse Society in Britain, and author of several books on Wodehouse, is irked by the whole Jeeves-as-logo situation. He insists that the site initially did mention Wodehouse's creation as its inspiration.

"My personal view, after having tried to use the engine to find a few things, is that Ask Jeeves is more like Ukridge [a decidedly thick-headed Wodehouse character] than Jeeves. So although when it was set up (acknowledging our Jeeves as the inspiration) it might have been regarded as something of a compliment, the fact that it does not now acknowledge his existence, coupled with its incompetence, says to me that like so much marketing today, it is no more than a con-trick."

Arguments as to antecedents aside, there remains the question of licensing. Where there's merchandising, there's money. Will the estate of P. G. Wodehouse collect

any of what Bertie Wooster would have called “the oof”? It seems doubtful.

“They are a completely separate entity at this point,” says Heather Staples firmly. “We have an amicable relationship with the Wodehouse estate, we just have no formal affiliation right now.”

The Wodehouse estate isn’t talking, but is rather giving the impression that should Ask Jeeves show up at the door, it would be about as welcome, to use a Wodehouse phrase, as “King Herod at an Israelite Mothers Social Saturday Afternoon.” Linda Shaughnessy of A. P. Watt Ltd., literary agents for the estate, will say only, “We are in touch. We are having discussions through our legal representatives.”

“It’s unconscionable for anybody to steal Jeeves from his creator,” protests Susan Cohen, vice-president of the Wodehouse Society in America. “It is ludicrous to say that Jeeves has nothing to do with P. G. Wodehouse. It’s like saying that Hamlet has nothing to do with Shakespeare.”

A simple trip to the Internet doesn’t clear up the issue, either. The name “Jeeves,” when typed into Ask Jeeves, puts you, not surprisingly, in touch with Ask Jeeves. So it does on the search engine Excite, which will also connect you to a laundry and dry cleaning service called “Jeeves of Belgravia.” Web Crawler links you to Ask Jeeves, but also to credits and episode information for the BBC television series “Jeeves and Wooster,” and plugging Jeeves into Infoseek puts you in touch with the International Guild of Professional Butlers, who have a whole Web page devoted to the books of P. G. Wodehouse.

Meanwhile, Ask Jeeves and Ovitz are pressing ahead. They have already displayed Jeeves as a 20-foot-tall float in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade in New York, gazing benignly down at the crowd, and comfortably rubbing elbows with Bugs, Buzz Lightyear, and other pop icons. The actor who has played Jeeves in limited-release TV commercials also appeared on the runway in a November fashion show celebrating the launch of *Animal Fair* magazine, a journal for pet lovers. (He was carrying his bulldog, Abbey.)

“We’re taking a look at how we can move Jeeves the character into popular culture . . . to a kind of Popeye status,” says Staples. And in the end, there may not be a lot that ardent Wodehousians can do about the matter except shudder. Elin Woodger, president of the Wodehouse Society in America, says, “We’ll probably just bung a bread roll at them. We’re not known for our official stances.” Susan Cohen is fiercer. “We don’t have to sit silent. Our job in the Wodehouse Society is to encourage people to discover and love P. G. Wodehouse. We are

going to be vocal. We can speak for Jeeves and Wodehouse.”

But it seems only fair to let the author speak for himself, from beyond the grave, as it were. In 1931, in the introduction to *The World of Jeeves*, Wodehouse wrote, “One great advantage in being a historian to a man like Jeeves is that his mere personality prevents one selling one’s artistic soul for gold. In recent years I have had lucrative offers for his services from theatrical managers, motion picture magnates, the proprietors of one or two widely advertised commodities, and even the editor of the comic supplement of an American newspaper, who wanted him for a ‘comic strip.’ But, tempting though the terms were, it only needed Jeeves’ deprecating cough and his murmured ‘I would scarcely advocate it, sir,’ to put the jack under my better nature. Jeeves knows his place, and it is between the covers of a book.”

Of course, Wodehouse was also a pragmatist. Jeeves was portrayed on film back in 1936, and has appeared on the stage and television. Shortly before Wodehouse’s death, Andrew Lloyd Webber secured the rights to a musical version of Jeeves. *By Jeeves* bombed, but let’s see Michael Ovitz try to cut Lloyd Webber out of something he thinks he’s entitled to. Although if anyone can do it, Ovitz can.

When Ask Jeeves was queried online with the question, “Who is Michael Ovitz?” the answer was, ominously, “This machine has performed an illegal function and will shut down.” Behold the awful, far-reaching power of Michael Ovitz. Or, as Jeeves would say to Bertie, “The mind boggles, sir.”

And Bertie’s response? “I inspected the mind. He was right. It boggled.”

## A CONVENTION REMINDER

By Hope Gaines

Our 2001 Wodehouse Convention will meet at the Sheraton Society Hill Hotel in Philadelphia on October 12-14 in — well, let’s say 2001. Reservations now being accepted at the Sheraton; more convention details soon to come. Tea, cricket, cow creamers . . . the mind boggles.

Call 1 (215) 238-6000 and mention the Wodehouse Society when you chat with the reservations people. Convention room rate is \$169, which is also in effect for three days before and three days after the dates of the bash.

# A MOVIE PROPOSAL

By Jean Tillson

The Internet forums PGW-Net and alt.fan.wodehouse have provided many a Plummie with the opportunity to share some bright ideas, but the following is one of the brightest we have ever seen. It began with a question put out to PGW-Netters by Stu Shiffman—to wit: “Say that some big Hollywood studio (say, Spielhammer Werkes International) was going to do a big budget film adaptation of one of Wodehouse’s novels. (1) Which one should it be? (2) Who would you cast in the leads?” This prompted the following response from Jean Tillson, known to her fellow on-line Wodehousians as Pighooey. Hollywood, take note!

—AD

Finally, illness has accomplished what no amount of good intentions could; it has given me sufficient time away from work and school to answer the above question which has, in fact, been the subject of one of my favorite daydreams for a long time. And I have come to the conclusion that one could never do a real Wodehouse story well enough to satisfy all parties. Therefore, the thing to do is to take the characters and make up one’s own story line. For instance, here is the one I turn over in my head most often (with the actors I envision in the roles):

Time (like an ever-rolling stream) has passed and, while it is still magically some time in the pseudo-Edwardian era we all know and love from Plum’s work, Bertie (Michael Palin) and Jeeves (John Cleese) are not as young as they once were. They come back from an extended ’round-the-world cruise and Bertie suddenly realizes that the Drones Club is now inhabited by middle-aged men with families and responsibilities who are in grave danger of becoming dull and respectable. Bertie, horror-stricken, decides that the way to liven things up and make them all feel young and reckless again is to put on a really good smoker with Pongo (Eric Idle) and Barmy Fotheringay Phipps (Tim Curry) doing their snappy cross-talk act, Gussie (Terry Jones) reciting poetry inspired by his newts, Bingo Little (Simon Jones) trying to teach his peke to play the piano, and all that sort of thing. Problems arise, however, when the Drones’ wives get together and insist on joining in and having the children take part, effectively turning the jolly old smoker into a bally family talent show. To further complicate things, Mrs. Bingo Little (Julie Christie) somehow manages to turn the talent show into a fund-raiser for Mixo-Lyidian war orphans because the heroine of her latest book happens to be a Mixo-Lyidian war orphan, you see, and she thinks it would be a great vehicle to promote her book. Her publisher, Lord Tilbury (Ian Holm), puts up a great deal of prize

money to promote the thing and Steggles (Derek Jacobi) is there making book on the outcome and generally trying to nobble things, but Jeeves out-smarts him in the end, of course.

Now, using the above as a background, we would naturally have a large number of the Drones’ children fall in and out of love with each other and this would in turn give us the opportunity to bring together some of the characters who never got to meet in the books. For instance, imagine that Pongo’s son Freddie (Hal Cazalet) is in love with Lord Emsworth’s granddaughter Victoria (Bosham’s girl, you know, played by Kate Beckinsale), but Lady Constance (Maggie Smith) wants Vicky to marry the son of Lord and Lady Sidcup (Oliver Reed and Vanessa Redgrave), Bertram Spode (Jude Law)—so named because Madeline thought the least she could do for Bertie after all his heroic devotion was to name a son after him. Vicky, however, can’t stand “Squiffy” Spode because not only does he believe the stars are God’s daisy chain, he is the leader of a whole band of militant loonies whose mission it is to see that everybody else believes it, too. As Squiffy is, in fact, secretly enamored of Gussie Fink-Nottle’s daughter Polly (Lara Cazalet) but too diffident to speak his love, it hardly matters, but Lady Constance doesn’t know that, you see, so she brings Vicky to Blandings Castle to get over her silly infatuation with Freddie. Freddie, meanwhile, talks to his godfather Bertie Wooster (now Lord Yaxley) and convinces him to go to Blandings in order to make Vicky (who has broken their engagement and is pretending to go along with her Aunt Constance’s wishes) see that it wasn’t his fault he got five days without the option for being caught in that raid on Francis Venus’s nightclub; he was simply trying to get his great-uncle Fred (Peter O’Toole) to come away from the baccarat table . . . and so, you get Bertie and Jeeves to Blandings Castle at last. Of course, Bosham (Tim McInnerny) is now the 10th Earl of Emsworth, but Beach (Brian Blessed) is still there complaining about the lining of his stomach, and McAllister (Sean Connery) is still trying to line the ancient yew path with gravel, while George Cyril Wellbeloved (Tony Robinson—alright, so I’ve been watching *Black Adder* while I’ve been sick) is back at the Empress’s sty (Empress III, probably, at this point) after being fired from Sir Gregory’s employ for drinking on the job or moving in with the Queen of Matchingham or something like that.

And so on and so on, what? I mean to say, it would be pie to come up with at least half a dozen more romantic entanglements between the children of Plum’s characters; add a few Mulliners and other notables to the mix and the only problem you’ll have plot-wise is knowing when to stop.

As for casting, I have a few more ideas, but I’ve not yet

figured out just how to weave them into the story. Here's a list:

Aunt Dahlia = Judi Dench  
Percy Pilbeam = Rowan Atkinson  
Gally = Richard Briers (of course)  
Mr. Mulliner = John Mortimer  
Baxter = Ian Carmichael  
Chimp Twist = Danny Devito  
Soapy Molloy = Robert DeNiro  
Dolly Molloy = Emma Thompson

Of course, Terry Gilliam would be in charge of sets and all that sort of thing by way of completing the Python contingent (and we might get him to direct, too, for that matter), and there has to be a way to get Billy Connolly in there somehow. Oh, and while they are too young to play Bertie and Jeeves in my picture, I can't stand the thought of making it without Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry, so I've decided to make them Ukridge (Mr. Fry) and Corky (Mr. Laurie). I also thought of making them Claude and Eustace, but they are supposed to be twins, so I'm not sure that would work.

Anyway, there are several benefits to this whole wheeze. First, making the main characters older eases the problem one always has in bringing fictional characters to the screen and that is the fact that everyone always has their own idea of exactly how their favorite characters look. I mean to say, think how many discussions we have had on this list alone regarding how old Jeeves is supposed to be and whether or not Bertie wears a monocle! But make them 20 or 30 years older and you won't offend quite so many sensibilities because most people haven't thought about what they might look like that far on.

Also, the parts of Bertie and Jeeves and some of the other main characters can actually be kept shorter by having all the romantic entanglements be between their children. Thus, we don't need the huge time commitment from some of the bigger stars and we can film the bits with DeNiro when he has time and the bits with Judi Dench when she has time, etc. And the opportunities for cameos are virtually endless! Everyone who is a fan of Wodehouse and wants to be an extra should be able to take part. I mean, we can have John Fletcher as a bookshop keeper, Tony Ring could be seen heading off to Lords in his real tennis kit, Norman Murphy could be in the background leading a tour of London, Charlie Watts could be a race horse owner in a scene at the track, Douglas Adams could be a bartender at the Drones, Frank McCourt could be standing on a soapbox in the park shouting about revolution and blood in the streets, and in and amongst it all we could have signs and advertisements for Slingsby's Superb Soups and Mulliner's Raven

Gipsy Face Cream and Little's Liniment. And we could all contribute to the screenplay much the way we contributed to the story selection in *What Ho!* We could send in our ideas for plot lines and little Wodehousian touches, then let the screenwriter put it all together and just wait and see what ends up getting used. We would have to "donate" the ideas, of course—it would be too complicated and difficult to manage if people expected individual compensation or credit, but there would be a special, private opening for members of the various Wodehouse societies.

Ah, daydreams! Still, if I come across several million dollars lying in the street any time soon I'll let you know and you can start bunging in your story ideas.



Several people responded to Jean's call for input. Some noted, for example, that Oliver Reed died a few years ago and thus is no longer available. Jan Kaufman proposed Rupert Everett to play Psmith Jr. David McDonough came up with the cleverest idea, however. David proposed Anthony Hopkins for Jeeves, going so far as to suggest some dialogue: "A former employer of mine once wore purple socks with a red cummerbund. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti..." Says Jean: "I've been laughing at that ever since!" Stay tuned. The plot may very well thicken on this one! —AD

## PLUM IN GRAND COMPANY

By Ben Jenson

My wife, Pauline, discovered this little gem in Ludwig Bemelman's fictional memoir of his time in Hollywood, *Dirty Eddie* (Viking, 1947). The scene is a dinner party in Malibu given in the 1930s for old and distinguished actors and actresses, including a Sir Gerald Graveline:

"But there," said the lieutenant, with raised voice, and holding his glass in the direction of Sir Gerald, "is the man who should play the lead, not—what's his name?"

"Thank you. Thank you very much, dear boy," said Sir Gerald, "but there are three roles in the world that I do not care to play. They are, in fact, not playable. They are: Christ, Shakespeare, and Jeeves. You start with six strikes against you when you try to portray any of them."

*Pace*, Arthur Treacher and Stephen Fry.

# THE PRIMAL PIGGERY

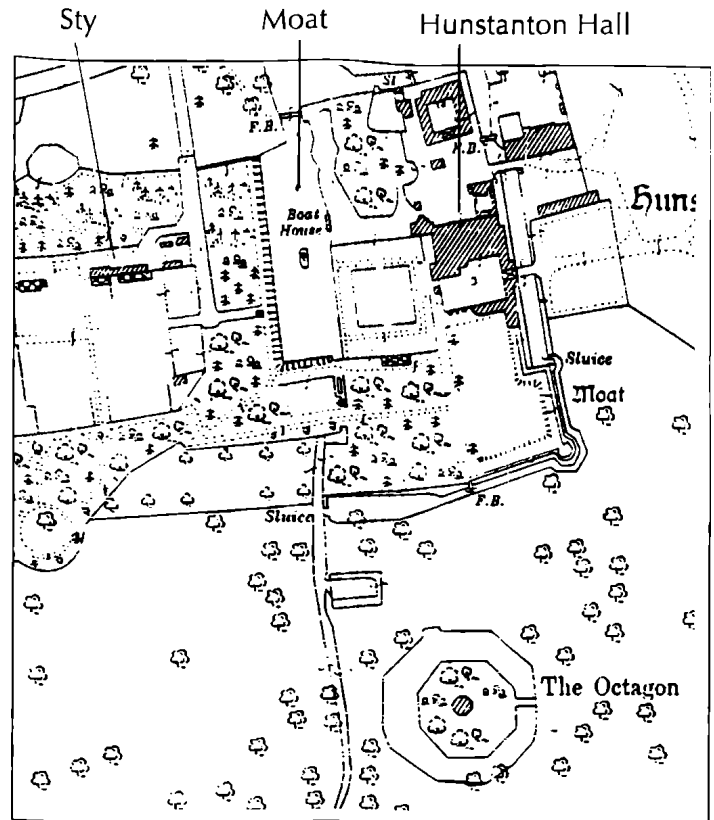
**N**orman Murphy's convention talk in Houston last October described how he had tracked down what was probably the inspiration for the Empress of Blandings' sty at Hunstanton Hall in Norfolk. In his talk, Norman told how he visited and photographed the remains of the sty, and even obtained a photograph of a certain black pig which lived in that sty in the 1920s and which had quite possibly served as the model of the Empress. Not long after his talk, Norman was able to locate for us a map of the Hunstanton Hall area, drawn in 1928, which shows not only the hall and the moat surrounding it, but the pigsty itself.

A portion of the map is shown here, with the hall, moat, and sty labeled. (In some accounts the widened part of the moat is called a lake.) As Norman points out in his *In Search of Blandings*, PGW spent considerable time at Hunstanton Hall over several years, was probably more familiar with it than with any other country house, and used it and parts of its grounds in several stories, among them *Money for Nothing*, "Jeeves and the Impending Doom," and "Mr. Potter Takes a Rest Cure."

**I**n the lower part of the map you will find a most significant building labeled "The Octagon." It is a small building on an island only half an acre in extent. It is surely—the hardest sceptic cannot doubt this—the original of the Octagon where Bertie and the Right Hon. A. B. Filmer took refuge from the furious swan in "Jeeves and the Impending Doom." In that story Bertie describes the building as having been built "to enable the grandfather of the late owner to have some quiet place out of the earshot of the house where he could practice the fiddle." Norman's *In Search of Blandings* quotes from the memoir of a Hunstanton neighbor to the effect that the Octagon was built about 1600 by a Sir Harmon LeStrange who "was a great music-lover and so fond of the violin that his wife . . . insisted on him building a little house on an island called the Octagon where he could practice to his heart's content and not disturb those inside the hall." The parallels between fact and fiction are perhaps closer here than in any other Wodehouse story.

The Octagon had survived more than 300 years when Wodehouse knew it, it was some 25 feet across, and its height I estimate to be at least that great (the swan had an almost unlimited supply of neck), so it was no trifling shed.

In describing his frantic efforts to escape from the angry swan, Bertie says that the "walls [of the Octagon] had grooves at regular intervals which were just right for the hands and feet, and it wasn't long before I was parked



Hunstanton Hall, Norfolk, and its immediate environs in 1928.

up on the roof . . ." It sounds like a masonry structure, and Bertie's feat in scaling such a wall without the aid of his usual waterpipe boggles the imagination.

So here is the original of the piggery of immortal fame, and the original of the tower which, though possibly stubby, is at least as legendary as Childe Roland's. We see them as a bird would have seen them in 1928, and we see them because Norman Murphy provided the map. Who else would have known where to find a detailed map of the Hunstanton area in that crucial period of the 1920s when Wodehouse visited and found inspiration for these stories? Norman is, as many people have noted, a unique phenomenon, but I think Jan Kaufman provided the ideal description of him at a recent meeting of our Blandings Castle Chapter when she said, "Norman Murphy is an Act of God." Amen.

—OM

. . . a softer sound succeeded it. . . a sort of gulpy, gurgly, plobby, squishy, wofflesome sound. . . The Empress was feeding.

"Pig hoo-o-o-o-ey!" 1928



# SWANS AND SHORT TEMPERERS

By **Alekh Bhurke**

Better known as Gussie Fink-Nottle, Alekh had originally shared the following story with the denizens of PGW-Net and alt.fan.wodehouse. It seems only fair to share the fun with Plummies everywhere. The moral of the story should be clear to the meanest intelligence. —AD

**W**hat ho! What ho! What ho! I recently had a very spiritual yet harrowing experience from which I was saved only because I read my Wodehouse religiously. Here is my tale.

I was in South Carolina for a convention—one of those swanky rural retreats with ponds and cottages and ducks and swans. And when I say swans I mean big, black swans looking as if they've just returned from a visit to their hair stylist and rather haughty about it.

To get from point A in this place to another point, say B, one needs to cross little wooden foot bridges. And as one day we went for a stroll there stood a swan in our way, guarding the bridge. We thought nothing of it as we quietly edged past and all was well. The next day I found myself in the vicinity of the same bridge with a Wodehouse in my pocket and the sun shining brightly. Not being of a particularly nimble mind, I took off the jacket, plopped down on the lawns and started on the book (*Louder and Funnier*). An enjoyable hour passed, the ducks waddled, the swans floated, all was right with the world. And then suddenly, through the corner of my eye, I spied what looked like a big, black, hissing garden hose on a collision course with me at 60 miles an hour. Further observation proved it to be one swan—wings spread, about sixteen feet of neck unrolled, hissing like a leaky gas-pipe and its temper shortening by the stride. In another two seconds the menace would be upon me!

The first thought was to look for strategically located little octagonal summer houses to climb upon. A quick survey of the landscape revealed the futility of such an endeavor. And then, quick as a flash, it came to me. I popped up, picked my jacket off the ground and opening it up wide, thrust it upon the head of the swan who was now conveniently located a couple of feet away from me.

The poor chum was so startled he staggered back. I took the opp. and legged it to a nearby balcony, leaving behind everything but my shoes. After fifteen minutes of what looked like a war-dance, it wandered off in search of other prey and I was able to pick up the remains of my attire and much humbled ego. I shudder to think what would have happened if I hadn't read my Wodehouse every Sunday morning from the age of ten. There is a

lesson in this for all of us.

P.S. These black swans, I was later informed, come from Perth, Australia. My sympathies go out to all Australians. But look at the silver lining, old chaps. Facing these swans on a daily basis must be what gives your cricketers that fabled poise and composure on the pitch. No wonder the Aussie fielders run so fast. I did too.

## SPREADING THE WORD

By **Sushila Peterson**

In response to Auntie's "Message from the Prez" in the winter 1999 *Plum Lines*, Sushila wrote to report on the ways in which she keeps Plum's name and works circulating among friends, libraries, bookstores, and local groups. Extracts from her letter follow. —AD

**I** boldly use the TWS suffix to my name in order to initiate interest and remind others great writing is always available in abundance from Wodehouse. Last year, I participated in a "Bloomsday Reading" of *Ulysses* held at the most culturally sound bookstore in town, primarily so that the literary community would be reminded of the presence of TWS as an active organization. I also addressed a well-established reading group to remind the members of Plum's works in fiction and his influence as a lyricist, etc.

I am fortunate enough . . . to have known how meaningful reading and sharing Wodehouse can be. It can extend life beyond a dismal prognosis for the terminally ill, just as it can help preserve the best of moments for those who've shared it . . . Last year, I sent one of my "Wodehouse Starter Packets" (a few stories selected to match the personality and habits of the individual) to an old school chum. Her response was, "Thank you for introducing me to this wonderful world."

It is not too forward an act to ask our best bookstores to post a small card or slip of paper with our society's/chapter's name and contact information. Reference librarians welcome the opportunity to maintain contact. Most libraries need new programs, and would welcome a casual "Wodehouse Night" presented by any TWS member. It might be a reading of any short story by a member and a couple of friends, then questions, and a suggested reading and resource list handed out to participants. I'd like to hear of more TWS members presenting readings in schools.

# THE GREAT WAR WITH GERMANY

By Murray Hedgcock

Tom Smith's informative background study on *The Swoop!* (Spring *Plum Lines*) provided a welcome reminder of a largely-forgotten genre popular in Britain around the turn of the century, warning of conflict to come, usually at the hands of the horrible Hun.

It was substantial and significant enough to justify a 1997 anthology, *The Great War with Germany, 1890-1914*, edited by I. F. Clarke, and published by Britain's Liverpool University Press.

Nearly 30 extracts or complete stories based on the premise are included, plus essays from Germany picking up the theme, and a 1915 study, "America Fallen," published by George Haven Putnam to warn America what could happen if Germany won the battle in Europe.

A substantial extract from *The Swoop!* is there, the editor demonstrating his essential good judgment by saying it was written by "the man who became the greatest comic writer in Twentieth Century English literature." Its lighthearted but witty approach is matched by reproductions of eleven cartoons by the brilliant comic artist W. Heath Robinson. Published in the newspaper *The Sketch* in 1910, these illustrated his fantasies as to how the Germans might be defeated.

*The Swoop!* is a reminder that Plum, contrary to popular belief that he was a dreamer living in a never-never world, could put his finger on current attitudes and, while making the reader laugh, make him think also.

## MEMORIES OF A GREAT AND GOOD MAN

By Ann Nicholson

In Alistair Cooke's 1981 book, *Memories of the Great and the Good*, he entitled one of his chapters "Wodehouse at Eighty." Reporting on his interview at Plum's home, Cooke described his host as a "big pink shambling bald-headed man with thick glasses . . . dressed in a long linen coat over a small-check shirt, fawn trousers, and canvas shoes." The two men discussed Evelyn Waugh's latest piece about PGW, touched on the Woosters, bemoaned the present type of humorist, and Wodehouse admitted to living as somewhat of a recluse. As Cooke left the house, his host went back inside and into "the real world of Psmith and Jeeves."

## PLUM JOB

Francine Swift sent, via Marilyn MacGregor, this important item about a future biography of Wodehouse. It appeared in the English *Daily Telegraph* of April 30, 2000 and is reprinted here in full. Note that, since the manuscript is to be delivered in "about three years," it may be four years or even more before we have the book in our hands. —OM

P. G. Wodehouse is about to have his first "authorised" biography. The novelist Robert McCrum has been approached by the Wodehouse estate to write "Plum's" official Life for Penguin. He will have access to Wodehouse's papers and, he says, a free hand in what he writes.

"I asked: 'What happens if I turn up that he was a big-amist?' and they said: 'We'll have to play it by ear.' Obviously the war is the big problem area," he says. "I have preliminary views on that, but it's unlikely the question of his collaboration will be settled exactly: it comes down to his naivety—or treachery, depending on your point of view. He is said to be the Prime Minister's favourite author, so no doubt it'll have to go through Millbank," he jokes. McCrum, who is starting with a read-through of the 120 or so novels and short story collections, is expected to deliver a manuscript in about three years. That's a formidable task, given that he works full-time as literary editor of the *Observer*, but he has no plans to take a sabbatical.

## SHAVINGS FROM PLUM'S WORKSHOP

In this issue we begin a series of some of Plum's manuscript notes for stories, printed by permission of the Governors of Dulwich College, and with our thanks to Dr. Jan Piggott, Curator of the Dulwich College Archive. The notes were provided to *Plum Lines* by Joel Brattin after a recent visit to the archive. The note is printed here as PGW wrote it, including the underlines. —OM

### Idea for story

(as planter in Malaya)

Man who has been abroad ^ for some years (as in Dick's story) — hasn't seen a white woman — goes on leave — falls in love with first girl he meets on boat — gets engaged (if better, two girls?) — Then he lands + meets heroine and wants to get out of it in order to marry heroine.

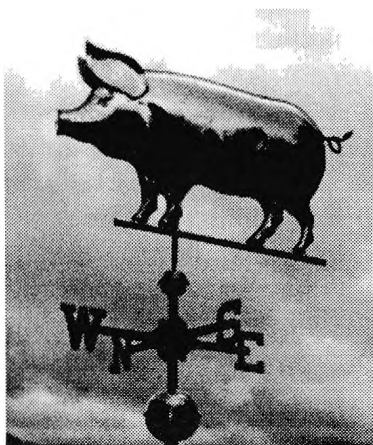
# WODEHOUSE APPRECIATION PAGE ON THE NET

Sushila Peterson has forwarded an article from the *New Yorker* magazine of December 6, 1999, detailing "an idiosyncratic list of some of our favorite Web sites." The list is capped by a description of "The P.G. Wodehouse Appreciation Page" ([smart.net/~tak/wodehouse.html](http://smart.net/~tak/wodehouse.html)). This is a web site created by TWSer Tom Kreitzberg, and a jolly good site it is, too. Here is how *New Yorker* author Sean Elder describes it. —AD

Like the Drones Club, where P. G. Wodehouse's befuddled hero Bertie Wooster repairs to toss biscuits with his friends and escape the company of women—especially aunts—this lovingly obsessive site is a gathering place for kindred souls. Aside from logging on for the seemingly endless links to all things Plum, fans come to take the interactive Quizlet (Q: Whom would you ask to hand-deliver a critical and highly sensitive letter: Gussie Fink-Nottle, Bingo Little, Dahlia Travers, or Bertie Wooster?), to tell their favorite Jeeves or Blandings saga, or to recall how they got to know the author ("Years ago I fell madly in love with a young woman who would NOT shut up about Wodehouse. I read his work assiduously. I never said thank you."). Though renown of Bertie's butler, Jeeves, has spread even to those unfamiliar with the canon, only a few can quote Wodehouse at will. Hence the pleasure of the "random quotation" feature, which generates such gems as "Why don't you get a haircut? You look like a chrysanthemum."

## PIG WEATHERVANE

Marilyn MacGregor found this lofty copper pig in a catalog from Wind and Weather, 1200 N. Main Street, Fort Bragg CA 95437-8473. It is listed as 14 inches high by 26 inches long, catalog number WV-GD-550P, with a price of \$185. If you need a roof-mounting bracket (and I can tell by the look in your eye that you do), they have those too. Order toll-free at (800) 922-9463, or email to [customerservice@windandweather.com](mailto:customerservice@windandweather.com). —OM



# ENCYCLOPEDIA PLUM

By Tom Smith

Author of the splendid analysis of *The Swoop!* that appeared in the spring 2000 issue of *Plum Lines*, Tom also submitted the following article, which will be published in the fall as an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*, edited by Jonathan F. Vance (ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford; a publisher of specialty encyclopedias in history and social science fields). —AD

*P. G. Wodehouse (Sir Pelham Grenville, "Plum", 1881-1975)*

P. G. Wodehouse, the creator of Jeeves, the quintessential British valet, and author of novels, short stories and Broadway lyrics, was captured by German forces on May 22, 1940 in Le Touquet, France.

Initially placed under house arrest, Wodehouse was deported to the prison at Lille with other enemy nationals. Over the next year, he was transferred to prisons in Liege, Huy, and finally to a lunatic asylum, Tost, in southwest\* Germany.

At Tost, Wodehouse mailed postcards to his American literary agent, requesting his agent send five-dollar checks to individuals in Canada. Upon receiving these checks, parents of missing Canadian Airmen learned that their sons were alive and incarcerated with Wodehouse.

An American Associated Press correspondent discovered Wodehouse in Tost and his American friends began to lobby the German government for his release. After allowing him to publish his story, "My War with Germany," the Germans confined Wodehouse to a hotel in Berlin, asking him to broadcast radio shows to America. The shows were broadcast to London, creating great controversy. Wodehouse was branded a traitor in the House of Commons and the BBC radio personality "Cassandra" launched a smear campaign. A government investigation cleared Wodehouse, but it was not released until 1980.

Because of the controversy over his broadcasts, Wodehouse was not welcome in England so he emigrated to the U. S. He became a U. S. citizen in 1955. Wodehouse was finally exonerated in January 1975 with a knighthood. He died the next month at the age of 93.

\* Tost, now Toszek, lies about twenty miles north of Gliwice in western Poland, not far from the Czech border. It was therefore located in southeast, not southwest, Germany during World War II. —OM

# HELTER-SKELTER, WE HAD TO RUN FOR SHELTER

By **Tony and Elaine Ring**

The Rings' reputation as rain-makers (Newts: remember the barbecue at Maria Sensale's home near Boston in drought-stricken 1993?) was eventually vindicated towards the end of their recent two-week stay in the environs of San Francisco and Livermore, California. Elaine and Tony were guests of Len and Shirley Lawson for the bulk of their stay, though Ed and Missy Ratcliffe and Jan Kaufman provided respite care for the Lawsons by also acting as hosts.

But what, I hear you ask, has this to do with rain? Well, the advice confidently given and happily accepted was that it does not rain in San Francisco in May. But it does, though fortunately not on the day on which Tony had to sing for his vacation. A meeting of 20 members from the Blandings Castle chapter plus three from Seattle was held at Len and Shirley's home, at which the nine completed tracks of the long-awaited Wodehouse Lyrics CD were played and very much appreciated. Hal Cazalet and Sylvia McNair both have wonderful voices, and Steven Blier's piano playing seemed at times miraculous. Tony then explained how his broadly-based Wodehouse collection had taken its present shape, and was rewarded during his visit by numerous pieces of information from Len's own formidable collection which will be used in the addendum to the McIlvaine bibliography.

The Rings were also able to have dinner with their former next-door neighbours from Great Missenden, who have settled in Livermore, and to join around a dozen chapter members at a production of *Iolanthe* at which Neil Midkiff was musical director. In addition they visited Monterey, Big Sur, Berkeley, Alcatraz, the Napa Valley and other spots, and walked in the rain in the Muir Woods.

The morals of this report are two-fold: first, the friendship of Wodehousians on an international basis can so easily turn into a delightful break in congenial company, but secondly, should you invite the Rings to your area at a time when it does not rain, it is advisable to retrieve your umbrellas and waterproofs before they arrive.

Many thanks to all who made the trip so enjoyable.

# SOMETHING NEW

We want to revive the "Something new" column of several years back, giving you current information on books, tapes, catalogs, and similar material about Wodehouse and his stories. Here are a couple of items:

From **Susan Cohen**: The Audio Editions catalog arrived today. They offer several Wodehouse tapes, but this is the first I've seen of "Thank You, Jeeves," adapted by Mark Richard. Performers: Paxton Whitehead, Jennifer Tilly and Simon Templeman. It's only one cassette and, therefore, rather expensive. \$18.95 plus shipping. However, being a Wodehouse fanatical fiend I ordered it anyway. One can always make up for the money by eating spaghetti rather than steak. I don't even know if it's very good. Anyone know anything about it? If you're interested the toll-free number is: 1-800-231-4261. It is item no. C1X119U. They said it is in stock.

From **Ed Bronstein**: Here's a source [for audio tapes] that hasn't been cited yet. It's NorthStar Audio Books, P.O. Box 129, Van Wyck SC 29744. President, Shirley Cauthen. Phone: 800 522-2979. Web address: [www.nsaudio.com](http://www.nsaudio.com). Catalog states that "NorthStar is Just for Libraries!" I believe that the Wodehouse Society Library would meet the necessary criteria.

Tapes are:

Laughing Gas, 6 cassettes, \$27.95  
Full Moon, 6 cassettes, 27.95  
A Damsel in Distress, 6 cassettes, 27.95  
Pigs Have Wings, 5 cassettes, 24.75  
Uneasy Money, 5 cassettes, 24.75  
Summer Moonshine, 6 cassettes, 27.45  
Indiscretions of Archie, 6 cassettes, 27.45  
Galahad of Blandings, 6 cassettes, 27.45  
A Gentleman of Leisure, 5 cassettes, 24.75  
Big Money, 6 cassettes, 27.95  
Something New, 6 cassettes, 27.45  
The Code of the Woosters, 6 cassettes, 27.95  
Leave it to Psmith, 6 cassettes, 27.95  
Heavy Weather, 7 cassettes, 30.10  
The Best of Mr. Mulliner, 10 cassettes, 38.15

I haven't heard any of these and know nothing of their quality.

# PLUM DELIVERS THE GOODS

By Stephen Marlowe

Mr. Marlowe, the novelist, sent AD this story of his one encounter with P. G. Wodehouse half a century ago. The story is printed with his permission. —OM

Early in November, 1997, I met Jim Goodrich of Albuquerque at the Bouchercon in Monterey, where I was an invited guest after receiving an award for work I'd done in the mystery genre early on in my career as a novelist. While being interviewed at the Bouchercon, I related an experience I'd had in which I'd come into contact with P. G. Wodehouse at a crucial time in his career. After the interview, Jim Goodrich came up and said that you absolutely had to have this information for *Plum Lines*, the Wodehouse fanzine, since it sheds new light on the man and his work.

This is what transpired:

Fresh out of college in 1950, I got a job as executive editor at the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Meredith was a humor buff and, especially, a Wodehouse fan. He represented Wodehouse who, as you know, went through a rough period after World War II when his frank and probably ingenuous answer to the question of how he'd been treated by the Germans was misinterpreted by the press. At any rate, Wodehouse, then living in New York, was not finding it easy to sell his work.

In either 1950 or 1951 (I'm sorry I can't be more precise, but it was a long time ago), Meredith asked me to accompany Wodehouse to *Collier's Magazine*, where the fiction editor, Knox Burger, was looking for a light serial to sandwich between a mystery and a western.

I met Wodehouse in the lobby of his apartment building. There was an elevator strike in New York City that week, and he'd come down twelve (I think) flights of stairs on foot. Meredith had apprised him by phone of the situation, and I asked him if he had an outline or perhaps some sample chapters of a novel-in-progress. He smiled that splendid Wodehouse smile and said he hadn't a thing, but was quite willing to talk to Mr. Burger at *Collier's*.

Knox Burger turned out to be a World War II combat vet with a gimlet eye, and he at once asked Wodehouse what he had to offer. A silence followed. Burger demanded: "An outline? What?" Wodehouse and I exchanged a swift glance. I can't say for sure all these years later who brought the elevator strike into play, the twenty-two-year-old wet-behind-the-ears executive edi-

tor or the urbane, splendidly aging writer.

But soon, between us, we had Burger half believing that there was indeed an outline (and even a few opening chapters) for Wodehouse's new novel—which, unfortunately, in our eagerness to meet with Burger, we'd left in the Wodehouse apartment, all those floors up in a tall building, right in the middle of an elevator strike.

Burger's gimlet eyes looked at us. We looked at him and at each other. "You trying to say," he asked grimly, "there's nothing to show me? I told Meredith I had to make a scheduling decision right away."

There was an uneasy silence. Then I spoke up, probably in a small voice.

"Why don't you give Mr. Wodehouse the use of an office and a typewriter? He could do the outline right here from memory."

Burger nodded grudgingly, his eyes boring into mine.

Wodehouse's eyes bored into mine even harder. But it is entirely possible that he was also trying not to grin.

"Well?" said Burger.

And Wodehouse nodded, and I could breathe again. "Shouldn't be any problem," he said.

Soon he disappeared into a small room near Burger's corner office. The silence built. Burger's eyes never left my face. I tried for a nonchalant look, no doubt failing dismally.

More minutes dragged themselves by. Then in the small adjacent room the typewriter made a few tentative noises. Then it made a few more. Then it paused to collect itself. And then it went like a pneumatic drill.

Wodehouse emerged less than an hour later with a beatific smile on his face and an outline written off the top of his large bald head. The serialized novel would be, as far as I knew, his first new work published in the States since the war had ended and he'd started living unfairly under the cloud.

I never saw him again, but I'll always remember that encounter, especially the smile wreathing his face and the sheaf of paper clutched in his big fist.



The serial was probably *Phipps to the Rescue*, published in *Colliers* in June and July of 1950, and in book form as *The Old Reliable*, 1951. It was based on a Wodehouse play, never produced, which he had been working on recently. Having the play freshly in mind surely aided the production of that magical outline. (See Jasen's biography, pp. 219-221.) —OM



## RICHARD USBORNE'S BIRTHDAY

In the spring 1999 *Plum Lines* we announced the ninetyeth birthday of Richard Usborne, Wodehouse scholar, author of several books on PGW, and the grand old man of the Wodehouse world. Well, through what Jeeves would doubtless call a concatenation of circumstances, the announcement was exactly one year early, though Richard did enjoy all those birthday cards that resulted.

His ninetyeth was really and truly, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die, on May 10 of this year. And he richly deserves our recognition again, not only for his age but for his many contributions to our enjoyment of the world of P. G. Wodehouse. His address is: The Charterhouse, Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6AN, England. Let's give Richard the rare medical condition known as "letter-opener's thumb" with our cards and notes on this special occasion. —OM

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## CORNERING CHAPTERS

You have probably noticed that the "Chapters corner" column has not appeared in these pages in a while. Auntie apologizes for this lapse, which she ascribes to a combination of zero writing time and sheer laziness. We'd like to get this feature going again, but can't do it without some help. If you would like to step up to the bat and become a regular columnist for *Plum Lines*, reporting on chapter activities, please let us know by calling or writing to Aunt Dahlia via phone, snail mail, or e-mail. Our chapters are the backbone of our society, and we'd like to keep our members informed of what they're up to! —AD

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