

The Road to Psmith¹

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I

The literary career of Wodehouse almost exactly covered the first three quarters of the present century. Eighty of his titles are in print in these islands today in hard covers published by Barrie & Jenkins, and Penguins usually have about twenty of them in paperback at any given time.² 'It is a striking example of the patience and loyalty of the British public', as his great master, Conan Doyle, observed of the unflagging popularity of Sherlock Holmes.³

It is also a striking example of the power and endurance of Wodehouse's *rappor*t with his readers. The achievement is in its way more remarkable than that of his master. When Conan Doyle wrote those words at the end of the 1920s, over half of his own literary output had vanished from the bookshops, and Holmes has carried on his lean shoulders anything to have survived in addition to his own cycle. Wode-

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²Barrie & Jenkins titles (where used by me, hereunder abbreviated as J) are £1.50 in most instances. The omnibus volumes are: *The World of Jeeves* (£2.50), *The World of Mr Mulliner* (£3), *The World of Psmith* (£3.50) and *The Golf Omnibus* (£4.95); they are attractively presented but the proof-reading is slipshod. The most recent volume is *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* (£2.60), a Jeeves story, although Wodehouse was engaged on yet another Jeeves novel at his death. Penguins vary between 35p and 50p. A recent listing included *The Inimitable Jeeves*, *Carry on, Jeeves*, *The Code of the Woosters*, *Jeeves in the Offing*, *The Mating Season*, *Right Ho, Jeeves*, *Very Good, Jeeves*, *Blandines Castle*, *Lord Emsworth and Others*, *Summer Lightning*, *Pigs Have Wings*, *Galahad at Blandings*, *Psmith in the City*, *Psmith, Journalist*, *Big Money*, *Uncle Fred in the Springtime*, *Laughing Gas*, *Piccadilly Jim*, *The Little Nugget*, *Summer Moonshine*, *Quick Service*, *Sam the Sudden*, *The Luck of the Bodkins* and *Pearls*, *Girls*, and *Monty Bodkin* but this is subject to incessant change. I have used several Penguins not necessarily in print in this essay and have cited them for my own convenience: P. Penguins need to watch their proof-reading too.

³Preface to *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1929).

house, on the other hand, has never had to depend on Jeeves to sell his other titles. Jeeves and Bertie have been the favourites, but Lord Emsworth, Mr Mulliner, the Oldest Member, Ukridge, the Drones Club, and Psmith—and the vast range of characters limited to one or two novels—have consistently retained their public. There is a story that Evelyn Waugh once asked Graham Greene what he proposed to write next, *The End of the Affair* having recently appeared. ‘Something about God, I suppose, Greene’?

‘No, Waugh, I think my next novel won’t be about God’.

‘I don’t know that that is a very good idea, Greene. A novel by you without God is rather like a novel by Wodehouse without Jeeves’.

It is probable, I suppose, that the anecdote is yet another from our admirable but dubious Mediterranean colleague Ben Trovato. Waugh is known to have expressed an almost fanatical admiration for some of the Psmith stories, for instance. But the parallel has its uses, especially if we want to suggest that the novel Greene was planning must have been *The Quiet American*. Jeeves at his best is Wodehouse at his; but much of Jeeves is eclipsed by the best of the other stories. Moreover the non-Jeeves achievement is often very different from the Jeeves triumphs. Wodehouse, despite common mythology, had different work for his various leads. And just as Greene made in *The Quiet American* an unrivalled contribution to our knowledge of the subtleties of Vietnamese war in colonial and post-colonial phases, Wodehouse performed many services by changing his *dramatis personae* as well as by the changing moods and emphases of his vast writing life-span.

With the exception of *Mike at Wrykin*⁴ none of the school stories proper which formed the bulk of his contribution to Edwardian literature have remained in print, although several had a remarkable lease of life. The exception is not, in fact, the best of them. Its survival almost certainly stems from the public’s interest in Mike, subsequently to be the other chief protagonist in two of the Psmith stories, and always Psmith’s closest friend. Wodehouse’s signal triumph among his pre-Psmith school novels was *The White Feather*.⁵ Like most of its fellows, it pursues popular, not to say hackneyed, themes in Edwardian public school narratives. But already Wodehouse was moving towards originality, an originality which contained far more realism about it than has been granted. Much of the humour in Wodehouse, in fact, consists of sending up standard pieces of nonsensical romanticism. Apart from the laughter (and I admit that to begin a sentence on him with those words is apart-from-that-Mrs-Lincoln-how-did-you-like-the-play), one of the bases of his appeal is that he retains a hold on our sense of reality. It is realism to make Jeeves more intelligent than Bertie; it is realism to see

⁴Published initially as a serial ‘Jackson Junior’ and then published as a single novel linked by one new line with its serial sequel ‘The Lost Lambs’, as *Mike* (1909). The sequel was published alone as *Enter Psmith* (1935) and in 1953 the two volumes were issued separately as *Mike at Wrykin* and *Mike and Psmith*, the second of which alone is in *The World of Psmith* (1974) but the first is still in print, J. To make matters even more difficult the third sequel ‘The New Fold’ in serial form was clearly seen by Wodehouse as holding the same relationship to the second that the second did to the first: we now know it as *Psmith in the City*. His only three-volume novel.

⁵1907. Illustrated by his life-long friend W. Townend.

Lord Emsworth's ambitions as limited to the sizes of his pumpkins and pigs; it is realism to write a story about school cowardice in which the hero really is a coward.

Wodehouse wrote very few critical essays, although his non-fiction works, notably *Performing Flea*⁶ and *Louder and Funnier* (1932. In print, J.), merit careful study from anyone who doesn't insist on his critics being perpetually highbrow or pompous, but in his gentle way he does protest time and again against the violation done to credibility in popular fiction. Interestingly, his first official swipe in this regard is an attack on the second part of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, rather irrelevantly slipped in at the end of a very early collection of school short stories, *Tales of St Austin's* (1903) and, at the end of his career, the revised Mulliner omnibus, *The World of Mr Mulliner* (1972), was closed with a poor squib about the absurdities of Sherlock Holmes. Wodehouse resembled Conan Doyle in seeking inspiration from the giants of whatever genre he was working in. He owed a lot to Thomas Hughes, in the school stories, and in general even more to Conan Doyle and detective fiction. But his attitude always seems to have been much more critical of his masters. Doyle certainly began the Holmes cycle by some rather ham-handed criticism of Poe and Gaboriau, but his reverence for his sources of inspiration, notably Plato, Boswell, Macaulay, Wilkie Collins and Stevenson, was usually proof against irony. Wodehouse revered his sources too, notably Doyle himself both as author and man,⁷ but it was a reverence which was secure enough to express itself in parody and criticism as well as imitation. For all that, he knew what he owed. Order, plot development, resolution of loose ends and judicious deployment of incident were lessons the detective story had to teach him: as the school stories other than *The White Feather*, and some of the early adult novels, can testify, he had initial difficulties in learning this part of his work.

The Edwardian Wodehouse was a comic writer striving to be born, yet it is curious that his one achievement of power was in fact a very grim story. The real nastiness of public school life, comparable to primitive society in its savagery against breakers of taboos, has seldom been captured so well as he did it in depicting the ostracism of the wretched Sheen. It was not a vein to which he returned very much. The Psmith stories have it from time to time, and there is in some of the other novels an occasional almost terrifying moment or two when the reader suddenly finds his kindly Mentor sounding a note far harsher because of its utter unexpectedness (*Big Money*, P, 127-128 (ch. 8), published 1931):

'... I never liked him, but he was a man I thought you could rely on. So I told him to go to Conway and offer him five hundred pounds'.

⁶Letters to Townend, introduced and edited by him (1953). The title is from Sean O'Casey's probable gibe 'English literature's performing flea'. In fact, O'Casey caught the versatility and intangibility of Wodehouse perfectly, and whether he meant it or not it is, as Wodehouse shrewdly recognised, an excellent compliment. In print, J.

⁷Wodehouse to Townend, 28 April 1925, *Performing Flea*, P., 35.

'For a property worth millions?' said Mr Robbins, drily.
'Business is business', said Mr Frisby.
'Quite', said Mr Robbins.

Berry Conway is portrayed as effervescently grateful to Mr Frisby, his employer, for having, as he thinks, helped him get rid of worthless holdings. Or again (*The Luck of the Bodkins*, P, 148 (ch. 14), 1935):

Reggie's views on jobs were peculiar, but definite. There were some men—he himself was one of them—who, he considered, had no need for a job. . . . A little patience on their part, a little of the purse-strings to help him over a bad patch, and he could have carried on in such perfect comfort. For Reggie Tennyson was one of those young men whom the ravens feed.

But—and this was the point—the ravens do not feed the Ambroses of this world. The Ambroses need their steady job. And if they lose it they find it dashed hard to get another.

Or to take a more obvious case (*Summer Moonshine*, P, 47-48 (ch. 5), 1938):

'If you like to make an exhibition of yourself—'

'I love it. Ah, here's your fruit salad. Eat it reverently. Three bobs' worth. And now about my reasons for parting company with the Princess Dwornitzchek. I left because I have a constitutional dislike for watching murder done—especially slow, cold-blooded murder'.

'What do you mean?'

'My father. He was alive then—just. She didn't actually succeed in killing him till about a year later'.

Jane stared at him. He appeared to be serious.

'Killing him?'

'Oh, I don't mean little-known Asiatic poisons. A resourceful woman with a sensitive subject to work on can make out quite well without the help of strychnine in the soup. Her method was just to make life hell for him'.

Perhaps the second is the best example. In *Big Money* we already know Frisby is betraying and swindling his secretary by the time of that dialogue, and his major comic moment comes much later on, with his marriage proposal (P, 194-195), ch. 11):

'I'm fond of money—I don't deny it—but . . .?'

'Isn't everybody?'

'What?'

'Fond of money'.

'Are you?'

'Of course I am'.

'Have mine', said Mr Frisby.

And *Summer Moonshine*, although the murder accusation occurs early, has already given warning of being one of the darkest of Wodehouse's novels. But the joblessness of Ambrose Tennyson hits the reader like the handle of a carelessly trod-on garden rake, following as it does the revelation that the film magnate Ivor Llewellyn had hired him in the belief he had written 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (*The Luck of the Bodkins*, P, 146-147):

'Okay', said Mr Llewellyn. 'Well, snicker at this one. You're fired. As soon as we hit New York you can take the next boat back to England or jump off the dock and drown yourself or do anything you darn please. What you aren't going to do is come to Llewellyn City and have a good time on my money'.

Wodehouse's school stories may well prove of more service to the historian than most of their contemporaries. He knew the world of the minor public school, and presented it with integrity. The brutality never reached the sick depths of *Stalky & Co.* where it is Kipling's neuroses rather than those of the system that we encounter; nor do the adventures compete with the cheerful fantasies of Frank Richards. Wodehouse was to outstrip both writers in comedy, but not before Psmith appeared. It is tempting to see some obligations to Richards in particular. The *Gem* and the *Magnet* were phenomenal successes which a journeyman writer in the same field would have been very foolish to ignore. And we find in them qualities Wodehouse was later to reveal with much greater sophistication, notably a concentration on the ludicrous, a stress on unconscious self-indictment in boasts, and above all a great delight in the mock-heroic especially through famous quotations. Richards is forever giving us such similes as Bunter rolling away and, like Iser, rolling rapidly; in an argument between the masters Quelch and Prout Quelch's eyes flash dark lightnings as did those of Roderic Dhu 'but Prout, like Ajax, defied the lightning'. But Wodehouse became dissatisfied with mere mock simile (*Big Money*, P, 211, ch. 13):

As he stood, propping himself up against The Nook's one tree and breathing the sweet night air of Valley Fields, his mind was not at its best and clearest. He had a dim recollection of a confused conversation with his friend, Captain Kelly, in the course of which much of interest had been said: but it had left him in a state of uncertainty on three cardinal points.

These were:

- (a) Who was he?
- (b) Where was he?
- (c) Why was he?

To the solution of this triple problem he now proceeded to address himself.

In a way, it was the sort of thing Marcus Aurelius used to worry about.

Inevitably, it is the exchanges between Bertie Wooster and Jeeves which provide the finest mock-heroic exercises, and with Bertie's aid another apparent legacy from Frank Richards is transmitted: the howler. One of the subtle uses of character and personality development is the cautious increase in the literacy of Bertie over the years—again, realism, in that such an effect of Jeeves's influence is a natural thing to assume. In *Thank You, Jeeves* Bertie singles the factor out, though, as one would expect, in relation to Jeeves's effect on others.⁸ By *Jeeves in the Offing* (published 1960) Bertie has matured considerably, but he still happily prattles in howlers although by now often being genuinely anxious to get useful allusions right instead of being merely irritated by Jeeves's learned incursions:

'... Do you recall telling me once about someone who told somebody he could tell him something which would make him think a bit? Knitted socks and porcupines entered into it, I remember'.

'I think you may be referring to the ghost of the father of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, sir . . .'

'That's right. Locks, of course, not socks. Odd that he should have said porpentine when he meant porcupine. Slip of the tongue, no doubt, as so often happens with ghosts . . .' (P, 97-98, ch. 11).

We are once more in the presence of a literary cousin of the well-known propensity of the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth in St Jim's for translating '*Maria omnia circum*' as 'All around Maria', to say nothing of Billy Bunter's even more spectacular findings from his research-work in the same field.

In the earlier Jeeves stories there is a little of the impatience of the average Philistine schoolboy with the owlish and learned swot. In 'Indian Summer of an Uncle' Bertie testily rejects an apposite quotation from Burns:⁹

'Never mind about the poet Burns'.

'No, sir'.

'Forget the poet Burns'.

'Very good, sir'.

'Expunge the poet Burns from your mind'.

'I will do so immediately, sir'.

'What we have to consider is not the poet Burns but the Aunt Agatha. She will kick, Jeeves'.

Yet at the close of the story with Uncle George set for marriage to his former barmaid, Bertie achieves what may be his only intellectual score over Jeeves, and it is strictly in terms of the Philistine's learning (*Very Good Jeeves*, J. 282. *World of Jeeves*, J. 483):

⁸Specifically J. Washburn Stoker and Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright (see ch. entitled 'Start Smearing, Jeeves'). Published 1934.

⁹*Very Good, Jeeves* (published 1930), J., 260-61 (ch. 9) and *The World of Jeeves* (published 1967), J., 470 (ch. 30).

'Besides, sir, remember what the poet Tennyson said: "Kind hearts are more than coronets".'

'And which of us is going to tell Aunt Agatha that?'

'If I might make the suggestion, sir, I would advise that we omitted to communicate with Mrs Spenser Gregson in any way. I have your suit-case practically packed. It would be a matter of but a few minutes to bring the car round from the garage—'

'And off over the horizon to where men are men?'

'Precisely, sir.'

'Remember what the poet Shakespeare said, Jeeves?'

'What was that, sir?'

'"Exit hurriedly, pursued by a bear". You'll find it in one of his plays. I remember drawing a picture of it on the side of the page, when I was at school.'

Naturally it is Jeeves himself to whom we must turn for the greatest intentional triumphs in the mock-heroic. I suppose everyone has their own favourites. To me the supreme moment is the symphonic climax of *Thank You, Jeeves* after Bertie, his face covered in boot-polish, agrees to be smuggled into the potting-shed to take the place of the equally boot-polished Sir Roderick Glossop, held in custody by Constable Dobson following arrest while trying to break into the garage of Bertie's country cottage:

'If I may be permitted to make an observation . . . ?'

'Yes, Jeeves?'

'It is a far, far better thing that you do, than you have ever done, sir.'

sir.'

* * *

Ukridge was the first of Wodehouse's great creations but his birth in the 1906 edition of *Love Among the Chickens* went unnoticed. As Richard Usborne has argued well, the book showed excessive obligations to very trivial comic periodical literature of the day (*Wodehouse at Work*, 1961, 73, 81-87). Moreover Wodehouse, who would later prove himself a professional workman without peer in the sheer business of making a novel perform its task, was uncertain, fumbling and coy. The 1921 revision, still in print, cut away a good number of embarrassing features such as movement from third-person narrative to correspondence and thence to first-person narrative. Ukridge himself was little altered in the revision but the improvement in his surroundings transformed him from Funny Friend into Anti-Hero. The deleted final chapter was a truly awful tableau in dramatic form which reminds one all too well of the proximity of Edwardian popular literature to drawing-room recitation and charade. Wodehouse wrote *Love Among the Chickens* looking at his primary source, Bill Townend's letter about a chicken-farm experience, with all the diligence of an inexperienced but conscientious graduate student largely dependent on a single major

document; he wrote as one doubtful as to whether he could write a comic novel, indeed whether anyone could. At that time the comic novel seldom strayed far from the entertaining sketch in music-hall, magazine or illustration. Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* is a good case of the problems of popular comic literature. It holds the public's affection because of an intermittent series of hilarious episodes and ludicrous digressions; yet in the end, its specifically sketchy format becomes too much for it, and this reader at least is as fed up with the boat as the three men and dog are, at the conclusion. (One could argue that Jerome's achievement in advancing the *ennui* of his audience proportionately to that of his protagonists was a fine piece of sympathetic naturalism: but it still does not make it a successful comic novel, although the work certainly is a highly successful use of comedy.) Wodehouse studied Jerome, and *Love Among the Chickens* does not tail off by reason of loss of drive; indeed Ukridge's final meeting with his creditors provides a climax not unworthy of a future master-technician. In some ways Wodehouse may have been an uncertain comic novelist having observed Jerome's self-injury wrought by inability to alter an initially successful narrative technique.

He would have found little to reassure him in other works. That Wilde and 'Saki' inspired him I take to be self-evident: yet Wilde (once more being read, if not much referred to, in later Edwardian Britain) seemed to cast doubt on the possibility of a comic novel. The most amusing scenes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are the conversations, which seem decidedly amateur by comparison with the plays which followed that sole novel. 'Saki' (pre-war Georgian for the most part) was a failure as a novelist even if *The Unbearable Bassington* has its many exquisite moments. Both produced very great comic short stories, the comedy being all the greater because of its long frontiers with satire and its briefer common ground with tragedy; and Wodehouse would acknowledge as much when he edited *A Century of Humour*.¹⁰ But was the comic novel a possibility?

It was the day of the popular magazine, and Conan Doyle had proved that the magazine wanted a connected series of short stories revolving around the same characters. To be sure adventure stories could be trusted to carry their own momentum in serial form; and if the three-volumed novel never quite survived Miss Prism's perambulator, people still took the time to read novels of smaller dimensions. But the world was too confident in its own seriousness to justify the time a novel written merely for laughter would demand; or if a work of novel-length was to be comic, the concentration a complex plot demands was asking too much. Wodehouse was not in himself a revolutionary here. The market was still ready for the Doyle formula, and Wodehouse's first great successes were to be with the series of comic short stories. It was not until the advent of the depression that he

¹⁰For Hutchinson's *Century* series which flourished in the 1930s. Very interesting for Wodehouse's more trivial sources but few of the pieces stand up on their own. The Wilde ('The Canterville Ghost') and 'Saki' ('Tobermory', 'A Matter of Sentiment') do, of course. Lorimer (see below) is represented, as is Townend. So are Jerome and Conan Doyle. Jenkins, by now dead, is not.

switched fully to comic novels, and then because the market seemed to demand it, according to the advice of specialists. The last book of Jeeves short stories appeared in 1930 (*Very Good, Jeeves*); Wodehouse claimed that Mr Mulliner made it possible to take Jeeves over to the novel,¹¹ but the last of the three books of Mulliner stories appeared in January 1933,¹² The last book of golf stories came out in 1926 (*The Heart of a Goof*). A few collections involving several different major protagonists were published subsequently,¹³ but for a writer of great success, the delays in their appearance were ominous. *Blandings Castle*,¹⁴ for example, was first published in 1935 at which time its first story ('The Custody of the Pumpkin') was a dozen years old.

But what made it possible for Wodehouse to switch to the comic novel in the 1920s was that he had already given himself the skills and the genius to do so. The skills he acquired by dogged hard work and by careful apprenticeship. Once he got started on novels, he produced an impressive run of romantic volumes with remarkable use of comedy. Yet up to 1923 his novels were not primarily driven by the dictates of comedy, although *A Damsel in Distress* (1919, Usborne is particularly good on this one) and *The Girl on the Boat* (1922) came close to that. Afterwards, romance had to fight its corner, and a small corner it usually proved to be.

What made Wodehouse a novelist, and what ultimately made him a comic novelist, were the same thing: Psmith.

The curious thing is that no more evolutionary process could be imagined. Instead of a sudden, successful alteration of styles and themes (which had been tried, and had failed, with *Love Among the Chickens*), the school stories from themselves produced a rather serious sequel concerned with immediate post-school life (*Psmith in the City*, 1910; see n.4 above); then the two major figures were resurrected to make a novel of a good sub-plot cannibalised from a poor imitation Ruritanian romance;¹⁵ finally, in the early 1920s, the last of the Psmith novels—hitherto Wodehouse's only novel series—was made the means of starting the second in another sequence.¹⁶ And there was nothing casual about the relationships of *Leave it to Psmith* with the later

¹¹Preface to *The World of Mr Mulliner* (published 1972), J., 8.

¹²*Mulliner Nights*. Fifteen Mulliners appeared subsequently of which five were in *Blandings Castle* (published 1935), one in *Lord Emsworth and Others* (published 1937) and three in *Young Men in Spats* (published 1936). The other six, of a later date, are poor.

¹³*Blandings Castle, Lord Emsworth and Others, Young Men in Spats, Eggs, Beans and Crumpets* (published 1940), *Nothing Serious* (published 1950), *A Few Quick Ones* (published 1959), *Plum Pie* (published 1967).

¹⁴Correctly *Blandings Castle and Elsewhere* but, misleadingly, the latter part of the title was lost sight of in most computations.

¹⁵*Psmith, Journalist* (published 1915). Mike is off-stage for most of the book, although he is responsible for Psmith's presence in America. The original use of the plot was in the American edition of *The Prince and Betty* (published 1912). See below.

¹⁶*Leave it to Psmith* (published 1923). Wodehouse had vaguely worked with a few characters appearing twice. *The Little Nugget* (published 1913) bequeathed the title-character and his mother to *Piccadilly Jim* (published 1918) for subordinate roles. Unfortunately Smooth Sam Fisher, an Oppenheim-style crook in the former, did not make the transition: his successor is reminiscent of a nasty from the *Gem*. His influence continued through to *Do Butlers Burgle Banks?* (published 1968). Similarly, Wally Mason of *Jill the Reckless* (published 1921) is spoken of as a partner of George Bevan of *A Damsel in Distress*.

Blandings Castle novels, although apart from the characters of Lord Emsworth, the Hon. Freddie Threepwood, the Efficient Baxter and Beach the butler there is virtually nothing that makes any of the Blandings series depend on the first Blandings novel, *Something Fresh*.¹⁷ It is quite easy to enjoy a Blandings novel without benefit of its predecessors (apart from obvious sequels like *Heavy Weather*'s (1933) succession to *Summer Lightning* (1929)), but *Leave it to Psmith* set up a series of postulates on which the whole Blandings vortex subsequently revolved. The alleged insanity of the Efficient Baxter, and his dismissal, arose directly from the developments in *Leave it to Psmith* and were critical to the working-out of *Summer Lightning*, whose plot in its turn dictated that of *Heavy Weather*. The next in the series, *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* (1939), was less dependent on predecessors for content; but in execution its themes of charges of insanity and elegant imposture were a new working-out of ideas brought into being in *Leave it to Psmith*. (Ashe Marson's pretence of being Mr Peters's valet in *Something Fresh*—after all, Mr Peters was in residence and knew what he was up to—and Baxter's victimisation on a gluttony charge in the same novel are what Usborne in another context called chrysalis-stage material;¹⁸ it was the second, and not the first novel, of the Blandings series which settled the pattern.) *Pigs Have Wings* (1952) is a reworking of material whose initial ideas had been aired in *Summer Lightning*, and some of the finest passages in *Full Moon* (1947) owe much to the same point of departure. Curiously enough, many novels outside the Blandings series proper also are traceable on a line of descent from *Leave it to Psmith*. *The Luck of the Bodkins*¹⁹ derives from *Heavy Weather*; and thence comes its long-delayed sequel *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* (1972) and the sequel to that, *Bachelors Anonymous* (1973), although none of the Blandings people appear in any of the three. Memories of Psmith may, no doubt, have gone into the making of Uncle Fred otherwise Lord Ickenham, and his presence in a Blandings story gave him a lease of life beyond the tour-de-force 'Uncle Fred Flits By'²⁰ in which he made his awe-inspiring *début*. This produced *Uncle Dynamite* (1948) and *Cocktail Time* (1958), the latter significantly, bringing back the steward Peasemarch who wreaked such havoc in *The Luck of the Bodkins*. And in saying all this, I am taking only the novels where a formal connection with *Leave it to Psmith* is obvious. Informal obligations to it are omnipresent across the Wodehouse literature after 1923.

The most curious thing about Psmith, as R. B. D. French²¹ has

¹⁷Published 1915. One suspects that the reason for the reuse of Blandings was that the four characters in question had been left hanging at the end, whereas the then much more satisfactory characters of *A Damsel in Distress*, from which so much of the later Blandings derives, were given appropriate endings to their stories, from which they could not be easily rescued later.

¹⁸*Wodehouse at Work*, 171. He uses the word in the context of Reggie Pepper's relationship to Bertie Wooster.

¹⁹It gave Wodehouse a lot of trouble: large now, it was much larger before publication. See *Performing Flea*, P., 81, 84-86, 90-91, 94.

²⁰Published in the *Strand*, 1935, and in *Young Men in Spats* next year. See Wodehouse to Townend, 12 September 1935, 15 May 1938, *Performing Flea*, P., 95, 117.

²¹P. G. Wodehouse (Edinburgh, 1966), 61-62.

observed, is that he is never mentioned again after *Leave it to Psmith* although the novel closes with him as a resident of Blandings as Lord Emsworth's secretary. Wodehouse in one of the last things he wrote, his preface to *The World of Psmith* (vi) acknowledged the problem in part:

People write to me occasionally asking why I don't do another Psmith story. The answer is simple. I can't think of a plot. A married Psmith, moreover, would not be quite the same.

He suggested that Psmith might have ended up by becoming a judge, and with his usual loyalty to his fellow-craftsmen in the business of humour, thought of him as possibly comparable in that sphere to A. P. Herbert's Mr Justice Codd.²² To think of Psmith as above the human comedy is wise; but is a judge quite far enough?

Wodehouse wrote his school stories very much with his own schooling in mind. Now, it is commonplace that the English public school of that day saturated its customers with the Greek and Roman classics, and while Wodehouse never paraded learning of this kind at his readers—after all, the swot did that sort of thing and his readers were assumed to be Philistines, at least during the phase of school stories—it would be perilous to neglect this part of his training. Psmith, I suggest, is a god.

The antecedents were conventional to a degree. Wodehouse had written a series of stories about Wrykin in several of which the cricketing Jacksons made their appearance. There is even an uncollected short story primarily about Marjory Jackson. Eventually the last of the Jacksons, Mike, offered a theme on fraternal kinship and rivalry. The story developed as much of a character for him as the average schoolboy demands for his school heroes. Whether, almost unobtrusively, the Jacksons had taken a sufficient hold on Wodehouse to make him feel the last Jackson would supply the last school story, we cannot say. There was something of the autobiographical in Mike Jackson, although much more in his adventures (especially in *Psmith in the City*) than in himself. Wodehouse seems to have had Mike's loyalty and his generosity, especially to persons of much weaker qualities than his own, witness the unflinching efforts to advance the reputation of Bill Townend and even the attempts to establish the name of Herbert Jenkins as a writer.²³ But there is little evidence of Mike's resentment, and none at all of his inarticulacy.

(To be continued)

²²Previously Sir Humphrey Codd, K.C., of the *Misleading Cases*, a less happy comparison (Herbert had much less consistency than Wodehouse in his characters). One wonders if these lines in *The Mating Season* are another tribute to Herbert:

'Haddock, sir'.

'Haddock, eh'?

'Yes, sir . . .'

'It's odd, but that name seems to strike a chord, as if I'd heard it before somewhere' (P., 6).

²³See 'Old Bill Townend' reprinted in *Week-End Wodehouse* (published 1951). J. 65-68. not to mention *Performing Flea*, *passim*. Jenkins was the author of the Bindle books and various others, including a God-awful set of detective stories concerned with one Malcolm Sage. Wodehouse's introduction to one of his volumes does his head no credit, and his heart much; and what little charity I myself possess has enabled me to forget the citation.