
# Plum Lines

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# 1917 and Beyond: Plum's Great Years of Music

## BY BRUCE MONTGOMERY

*Bruce spoke at the 2017 TWS convention about Wodehouse's great success in musical theater in the early part of the twentieth century. Bruce played snippets of the songs mentioned during his talk. We highly recommend that you do the same for the full effect!*

PELHAM GRENVILLE WODEHOUSE shimmered into this world 137 years ago. And a mere century ago, in the fall of 1917, P. G. Wodehouse was being celebrated as the preeminent lyricist of Broadway musical comedies.

During his early days of writing the stories that would cement his reputation as a literary giant, Plum also wrote lyrics, and sometimes the book, for musical comedies. His prolific output of novels and stories has obscured our view of these earlier works for the theater.

Everyone here is familiar with Plum's great mountains of stories. But lying behind this range of peaks, there are the lyrics for hundreds of songs and the libretti for more shows than, for example, Gilbert of Gilbert & Sullivan fame. It was a few years ago, while scrambling around in the Wodehouse "Front Range," that I saw PGW's musicals in the distance. I have been hiking around discovering them for myself ever since.

So in this talk, I hope to spark your interest in those more distant hills that lie beyond the Front Range. Let me say that I'm just a tourist masquerading as a tour guide. As such, I'm going to honor Ogden Nash's injunction about Wodehouse: I am going to quote his gems until I make a nuisance of myself:

> Flourish the fish-slice, your buttons unloosing,
> Prepare for the fabulous browsing and sluicing,
> And quote, till you're known as the neighborhood nuisance,
> The gems that illumine the browsance and sluicance.

Wodehouse was involved with about forty musical comedies. In 1917 alone he provided lyrics to seven shows, and five of them were playing at the same time on Broadway. This is a record that will likely not be broken in our lifetimes.

As far as we know, Plum wrote his first lyric for the stage in 1904 for a show called *Sergeant Brue*. He was 23. Two years later, he met the young composer Jerome Kern and wrote a funny lyric about a British politician, which played to laughter and encores for weeks. But Wodehouse's lyrical output didn't explode until the "Princess Period," when Kern and Guy Bolton got Plum involved in their work on Broadway—three brilliant artists growing into the peak of their powers.

Our boys were hot stuff, and Wodehouse catalyzed the reaction. Starting in 1916, they created what we now call the Princess shows, though some of them didn't open at that intimate theater. Our trio of musical fame, in their thirties and with youthful energy, worked ceaselessly on a frantic succession of shows. As Plum observed, "Writing musical comedies is like eating salted almonds—you can always manage one more."

The five shows that the three opened together in 1917 were:

- *Have a Heart*
- *Oh, Boy!*
- *Leave It to Jane*
- *The Riviera Girl*
- *Miss 1917*, also known as *The Second Century Show*

So, let's set the cast. Who was Jerry Kern? The list of familiar tunes by Jerome David Kern is long: "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Pick Yourself Up," "Ol' Man River,"

"A Fine Romance," "Bill," and so many more. Jerry was a true melodic genius who became a founding and principal composer of the Great American Songbook.

Plum first met Jerry in 1906 in London, when Jerry contributed a tune to a West End show and Plum did the lyrics. Wodehouse was 25, Kern was 21. Jerry was fresh from a stint in Heidelberg, studying composing with tutors after growing up in New York City and Newark.

Fast forward nine years. Kern and Guy Bolton meet in New York and write their first Princess comedy in 1915. Bolton writes the book, Kern composes the tunes. Kern and Bolton then create a second and a third musical comedy, which do okay at the box office but suffer from just okay lyrics. Wodehouse at the time was writing his early stories as well as theater reviews and more—and that's when Plum was recruited to the team. When the thought came of using Wodehouse for the lyrics, Bolton and Kern embraced it like an aunt clasping a long-lost nephew. Within two years, the trio had blown the roof off Broadway. As the *New York Times* put it when writing about *Oh, Boy!*: "You might call this a musical comedy that is as good as they make them if it were not palpably so much better."

Guy Reginald Bolton was Plum's friend from the day they met until the day Plum died. Guy started writing plays in his late twenties, fell in with Jerry Kern, met Wodehouse, and the three of them rocketed to fame together. For the rest of his very long life—he lived to be almost 97—Guy made a fine living by writing for the theater.

Plum and Guy worked together, golfed together, vacationed together, stayed at each other's houses, and eventually lived for decades as neighbors in Remsenburg. When Guy's daughter Margaret ("Peggy") was born, she was given the middle name of Pamela in tribute to Plum, who was her godfather. As Plum wrote to Bill Townend, his lifelong school chum from Dulwich, "Guy and I clicked from the start like Damon and Pythias. We love working together. Never a harsh word or a dirty look. He is one of the nicest chaps I have ever met and the supreme worker of all time. I help him as much as I can with the 'book' end of the things, but he really does the whole job and I just do the lyrics, which are easy when one has Jerry to work with."

Guy had an astonishing personal life. Handsome, witty, charismatic, and rich, he missed no opportunity to charm leading ladies, chorus girls, and the occasional wife of a colleague. His tempestuous personal life included innumerable affairs, four wives, and four children. Lee Davis's triple biography *Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern* makes quite the read.

Bolton wrote 23 plays and musicals with Wodehouse and many more with other lyricists. By the mid-1920s, he would become a leading playwright on Broadway.

So now that we have met the cast, let's focus on some lyrics from Plum's fifteen-year foray into musical theater.

We have all noticed that a Wodehouse story on the screen or the stage, while amusing enough, is simply not as good as reading the book itself. On the theater stage or silver screen, the characters enact the plot and speak the words, but the content of Plum's printed stories depend on so much more than that. Fortunately, just as Wodehouse created the narrative surroundings that cause his plots and characters to sparkle in an "idyllic world that can never stale" (as Evelyn Waugh said so well), so Kern created the musical surroundings that inspired Plum's lyrics to sparkle in much the same way on the stage.

An analysis of the lyrics themselves, examined separately from the music, is all well and good, but their full import is missing without the music. Plum's lyrics need to be enjoyed in their natural habitat, snugly fitted into a melody with harmonies.

Wodehouse's lyrics helped bring more naturalism to the theater. His lyrics inserted real life into what had often been a highly stylized and unreal art form. Plum's genius was his ability to achieve an effortless, captivating naturalism with conversational, witty, droll, everyday language crafted onto Kern's melodies. Take the monster hit that established our trio, *Oh, Boy!*, which opened in February 1917 at the Princess Theatre. In an introductory verse, Wodehouse talks quite naturally about modest things in "Nesting Time in Flatbush":

> I've always liked the sort of song you
> hear so much today,
> Called "When it's something-or-other
> time" in some place far away.
> Oh, "Tulip Time in Holland" a
> pleasant time must be,
> While some are strong for "Apple
> Blossom Time in Normandy."
> But there's another time and place
> that makes a hit with me.

And, so saying, Wodehouse brings musical theater home to a walk-up apartment in Brooklyn:

> When it's nesting time in Flatbush,
> We will take a little flat,
> With "welcome" on the mat
> Where there's room to swing a cat.

Plum's lyrics have the elements that make his stories so funny: imaginative similes, whimsy, cracked quotations, exaggeration, wry observations, perfect couplets—and all in natural, contemporary language.

There's a string of similes in the tune "You Can't Make Love by Wireless" (from *The Beauty Prize* , 1923*):*

It's like bread without the jam . . .
Like a village church that's spireless
Or a little home that's fireless
Or a motor car that's tyreless

In 1916, the issue of treating employees nicely was much in the news. Wodehouse's description of a store owner's business philosophy in the title song, "Have a Heart," keys whimsically off that current topic.

A girl in a department store has quite
a wretched time of it.
I shouldn't care to have her job myself.
It seems to me a foolish way
To have to spend the whole damn day,
Stuck up behind a counter, hauling
what-nots off the shelf.
Have a heart! Have a heart!
Remember she is human just like you.
Wouldn't you regard with loathing
Hats and coats and underclothing,
If you hadn't got to bed till half-past two?

Now try this whimsy from "Sir Galahad" from 1917's *Leave It to Jane*:

Some night when they sat down to dine,
Sir Claude would say: "That girl of mine
Makes ev'ry woman jealous when
she sees her!"
Then someone else would yell, "Behave!
Thou malapert and scurvy knave!
Or I will smite thee one upon the
beezer!"

For an example of cracked quotations, we'll turn to the song "Julius Caesar" (from the unproduced *Pat*, 1924). (A "Truly Warner" is a hat, Mr. Warner being an American haberdasher.)

If he met a girl along the block
He would raise his Truly Warner
And softly murmur, "*Hic, haec, hoc*!"
Which meant "Come round the
corner."

Wodehouse often used overstatement, as in this sweet bit of regretful exaggeration from "You Never Knew About Me" (*Oh, Boy!*, 1917):

I was frivolous and gay, sad to say,
When I was five.
. . .
I never missed chances
Of juvenile dances,
For my life was one mad spree.
I was often kissed 'neath the mistletoe
By small boys excited with tea.

Or "The First Day of May" from the same musical:

And then the place is in a fine way
With men who come in unawares
And do ju-jitsu with the Steinway
And catch-as-catch-can with the chairs.
You hear a crash that turns you chilly
You say: "Good gracious, what was that?"
And find they've dropped the stove on
Willie
Or stubbed their toe on James, the cat,
Or dumped the chiffonier on father's
Sunday hat.

Musing about how "A Little Bit of Ribbon" (*Oh, Boy!*) can be used to good effect, Wodehouse makes wry observations about the deadlier of the species:

For a little bit of ribbon
And a little bit of lace,
And a little bit of silk that clings,
When together they are linking,
Always sets a fellow winking,
And they also set him thinking things.
It's a useful combination
For assisting a flirtation
If you want to get a man beneath your spell.

In *Have a Heart* (2017), Dolly sings about romance in a way that perhaps reflects Guy Bolton's wry sense of humor as captured by Wodehouse in "It's a Sure, Sure Sign":

Though long you've been a gay and
giddy bachelor,
There'll come on the scene a girl not
like the rest.
You'll notice something in her eye that
fills you with dismay;

You'll find that when you're with her
you can't think what to say.
That's a sure, sure sign.
You have ceased to be a rover
And your single days are over.
It's a sure, sure sign!
You had best begin rehearsing
For the "better-and-for-worse"-ing
If she creeps besides you softly in the gloaming,
Whispers gently "Don't you think the moon's divine?"
Keep your courage steady, Freddie,
For she's got the harpoon ready,
It's a sure, sure sign.

And now here's a bouquet of couplets, perfect in concept and execution, all written in natural, contemporary language. First, Plum's comic feelings about the IRS long predated his troubles with them, as we hear in "Flubby-Dub the Cave Man" from *Oh, Boy!*:

When men called for taxes,
He'd just sharpen up his axes

His audiences must have shared a fellow feeling with Plum on the subject of taxes. Seven years later, Wodehouse returns to the same theme. This is from "Bongo on the Congo" from 1924's *Sitting Pretty*:

There no one collars
Your hard-earned dollars.
They've a system that's a bear:
When government assessors call
To try and sneak your little all,
You simply hit them with an axe,
That's how you pay your income tax.

"Cleopatterer" is a tour de force of creative couplets, from *Leave It to Jane* in 1917:

She couldn't stand by any means
Reproachful, stormy farewell scenes;
To such coarse stuff she would not stoop;
So she just put poison in his soup.
. . .
She gave those poor Egyptian ginks
Something else to watch besides the Sphinx.

A couplet found in "You Can't Make Love by Wireless" (*The Beauty Prize*, 1923) is just remarkable, I think. Each of us in this room could write a million poems about the telegram and this couplet would appear nowhere in our pile of paper:

Never more his jokes'll
Entertain the fo'c'sle

I will close with my take on what may be Plum's finest lyric. Not everything he wrote was funny; sometimes the plots called for love songs. When a straight song was needed, he wrote touching, thoughtful, sweet lyrics while always avoiding the saccharine or maudlin. "The Siren's Song" (*Leave It to Jane*) was a favorite of his and fits that description. "Bill" (written for 1918's *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* but performed first in *Show Boat* in 1927) was also a favorite of his and it's a favorite of mine. Unlike his funny songs,

The words aren't comic, or clever, or witty.
The tune is pretty, but so?
It isn't half as funny
As dozens of lyrics we know.
So, I can't explain
Why this lyric achieves fame surpassing the rest—
I love it, because it's—I don't know,
Because it's just Plum's best.

In regard to the Bill of the title, Plum wrote that "A motor car he cannot steer, and it seems clear whenever he dances his partner takes chances." Ira Gershwin praised those lines, saying, "That's a lyric!" It's been called an immaculately compressed character sketch, rendered rueful by the notes on which it sits. Plum's genius helped to create these new types of lyrics, with natural language and phrases, everyday images, and accents in the words aligned with high points in the music.

Writing lyrics set Plum up financially and made him famous, though his early books were also selling well at the same time. Today, his heaps of wonderful lyrics are only overlooked because of the mountains of stories that came later. But you should seek out and listen to his shows, many of which are available in modern recordings. In the early 1920s, every young lyricist aspired to be like Wodehouse.

I hope that I've struck a spark of interest in you. And now, from "Till the Clouds Roll By" (*Oh, Boy!*, 1917):

It is vain to remain and chatter,
And to wait for a clearer sky.
Helter-skelter, I must fly for shelter
Till the clouds roll by.


# 2019 Convention: Pigs Will Be Flying in Cincinnati

The Flying Pigs Chapter of TWS is pleased and excited to invite you to Cincinnati, Ohio, for the next biennial convention. You couldn't ask for a more beautiful place to spend October 17–20, 2019, than in the Queen City of the West! The weather will be glorious, and if it isn't, the Palm Court bar will give you plenty of opportunities to browse and sluice—perhaps a hot Scotch with lemon. The beautiful Netherland Hilton in downtown Cincinnati (https://tinyurl.com/tws-cin-19) is a delight to the eye and will be within walking distance of a number of enticing sights: the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Contemporary Arts Center and the Taft Museum (in the home of William Howard Taft's aunt—how good is that?), not to mention entertainment areas such as The Banks and Over the Rhine. Registration details and more will be coming in future *Plum Lines* issues. In the meantime, mark your calendars and plan to join your fellow Wodehousians for a ripping good time.

# Riveting Talks Need Riveting Speakers

A highlight of every TWS convention is the Saturday of Riveting Talks. While we have a few speakers in place, we are in need of more. This could be your chance to hold forth (for 20–25 minutes) on some aspect of Wodehousiana that has always fascinated you. If you are interested, please contact Bill Scrivener at Let him know what your proposed topic is and he'll take it from there.

# A Few Quick Ones

*Thanks to all who contribute. If not otherwise noted, the Quick Ones Superstar Team of Evelyn Herzog and John Baesch have contributed the following.*

In the September 7, 2017, *London Review of Books*, Ferdinand Mount reviewed several works, including *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* by Shashi Tharoor. While Tharoor had much to say that is not in a positive vein (he argued "with . . . passion, that [the Raj] was much worse for India and the Indians" than it was for Britain), he did love "several of Britain's legacies to his country—tea, cricket, and P. G. Wodehouse."

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Cartoonist Harry Bliss did a "graphic review" of Norman Douglas's *South Wind* in the September 24, 2017, *New York Times Book Review*. The opening panel is the nugget of interest to TWS. The wife asks her husband how his day was, and he answers, "Well, I just finished this book I've been enjoying, sort of a mash-up of Trollope, Wodehouse, and Nabokov." After his long description about the fairly sordid plot, which, according to Douglas, was "how to make murder palatable to a bishop," the husband finally asks his wife to tell him about her day. It does make us wonder how Wodehouse figures in *South Wind*.

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Henry Slesar was a "quiet-spoken, jazz-loving crime writer" who was "turning out some 500 hours of soap operas" each year in the early 1970s, according to Michael Mallory in the Spring 2018 *Mystery Scene*. Mallory said that, at the peak of his career, Slesar "counted as one of his biggest fans the English author P. G. Wodehouse."

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In the November 2017 *Chronicles*, columnist Ralph Berry wrote of some of the history of George MacDonald Fraser (*Flashman*). It is the opening of his article where Plum is mentioned: "P. G. Wodehouse reached for Keats to describe his emotions when he read the first of [Fraser's] Flashman saga."

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Reviewer Matthew Walther, in the June/July 2017 *First Things*, wrote of Msgr. Ronald Knox that Knox must take the silver medal as the "greatest writer of English prose in the last century." He dismisses Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, John Updike, William Faulkner, and others in favor of Knox. Walther's opening sentence assumes that everyone agrees that the gold medalist is . . . well, I don't need to name the winner, do I?

# Letters & Comments

As I reached the final page of the Summer 2018 *Plum Lines*, a chill wind began to blow through the fragrant gardens of Eagle, Idaho. The hollyhocks huddled and the plump snails raced for cover. Neil Midkiff had contributed a letter debating a couple of points in my essay ("The Times of P. G. Wodehouse") from the 2017 TWS convention in D.C., published in the Spring 2018 *Plum Lines*. I realized at that point that some readers may be assuming that I had cited all my foundations when I wrote the paper. However, I use a system of distillation and blending similar to the production of maple syrup or whiskey. A large volume is reduced to the desired sweetness and density.

Literary journalism does not always follow the scientific style of showing critical letters to the original author before letter publication. Often, resolution can be achieved without rebuttal. In our case, the matter will involve at least three quarterly issues of *Plum Lines*. The millennial attention span will be challenged.

Time's role in the writings of PGW is extensive. He was influenced by time and he contributed time theories that went far beyond a linear, simplistic approach. I could only offer samples of the problems and PGW's solutions. In my history section I exposed the misconception that Wodehouse ignored historical references. Neil contested my belief that "Jeeves Takes Charge" makes the participation in WWI unlikely. "JTC" is an explanatory flashback. The events in it occurred at least six years before the recounting. Neil is correct in observing that "JTC" does not eliminate any possibility of Jeeves being in WWI. Still, it stretches imagination that our valet Jeeves could have "messed around" in the same war that killed his namesake.

Neil then relied on PGW's preface to *Blandings Castle and Elsewhere* to clarify the complex chronology of the Blandings stories. I cited *A Simplified Chronology of Wodehouse Fiction* (2011) in which Tony Ring notes the time intervals between magazine publication and *Blandings* appearance. (I did not cite *Thank You, Wodehouse* (Morris, 1981) in reference to the Blandings chronology. Morris's analytic system disgruntled me to some degree.)

I continue to believe that time issues in Wodehouse are not solved by a reliance on simplistic techniques. We have the Unifying Theory. The power of fiction continues to smooth the path.

Seeking truth in time,
**Chris Dueker**

To Chris Dueker, with permission to publish in *Plum Lines*: It did take my poor intellect and even poorer knowledge of Wodehousian logic some time to digest the finer points of your feature article in *Plum Lines*. After seventy-odd readings (mostly while aboard Caltrain, the finest public transit system that San Carlos has to offer), I believe I have sufficiently digested the surface layers enough to detect your main points.

My neophytic mind favored your admonition to avoid the work of Albert Einstein, but after references to so many varied and even logic-defying examples of the works of Wodehouse, I'm inclined to believe that a man's sanity is best served staying out of the works of both Wodehouse and Einstein. Of course, tilting at windmills is what keeps a mind young, so I'll continue to pick up scraps from the master.

I did really appreciate your tidy solution to the difficulties of timelines in a Wodehousian universe. Even Einstein must bend to your logic, as it takes a real fool to argue with the decrees of a librarian.

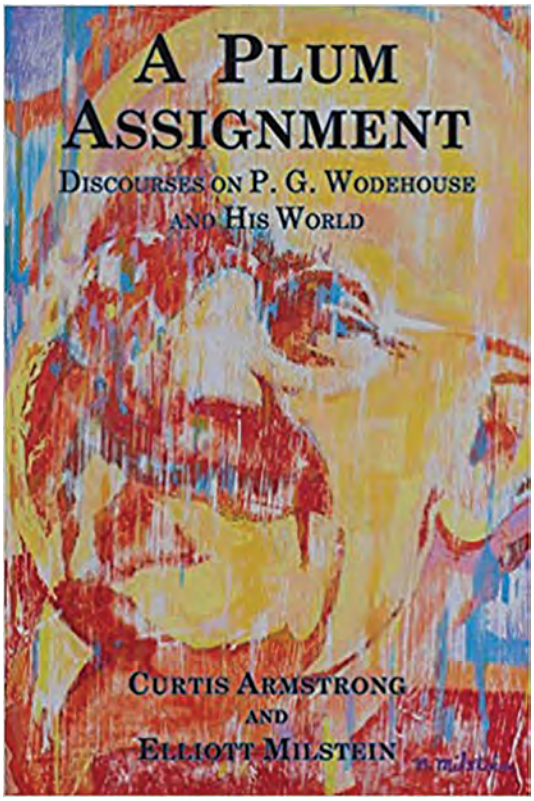
Undoubtedly, this was the best edition of *Plum Lines* to date and no doubt selling out on Amazon and at your local newsstand. As they do with James Joyce, scholars will no doubt debate the finer points of this prose for many decades and will delve to a great depth on the hidden meanings of each word. This humble reviewer can only hope that, in time, I shall be forgiven for my clumsiness in daring to comment on such an opus.

Relatively yours,
Nick Carpenter
San Francisco

> George returned to his thoughts.
>
> Time, as we understand it, ceases to exist for a man in such circumstances. Whether it was a minute later or several hours, George did not know; but presently he was aware of a small boy standing beside him, a golden-haired boy with blue eyes, who wore the uniform of a page.
>
> He came out of his trance.
>
> *A Damsel in Distress* (1919)

# Review: *A Plum Assignment*

## by Gary Hall




Reading *A Plum Assignment*, the new book by two TWS luminaries, is a true delight. The work is a collection of a great variety of essays, full of humor, information, and inspiration. Having the great fortune to personally know both authors only adds to the pleasure. Elliott Milstein is a past president of The Wodehouse Society. Curtis Armstrong is an actor of great repute and an aficionado not only of Wodehouse but of various musicians, actors, and writers, including Harry Nilsson, Laurel and Hardy, and Arthur Conan Doyle.

Curtis and Elliott have individually and collectively entertained and educated Wodehouse enthusiasts with their talks at TWS conventions and with their written discourses in prior issues of this journal and elsewhere. They've been fast friends for many years, and now this publication arrives on the scene and gives us a good dose of their expert commentaries.

*A Plum Assignment: Discourses on P. G. Wodehouse and His World* was published in April this year by Winch and Clutterbuck. Curtis and Elliott enlisted the aid of Ashley D. Polasek as editor as well as designer of the book and its cover.

The book is loaded with treasures. The foreword by Elin Woodger Murphy is an essential read, and the appendix contains the openings to Wodehouse's novels, which is a useful addendum to the original version of Elliott's paper "A Study of the Openings of P. G. Wodehouse."

In addition to the several articles by each author, there are connective chapters, in which each describes how these essays developed. Those descriptive sections give great insight to the humor-based relationship between the two brilliant fellows and provides other anecdotes that give continuity to the works across the years. There's a bit of fun banter from time to time, including the controversy, myth, and mystery of how the two originally met and how they began to share their mutual admiration for Wodehouse's works. There's also a bit of life adventures tossed in along the way. Short tasty bits between the main courses (like "Only the Appetizer," "Quite the Best Talk Ever," "Virtually Vibrating with Pride," and "Who Is This Remarkable Boy?") are sure to satisfy.

As I read through the papers, many of which had already crossed my desk (or, technically, my computer) on their way to being published in *Plum Lines*, I was again refreshed by the depth and breadth of Curtis's and Elliott's Wodehousean scholarship and insight. But most importantly, these essays help explain why we are all so enamored of Wodehouse, who passed away more than forty years ago yet continues to make a deep impression on all of our lives. I revel in any discourse that continues to discover new information about how such lasting brilliance came about from one author, and how an author of such light fare sits at the pinnacle of English literature.

Messrs. Armstrong and Milstein have different styles, which adds much flavor to the book. It's difficult for me to not hear their respective voices delivering their words, and perhaps my comment here is as much on the men as the writing, but Curtis brings an effervescence, a bubbly cheer to his essays, while Elliott speaks with a gentle British formality (that's high praise from me) that perpetually surprises with a sparkling American wit through his words, done very naturally and flawlessly. No wonder the two complement each other so well.

Some will recognize the titles: "Nodders I Have Known: Wodehouse's Hollywood and Mine," "The Nature and Development of the Imposter in the Works of P. G. Wodehouse," "Under the Influence of Laughing Gas," and many more.

The paperback book is listed at $16.95 on Amazon; you'd best get it now—the collectors will be jacking up the price astronomically. You will enjoy this volume—a must for your Plummy shelf.

# "Reduce to a Spot of Grease": P. G. Wodehouse and Harry W. Flannery

BY TODD MORNING

HARRY W. FLANNERY was a CBS News correspondent who interviewed P. G. Wodehouse on the radio from Berlin in 1941. He later reported on his encounters with Wodehouse in his book *Assignment to Berlin*, published in 1942 in the United States and Britain. In her 1982 biography of Wodehouse, Frances Donaldson wrote: "In the course of time Plum grew to dislike Flannery almost more than anyone else he met in his life." A September 3, 1945, letter from Wodehouse to Guy Bolton backs Donaldson's claim: "Tear the insides of the blighters, laddie. (I am all full of vim and venom just now, as I am in the middle of the chapter of my camp reminiscences in which I reply to my critics, notably Mr. Harry W. Flannery, who I propose to reduce to a spot of grease. I am living on raw meat, and human life is not safe within a mile of me.)"

What did Flannery do to spark such ire in the usually affable Wodehouse? First, let's provide some background. Harry W. Flannery replaced William Shirer as the CBS correspondent in Berlin in the autumn of 1940. At that time the United States was neutral, and American newspaper and radio correspondents were permitted to report from Germany, although they operated under strict censorship. Flannery wrote that he first met Wodehouse in January 1941 at the Tost internment camp where the author was being held as an enemy alien. The two had other encounters at the Adlon Hotel in Berlin after Wodehouse's release from internment. In June 1941, Flannery interviewed Wodehouse over CBS radio, shortly before the latter began his five infamous broadcasts over German radio. Wodehouse biographer Robert McCrum wrote: "Even before the five talks had been transmitted, it was his interview with Harry Flannery of CBS—the first time Wodehouse's voice was actually heard on the airwaves—that did the most immediate damage to his reputation. The CBS broadcast preceded his own talks by several days, but it became hopelessly confused with Wodehouse's scripts and contributed to the bad publicity he was now attracting every time he opened his mouth in Berlin."

In his account of the CBS interview, McCrum wrote: "Fatally, too, [Wodehouse] trusted Flannery and misread his interests." McCrum goes on to write that Flannery was "a committed anti-Nazi who saw the interview as an opportunity to extract maximum propaganda value from Wodehouse, whom he believed to be a mixture of dupe and collaborator." The portrait of Wodehouse presented in *Assignment to Berlin* makes it clear that Flannery had no respect for Wodehouse (more on this later), but it may be a stretch to say that he saw the interview as an opportunity to extract propaganda value. In his book, Flannery explains that his motivation for interviewing Wodehouse came from a reporter's desire to snag a big story first. Flannery relates a conversation that he had with Werner Plack, who knew Wodehouse before the war and was assigned by the German government to work with American reporters: "That afternoon, Plack said that he could not tell me the whole Wodehouse story yet, but he assured me that no other correspondents knew about it. It was worrisome to hold a story so long, but since I could not get the story past the censors until one of the Nazi officials gave approval, there was nothing to do but wait." Flannery goes on to relate how he kept the story of Wodehouse's release from internment as an exclusive for CBS.

Regarding the interview itself, McCrum wrote: "This 'interview,' following CBS custom, was scripted in advance by Flannery, shown to Wodehouse for his approval, and then performed by the two men in a live radio feed to New York." Although a scripted interview would seem to breach journalistic standards, Flannery had no choice in the matter. The requirement for scripted interviews was imposed by the Nazis. At one point in his book, Flannery quotes himself letting loose on the Nazi officials who oversaw his broadcasts: "You censor the scripts and you have a man to see that I don't deviate from it. You make recordings to see that I don't even use inflections to cast doubt on what I say. You control everything that goes out of here." In addition, the amount of airtime that Flannery received for his reports from Berlin was precisely allocated and very short. Under these conditions an unscripted interview would have been difficult even if it had been permitted.

The response to the interview did not go well for Wodehouse. McCrum accurately points out that the public reaction was mostly negative. Reading through the transcript of the interview, which is printed in its entirety in *Assignment to Berlin*, it's clear that he tried to project cheerfulness in the face of adversity. It would have been best, however, if he had omitted such lines as:

> But I'm living here at the Adlon—have a suite on the third floor, and a very nice one, too—and can come and go as I please.
>
> . . .
>
> But I'll tell you something about the war and my work that's been bothering me a great deal. I'm wondering whether the kind of people and the kind of England I write about will live after the war—whether England wins or not, I mean.

As soon as the Wodehouse interview finished, the CBS broadcaster Elmer Davis interjected his own thoughts from the studio in New York. Davis said that it was all well and good that Mr. Wodehouse was released from internment. He then reminded the audience that many Nazi prisoners, especially in places such as Dachau, were not so fortunate. Interestingly, no Wodehouse biographer mentions that Davis's remarks led to the Nazis banning CBS from broadcasting for about two weeks. Flannery describes how he was called into the office of a Nazi censor and told: "We have reports about the comments made by your man Davis about the release of Mr. Wodehouse, and we are sorry, but you can't broadcast any more." After much haggling with Nazi officialdom, Flannery was able to return to the airwaves on July 12, 1941. The banning of CBS because of Davis's remarks received wide coverage in American newspapers.

Wodehouse bears much of the blame for the CBS interview. After all, he could have amended the script or even refused to be interviewed. Wodehouse had no control, however, over his unflattering portrayal in *Assignment to Berlin*. I've read the book twice and found it interesting. Flannery wrote from firsthand experience about how the Germans coped with rationing and the British bombing raids, as well as his struggles to do his job as a reporter despite roadblocks thrown up by the Nazis, and his visits to the German side of several battle fronts. It was written quickly (Flannery didn't return to the United States until mid-October 1941; the book was published just eight months later, at the end of June 1942) and was meant to boost the American war effort. (It was published by Knopf as part of a series called "Books for Wartime.")

About fifteen pages of *Assignment to Berlin* cover Flannery's encounters with Wodehouse in Germany. How accurate is his account? Before I move on to what he said about Wodehouse, I think it is best to let Wodehouse have a say. He would not have fully known what Flannery had written about him until after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. On December 30, 1944, he wrote this from Paris to his friend William Townend:

> The unfortunate thing was not being able to contradict the lies told about me at the time. It's hopeless to do so three or four years later. Flannery's book, for example. Not a word of truth in it. Nobody ever came down to the camp to talk to me about being released and making talks on the radio. And all the conversations he reports as taking place between himself and me were non-existent.
>
> I only saw the man three times, once when he got me to talk to him on the radio, another time when I came up to Berlin and ran into him having dinner at the Adlon, when I stopped by the table and said about a dozen words, and the third time when Ethel arrived. From his book you would think we were always together. I wish, by the way, when people invent scenes with one they wouldn't give one such rotten dialogue. Can you imagine me saying some of the things he put into my mouth? But I suppose there is nothing to be done about it now.

Flannery first met Wodehouse at the German internment camp in January 1941. He reported that Wodehouse told him he was working on a novel called *Money in the Bank*. Flannery also included this exchange:

> Wodehouse asked if there were any motion-picture offers for his latest novel. "I hope agents know I am receptive," he declared. "And say," he went on, "what does the United States government do about the income tax of a person in one of these places. How do I pay income tax?" I suggested the government might be left to worry about that.
>
> "But they find you, you know," said Wodehouse.

Their next meeting was at the Adlon Hotel after Wodehouse's release. After this meeting, Flannery received word that CBS would like to have Wodehouse interviewed on the air. He mentions going through the script of the interview with Wodehouse:

> Among the questions I planned to ask him was what he thought of the Russian campaign. Wodehouse proposed saying, "The bigger they are the harder they fall."

I cautioned him against that. "That predicts Nazi victory," I said. "You can't do that."

"Why not?" he asked.

"We're fighting the Nazis. Any such reply would be propaganda or worse, coming from you."

Wodehouse thought a moment. "Do you know," he said, "I wouldn't have thought of that."

Flannery says that he learned of Wodehouse's intention to broadcast on German radio just after the interview. According to Flannery, he advised Wodehouse against it. Wodehouse, however, failed to comprehend why people in Britain and America would be upset by his broadcasting over Nazi radio. Flannery also mentions that the Germans offered to let Wodehouse do his broadcasts over NBC or CBS, instead of Nazi radio, but both networks turned this down.

In his account of his final meeting with Wodehouse, Flannery is openly sarcastic and does not hide his dislike of the British humorist. He ran into Wodehouse at the Adlon after Wodehouse had returned to Berlin from the German countryside to record more broadcasts:

Some weeks later I was having luncheon in the Adlon when Wodehouse came by. I asked him to sit down and have a drink.

"And how are you?" I asked.

"I'm beastly tired today," he said. "You see, they had no chauffeur for me today, and I had to come in on the train."

Poor prisoner of war.

"And how is Mrs. Wodehouse?"

"Why, she's well enough, but she's frightfully upset. You see, one of her trunks hasn't arrived and it's the one with the dinner dresses in it. She likes to dress for dinner every night."

That was too bad.

*Assignment to Berlin* received mostly favorable reviews and was on the bestseller list in the summer of 1942. The reviewers never questioned Flannery's account of his conversations with Wodehouse. In an example of how muddled things can get, the syndicated book critic John Selby, whose column appeared in many small- and medium-market American newspapers, wrote: "The neatest job is done on P. G. Wodehouse. Mr. Flannery says that Wodehouse accepted favors such as estates and freedom out of guilelessness." Nowhere in his book does Flannery write that Wodehouse accepted such favors in return for broadcasting. Yet how many Americans read Selby's statement and believed it? Flannery also went on a lecture tour of the United States and Canada in 1942, and all the contemporary newspaper accounts I've found of his lectures mention that Wodehouse was discussed at each talk.

In Britain, Flannery's book was published in September 1942. British reviewers were also happy to pass on to their readers his unflattering comments about Wodehouse. In a November 1, 1942, report from London to the *New York Times*, columnist Herbert W. Horwill wrote: "The account given in Harry W. Flannery's *Assignment to Berlin* of its author's interview with P. G. Wodehouse has received considerable attention here." Horwill went on to assert, "It is significant that, whereas Wodehouse's books were formerly in great demand at our public libraries, it is seldom that one of them is now missing from our shelves." (Readers may remember that my articles in the Winter 2014 and Spring 2015 issues of *Plum Lines* cast doubt on the notion that the British public stopped checking out Wodehouse books from libraries during the war.)

Robert McCrum, in his biography of Wodehouse, discusses Wodehouse's relationship to Harry Flannery in a few pages. Frances Donaldson, however, makes Flannery's statements about Wodehouse a major focus of her biography. In particular, Donaldson investigates this claim from *Assignment to Berlin*: "Plack had gone to the camp near Gleiwitz to see Wodehouse, found that the author was completely without political sense, and had an idea. He suggested to Wodehouse that in return for being released from the prison camp he write a series of broadcasts about his experiences; there would be no censorship and he would put them on the air himself." Donaldson calls this "the most damaging statement that has ever been made about the whole affair and one that until now has not been answered publicly."

Donaldson had it right. A quid pro quo agreement of release from internment in exchange for the broadcasts would have made it difficult for Wodehouse to claim that he just made a stupid mistake but had not committed a crime. Major E. J. P. Cussen summarized this neatly in his 1944 report to the British government on Wodehouse's activities in Germany:

If, of course, enquiries in Germany show that Wodehouse obtained his release upon the condition that he should broadcast, the intention to assist the enemy will become plain indeed. If, on the other hand, the account given by Wodehouse in his statement is confirmed, it may be that a jury would find difficulty in convicting him of an intention to assist the enemy.

Donaldson went so far as to seek out Werner Plack, who denied making such a deal with Wodehouse. She mentions that Plack also denied that there was a deal in letters to another Wodehouse biographer, Richard Usborne. With the war long over, Plack had no good reason to lie. Since the Cussen report clearly states that the case against Wodehouse would hinge on the discovery that a deal had been made, the fact that no prosecution was attempted shows that the British investigators found no evidence of a deal.

Wodehouse himself went so far as to write to Flannery's London publisher in 1945. He denied making a deal with Plack and also denied having ever met Plack until his release from the internment camp (which wasn't true since he had met Plack in Hollywood in the 1930s). He ended the letter with: "If Mr. Flannery cares to write to me admitting that he was mistaken, I shall not pursue this matter."

Flannery replied to Wodehouse: "Whether Plack went to the camp himself, had someone else go, or arranged your release on information otherwise obtained from the camp, is irrelevant. In any case Herr Plack told me that he had not only arranged your broadcasts, but those of others to follow."

Donaldson points out that this response dodged the question of whether Wodehouse obtained his release by agreeing to broadcast. As George Orwell wrote in his 1945 essay "In Defense of P. G. Wodehouse": "The striking of an actual bargain between Wodehouse and Plack seems to be merely Flannery's own interpretation."

*Assignment to Berlin* also includes other inconsistencies. For example, Flannery states that he spoke with Wodehouse in the internment camp in January 1941. Yet only six months later, in June 1941, Flannery gives this description of meeting Wodehouse at the Adlon:

> I strolled in, looked around, and found a man that fitted Wodehouse's description at a table with three other men.
>
> "Mr. Wodehouse, I believe," he said.
>
> "Why, yes," he said. "How did you know?"
>
> I introduced myself and told him I wanted to talk with him.

Why is it that Wodehouse and Flannery needed to introduce themselves when they had met just six months before? Under normal circumstances this might happen, but Wodehouse would certainly remember talking to an American journalist in the internment camp, and a good reporter would not have forgotten what Wodehouse looked like in so short a time. In addition, in *Assignment in Berlin*, Flannery offers no evidence for this June 1941 meeting at the Adlon.

*Harry W. Flannery*

By this time, the Wodehouse plot was evident. It was planned to be one of the best Nazi publicity stunts of the war, the first with a human angle. Plack knew that the broadcasts would tell some unpleasant truths about the Nazis, but that they would be lightened by the Wodehouse wit. He knew that Wodehouse would not be dangerously critical; he never was. He could be trusted to write a script that would need no censoring, and since he was Wodehouse he would gain an audience for Nazi programs.

With better reporting, Flannery would have discovered that the Berlin broadcasts did not result in pro-Nazi propaganda: they were not one of the best Nazi publicity stunts of the war. They only produced condemnations of Wodehouse on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, few Americans seem to have listened to the broadcasts. There's no doubt, however, that *Assignment to Berlin* damaged Wodehouse's reputation.

And since Wodehouse never published his camp memoirs (referred to in his letter to Guy Bolton, quoted at the beginning of this article), he never told his side of the story of his dealings with Flannery. We'll let Wodehouse have the last word and leave it at that (for now): "It's just that these blighters have to try to sell their books by inventing sensational things." (Wodehouse to William Townend, February 24, 1945)

# Wodehouse's Peers in Comedy, Part Three

## by Michael Dirda

*Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist Michael Dirda (*Washington Post*) spoke at the 2017 TWS convention, where he recommended other writers of humor. Parts One and Two were published earlier; we now conclude with the balance of Michael's selections.*

**(5)**

Between 1899 and the outbreak of World War I, Edith Nesbit (1858–1924) scribbled one juvenile masterpiece after another. In the United States, however, Nesbit isn't anywhere near as well-known as she deserves to be, given her delightful humor, sprightly and conversational style, and all-around irresistibility.

In *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* the six Bastable siblings decide to start a penny newspaper, *The Lewisham Recorder*, chockablock with *faits divers*, such as this piece of useful knowledge from Horace Octavius, the youngest member of the family: "It is a mistake to think that cats are playful. I often try to get a cat to play with me, and she never seems to care about the game, no matter how little it hurts." Naturally, there's a classified section, too: "Legal answer wanted: A quantity of excellent string is offered if you know whether there really is a law passed about not buying gunpowder under thirteen.—Dicky."

Critically savvy readers will recognize that the Bastables, like Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, regularly perceive the quotidian world around them through the distorting lens of favorite books. As a consequence, even the most common activities take on an air of romance. Thus, the poetic Noel—author of "Lines on a Dead Black Beetle That Was Poisoned"—refers to the tin cup at a public water fountain as "a golden goblet, wrought by enchanted gnomes." When Alice employs a divining rod to locate hidden treasure, she wholeheartedly acts out her part as a pagan priestess: "The magic rod has spoken," said Alice; "dig here, and that with courage and dispatch. . . . Dig an you value your lives, for ere sundown the dragon who guards this spoil will return in his fiery fury and make you his unresisting prey."

In my favorite episode, the siblings play bandit and capture the obnoxious neighbor boy Albert for ransom. Oswald addresses their prisoner:

> "There will be no violence," said Oswald, "no violence. But you will be confined in a dark, subterranean dungeon where toads and snakes crawl, and but little of the day filters through the heavily mullioned windows. You will be loaded with chains. . . . Straw will be your pallet; beside you the gaoler will set a ewer—a ewer is only a jug, stupid; it won't eat you—a ewer with water; and a mouldering crust will be your food."

Oswald also addresses the imagined reader—a narrative technique that runs throughout Nesbit's work—to correct any possible misunderstandings: "You may think we had no chains, but you are wrong, because we used to keep two other dogs once, besides Pincher, before the fall of the fortunes of the ancient House of Bastable. And they were quite big dogs."

Following the success of *The Treasure Seekers*, Nesbit would go on to relate further adventures of the Bastables in *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904). These were followed by the three great fantasies: *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and *The Story of the Amulet*. While her realistic and rather dark novel *The Railway Children* is today her most famous book, the most intricate and best is *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), half P. G. Wodehouse, half philosophical romance. Because of illness in the family home, Gerald and Jimmy are compelled to spend their vacation with their sister Kathleen at her deserted boarding school, under the guardianship of her French teacher. Almost immediately they discover a cave that leads them into a magical-seeming realm, dominated by an Italianate villa surrounded by gardens. Before long, the children and a new friend named Mabel learn that the statues in the garden come alive at night and that the owner of the villa is an impoverished young nobleman. He still pines for his lost beloved, reportedly spirited away to a French convent. Will the parted couple ever find each other again?

> "Oh, he'll find her all right,' said Mabel, 'when he's old and broken down, you know—and dying; and then a gentle Sister of Charity will soothe his pillow, and just when he's dying she'll reveal herself and say: 'My own lost love!' and his face will light up with a wonderful joy and he'll expire with her beloved name on his parched lips."

The Wodehousean aspect of *The Enchanted Castle* is evident, even without the bumbling crooks, Keystone-

style cops, and a background love story to rival *Only a Factory Girl*. Above all, the writing is understatedly witty throughout, as when Mabel—who has become invisible—must compose a note to explain her "absence":

> Dear Aunt, I am afraid you will not see me again for some time. A lady in a motor-car has adopted me, and we are going straight to the coast and then in a ship. It is useless to try to follow me. Farewell, and may you be happy. I hope you enjoyed the fair. Mabel.

**(6)**

To this day the name Ronald Firbank too often provokes a snicker or a giggle when it is recognized at all. For many, he is only an all-too-gay writer, fiction's pastry chef, the author of airy-fairy tales of randy prelates, creamy altar boys, and upper-class matrons who yearn to have their pet dogs baptized or their faces enshrined in the stained-glass windows of a cathedral. The very titles of his finest books suggest the fey and the fatuous: *Vainglory* (1915), *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926).

In fact, Firbank (1886–1926) should be honored as a great master of twentieth-century literature, one whose books—along with those of Wodehouse—taught narrative economy, lightness of touch, and speed to a generation of comic writers, among them Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell.

Firbank ushered in this literary revolution by simply cutting the dull stuff out of his books. He discarded leisurely descriptions and stripped dialogue of its "he saids" and "she saids." For instance, to evoke accurately a crowded cocktail party (in *Valmouth*, 1919), an entire page is devoted to mere snatches of conversation, just the bits that might be overheard by someone wandering a little hazily around the room with a glass of sherry in his or her hand:

> "Heroin."
> "Adorable simplicity."
> "What could anyone find to admire in such a shelving profile?"
> "We reckon a duck here of two or three and twenty not so old. And a spring chicken *anything to fourteen*."
> "My husband had no amorous energy whatsoever; which just suited me, of course."
> "I suppose when there's no room for another crow's-foot, one attains a sort of peace?"
> "I once said to Doctor Fothergill, a clergyman of Oxford and a great friend of mine, 'Doctor,'" I said, 'oh, if only you could see my——'"
> "*Elle était jolie! Mais jolie! . . . C'était une si belle brune . . . !*"
> "Cruelly lonely."
> "Leery. . . ."
> "Vulpine."
> "Calumny."

And so forth, funnier and funnier. Firbank's nine slender novels are awash in white space, sentence fragments, dashes, italics, ellipses. "I think nothing of filing fifty pages down to make a brief, crisp paragraph or even a row of dots." For Firbank unheard music was nearly the sweetest of all.

Above all, Firbank remains unremittingly, gloriously campy. A Miss Missingham, author of *Sacerdotalism and Satanism*, remarks that the towers of a cathedral at twilight resemble "the helmets of eunuchs at carnival time." Another character's over-elaborate dress calls to mind "a St. Sebastian with too many arrows." Lady Georgia Blueharnis observes that the hills near her estate "would undoubtedly gain if some sorrowful creature could be induced to take to them. I often long for a bent, slim figure to trail slowly along the ridge, at sundown, in an agony of regret."

Perhaps the apex of Firbankian repartee occurs in his play *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920), when Nadine introduces her husband Adrian to Blanche. Here is the dialogue:

> Nadine: "My husband."
> Blanche [*genially*]: "I think we've slept together once?"
> Adrian: "I don't remember."
> Blanche: "At the Opera. During *Bérénice!*"

Every word of this is perfect, but Blanche's stage direction—"genially"—strikes me as even more drily brilliant than Adrian's reply.

**(7)**

All six books in E. F. Benson's cycle about Emmeline Lucas and Elizabeth Mapp are quite irresistible, but their humor—subtle, malicious, ever-fresh—emphasizes situation over language. Again and again, "Lucia" finds her dictatorship of local society threatened, and she must outmaneuver adversaries on many flanks.

All the novels—starting with *Queen Lucia*—are masterly send-ups of the syrupy civilities and

hypocrisies of daily life. Who can forget Lucia's kitschy "Shakespearean" garden? Or how she pretends to take a lover so as to seem more attractive to London society? In *Miss Mapp*, the huffing Navy man Captain Puffin suffers a seizure, falls forward into his soup—and drowns. At the opening of *Lucia in London*, Georgie Pillson—Lucia's epicene neighbor and ally—extends his sympathies after the death of a wealthy aunt: "Georgie held her hand a moment longer than was usual, and gave it a little extra pressure for the conveyance of sympathy. Lucia, to acknowledge that, pressed a little more, and Georgie tightened his grip again to show that he understood, until their respective fingernails grew white with the conveyance and reception of sympathy. It was rather agonizing, because a bit of skin on his little finger had got caught between two of the rings on his third finger, and he was glad when they quite understood each other."

In *Mapp and Lucia*, Benson brings his two greatest characters into direct conflict. After the death of her husband, Lucia decides to leave the village of Riseholme and move to Tilling, a port city rather like Rye (where Benson lived, eventually becoming mayor). Before long, Tilling's established society queen, Elizabeth Mapp, is launching foul plots to prevent the dynamic Lucia from further captivating a local major, a clergyman who chatters away in a comic Scots dialect, and a woman known as Quaint Irene, reportedly based on the famous lesbian Radclyffe Hall. Dinner parties, art competitions, bridge games, and catty conversation drive the novel to its famous climax, in which the two rivals are swept out to sea while clinging to a kitchen table.

It's hard to quote from the Lucia books, for so much of their tone depends on context. But here's Mapp, on her way to purloin the closely guarded recipe for the scrumptious Lobster à la Riseholme: As she passes some servants on their way to a whist drive, she "wished them a Merry Christmas and hoped they would all win. (Little kindly remarks like that always pleased servants, thought Elizabeth; they showed a human sympathy with their pleasures, and cost nothing; so much better than Christmas boxes)."

(7)

[*Here we must interject that, perhaps due to the general good cheer of fine company, and the excellent work by the barmaids at the convention dinner, Michael seems to have listed two great authors as number seven. We minded not, as we were also under the influence of the same forces, and we were enjoying his talk immensely. He could have had several more sevens and not upset us a whit.—Ed.*]

*Augustus Carp, Esq.*—"being the autobiography of a really good man"—appeared in a 1924 anonymous work that is now known to be that of a distinguished physician named Henry Howarth Bashford. Anthony Burgess considered it "one of the great comic novels of the twentieth century," as will anybody else who finds and reads the book. Like *Vice Versa*, Augustus Carp is the tale of a father and son. The two Carps are models of unconscious hypocrisy. That is, each imagines he behaves as a perfect Christian—always spelled Xtian with a capital X—even while exploiting loved ones, blackmailing teachers, bringing suit for minor infractions, and wrecking lives.

In particular, young Augustus's narrative voice is a masterpiece of controlled irony. One revels in every word and turn of his elegant syntax: "From the time of his marriage to the day of my birth, and as soon thereafter as the doctor had permitted her to rise, my father had been in the habit of enabling my mother to provide him with an early cup of tea. . . . Clean in her habits, quiet about the house, and invariably obedient to his slightest wish, he had very seldom indeed, as he often told me, seriously regretted his choice of a wife." That word "enabling" shows genius, though some readers may prefer the more subtle virtuosity of "seriously."

The Carps always find excuses: "But to become ordained presupposed an examination, and I had been seriously handicapped in this particular respect by a proven disability, probably hereditary in origin, to demonstrate my culture in so confined a form." After finagling his Xtian way into a job with a religious publisher—they distribute books with titles like *Gnashers of Teeth* and *Without Are Dogs*—young Augustus comes to know the Stool family, fanatically devoted to stamping out drink, dancing, and tobacco. Here is son Ezekiel: "No taller than myself, and weighing considerably less, he had suffered all his life from an inherent dread of shaving, and the greater portion of his face was in consequence obliterated by a profuse but gentle growth of hair. His voice, too, owing to some developmental defect, had only partially broken; and indeed his father Abraham (afterwards removed to an asylum) had on more than one occasion attempted to sacrifice him, under the mistaken impression that he was some sort of animal that would be suitable as a burnt offering."

Later, Augustus meets Ezekiel's father: "Mr. Abraham Stool, indeed, who had not then been segregated, but who was already under the impression that he was the Hebrew patriarch, several times insisted upon my approaching him and placing my hand under

his left thigh, after which he would offer me, in addition to Mrs. Stool, a varying number of rams and goats."

Shortly after his encounter with the Stools, Augustus describes his father's heroic but ultimately vain struggle to rid their church—St. James the Least of All—from the influence of a fishmonger named Carkeek. There follows Augustus's own fruitless attempt to rescue the chorus girl Mary Moonbeam from the depravity of the stage, a noble act repaid by the darkest chicanery. Happily, this "memoir" ends with our hero married, dwelling in the country with his wife and her four sisters, listening to the incomprehensible sermons of Rev. Simeon Whey, and ready to write the book we have just read.

**(8)**

A prolific contributor to *Punch*, A. P. Herbert (1890–1971) is little read these days, but in his three books about Topsy, especially the first—*The Trials of Topsy*—he was obviously a man ahead of his time. This collection of *Punch* articles, as well as the two sequels, *Topsy MP* and *Topsy Turvy*, are irresistible. A London debutante who writes breathless letters to her friend Trix, Topsy is nothing less than a Jazz Age Valley Girl. Imagine a blend of Lorelei Lee and the Alicia Silverstone of *Clueless*:

> Because my dear as I've been trying to tell you all this time, two nights ago we went over to the Hunt Ball of the Yealm Vale and Fowkley, my dear pronounced Yaffle, Mr. Haddock and me and that rather antiseptic young Guardee I told you about, Terence Flydde by name, my dear too Etonian, my dear utterly clean-limbed, washes all over and flawlessly upholstered, but of course the cerebellum is a perfect vacuum, well, my dear, I've always fancied he was rather attracted and of course he's absolutely baneless but of course a girl would just as soon marry a pedigree St. Bernard dog, so I didn't exactly propose to dedicate the evening to him though I must say those red coats are rather decorative . . .

During her adventures, Topsy writes about country weekends, charity bazaars, art shows, Christmas, dieting, and even politics. While working on Mr. Haddock's parliamentary campaign, our heroine prints up her own views on social issues and foreign affairs:

> Of course don't think I don't adulate the poor because I simply do only the people I pity are the Middle Classes who of course pay for everything and get nothing and why they do it I simply can't imagine and my advice to them is to pay no Income-Tax until they've one foot in the jail.

Elsewhere, Topsy notes, with her usual impeccable logic, "Of course, I adore Peace and Disarmament and everything, but what I always say is well, what about pirates?" What indeed?

**In Conclusion**

And so there are my eight. I meant to talk about at least eight others, including W. W. Jacobs and his short stories, J. Storer Clouston's *The Lunatic at Large*, Barry Pain's Eliza novels, the half-forgotten fantasies of Frank Richardson, Amanda Ros's immortal *Irene Iddlesleigh* (widely regarded as the most hilariously bad book ever written), and even Daisy Ashford's charming *The Young Visiters*. In particular, I regret leaving out George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*, a subtle, gently humorous book that Evelyn Waugh thought the best comic novel in English.

And yet, despite their merits, none of the authors I've mentioned tonight surpasses Plum as a creator of zingy similes and verbal smiles: "Like so many substantial citizens of America, he had married young and kept on marrying, springing from blonde to blonde like the chamois of the Alps leaping from crag to crag." So while I heartily recommend Saki, Nesbit, and all the others, please don't expect them to deliver what Wodehouse supplies in easy abundance: Nothing less than sheer earthly bliss.

# C-3P-Jeeves

TWS member **Cynthia Wagner** of Bethesda, Maryland, was taking advantage of the holiday to catch up on her periodicals and came across the *Smithsonian*'s December 2017 article by Jeff MacGregor, "Robot Love." MacGregor describes *Star Wars* droid C-3PO thusly: "He is the expressionless and instantly recognizable gold-plated face of the franchise. Head tipped just so, shuffling like a geisha, he arrived on-screen as a quantum upgrade to Robby the Robot by way of P. G. Wodehouse."

# Anne Cotton, 1933–2018

We were saddened to learn that Anne Cotton, known to her Wodehousean friends as Lady Bassett, passed away on July 28. Leader of the New England Wodehouse Thingummy Society (NEWTS) for eleven years, Anne had been a constant and colorful presence at conventions after joining TWS and spoke at two of them. She was, perhaps, best known for the wonderful costumes she wore at our conventions, but she was a woman of many parts.

Born on June 19, 1933, in Columbus, Ohio, and raised in Chicago, Anne received her BA from Smith College in 1955 and went on to have a varied career that included working as a translator with the National Security Agency and five years as a secretary for the Metropolitan Opera (a job that included appearing onstage in non-singing roles). She spent 25 years at Harvard University, twenty of them as Assistant Registrar and Registrar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She received her ME from Harvard in 1972 and ten years later became a Doctor of Education. In 1987 she moved to South Hadley, Massachusetts, where she was Registrar at Mount Holyoke College for eleven years. She was actively involved in faculty shows, including acting, writing, and producing.

After retiring in 1998, Anne turned to volunteer work, conducting pet therapy visits with her beloved flat-coated retrievers. Treasurer of her regional dog-breed club for ten years, she wrote a regular column for the Northeast Flat-Coated Retriever Club's newsletter for even longer.

*A member of Anne's beloved breed of flat-coated retrievers*

Her devotion to her dogs provided the foundation for her talk at the 2007 TWS convention, "If Jeeves Were a Dog" (see *Plum Lines*, Spring 2008). Her previous talk, "The Old School Tie That Binds"—an examination of the English educational system as reflected in Wodehouse's fiction—was presented at the 1995 convention (see *Plum Lines*, Spring and Summer 1997). By then she had joined the NEWTS, and she eventually became the chapter's president. She wrote several pieces for *Plum Lines* and was a regular contributor to the online forum PGWnet. She was also an enthusiastic member of the Clients of Adrian Mulliner and helped to organize their Junior Bloodstains at TWS conventions.

Anne eventually went into assisted living, then a nursing home in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she died peacefully. She is survived by four nieces and nephews, to whom we extend our condolences. We shall miss her very much.

*Anne Cotton brought spirit and fine costumes to the TWS conventions*

# Big Sexy Jeeves

The *New York Post's* Health & Fitness section ran an article on fat pets, called "Dog Pound," in their October 3, 2017, issue. They received a picture from dog owner Mia Pellicciari of her 15-pounder (not even close to Bustopher Jones!), named Big Sexy Jeeves. Unfortunately, the accompanying article did not give any indication that the canine Jeeves has any of the astuteness of his fictional namesake.

> Five minutes later, accompanied by the six Pekingese and bearing about him a pound of my tobacco, three pairs of my socks, and the remains of a bottle of whisky, Ukridge departed in a taxi-cab for Charing Cross Station to begin his life-work.
>
> "Ukridge's Dog College" (1923)

# Wodehouse at the Chautauqua Institute

BY SHIRLEY SAMPSON

THIS SUMMER, I spent a week at the Chautauqua Institute on lovely Chautauqua Lake in upstate New York. The Institute dates back to the nineteenth century, and Bertie Wooster and his friends would feel right at home vacationing there, although they might skip the high-toned lectures, operas, concerts, and plays. More to Bertie's taste are a nearby golf course, boating, and popular music, but there are no tracks for horse or dog racing. He would probably be especially put off by the improving lectures each morning, while Florence Craye would certainly encourage attendance. The week's topic was "The Life of the Written Word."

I stayed at the charming Spencer Hotel, which was built in 1909. It has a literary theme inspired by the Chautauqua Scientific and Literary Circle, founded in 1882: the oldest continuously operating book club in the United States. Bertie, beware!

Each room is named for a different author. I stayed in the P. G. Wodehouse room, which has an information notebook with a Wodehouse biography and reading list. The room is complete with a life-size wooden cutout of Jeeves. (This could be a little disconcerting when I came in after an evening concert.) The ceiling is decorated with sheet music around the edge, including "'Til the Clouds Roll By" and "Ol' Man River." A bar area in the dining room has an "Anglers' Rest" sign.

To add to my room's atmosphere, there was a delightful old deep tub. The first morning, I made the mistake of sitting down in it. I did get out without needing to call the fire department, but it was a close call! After that, I stood and used the handheld shower.

I've already made reservations to go back next year. The lecture topic for the week I have chosen is "What's Funny? In Partnership with the National Comedy Center." I have reserved the E. F. Benson room—which, by the way, has a shower.

*For more information on the P. G. Wodehouse room at the Chautauqua Institution, go to https://goo.gl/FKfNzd.*

> "I think the trouble with Freddie," said the Crumpet, "is that he always gets off to a flying start. He's a good-looking sort of chap who dances well and can wiggle his ears, and the girl is dazzled for the moment, and this encourages him."
>
> "Good-bye to All Cats" (1934)

# Treasurer's Report for 2017

BY INDU RAVI

| | |
|---|---|
| **Balance as of December 31, 2016** | **$28,777.52** |
| **Income:** | |
| Membership dues | $13,788.00 |
| 2017 Convention income | $42,950.00 |
| Interest | $33.54 |
| ***Total Income*** | $56,771.54 |
| **Expenses:** | |
| *Plum Lines* production and mailing | $9,707.71 |
| 2017 convention general expenses | $52,189.64 |
| PayPal fees | $502.85 |
| Donations[2] | $500.00 |
| Correspondence, supplies, other | $30.00 |
| ***Total Expenses*** | $62,930.20 |
| ***TWS Convention Reserve Fund***[1]**:** | |
| *Balance as of December 31, 2016* | $8,660.87 |
| *Net convention subsidy* | $3,660.87 |
| ***Balance as of December 31, 2017*** | ***$5,000.00*** |
| **Total Balance as of December 31, 2017:** | $22,618.86 |

(1) Included in the Total Balance
(2) Donation to update PGWnet management software

# Bertie: Not a "Hermetically Erudite Dimwit"

DAVID RUEF (nom de Plum Monty Bodkin) sent along a review of a new book of short fiction by Helen DeWitt, *Some Trick: Thirteen Stories.* Helen (best known for *The Last Samurai*) has a certain "tart, brisk, snobbish, antic" tone, according to reviewer James Wood in the June 4, 2018, *New Yorker*. Mr. Wood compared Ms. Dewitt's writing to many others, and decided that "We have moved from Calvino to Wodehouse—if one can imagine a Bertie Wooster who is not a straightforward dimwit but an eccentrically clever and hermetically erudite dimwit."

# Chapters Corner

What is your chapter up to these days? Tell the Wodehouse world about your chapter's activities! Chapter representatives, please send all info to the editor, Gary Hall (see back page).

Please note that our webmaster, Noel Merrill, tries to keep chapter activities posted on the society website. So, it's a good idea to send information about upcoming events to Noel on a timely basis. His contact information is on the last page of this issue.

**Anglers' Rest**
(Seattle and vicinity)
Contact: Susan Collicott

**Birmingham Banjolele Band**
(Birmingham, Alabama, and vicinity)
Contact: Caralyn McDaniel

**Blandings Castle Chapter**
(Greater San Francisco Bay area)
Contact: Bill Franklin

**The Broadway Special**
(New York City and vicinity)
Contact: Amy Plofker

**Capital! Capital!**
(Washington, D.C., and vicinity)
Contact: Scott Daniels

**Chapter One**
(Greater Philadelphia area)
Contact: Herb Moskovitz

The Chaps of Chapter One met at Cavanaugh's on Headhouse Square on June 22. Mark Reber, ably assisted by his daughter Rebecca, presented a fascinating talk comparing the writing styles of Wodehouse and Rex Stout.

Mark is highly qualified to compare Plum and Stout, having no less than 72 volumes of Wodehouse and 49 volumes of Stout in his voluminous library. Wodehouse and Stout were friends, and the late Norman Murphy previously identified six PGW tomes in which the great man mentioned Stout or one of his characters. What is astounding is that Mark carefully perused all six works to precisely locate the passages mentioning Stout.

Mark went on to compare Wodehouse's *The Code of the Woosters* with *Over My Dead Body* by Stout. Mark mentioned that while reading every Rex Stout book, he had to look up one or two words in the dictionary. It was clear to everyone that Mark and Rebecca had toiled tirelessly over the innumerable details of their very fine presentation. Quite supererogatory; kudos to them and all that. The Chaps are eternally grateful for their sweat and toil.

The next meeting has been set for September 23 at Cavanaugh's. Bob Rains will lead a discussion about an original Bertie/Jeeves play by Ken Ludwig.

**Chicago Accident Syndicate**
(Chicago and thereabouts)
Contact: Daniel & Tina Garrison

**The Clients of Adrian Mulliner**
(For enthusiasts of both PGW and Sherlock Holmes)
Contact: Elaine Coppola

**The Den(ver) of the Secret Nine**
(Denver and vicinity)
Contact: Jennifer Petkus

**The Drone Rangers**
(Houston and vicinity)
Contact: Carey Tynan

**The Flying Pigs**
(Cincinnati area and elsewhere)
Contact: Susan Pace or Bill Scrivener

The Flying Pigs Chapter met on July 29 to finalize the menu for the 2019 convention—Anatole would be proud—and to review our progress on the myriad pieces that go into putting together a top-notch affair. As we prowl about the city looking for tempting items for you, we have encountered unexpected Wodehouse aficionados who, once they have gotten over their astonishment that there are kindred spirits in Cincinnati, have hastened to join our jolly band of pigs. Rick and Nancy Arnest provided an excellent dinner, and the guests provided excellent conversation and camaraderie. We're looking forward to many more gatherings and encourage all prospective Pigs, lurking in the underbrush or the clouds, to come forward and join us.

**Friends of the Fifth Earl of Ickenham**
(Buffalo, New York, and vicinity)
Contact: Laura Loehr

**The Melonsquashville (TN) Literary Society**
(Tennessee)
Contact: Ken Clevenger

On August 4, in Knoxville, Tennessee, thirteen lucky Melonsquashvilleans gathered. The foodstuffs, savory and sweet, were delectable and the conversation was enchanting. We were happily joined by a new couple from Talbott, Tennessee: Sabrina and Lee, a high-school reference librarian and a history teacher, respectively, who even jumped into the dramatic reading of our Wodehouse short story.

We read "Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court." Sabrina and Lee were excellent as our poets Charlotte Mulliner and Aubrey Trefusis. The ever-adept Bill Watts took three roles, as Sir Francis Pashley-Drake, Aubrey's brother Wilfred Bassinger, and Sir Alexander Bassinger. Our three narrative voices were supplied by the lovely Tanya Hall Gheen, the intrepid Mary Jane Curry, and Ken Clevenger, who hogged the role just to be able to read that lovely Wodehouse poem "Good Gnus."

Our next event will be Saturday, December 8, in the Clevenger home. This will be the now traditional chapter pre-Christmas BBQ luncheon (Melonsquashville is, after all, in the South). We plan to present a playlet, adapted by the above-named Mary Jane Curry, from the Wodehouse–Ian Hay play *Leave It to Psmith*. An ambitious undertaking, to be sure, but, if lacking a stage, we at least have loads of talent!

Sometime in late January to mid-February 2019, we plan to hold a chapter meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, to see *Jeeves at Sea* by the NC Stage Company. They have been brilliant with three prior Margaret Raether adaptations, and already the excitement is building for this new production.

**The Mottled Oyster Club / Jellied Eels**
(San Antonio and South Texas)
Contact: Lynette Poss

There is nothing like inclement weather to keep one indoors with a pot of tea, a book, and a chair by the fireplace. In South Texas, that tea will have an inch of sugar at the bottom and four inches of ice on top. The fireplace won't be lit—or, if it is, the air conditioning will be turned on high to enjoy it. Relaxing in a hammock outside won't do in July.

We reread a favorite in March, *The Code of the Woosters*, in case a newcomer had not. Also, heavy traffic in the area prevented most of us from getting to the meeting. It was not the first time this had happened. An email vote was taken to find a different meeting time at the bookstore, or a different place. Alas, the bookstore did not have room for us on weekends. We went off to search for new digs. By May we had found a new home (information below). In that month a young person's thoughts turn to love, and so we turned to *Love Among the Chickens*. This lighthearted tale of Ukridge feathering his nest egg as only he can was just right for spring.

If you wish to read along with us, here's how—October: Short stories by H. H. Munro; November: *A Pelican at Blandings*; December: Christmas party!

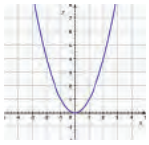
The Mottled Oysters/Jellied Eels of South Texas meet on the first Saturday of the month at the John Igo Branch Library, 13330 Kyle Seale Parkway, at 2:00 pm. It is located on the northwest side of San Antonio. If you are a Wodehouse fan living in or near San Antonio, or just visiting, please join us. We venture out for nourishment and tissue restoratives afterwards.

**The New England Wodehouse Thingummy Society (NEWTS)**
(Boston and New England)
Contact: Lynn Vesley-Gross

**The Northwodes**
(St. Paul, Minneapolis, and vicinity)
Contact: Mike Eckman

**The Orange Plums**
(Orange County, California)

**The Pale Parabolites**
(Toronto and vicinity)
Contact: George Vanderburgh



**The PeliKans**
(Kansas City and vicinity)
Contact: Bob Clark

**The Perfecto-Zizzbaum Motion Picture Corporation**
(Los Angeles and vicinity)
Contact: Doug Kendrick

**The Pickering Motor Company**
(Detroit and vicinity)
Contact: Elliott Milstein

After a long hiatus, the Pickering Motor Co. met at Mike and Sherry Smith's home to welcome two new members, Charles and Ann Bieneman. They met Elliott Milstein at the TWS convention in D.C. last year. He told them about our chapter, and now they have joined us. Our President for Life, Luann Warren, gave them a brief history of the chapter. Charles and Ann are very nice people and sound on all things Wodehouse. We like them. There are rumors of two more prospective members in our neighborhood. We look forward to meeting them.

The assignments for this meeting were three short stories: "Comrade Bingo," "The Great Sermon Handicap," and "The Purity of the Turf." A spirited discussion ensued, touching on Wodehouse's depiction of politicians, the theme of betting and losing, and why Wodehouse's characters often tried to influence (i.e., fix) the outcome of a sporting event they had a bet on.

Elliott Milstein and Curtis Armstrong's book about Wodehouse has been published! *A Plum Assignment* is an anthology of articles from *Plum Lines*, miscellany, and riveting talks from past conventions of The Wodehouse Society. It is also a tale of two friends who met in high school and bonded over their mutual love of Wodehouse. They have been friends ever since. The book is available on Amazon, is well worth reading, and is the reading assignment for the Pickerings' next meeting.

**The Pittsburgh Millionaires Club**
(Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)
Contact: Allison Thompson


**The Plum Crazies**
(Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and vicinity)
Contact: Betty Hooker

**The Plum Street Plummies**
(Olympia, Washington and vicinity)
Contact: Thomas L. R. Smith


The Plum Street Plummies hosted the Third Annual Wodehouse Open. The golfers (Thomas Smith, Gloria Garrett, and Owen and Susan Dorsey) met at Marvin Road Golf at 10 am on Saturday, August 11. The weather was cool at 71 degrees and overcast. It rained off and on during the competition but never hard enough to keep the golfers off the course. The cool weather invigorated the foursome: three of the four scored a hole-in-one. The winner of the Third Annual Open was none other than Thomas Smith. Last year's winner, Owen Dorsey, presented the trophy to this year's winner.

*Right up there with the Green Jacket: TWS president Tom Smith accepts the trophy from Owen Dorsey.*

**The Right Honorable Knights of Sir Philip Sidney**
(Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
Contact: Jelle Otten

The Honorable Knights of Sir Philip Sydney came together on February 17, 2018. We c[illegible] new Dutch translation of the Wodehouse stc[illegible] Exile" from the collection *The Man Upstairs and Other Stories*. Marcel Gijbels and Herman van Riel published "Ruth in Ballingschap." Whether in Dutch or English, it's an early story that includes traces of scenes which Wodehouse would use in later stories. For example, scenes from "Ruth" foreshadow the stopping of a dog fight in *The Adventures of Sally* and the energetic love story in *Leave It to Psmith*.

Leonard Beuger told us about his first visit to a TWS convention, the most recent one in Washington, D.C., in October of 2017. He proudly showed the purple socks he wore during the convention. These socks certainly escaped Jeeves's notice.

As a result of two different Dutch versions of the same story ("Something to Worry About"), translated respectively by Ronald Duk and Donald Duk (the Duk Twins), a discussion started about rules of translation. Do you have to render an English expression word for word or are you allowed to replace it with a Dutch expression with the same significance? Should you have to translate the names of personages, villages, etc.? Are you permitted to modernize obsolete expressions in the text? And so on. There were no final decisions made.

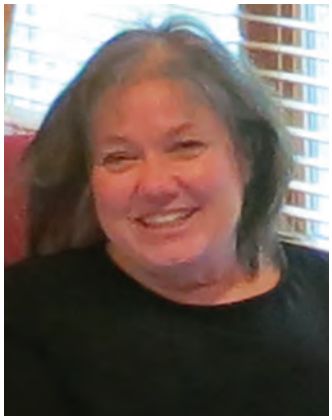
The next regular meeting of the Knights will be on October 13, 2018, at 1 PM in Restaurant Szmulewicz, Bakkerstraat 12 (off Rembrandtplein) in Amsterdam. Which is, of course, in The Netherlands.

**Rugby In All Its Niceties**
**(Rugby, Tennessee Region)**
Contact: Donna Heffner

**The Size 14 Hat Club**
(Halifax, Nova Scotia)
Contact: Jill Robinson

**The West Texas Wooster**
(West Texas)
Contact: Troy Gregory

# Diane Hain



The Plum Crazies are very sorry to announce the passing of Diane Hain, our chapter secretary, after a brief [illegible], a resident of [illegible]nsylvania, left us on August 13, 2018. She was a founding member of the Plum Crazies and a member of Philadelphia's Chapter One.

Diane was introduced to Wodehouse by her father, and she treasured the volumes she inherited from him. After Diane joined the Plum Crazies, her husband Ed also became a fan. You may remember Diane and Ed from the D.C. or Seattle conventions.

Diane served as a researcher with the Insurance Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and later became the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania House Agricultural and Rural Affairs Committee.

Diane is survived by her husband, Edward Hain, of Hershey; two daughters; three stepchildren; and five grandchildren.

We will all miss Diane's optimism and enthusiasm at our meetings and conventions. She was intelligent, interested in everything, and always a lot of fun.

*Diane Hain and husband Edward in happy times, wearing dashing TWS convention attire.*

# *Wodehouse: The Early Years*, Part One

## by John Dawson

*We're very pleased to offer a serialized version of a new work by Wodehousean John Dawson. John's credentials are impeccable: He was a key player in the Globe Reclamation Project other research efforts. We'll be publishing parts of this work over the next several issues of* Plum Lines. *We'll start with the introduction, and then move into the first chapter, Sion Hill.*

**Introduction**

We have a rich knowledge of Wodehouse's life and career from his biographers David A. Jasen, Richard Usborne, Barry Phelps, Frances Donaldson, Benny Green, Robert McCrum, the late Norman Murphy, and others. Through their efforts, fans have learned of Plum's career as an author and lyricist and his years in London, New York, France, Hollywood, and Remsenburg. Notable events in his life—such as his long marriage to Ethel, the war and tax episodes, and, of course, his love for his dogs—are well chronicled.

David Jasen first met Wodehouse in 1958, and the two were friends for seventeen years. In 1970, relying on his own collection and visits to Plum's publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, Jasen published *A Bibliography and Reader's Guide to the First Editions of P. G. Wodehouse*. His compilation of titles, characters, and plot synopses guided my collection. Plum eventually agreed to let Jasen write his biography. Over a fifteen-year period, the pair spent dozens of hours together as Wodehouse recollected a long, eventful life. The result was the landmark 1974 biography *P. G. Wodehouse: A Portrait of a Master*, an uncritical, well-researched account of his life and career. Jasen is the only one of Wodehouse's major biographers to have known him (Richard Usborne met him once in 1971), and Plum's quotes are among the book's most valuable passages. *Portrait* has stood the test of time and remains an essential primer on Wodehouse's life and career.

Concerning Wodehouse's childhood years, Jasen felt readers would not be much interested in the years leading up to Dulwich; accordingly, he established the 1881–1894 timeline in a few perfunctory pages which contain capsule portraits of family members and a few of Plum's recollections of schools and teachers. For this purpose, he asked Wodehouse to recollect his early years in a letter. On October 15, 1963, the author responded with a seven-page, 4,000-word "outline of my childhood and early boyhood." Jasen drew on this letter extensively for his book. Later biographers repeat the chronological pattern, but the page space devoted to Wodehouse's life up to age twelve is only about 4 percent of the aggregate total of the six major biographies. I was disappointed to find that, beyond Jasen's work, none of these accounts contain fresh research on the people and events of the period. Later biographers simply adopted and paraphrased Jasen's version of events, adding only speculative psychological analyses to fill the void.

Readers of Plum's cheery books might be taken aback by what has been written about his childhood. They will find tales of an abandoned or orphaned child and his "heartless" parents. They will be given to understand that he was saddled with "inner hurt" inflicted by irresponsible parents who abdicated from their responsibilities. In adulthood, the idyllic world he created in fiction supposedly was, at its core, a way to escape the demons of a miserable childhood. Such is the mythology, but it is time for a reevaluation based on facts, not assumptions.

There is no evidence that Plum was ever traumatized by a supposed abandonment, that he was ever mistreated or deprived in any way, or that he felt unloved or rejected by his parents. As far as is known, he never suffered any psychological disturbance or impairment. There is no hint of childhood unhappiness in his juvenilia, adult fiction, autobiographical writing, interviews, or hundreds of letters. In 2014 Jasen told me that Plum had "a fabulous memory. Everything he told me that I checked out turned out to be true, and I never had the sense that he was anything less than completely forthcoming with me. He always gave me the truth as I could recognize it. I didn't ask terribly much about his feelings. When he told me he had a happy childhood, I believed him."

As I studied the major biographies, I was astounded to find that certain of Plum's biographers had created imaginary events out of whole cloth and presented them without disclaimer, as though they had actually occurred. The practice was used to validate speculative narratives and to inject artificial pathos into Wodehouse's story. The most egregious faults I find are numerous unsourced passages which claim to portray the innermost thoughts, feelings, and motivations of Wodehouse's parents, especially those of his mother. None of these cite a family letter, journal, recollection of the four sons, or statements from anyone who knew Eleanor. There is no known evidence of her thoughts on her marriage or her children. Readers of these books

will not find an objective treatment of her as a woman, wife, and mother.

We are living in a great age for those who seek to explore the past. In the years since McCrum's *Wodehouse: A Life* was published, a vast amount of period material inaccessible to his biographers has become available through the internet. All these sources can help correct long-standing errors and add both new facts and fresh perspective to every chapter of Plum's story.

I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the late Norman Murphy for the email correspondence we conducted for about five years up to his death in 2016. Norman did not write much about Plum's childhood in his books and his comments here will be new to many readers. I was honored to supply him from time to time with newfound documents and information—"pulling rabbits out of [my] hat," as he put it—and in the twilight of his years, his enthusiasm about Wodehouse's history is eloquently expressed here in his own words.

I am grateful to Wodehouse's biographers for bringing his life and career to light. I have enjoyed their books immensely. My commentary is restricted to their accounts of the years 1881–1894. Notwithstanding my frank criticisms of this limited part of their work, I have the utmost admiration for their achievements. I am likewise thankful to the many collectors and experts who have shared their knowledge as I conducted research for this work. The opinions I express throughout the text are mine alone and should be imputed to no one else.

**Chapter 1: Sion Hill**

In April 1862, P. G. Wodehouse's future grandfather, Rev. John Bathurst Deane, his wife Louisa, their eight daughters, and their youngest son, Walter, moved into a stately three-story home at 18 Sion Hill, Bath, Somerset. Rising to 243 feet, Sion Hill offered a picturesque view of the historic city below. The family had made Sion Hill its home from at least 1847, when Rev. Deane's mother, Ann, relict of Captain Charles Meredith Deane, died at her home on the hill. The family's roots in Bath are traced to antiquity in Rev. Deane's family history, *The Book of Dene, Deane, and Adeane—A Genealogical History*, published posthumously in 1898. The Deane home had large reception and living rooms on the ground floor, nine bedrooms above, servants' quarters, laundry, larder, and wine cellar. Louisa and her four unmarried daughters left the home in 1887 when Rev. Deane died. The rambling old house, renumbered to No. 20 in the 1870s, still stands in what has always been a very desirable district.

Rev. Deane (1797–1887) married, first, Caroline Lemprière, whose sister was married to his older brother Charles. Caroline died ca. 1830, leaving the 33-year-old teacher with three small children. From 1836 to 1855 he was a schoolmaster at his old school Merchant Taylors', where he headed the mathematics department. In 1834 he married Louisa Elizabeth Fourdrinier of Islington, daughter of a wealthy Huguenot papermaker. The couple were married 53 years and produced thirteen children. One son, Louis, died in 1839 at the age of one year. The eleventh child was Plum's mother, Eleanor (1851–1941). Rev. Deane's death notices referred to him as one of the oldest clergymen in the Church of England. In 1915, when she was seventy years old, Plum's Aunt Mary remembered him in her journal: "August 27, 1797. My father's birthday. Blessed be his name. May his blessing be with me, his faithful daughter."

In 1862 Rev. Deane was a 63-year-old historian, author, schoolmaster, and rector of St. Martin, Outwich. His daughters at home ranged in age from Louisa at 35 to Emmeline, 4. In *The Shadow of Mary Deane* (Chapter 10, "Formidable Aunts and the Real Mary Deane"), Patricia Whalley wrote: "They all seemed to have the skills required of a gentlewoman and it is evident that they were brought up as young ladies in a religious environment, each learning to read well, paint, and sew to a high standard. They attended both art and language classes and appear to have all the accomplishments expected of young Victorians." The daughters were Louisa (Lulie), Evelyn Rosamund (Rose), Mary Bathurst, Caroline (Car) Edith, Jane, Eleanor, Anne (Annie), and Emmeline (Em or Nim.)

The eldest son of the second marriage was Hugh Pollexfen (1836?–1904), his middle name probably honoring a Scots ancestor. Hugh was sent to Charterhouse, a boarding school about a hundred miles from Bath. He joined the South Devon Infantry in 1854, served in Crimea and China, and eventually rose to the rank of Major. In 1867 he married Juliette (Plum's Aunt Ju), daughter of Captain Edward Daniell of the 75th Regiment. Rev. Deane conducted the ceremony at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Bath.

Hugh's brother Walter Meredith (1840–1906) was educated under his father at the boys' school Merchant Taylors' and graduated from Cambridge in 1862, leaving home as the first cadet chosen for a new government student interpreter program in Hong Kong.

About forty paces to the east of the Deane home stands a three-story nineteenth-century house at 17 Sion Hill. The Deanes were associated with the house, once known as Arbutus Lodge, from as early as 1873, when the *Bath Chronicle* announced the birth of one of Plum's cousins: "November 9, at 17 Sion Hill, to the wife of Capt. Hugh Pollexfen Deane, a daughter." The child

was Marjory Ella, known as Ella. Along with her two older sisters, Violet Constance and Dorothy Juliette, both born in Malta, she spent her formative years with the Deane family at 18 Sion Hill while her parents were stationed overseas. Nearly twenty years after Ella's birth, Ernest and Eleanor Wodehouse leased 17 Sion Hill and placed sons Peveril (then three years, six months old) and Armine (one year, ten months) in the home with their nurse, Miss Roper, and two servants. In August 1883, pending Plum's arrival from Hong Kong, a rear bedroom was added to the house. Today 17 Sion Hill is configured for four bedrooms and three baths, and valued at close to £2 million.

On the lot west of the Deane home stands the three-story Hecla Cottage at 19 Sion Hill. Hugh and Juliette leased this property from 1880 to 1884 to accommodate home visits. With three granddaughters to tend to, Louisa placed advertisements for help in the *Chronicle*. It might have been this one, dated January 8, 1880, that brought Plum's future nanny to the Deanes: "Wanted, a respectable young woman, not less than 18, who has had some experience under a good nurse, as maid to three little girls, and to assist in the housework in the mornings. Must be a thoroughly good needlewoman. Must be well-recommended. Apply before 11 in the morning, at 19 Sion Hill."

Nos. 17, 18, and 19 Sion Hill are where Wodehouse, his older brothers, and their oldest cousins were brought to spend their early childhoods—not among perfect strangers, but in the bosom of the family.

# Contents



# Officers & Volunteers

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Vice President
Bill Scrivener

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Indu Ravi

Membership Secretary (new-member inquiries, contact information changes):
Ian Michaud

*Contact Ian electronically at http://www.wodehouse.org; click on the Membership tab for contact forms.*

Editor in Chief and Oldest Member:
Gary Hall

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Final Proofreading & Technical Assistance, Printer/Mailer Liaison, Rosters, Dues Sheets: Neil Midkiff

Website address: www.wodehouse.org
Webmaster: Noel Merrill /

Quick Ones (unless otherwise credited) courtesy of John Baesch and Evelyn Herzog.

*We appreciate your articles, research, Quick Ones, tales of My First Time, and other observations. Send them to Gary Hall via e-mail or snail mail at the addresses above. Deadlines are February 1, May 1, August 1, November 1. If you have something that might miss the deadline, let me know and we'll work something out.*