A LIFE IN LETTERS

'Sunlit perfection'
Stephen Fry

P. G. Wodehouse

Edited by Sophie Ratcliffe

A LIFE IN LETTERS

BOOKS BY P. G. WODEHOUSE

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BY SOPHIE RATCLIFFE

On Sympathy (Oxford University Press, 2008)
The Lost Properties of Love (William Collins, 2019)

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P. G. Wodehouse

Edited by Sophie Ratcliffe

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For all Wodehouse's heroines,
imaginary and real, especially Leonora

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ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE TEXT PAGE

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A LIFE IN LETTERS

Introduction

When it comes to letter-writing, P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster belongs to the minimalist school:

Dear Freddie, —

Well, here I am in New York. It's not a bad place. I'm not having a bad time. Everything's not bad. The cabarets aren't bad. Don't know when I shall be back. How's everybody? Cheerio! —

Yours,

Bertie.

PS. — Seen old Ted lately?

'Not that I cared about old Ted', he adds, 'but if I hadn't dragged him in I couldn't have got the confounded thing on to the second page.'[1]

Receiving post is, for Bertie, equally confounding. This is partly a matter of timing; morning, after all, is never the best time for reading, especially if you have a 'bit of a head on'.[2] But it is also because the letter, in the world of Wodehouse, is an intrusive presence – a symbol of reality permeating the all-too-secure haven of one's bachelor flat, gentlemen's club or country seat. Whether it hails from an aunt, fiancée or amorous peer of the realm, the envelope by the toast rack is a threatening sight – a crumb in the butter of the Wodehousean Eden.

Wodehouse's own attitude to letters was more positive. Many different exchanges – ranging from notes to his family to business letters and discussions of plot design – offer a fascinating and unique insight into a twentieth-century writing life, and the history of his time. Wodehouse exchanged letters with numerous well-known figures – including artists and writers such as Ira Gershwin, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Agatha Christie. He also kept up a regular correspondence with his friends and family, especially his beloved step-daughter, Leonora, or 'Snorky'.

While some might assume that Wodehouse's novels are conventional, beneath the mostly male upper-crust there is some radical

table-turning. Butlers bail their masters out, passion wins over reason, and girls, invariably, know more than boys. The letters reveal the roots of this reversal. Wodehouse was a self-made man who married a chorus-girl, spent time with Hollywood movie stars, and endured Nazi imprisonment and journalistic accusations of treason. This was a life that was much more eventful than many – especially many of his younger generations of readers – might assume. As for the man himself, this 'laureate of repression' could be affectionate, naughty and tender in correspondence.[3]

A number of these letters touch on Wodehouse's feelings about love. Bertie Wooster declares that there are two sorts of men. Those who would like to find a woman in their bedroom, and those who would rather not. From accounts of his own marriage, Wodehouse was, in many ways, of the second sort. Nevertheless, his early letters to his friend Leslie Bradshaw contain some revealing details about his romantic encounters, while in his later letters he speculates, from time to time, on other people's sex lives, marriages and divorces.

Solvency is also a key theme of his correspondence – the getting, losing and spending of money dominates his letters as much as it does his plots. Ever since missing out on his place at Oxford, Wodehouse was driven by the idea of bringing in the 'boodle' – and he was hugely successful as an earner.[4] The correspondence follows his financial fortunes, his crises with the taxman, his affectionate reflections on his wife's spending, and his gifts to friends and family.

Elsewhere, letters demonstrate the difficulties of plotting, the complexities of character creation and also the moments of inspiration. When Jeeves, 'the perfect omniscient nanny', first entered the Wodehouse oeuvre, he came in with the utmost discretion.[5] As Wodehouse told Lawrence Durrell, '[i]t never occurred to me that Jeeves would do anything except open doors and announce people.'[6]

Whether delivering an account of the difficulties of getting a small glass of whiskey during Prohibition, or giving the 'low down on the Riviera',[7] Wodehouse offers characteristically comic accounts of living, writing and socialising in England, America and France through the 1920s and 1930s – as well as an extraordinary account of his life in a German internment camp, in Nazi Berlin, and in occupied and post-liberation Paris.

Given Wodehouse's acknowledged skill as a novelist, it is perhaps surprising that it has taken so long for so many of these letters to be collected in one volume.[8] The delay comes in part from Wodehouse's unusual place in the English canon. An acknowledged master of the English comic novel, praised by philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Anthony Quinton, and writers such as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, he has also always been an unashamedly popular writer – one whom readers have, on the whole, simply enjoyed, rather than studied. From one perspective, Wodehouse merits a scholarly volume, directed at an academic audience – from another, he deserves a letters book aimed at the general reader. This edition seeks to serve both readerships.

Wodehouse is also a writer whose works resist a certain sort of biographical approach. He disliked investigations into his personal life and circumstances, partly because he found them intrusive. (He wrote to his friend William Townend that their unedited correspondence should eventually 'be destroyed. Gosh', he added, 'it would be awful if some of the things I've written you were made public').[9] And he also intimated that biographical context was, to a degree, irrelevant to understanding a work of art. Writing about Shakespeare, he noted that 'a thing I can never understand is why all the critics seem to assume that his plays are a reflection of his personal moods and dictated by the circumstances of his private life. You know the sort of thing I mean. They say "*Timon of Athens* is a gloomy bit of work. That means that Shakespeare was having a lousy time when he wrote it." I can't see it. Do you find that your private life affects your work? I don't.'[10]

Indeed, while the Edwardian England of Wodehouse's early adulthood permeates his works, his personal circumstances and the tenor of his fictional worlds are not always an easy match. One of the surprises of this correspondence is the occasional, startling disparity between life and art. Take his masterly *Joy in the Morning*, written during one of the most difficult periods of his life. Just weeks after leaving Nazi internment, Wodehouse was still able to conjure up the 'embowered' hamlet of Steeple Bumpleigh, 'in the midst of smiling fields and leafy woods'. While he struggled with the weight of national disapproval, his halcyon fictional world had only one cloud on the horizon – the 'somewhat sticky affair' of Bertie, Florence Craye and 'Stilton' Cheesewright – effortlessly resolved by the shimmering Jeeves.[11]

Parallels between Wodehouse's correspondence and his fiction run at a deeper level. Wodehouse may have famously parodied the modernist poets, but he has more in common with T. S. Eliot than he might have admitted. For Wodehouse, as for Eliot, the aim of the written text was not to express, but to 'escape' from emotion.[12] It is, as he told a friend, 'hopeless to try and put down on paper what one is feeling'.[13] From Wodehouse's earliest works, we find that the idea of internal psychology, in what he referred to as 'the Henry James style', is parodied and resisted.[14]

His letters have a similar emotional reticence. It was Dr Johnson, one of Wodehouse's earliest literary loves, who wrote that a man's soul, 'lies naked' in his letters.[15] Wodehouse's attitude to nudity was a wary one: 'You know my views on nudes', he once wrote to a friend, 'I want no piece of them.'[16] Wodehouse's letters are usually clad in the epistolary equivalent of Bertie's heliotrope pyjamas, carefully buttoned up to disguise true feeling.

The 'cladding', for Wodehouse, has always been his extraordinary written style. Drawing on the techniques of such writers as Dickens and Thackeray, Conan Doyle and O. Henry, as well as lesser-known but popular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors such as W. W. Jacobs and Barry Pain, Wodehouse's fiction offers something unique in the history of English prose. He is, as Stephen Medcalf argues, 'the greatest and most original' of a group of writers (the list includes G. K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh and John Betjeman) who may have eschewed the techniques of modernism, but who still provide stylistic paths through the same insecurity that the modernists exposed.[17]

While such a style is difficult to analyse (one critic has compared the act to 'taking a spade to a *soufflé*'), there are a variety of figures of speech that recur throughout his fiction, and his letters.[18] One is the way in which he deflects emotion away from the self. When disaster occurs in the shape of income-tax demands or illness, it is the 'home' that metonymically laments. When he expresses admiration for his wife, her outfits – rather than her body – garner the praise. Such manoeuvres are perfected in his fiction, with his use of the transferred epithet – a technique that casts the state of mind of the protagonist onto a nearby, unlikely inanimate object. We have, for example, 'I balanced a thoughtful lump of sugar on my teaspoon';[19] 'he uncovered

the fragrant eggs and b. and I pronged a moody forkful'[20] – or the memorable ablutions in *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*:

> As I sat in the bath-tub, soaping a meditative foot and singing, if I remember correctly, 'Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar', it would be deceiving my public to say that I was feeling boomps-a-daisy.[21]

The shifting of affect, from mind to limb, is not only absurdly incongruous; it has the effect of holding the emotion in question at arm's (or leg's) length. The pace of this sentence is also ingenious. It suspends its meaning, clause after clause, building up our expectations, till it sinks, like a punctured rubber duck, on 'boomps-a-daisy'. It is a phrase as unexpected – after the precision of 'if I remember', the mystique of 'Shalimar' and the rhetorical nod to 'my public' – as it is daft. But Bertie isn't even feeling 'boomps-a-daisy'; it is part of his charm that his low mood is described not only tangentially, captured in the shape of his 'meditative' foot, but through negative inference and euphemism.

Discretion also governs another feature of the typically Wodehousean syntax – his use of abbreviation. Terms such as 'posish', 'eggs and b.', 'f.i.h.s' ('fiend in human shape') and 'festive s.' ('festive season') appear both in Wodehouse's fiction and in his letters, and there is a perfectly balanced comic tension about these coded syntactical tics. The unsaid-but-understood creates a clubby feeling of intimacy between writer and reader. But there is also something subtly self-deprecating about the Wodehousean abbreviations – as if he is creating a voice that is necessarily compacted, determined not to draw too much attention to itself. As Basil Boothroyd points out, both Wodehouse's heroes and Wodehouse himself 'are vulnerable at heart'.[22]

Wodehouse is a writer who could easily have chosen to write quite a different sort of fiction – one ballasted by an armoury of academic knowledge. A brilliant scholar, disappointed in his hopes for university, he had an immense grasp of literature, philosophy and Classics. Well into his later years, his letters reveal that he spent time reading Balzac, Austen, Fielding, Smollett and Faulkner, and throughout his career his writing demonstrates this literary breadth. But this is not the dense allusive erudition that one finds in writers such as Ezra Pound or

Gertrude Stein. Balancing Byron and Shelley, Plato and Maeterlinck against contemporary slang, Wodehouse moves seamlessly between registers, both celebrating and diminishing the world of high art.

Wodehouse's pre-eminent stylistic flourish is his use of metaphor and simile. Page after page of his novels contain sparklingly unusual stretches of the imagination – 'Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes'; a man 'wilts' like 'a salted snail' – and one finds the same in his letters.[23] 'Things', he tells a friend, 'are beginning to stir faintly, like the blood beginning to circulate in a frozen Alpine traveller who has met a St Bernard dog and been given a shot from the brandy flask';[24] returning to New York, he reflects, 'was like meeting an old sweetheart and finding she has put on a lot of weight'.[25] It is a technique that does more than simply amuse. Some of Wodehouse's similes and metaphors are so extraordinary that they approach the absurd. Style, for Wodehouse, is a carefully crafted form of ludic release, and it is in the very texture of his sentences that one can see the originality of his mind at work.

Nevertheless, the letters in this volume have a very distinct stylistic difference from Wodehouse's fiction. Often written at speed, the letters show Wodehouse without his crafted style in place. Moments of great emotion break through: his excited optimism at the prospect of winning a scholarship to Oxford; his terrible disappointment when he learned that a 'varsity life was not to be his lot after all; his stoicism in the face of romantic disappointment; his devastation at the death of his stepdaughter; his bewildered outrage and sorrow at the public response to his wartime errors.

Apart from a hiatus during the years 1915–1917, for which unaccountably no letters survive, the correspondence provides an extraordinarily detailed account, not only of Wodehouse's activities, but of his evolution as a writer: his early success in schoolboy magazines (*Mike Jackson* and *Psmith*), his rapid development as a writer in Edwardian journalism, his battles to make his mark with New York periodicals, his writing for *Playboy* magazine, and his love of 1970s TV soaps. New sources for Wodehouse's characters, from to Billie Dore to T. Patterson Frisby, are revealed – and new caches of correspondence provide important insights into his years in New York and Berlin.

It is all too often forgotten that Wodehouse was a famous lyricist and playwright as well as a novelist. As the critic Mark Steyn notes, '[h]ad Wodehouse died in 1918 he would have been remembered not as a British novelist but as the first great lyricist of the American musical.'[26] Wodehouse read his way through Shakespeare each year – and he adored the works of W. S. Gilbert. This book of letters has a dramatic quality of its own, with its fair share of characters standing in the wings. Wodehouse's friend and one-time collaborator, Herbert Westbrook, one of the inspirations for his comic hero Ukridge, was an influential backstage presence in Wodehouse's life. The imperious theatrical producer, Florenz Ziegfeld, was partially responsible for the numerous changes of address that we find in Wodehouse's correspondence, frequently sending verbose telegrams summoning Wodehouse from across the Atlantic to rescue his latest production. Elsewhere in these letters, we catch glimpses of Wodehouse's dealings with wayward literary agents, stroppy actresses and loyal wartime comrades. And there is his huge range of enduring non-human attachments – Wonder and Squeaky, Bimmy and Bill, his adored dogs and cats. The most important of all behind-the-scenes presences was his wife, Ethel. In the letters, we see her negotiating prices for Wodehouse's serials, rethinking his plot ideas and liaising with agents, before heading to the local casino. Wodehouse, meanwhile, was often to be found cutting a letter short because of Ethel's pressing demands. I must stop now, he told his friend, the novelist Denis Mackail, as Ethel is 'yowling in the passage that my cocktail is ready.'[27]

There is a further staginess to these letters, for Wodehouse is often to be found ventriloquising a specific persona according to the perceived preference of his correspondent. With his friend Eric George, he adopts the role of a passionate but jilted inamorata out of a Thackeray sketch, then switches to the character of an ersatz Sam Weller, before brandishing his literary knowledge like an undergraduate manqué; to Leonora, he is both an adoring father and good 'pal', full of slang and silliness; when writing to Denis Mackail, Wodehouse can be unusually sarcastic and catty. Meanwhile letters to the dashing Guy Bolton have an uncharacteristic machismo about them, containing innuendos, dirty jokes and – somewhat implausibly – a mention of the 'brave old days' when Wodehouse 'used to have the clap'.[28] Indeed,

reading these letters, one feels that Wodehouse comes close to Keats (a poet often quoted in his novels): he is a writer with 'no self at all', constantly shape-shifting to suit his audience.[29]

Of course, the central drama of Wodehouse's life was one in which he was an unwitting player. The story of his internment by the Nazis, and the subsequent controversy that ensued after he had made a series of humorous broadcasts on German radio, is well known. These letters, many of which have never been seen before, offer an unprecedented insight into the ways in which Wodehouse negotiated, or failed to negotiate, the complexities of wartime Berlin and occupied Paris – and his deep fear of losing his public as a result of his error of judgement.

Given Wodehouse's lack of any real involvement in the major political events of the twentieth century, it is often asked whether there is any political aspect to his writing – indeed critics may ask how to negotiate an oeuvre that seems to resist politics so determinedly. Wodehouse's method of writing a novel was, he claims in a letter, 'making the thing frankly a fairy story and ignoring real life altogether'.[30] As Evelyn Waugh writes, when reading about Wodehouse's characters

> We do not concern ourselves with the economic implications of their position; we are not sceptical about their quite astonishing celibacy. We do not expect them to grow any older, like the Three Musketeers or the Forsytes. We are not interested in how they would 'react to changing social conditions' as publishers' blurbs invite us to be interested in other sagas. They are untroubled by wars. [...] They all live, year after year, in their robust middle twenties; their only sickness is an occasional hangover. It is a world that cannot become dated because it has never existed.[31]

Wodehouse's work, however, can be seen as more than simply escapist, providing us, as it does, with the notion of an alternative universe. He is, as Auden notes, one of the 'great English experts on Eden' – he 'proclaims the dream of a world where things could be otherwise'.[32]

As for the politics of the man himself, these letters demonstrate something of Wodehouse's particular brand of good nature, mixed with naïveté and blindness – and 'a complete unawareness that anyone

could be as ungentlemanly as the Nazis actually were'.[33] Wodehouse's comments on international events range in character from patriotic interest to somewhat disengaged bemusement. One thing the letters make clear, however, is his lack of snobbery and prejudice. Wodehouse writes as readily to ex-housekeepers as to aristocrats, and his letters are always warm, interested, and invariably concerned with the welfare of his correspondent. Indeed, one of the reasons why Wodehouse's personal sense of politics was so hazy was that he never seemed able to conceive of, or interest himself in, the notion of others in the context of any sort of group at all; his concern was wholly with the individual.

Looking through these letters, a reader might be struck by the workaday nature of Wodehouse's correspondence. He is, at times, downright ordinary. While the letters are consistently interesting for the detail they contain and the light they shed upon his times, they display only on occasions the extraordinary stylistic élan that one finds in his fiction. The particular qualities that make up Wodehouse's character as both a man and a writer explain this resistance to extensive rhetorical flair. The ethics of Wodehouse's entire oeuvre are, as critics have noted, an ethics of humility. It is, after all, Bertie's humility 'with all its complicated to and fro of self-realisation and avoidance of self-realisation' that makes him, for us, an interesting character.[34] And there is a humility in Wodehouse's writing from the largest scale – he happily adopts the role of a popular genre writer – to the level of an individual sentence. Wodehouse may play with the everyday cliché, but he never derides it. The rhythms of everyday speech, are, for him, a form of communion. He was a humble man, and the modesty of his letters reflects this.

Born in 1881, the year in which the first telephone company was formed, Wodehouse grew up at a time of phenomenal change in methods of communication, and he was acutely aware of the expressive capacities – or failures – of varying media. 'You can't', as he wrote in a 1923 lyric 'make love by wireless':

> It's like eggs without the ham
> There is nothing girls desire less
> Than a cold Marconigram;

For it's something you can't speak to
From a someone you can't see;
It's like a village church that's spireless,
Or a Selfridge's that's buyerless
Or a Pekinese that's sireless
And it isn't any good to me![35]

But Wodehouse was no technophobe. Like his contemporary, James Joyce, Wodehouse relishes the comic possibilities that such new media allow a writer. One thinks, for example, of Monty Bodkin's garbled telephone call to Lord Emsworth in *Heavy Weather*, alerting him to an imminent pig-napping, or Smallwood Bessemer's whistle-stop proposal in 'Tangled Hearts':

'Miss Flack?'
'Hello?'
'Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but will you marry me?'
'Certainly. Who is that?'[36]

Telegrams also provide a rich vein of humour. Aunt Dahlia's epic telegram exchanges with her 'fat-headed nephew' in *Right Ho, Jeeves* are a case in point. Or Madeline Bassett's lyrical telegraphese – 'Please come here if you wish but, Oh Bertie, is this wise? [...] Surely merely twisting knife wound' (in which, as Stephen Medcalf writes, the humour 'lies in the idiocy of omitting "in the", after putting in "Oh Bertie"').[37] Elsewhere, we see Wodehouse's comic riffs on the public letter form in *Over Seventy*, and his mocking of cliché in *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*, in which Chimp Twist is left to brood on a picture postcard presenting 'a charming picture of the Croisette at Cannes' bearing the unusual inscription: 'Having a wonderful time. Glad you're not here'.[38]

Wodehouse's writing career took off at a point when there was a boom in the appearance of the 'open' or 'public' letter. The daily paper, as Matthew Rubery notes, was an interactive entity, full of personal announcements, advertisements and 'brief stories written in the blood of broken hearts'.[39] Wodehouse himself was briefly an 'agony uncle' for the journal *Tit-Bits*, and he took a particular delight in the psychology

of the public letter writer, as his 1904 *Punch* article 'Balm for the Broken-Hearted' reveals. The article is allegedly constructed from the contents of an editorial waste-paper basket, containing readers' responses to a 'broken-hearted' correspondent who had written to the paper during the previous week:

SIR,—The accident of which your correspondent complains is one that might happen to anybody. All that he needs, in my opinion, is a little perseverance and determination. Perhaps travel would prove as efficacious in curing him as it was in curing me under similar circumstances. The object of my devotion was a lady whose refined singing and dancing had created something of a furore at the music-halls. My life was temporarily blighted by the discovery that she was already married, and that her youngest son was then playing *Hamlet* in the provinces. But I soon recovered on joining my ship and going for my first voyage, and since then her memory has cost me scarcely a pang. Like the good sailor I am, I have now a wife at Marseilles, a second at Amsterdam, a third in London, and others at Nagasaki, New York, Athens, Archangel, and, I believe, Constantinople.

I am, yours, &c., VIKING.

Sir,—Your correspondent might derive consolation from the history of the Israelite kings. King SOLOMON was in all probability jilted—perhaps frequently—in his salad days. Yet in the end, by persevering and not giving way, he amassed the substantial total of one thousand (1,000) wives. Without counselling him actually to go and do likewise, I should like to point out to your correspondent that *this is the right spirit*.

Yours, &c., THEOLOGIAN.

MY VERY DEAR SIR,—Take my advice, and look on the bright side. What seems a misfortune at first sight, often proves in the end to be a blessing. Many years ago I was engaged for six months to a lady who afterwards refused to marry me. What was the result? Misery? Gloom? Not a bit of it. I wrote and placed to great advantage articles on 'How to Propose', 'Buying the Ring', 'Do Girls like Presents?', 'The £ *s. d.* of Courtship', 'Should Kisses be Taxed?' and 'How to Write a Love-letter'; also two hundred and four sets of verse, and a powerful story

called *The Jilting of Joshua Jenkins*. I attribute to my engagement and the experience I derived from it my present position of sub-editor on *Blogg's Weekly Nuggets. Verb. Sap*.

Yours in haste, ENERGETIC JOURNALIST.[40]

All these written forms – the public letters, the telegrams, the postcards – feature in this book, and it is one of the pleasures and challenges of this edition to attempt to convey Wodehouse's pride in impressively headed notepaper, his marginal doodles, and his frustration with his beloved Royal typewriter. One imagines that the felicitously mistaken euphony of a 1932 telegram, instructing his agent to 'PUBLISH OMNIBUSH' signed 'SODEHOUSE', would have made Wodehouse smile.[41] A full sight of Wodehouse's extant correspondence gives a sense of the rate at which he was working and writing. He was often typing several letters a day – almost every day of his life. And, despite a (fictional) anecdote in which he claimed that he tossed all his letters out of the window, relying on the public's goodwill to post them, he was an assiduous and careful correspondent.[42]

There are many such confected anecdotes in Wodehouse's autobiographical works. They appear not through any innate mendacity, but from his almost compulsive desire to please his readers. 'We shall have to let truth go to the wall if it interferes with entertainment', he told Guy Bolton, as they planned their autobiographical memoir, *Bring on the Girls*.[43] Indeed, any editor setting out to work on Wodehouse's correspondence from a biographical perspective is conscious that Wodehouse likes to 'improve' his primary material. The 'letters' from Wodehouse, collected by his friend William Townend and published under the title *Performing Flea*, are a prime example – radically rewritten, as Wodehouse told his editor, to be 'full of anecdotes about celebrities – which the public loves – and a lot of funny stories'.[44] The letters are also heavily cut, to remove what Wodehouse saw as the 'frightfully dull' focus on 'Pekes and footer'.[45]

The original copies of Wodehouse's letters are kept in a variety of locations. A large number are held in the Wodehouse Archive. Many are in private hands, and a quantity in library collections across the world. Their forms are various and fascinating, ranging from hand-

written and typed letters, to telegrams, novelty Christmas cards, postcards, and scribbled notes, letters embedded in government papers – and not a few transcribed by admiring friends.

Given the adverse comments that have been levelled at Wodehouse over the years, transparency has been of paramount importance in the preparation of this edition. I have been fortunate to have the full support and cooperation of the Wodehouse Estate, which granted me the freedom to publish any and every part of any Wodehouse letter. But the vast size of Wodehouse's correspondence has necessarily made this a selected edition. Letters have been chosen for inclusion on the basis of their individual merit – either in terms of the information that they offer about Wodehouse's life, the evolution of his style, or times in which he lived. Cuts within individual letters have also been essential, but passages have only been removed if they are irrelevant to the main thrust of the letter, or to Wodehouse's biographical or artistic narrative. I have made a particular point of leaving the letters that Wodehouse sent during the war years as complete as space will allow.

One of the problems in editing Wodehouse's letters is the effect it has on their particular rhythm and tone. Given that Wodehouse is the subject of this book of letters, cuts have obviously been made to make him the primary focus. This has the effect of diminishing one of the key aspects of his correspondence – his concern for other people. There is almost no letter that does not begin and end with Wodehouse's often extensive concerns for, and enquiries about, the person to whom he is writing. Bill Townend's eczema, Rene's arthritis, Lily's finances and the state of Denis's dog's bowels are all part of the substance of his letters.

A final editorial decision relates to the question of when a letter actually qualifies as being a letter; whether, for instance, one should include letters that were written but never posted, letters that were posted but never received, or letters that exist only in the form of copies – transcribed within the letters of others. I have included all of the above in this edition, with the view that the journey a letter has taken, or not taken, may be illuminating in its own way. A particularly intriguing history surrounds one of the critical letters in this book – a note that was written by Wodehouse when under prison guard in Paris. The letter was an affectionate and cheerful one, intended to

reassure Ethel of his safety and to raise her spirits in the frightening atmosphere of newly liberated Paris. Wodehouse gave the letter to a messenger – but it was in fact never delivered as intended. Instead, some forty-seven years later, an envelope arrived in Remsenburg, Long Island, addressed to Lady Wodehouse. The Frenchman who had been charged with its delivery had, for some reason, been unable to carry out his mission, and the document only came to light after his death.

Wodehouse himself had died just two years earlier – but the delivery of this love letter from beyond the grave seems a small material tribute to his fictional world where all, in the end, comes right. As Wodehouse's Ginger Kemp puts it, 'such is the magic of a letter from the right person'.[46]

1 'The Aunt and the Sluggard' (*Strand* and *SEP* 1916), repr. in *Carry On, Jeeves* (1925).
2 See 'Doing Clarence a Bit of Good' (*Strand* 1913; *Pictorial Review* 1914), repr. in *My Man Jeeves* (1919).
3 The phrase is Robert McCrum's. See *Wodehouse: A Life* (London: Viking, 2004), p. 139.
4 See PGW's early letter to Eric George, October 1899 (Morgan).
5 The description is W. H. Auden's. See 'Balaam and His Ass' (1954), repr. in *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1948), p. 144.
6 PGW to Lawrence Durrell, 19 May 1948 (Southern Illinois).
7 PGW to Leonora Cazalet, 2 April 1921 and 30 March 1925 (Wodehouse Archive).
8 There have been two earlier collections of Wodehouse's letters. Frances Donaldson's *Yours, Plum: The Letters of P. G. Wodehouse* (1990) is limited to the letters located in the Wodehouse Archive, and its thematic arrangement makes it necessarily highly selective; *Performing Flea* (1953) contains solely Wodehouse's letters written to William Townend.
9 PGW to William Townend, 23 March 1955 (Dulwich).
10 PGW to William Townend, 24 February 1945 (Dulwich).
11 *Joy in the Morning* (1946), Chapter 1.
12 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion', T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 21.
13 PGW to Denis Mackail, 18 November 1949 (Wodehouse Archive).
14 See P. G. Wodehouse, 'Stone and the Weed', *The Captain* (May 1905), repr. in *Tales of Wrykyn and Elsewhere* (London: Porpoise, 1997), p. 315.
15 Dr Johnson to Hester Thrale, 27 October 1777. See *Letters To and From the Late Samuel Johnson L.L.D.*, published by Hester Lynch Piozzi (London: A. Strachan, 1788), p. 11.
16 PGW to Denis Mackail, 7 November 1945 (Wodehouse Archive).
17 Stephen Medcalf, 'The Innocence of P. G. Wodehouse' in *The Modern English Novel: the Reader, the Writer and the Work*, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), p. 188.
18 See *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 1 February 1933, vol. 184, p. 140.
19 *Joy in the Morning*, Chapter 5.
20 'Jeeves and the Impending Doom', in *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930).
21 *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*. See Chapter 1.
22 Basil Boothroyd, 'The Laughs' in *A Homage to P. G. Wodehouse* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), p. 62.
23 *Pigs Have Wings* (1952), Chapter 5; *Bertie Wooster Sees It Through* (1954), Chapter 19.

24 PGW to Guy Bolton, 1 September 1945 (Wodehouse Archive).
25 PGW to William Townend, 11 May 1947 (Dulwich).
26 Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 53.
27 PGW to Denis Mackail, 26 January 1946 (Wodehouse Archive).
28 PGW to Guy Bolton, 16 October 1959 (Wodehouse Archive).
29 'the poet has [...] no identity [...] he has no self [...] When I am in a room with People [...] the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated', John Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, repr. in *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 195.
30 PGW to William Townend, 23 January 1935 (Dulwich).
31 Evelyn Waugh, 'An Angelic Doctor: The Work of P. G. Wodehouse' (1939), repr. in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 255.
32 W. H. Auden, 'Dingley Dell & The Fleet', repr. in *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 411. My second quotation is taken from Theodor Adorno's 'Lyric Poetry and Society' (1951) in *Telos* 20 (1974), p. 5.
33 Medcalf, p. 189.
34 Medcalf, p. 197.
35 'You Can't Make Love By Wireless' from *The Beauty Prize* (1923). See *The Complete Lyrics of P. G. Wodehouse*, edited by Barry Day (Oxford: Scarecrow, 2004), pp. 325–6.
36 'Tangled Hearts' in *Nothing Serious* (1950).
37 P. G. Wodehouse, *The Code of the Woosters*, Chapter 2; Medcalf, p. 197.
38 *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* (1972), Chapter 3.
39 'Our Wants', *Punch* 3 (1842), p. 140.
40 P. G. Wodehouse, 'Balm for the Broken-Hearted', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, vol. 126, 24 February 1904, p. 135.
41 PGW to Paul Reynolds, 27 April 1932 (Columbia).
42 See *Bring on the Girls* in *Wodehouse on Wodehouse* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 139.
43 PGW to Guy Bolton, 4 November 1952 (Wodehouse Archive).
44 PGW to J. D. Grimsdick, 23 March 1953 (Dulwich).
45 PGW to William Townend, 23 March 1955 (Dulwich).
46 *The Adventures of Sally* (1922), Chapter 11.

Editorial Policy

All cuts are marked with an ellipsis, with the exception of postscripts that are, on occasion, silently omitted. Silent corrections are made for most typographical errors, save in the case of misspelled names, where it is thought that the mistake might reveal something about the relationship. The layout of Wodehouse letters varies and on occasion no date or address is given. Where it seems appropriate or necessary, an approximate date may be supplied in square brackets. If present in the original, dates have been justified to the left, and all addresses to the right. Addresses have not been standardised, but are given as they appear on the original letter. If a salutation or signature is omitted, this signals that a significant cut has been made at either the beginning or end of a letter, or both. Wodehouse's occasional intentional comic grammatical lapses ('look what he done') and idiosyncratic spelling, ('dam' for 'damn', 'lyrist' for 'lyricist') have been preserved and left unmarked, so as not to clutter the reading texture. All sources for the letters are given at the end of the book, together with references for any quotations within the commentary.

Selected Recipients

LILLIAN SARAH BARNETT
(1880–1974)

Known to Wodehouse as 'Lily', Lillian Barnett was Wodehouse's housekeeper at his house in Emsworth – 'Threepwood'. Wodehouse continued to maintain his house in England for a time while he was in America, and often wrote to Lily to send over necessary possessions and organise minor administrative matters – and to get news of England, as he found himself 'frightfully homesick at times'. Indeed, Wodehouse's letters are less those of an employer than of a friend. Personal, affectionate and helpful, he informs her of his latest theatrical or writing ventures, asks after her husband, Bert (the local postman), and attempts to help find work for her children. The correspondence continued throughout Wodehouse's life, long after his house at Emsworth was given up.

ANGA VON BODENHAUSEN
(1900–1976)

Of Scottish descent, and a member of a respected German aristocratic family, Anga von Bodenhausen was a widow when she met Wodehouse. She lived in Degenershausen, an estate in the Harz mountains in Germany, with her young daughter, Reinhild. Anga took Wodehouse in as a house-guest in 1941, following the outcry surrounding his Berlin broadcasts. He returned to her house during the summer of 1942.

Fervently anti-Nazi, Anga later became engaged to her cousin, Raven von Barnikow, who was peripherally involved in the assassination attempt upon Hitler. Wodehouse corresponded with Anga on his return to Berlin, and also later, when he and Ethel moved from Berlin to Paris. After Germany's defeat, Degenershausen fell into the hands of the Russians, and Anga von Bodenhausen was advised to surrender

the property and make her escape. Moving through Bavaria, and then on to Berlin, Anga and her daughter suffered much hardship and near-starvation. They lost touch with the Wodehouses, and eventually found safety and a home in Holstein.

GUY BOLTON
(1882–1979)

Born in Kent, Bolton's childhood was blighted by the early death of his mother, who was an alcoholic. His father moved the family from England to Manhattan in 1893. Bolton dreamed of being a writer, but initially found himself working in his father's engineering business, before qualifying as an architect. He had his first magazine story accepted in 1904. Married by 1908, and soon with two children to support, he continued to work in his father's architectural firm, while collaborating on plays. Encouraged by a 1911 success, he gave up his day job to write for the theatre full-time. In 1914, he first met and began to write lyrics for the composer Jerome Kern. In 1915, Kern and Bolton joined forces with Wodehouse, and an immensely successful three-way collaboration began on a series of musical comedies which played at the Princess Theatre in New York. These included such hits as *Sally*, *Oh, Boy!*, and *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* Wodehouse and Bolton remained close friends for the rest of their lives, working and travelling together during an intensive period between 1915 and the early 1920s. Bolton recalls that working with Wodehouse was 'delightfully easy ... Ideas came and were dropped or seized on ... we were always laughing'.

Bolton continued to write straight plays, musical comedies and novels throughout his life. He sustained a long correspondence with Wodehouse, which touches frequently on the subject of work, as well as their other shared passion – dogs.

Bolton's romantic life was often complicated. Extremely handsome, he was drawn to many women and divorced three times, but his fourth marriage in 1937 to Virginia DeLanty, a former chorus-girl, was to last until his death.

LESLIE HAVERGAL BRADSHAW
(1892–1950)

Bradshaw and Wodehouse first met in New York in 1909 and their friendship began when Bradshaw, a fellow Englishman, interviewed Wodehouse for a feature for the boys' magazine, *The Captain*, in 1910. Bradshaw's father had worked his way up from cabin boy to a captain of the Red Star Shipping Line, and his mother was a nurse from Liverpool. The family moved to New York in 1907. Bradshaw's mother was a Christian Scientist, and both parents had strong views about their son's aims in life.

Bradshaw worked as a journalist and editor for various New York publications, and also as private secretary and amanuensis for the financier and writer, Thomas Lawson, in Boston. When in New York, Bradshaw often stayed with Wodehouse, and acted as his literary agent on an informal basis. Wodehouse dedicated his novel, *Psmith in the City*, to Bradshaw in 1910. Bradshaw reciprocated with a dedication to Wodehouse in his school novel, *The Right Sort*, in 1912. After a difficult romance, Bradshaw married the American, Olive Marie Barrows, in 1915.

SIR EDWARD CAZALET
(1936–)

The second child of Leonora Cazalet. Folklore in the village of Shipbourne, Kent, tells of Wodehouse patiently following Edward's nanny and pram round Shipbourne Green before setting off on his own normal daily six-miler. Edward in his early days became very involved with his father, Peter's, racing stable, riding as an amateur steeplechase jockey. Later he became a barrister and subsequently a High Court judge. Wodehouse loved hearing about Edward's cases and, at times, he would ask for guidance when dealing with legal matters in his plots. (On one occasion Edward recalls telling Wodehouse that he had been unable to trace any record of a policeman's helmet ever having been stolen.)

Edward would visit Wodehouse in Long Island, armed with the latest thrillers or bestsellers: Agatha Christie, Dick Francis and Anthony

Powell were much favoured. After lunch he would go out with Plum on his afternoon walks, accompanied by at least two dogs and meeting other canine friends of theirs in the neighbourhood. In the evening two pre-dinner martinis each was the norm.

In 1965, Edward married Camilla Gage, and Wodehouse greatly enjoyed discussing Shakespeare with her. She recalls that he 'preferred the comedies to the tragedies' and that, overall, he thought *Love's Labour's Lost* was one of the most underrated of Shakespeare's plays.

Edward now helps to run the Wodehouse Estate, which continues to have a remarkable turnover of Wodehouse's books, translated into at least thirty languages.

LEONORA CAZALET (FORMERLY WODEHOUSE NÉE ROWLEY) (1904–1944)

Daughter of Leonard Rowley and Ethel Newton, Leonora was educated in England, France and America. Her father died in 1910, when Leonora was only six, but she was formally adopted by Wodehouse five years later. She soon became his adored daughter. Jokingly referred to as his 'confidential secretary and advisor', Leonora frequently advised him on his manuscripts, and accompanied him on business trips. She was a talented writer in her own right, albeit with a very small output, and published under the pseudonym, 'Leol Yeo'. She also worked briefly for MGM studios in Hollywood. Leonora was remembered as an extraordinarily intelligent, charming and attractive person – an individual full of 'humanity', with 'no understanding or feeling for class barriers', who was 'interested in everyone she met'.

Leonora married Peter Cazalet in 1932, and had two children – Sheran and Edward. She died unexpectedly, and suddenly, in 1944, before her fortieth birthday. On hearing of her death, Wodehouse was reported to have said, 'I thought she was immortal'. Wodehouse never recovered from her loss. When her son, Edward, once asked him if he could write a short memoir about her he said, a few days later, in a voice close to tears, that he just could not manage this because he found it too painful.

THELMA CAZALET-KEIR
(1899–1989)

The sister of Wodehouse's son-in-law, Peter Cazalet, Thelma Cazalet joined her brother, Victor, in the House of Commons in 1931 and was an active and regular speaker on a number of issues – in particular, education, women's rights and the arts. She was married in 1939 to the journalist and broadcaster, David Keir. In May 1945, she was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Education in the short-lived post-war caretaker government. The 1945 general election was to sweep the coalition government from power – ending her parliamentary career. Thereafter she became a member of the Arts Council, a Governor of the BBC, and President of the Equal Pay Campaign Committee. She was appointed a CBE in 1962.

For Wodehouse's ninetieth birthday, she edited the collection, *Homage to P. G. Wodehouse* – a series of congratulatory essays from twelve well-known writers, including John Betjeman, Auberon Waugh and Malcolm Muggeridge.

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
(1859–1930)

Doyle began writing while pursuing a career as a medical surgeon. Service as a ship's doctor gave him a range of experiences, many of which fed into his later writing. In 1885 he settled in Portsmouth and built up a successful practice, and also a reputation as a writer of short stories. His first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published when Wodehouse was only six years old. By 1891, Doyle had moved to London, and his work was a hit with the readers of *The Strand Magazine*. Doyle was always one of Wodehouse's great writing heroes, and a major influence on his early work. Quotations from Doyle's work appear thoughout Wodehouse's writing, from his first novel, *The Pothunters*, to his last complete book, *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*. The pair played cricket together at Lord's, and also at Doyle's country house, and met for lunch occasionally during the 1920s, where the conversation sometimes turned to their shared interest in spiritualism.

ERIC BEARDSWORTH GEORGE
(1881–1961)

Also known as 'Jimmy', Eric George was in the year above Wodehouse at Dulwich College. He left in 1899 to take up a place at Oriel College, Oxford. Wodehouse's own nickname for George – 'Jeames' – is taken from Thackeray's parodic *Punch* sketches, 'The Diary of C. Jeames de la Pluche Esq.' (1845). The sketches tell the story of a footman turned millionaire. In their correspondence, Wodehouse adopts the phrases and voice of one of Jeames' spurned female admirers. George went on to exhibit at the Royal Academy, specialising in the male nude figure, and religious subjects. His epic poem, *Cephalus and Procris: An Episode between Two Wars*, was published in 1954.

IRA GERSHWIN
(1896–1983)

Born in New York, Ira began his working life in a hotel owned by his father, and started writing lyrics at the request of his younger brother, the composer, George. To begin with, he was much in George's shadow, but by 1924, Broadway billboards gave joint credit to both the Gershwins on the smash hit *Lady, Be Good*, soon to be followed by numerous Broadway successes. Ira went on to write such well-known lyrics as 'The Man I Love', ''S Wonderful' and 'I Got Rhythm'. Wodehouse first collaborated with the Gershwin brothers on the 1926 musical, *Oh, Kay!*, and Ira Gershwin was one of the many lyricists who would later pay tribute to Wodehouse as a mentor and inspiration. The pair met again in Hollywood in the 1930s and continued to correspond for the rest of their lives.

LADY HORNBY (NÉE CAZALET)
(1934–)

Sheran and her younger brother Edward were regularly visited by their grandparents Ethel and P. G. Wodehouse in the years before the war,

and Wodehouse particularly enjoyed going for long walks with his young granddaughter when staying with the family. From the mid-1950s, Sheran was making frequent visits to America to see the Wodehouses. In the late 1950s, she began work for the BBC, ultimately becoming part of a team running one of its main contract departments. She remembers that Wodehouse often questioned her closely about her work in the television and theatre worlds, and the pair would go to New York together, to see the latest shows. In 1967, Sheran married Simon Hornby, later to be Chairman and Chief Executive of W.H. Smith. Hornby was a major Wodehouse enthusiast and later a Patron of the P. G. Wodehouse Society. He regularly joined her on her visits to Long Island.

DENIS GEORGE MACKAIL
(1892–1971)

Grandson of the artist Edward Burne-Jones, Mackail was born into an academic and literary family. After an Oxford education, financial constraints forced him to put his literary ambitions aside, and he found himself working as a civil servant and later in the print room of the British Museum. Nevertheless, his first novel, *What Next?*, found immediate success, and enabled him to give up work and write full-time. Wodehouse and Mackail frequently exchanged letters, discussing not only work, but also their shared love of Pekingese dogs. Denis had a long and happy marriage to Diana Granet, and Ethel was also close to the couple. Despite the overall warmth of their correspondence, in later years, Wodehouse seemed to find the sarcastic strains of Mackail's letters grating.

SIR EDWARD MONTAGUE COMPTON MACKENZIE
(1883–1972)

After attempts at poetry and theatrical writing, Mackenzie began to find success as a novelist in the period just before the First World War. Service in the Royal Marines interrupted his writing, but provided him with much material for later novels. After the war he settled in

Scotland, became a founder member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, and went to live on the Hebridean island of Barra (which was later to inspire his most enduring novel, *Whisky Galore*).

Mackenzie first came across Wodehouse in 1899, when both writers were still schoolboys. Mackenzie recalls reading of Wodehouse's exploits on the rugby pitch as 'an outstanding forward' for a rival school team. Mackenzie went on to admire Wodehouse's fiction greatly – and when Wodehouse praised Mackenzie's 1919 comic novel *Poor Relations* as the 'best comic novel for a long time', Mackenzie recalled that it was 'the greatest pleasure he had ever received from a review during my life'.

The pair became friends, and Mackenzie was invited to lunch parties at Norfolk Street, finding himself captivated by Leonora – 'the most brilliant young woman I had ever known'. Mackenzie was a staunch supporter of Wodehouse during the difficult war years, and wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* to counter A. A. Milne's attack on Wodehouse's broadcasts from Berlin.

Mackenzie was, like Wodehouse, a prolific writer, and the pair exchanged occasional congratulatory letters throughout their careers.

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE
(1903–1990)

British journalist, broadcaster and author, best known in his later life as an outspoken television presenter. After travelling widely to report on worldwide news stories, Muggeridge joined the Intelligence Corps, and served in Mozambique, North Africa, Italy and Paris during World War Two. When Wodehouse was interrogated by MI5 about his wartime broadcasts, Muggeridge was assigned to the Wodehouses as a liaison officer. He soon became good friends with the couple, helping them negotiate the difficulties of post-liberation Paris – as well as introducing Wodehouse to George Orwell.

Wodehouse was always intensely grateful for Muggeridge's help and support during these war years. Muggeridge became editor of *Punch* magazine in 1953, and commissioned a number of articles from Wodehouse, which later became part of Wodehouse's autobiography, *Over Seventy*.

JAMES BRAND PINKER
(1863–1922)

Pinker began his career as a clerk in Tilbury Docks, then worked as a journalist in Constantinople before becoming the editor of *Pearson's Magazine*. After only a year as editor, he left to found his literary agency in London in 1896. Pinker was one of the very first professional literary agents, and his clients included Henry and William James, Arnold Bennett, Joseph Conrad, George Gissing, H.G. Wells, D.H. Lawrence, Edith Wharton and James Joyce. His entry in the 1901 *Literary Year Book* noted that he had a particular reputation for 'helping young authors in the early stages of their career, when they most need the aid of an advisor with a thorough knowledge of the literary world and the publishing trade'.

PAUL REVERE REYNOLDS
(1864–1944)

A Harvard-educated philosophy graduate who studied under William James, this 'tall, spare, awkward, shy' man was the unlikely founder of America's first and (for its time) most successful literary agency. Wodehouse became Reynolds' client in 1915, and joined a list that included Stephen Crane, George Bernard Shaw, Willa Cather, Booth Tarkington, H. G. Wells, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Reynolds' offices were as modest as his persona. His son recalls that he leased 'four small, dirty, badly furnished rooms', always worked in his starched collar and suit, and rarely stopped for lunch. The office telephone was almost redundant; Reynolds preferred letters, replying remarkably promptly and carefully to even the smallest written enquiry. He was unceasingly attentive to Wodehouse, and dealt efficiently and tactfully both with major deals with magazine editors, and with minor requests – sending flowers to Ethel on Wodehouse's behalf, or dealing with unpaid bills.

TOM SHARPE
(1928–)

A British writer, famous for his satirical novels, such as *Riotous Assembly* (1971), *Indecent Exposure* (1973) and *Porterhouse Blue* (1974). Wodehouse admired Sharpe's work and a correspondence began in the 1970s, in which Wodehouse confided his insecurities about the plots of his novels, his reflection that if he 'had gone to Oxford', he wouldn't have become a writer – and his honest opinion that William Townend's writing was 'frightfully dull'.

WILLIAM TOWNEND
(1881–1961)

Known in early correspondence as V.T., 'Villiam', and later as Bill. Wodehouse shared an attic study with Townend at Dulwich College, and slept in the same dormitory in Elm House. Townend left Dulwich in 1899 to train to become a commercial artist, and provided illustrations for Wodehouse's early serial, *The White Feather*. He married Irene Ellam, known as 'Rene', in 1915. Townend spent his twenties in America and Canada, before returning home. He published many short stories and novels but never found success on a wide scale. A book of Wodehouse's letters to Townend, *Performing Flea*, edited by Townend himself, was published in 1953.

It was Wodehouse who persuaded Townend to give up painting for writing. Wodehouse always felt some responsibility towards his friend as a result. Their extensive correspondence over fifty years shows that Wodehouse gave him much advice and encouragement, as well as writing to publishers on his behalf – and quietly subsidising him. The pair often discussed each other's emerging plots, and Townend offered Wodehouse numerous ideas for his stories.

EVELYN WAUGH
(1903–1966)

Born in London, the son of publisher and editor, Arthur Waugh, Evelyn went up to Oxford in 1922. Although he initially resisted the idea of becoming a writer, his 1928 success *Decline and Fall* was followed by novels that included *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Black Mischief* (1932) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Waugh had admired Wodehouse for many years, writing in his diary in 1940 that he 'read P. G. Wodehouse (who has been lost along with the Channel ports) [...] and forgot the war'. The pair first met when Waugh visited New York after the war, and they became friends.

Waugh's championing of Wodehouse culminated in a 1961 radio tribute, in which he condemned the Establishment's treatment of Wodehouse during the war, and celebrated his 'idyllic' fictional world. In Wodehouse's later years, the pair bonded over their mutual dislike of journalists. Wodehouse was to commemorate Waugh's infamous public row with two journalists from the *Daily Express* in verse. Waugh referred to Wodehouse, both affectionately and respectfully, as 'Dr Wodehouse' – in reference to his honorary Oxford D.Litt. Wodehouse's library contained all of Waugh's novels, one of which is inscribed to 'the Master of Our Profession'. One 'has to regard a man as a Master', Waugh wrote, 'who can produce on average three uniquely brilliant and entirely original similes to every page'.

CHAPTER ONE

Childhood

Throughout their marriage, P. G. Wodehouse and his wife Ethel left small notes around the house for each other. Some were affectionate, others more workaday. One from Ethel, written long after her husband had gone to bed, reads as follows:

> 3.30am
> My Darling
> Pears for your breakfast and please first
> drink the small glass of fresh orange juice.
> Took hours to squeeze.
> All the love I have.
> Bunny[1]

The tone here says much about this relationship. Ethel's emotional candour made her a good match for a man who, even in his most personal letters, gave little away. It was a marriage that brought Wodehouse long-lasting happiness, providing him with inspiration, domestic security and a type of loving affection that bordered on the maternal.

Pelham Grenville was born into a very different atmosphere. His was a typical Victorian childhood, where feelings remained unspoken and distances were kept. The third of four sons, he arrived prematurely on 15 October 1881, when his mother was visiting relatives in Guildford [see plate 1]. His first lodgings were unassuming, but behind the façade of the tall Victorian end-of-terrace house at 59 Epsom Road, one of the most remarkable writers of the twentieth century made his entrance.

Though not wealthy, the Wodehouses were established members of that very specific, but long vanished, sector of society – the Victorian 'gentry' – defined by its particular ideas of morality, education, status and propriety. The Wodehouse family line itself could be traced back to Agincourt, while his mother's family, the Deanes, were related to

Cardinal Newman. Eleanor displayed a surprisingly romantic streak in her choice of names for her sons. Philip Peveril, her eldest, took his name from Walter Scott's 1823 novel *Peveril of the Peak* – an allusion to the fact that he was born overseas, the first white child born on the Peak in Hong Kong. The choices for the two middle sons were less literary but equally striking. Armine was an old family name from the Wodehouse line, while Pelham (always known to his friends as 'Plum') was named after his godfather, Colonel Pelham von Donop. But with Wodehouse's middle name – Grenville – Eleanor once again showed her poetic side, conjuring one of Tennyson's heroes; and with Richard Lancelot, her youngest child, Eleanor returns to Tennyson and Arthurian legend.

The names might have been unusual, but Wodehouse's father, Henry Ernest – known as Ernest – was 'as normal as rice pudding' and determined to give his sons a childhood to match.[2] This was a world of tapioca and high tea, of moral edification and steely discipline. The only thing conspicuously – but critically – missing from Wodehouse's upbringing was the presence of his parents.

Ernest was one of many ambitious young Victorian men who had chosen to forge a career in the Colonies. After joining the Civil Service in 1867, he had been sent to Hong Kong. A post in such a location was 'rather like being awarded your Second Eleven colours; for the First Eleven always went to India'.[3] Nevertheless, there was much for a civil servant to do in 1860s Hong Kong. Crime flourished, piracy was rife, and the numerous opium dens and brothels needed to be kept under licence. Both the Anglo-Chinese police force and higher-ranking members of the British Administration had been perceived as corrupt, and Whitehall was attempting reforms. Initially appointed as an interpreter, Ernest was given the important job of commanding the Chinese section of the police force.[4] He met and married Eleanor Deane in 1877, and soon became a respected magistrate [see plate 3].

After Pelham's birth, Eleanor took her third son back to 'The Homestead', their bungalow in Hong Kong, and for the first two years of his life he was placed in the care of an 'ayah', or Chinese nursemaid. Meanwhile, Armine and Peveril were set up in a house in England under the care of a nurse named Emma Roper. Eleanor kept a close eye on the situation, as her parents were living in the house next door.

Once Pelham was three years old, he was brought back from Hong Kong to join his brothers. 'Nanny Roper' was remembered by Wodehouse as being 'very severe in her manner, making the boys dress formally every day and keeping them spotlessly clean'.[5] Some firmness was probably necessary; a childhood friend recalled that the 'little Wodehouses', especially Pelham, were 'very naughty' [see plate 2].[6] A few years later, the children were moved on to what was known as a 'Dame School' – a privately run establishment in a family home, in which small numbers of children received education and accommodation. Overseen by the Prince sisters, and based in Croydon, a suburb of South London, 'Elmhurst' (as it was later known) catered specifically for the families of colonial civil servants. Later, Wodehouse remembered his Croydon school as the place in which he first encountered the feisty nature of the Cockney housemaid, immortalised in figures such as *Uncle Dynamite*'s Elsie Bean.[7]

Many Victorian children whose parents were British nationals overseas received this sort of education *in loco parentis*. Indeed, separation from one's parents under such circumstances was the norm. The climate of the tropics was hazardous for infants, and Hong Kong had particularly acute problems in terms of drainage and sanitary provision. Parental leave was at four- or five-year intervals, and travel from Hong Kong to England by ship took over two months. A number of children endured far worse than Wodehouse. The young Kipling, a decade earlier, was sent back from Bombay at the age of three, and was cruelly treated. Looking back on the sudden separation from his parents, Kipling recalls the experience as akin to having 'lost all [his] world'.[8] Wodehouse, by contrast, reflected cheerfully on his early years. He had, he admits, no shortage of familial contact. Holidays from school were spent visiting his numerous relatives. The Wodehouse boys had no fewer than fifteen uncles and twenty aunts. But this was contact of a desultory sort:

> Looking back, I can see that I was just passed from hand to hand. It was an odd life with no home to go to, but I have always accepted everything that happens to me in a philosophical spirit; and I can't remember ever having been unhappy in those days. My feeling now is that it was very decent of those aunts

> to put up three small boys for all those years. We can't have added much entertainment to their lives. The only thing you could say for us is that we never gave any trouble.[9]

Wodehouse's breeziness is accented by his characteristically 'decent' understatement. Things in his world are always 'odd' rather than 'terrible'. But sadness seeps through. The Wodehouse children sound like so much unwanted luggage. There is a touch of strained parody about the final phrase – 'we never gave any trouble' – as if the voices of many disapproving aunts are still ringing in his ears. Perhaps most significant is the thin comfort blanket of amnesia: 'I can't remember ever having been unhappy'. There were, one suspects, muffled tears at bedtime for his own 'lost world', preface to emotional withdrawal.

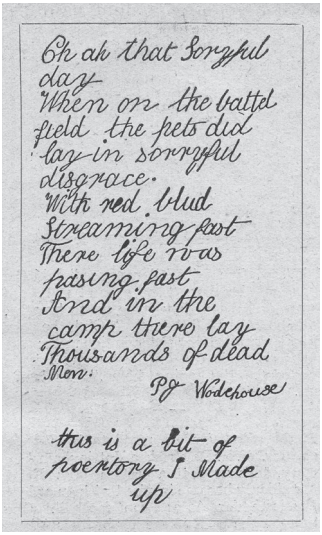
For even by Victorian standards, Ernest and Eleanor's absence was a long one. The separation was to create a coolness between Wodehouse and Eleanor. 'We looked upon mother', he recalls, 'more like an aunt. She came home very infrequently'.[10] The fact that there are no extant letters between Wodehouse and his parents, either from his childhood or from his later life, may indicate something about these particular relationships. While it is not clear what sort of correspondent Eleanor Wodehouse might have been, she was, by all accounts, a distant and unsentimental mother.

This question of emotional containment echoes through Wodehouse's writing. Brought up in the midst of the Victorian cult of childhood, Wodehouse would have been surrounded by commodified images such as the Pears' Soap 'Bubbles' boy, and the lisping 'sweet innocence' of the children's classic *Helen's Babies*.[11] Those of tender years, in Wodehouse's fiction, are portrayed with less sentiment. 'I can't handle anything except rather tough children, if I am to get comedy', Wodehouse admitted.[12] For Wodehouse, being a child – and being tough – went hand in hand.

While he kept his sons at arm's length, Ernest Wodehouse planned their education with some care, particularly as his second son, Armine, was seen to be academically brilliant. Pelham was left more to his own devices, and read children's popular works voraciously. I was 'soaked in Anstey's stuff', he recalls.[13] Familiar with Victorian classics such as *Tom Brown's School Days*, he also read and loved the moral bestseller

Eric, or Little by Little, and was gripped by the school stories which appeared in the weekly penny magazine *The Boy's Own Paper*.[14]

But even in his earliest years Wodehouse went a step beyond the average schoolboy, independently tackling Pope's translation of the *Iliad* at the age of six, and writing his own brand of epic 'poertory', of which a remnant survives:


Oh oh that Sorryful day
When on the battel field the pets did lay in sorryful disgrace.
With red blud Streaming past
There life was pasing fast
And in the camp there lay
Thousands of dead Men.
P G Wodehouse

this is a bit of poertory I Made up

In 1889, a change was called for. Peveril, Wodehouse's eldest brother, was suffering from a 'weak chest', and the Wodehouse children were moved to a school in Guernsey as part of a 'package deal', where they might 'benefit' from the sea air. Wodehouse remembers it as 'a delightful place. [...] My recollections are all of wandering about the island.' The only disappointment, he recalls, was 'the awful steamer trips back to England for the holiday'.

Vacations, Wodehouse recalls, would be spent with 'various aunts, some of whom I liked but one or two were very formidable Victorian women'.[15] Wodehouse was aware that he should 'Never complain!' He chose, instead to 'note every detail and write it down'.[16] The young Wodehouse may not have always had a pencil to hand, but it is clear from his fiction that he was continually observing his surroundings, and making mental notes, particularly on the matter of Aunts. It is,

of course, Bertie Wooster who is most particularly plagued by the Auntly phenomenon – and his confrontation with an intimidating vista at Deverill Hall has something of a child's perspective about it:

> As far as the eye could reach, I found myself gazing on a surging sea of aunts. There were tall aunts, short aunts, stout aunts, thin aunts, and an aunt who was carrying on a conversation in a low voice to which nobody seemed to be paying the slightest attention.[17]

Bertie's Aunt Agatha, 'the nephew-crusher' who 'chews broken bottles and kills rats with her teeth', was, Wodehouse later confirmed, his Aunt Mary Deane, 'the scourge of my childhood'.[18] Another Deane sister, Louisa, was one of the models for the kindlier Aunt Dahlia.

'In this life', as Bertie phlegmatically muses, 'it is not aunts that matter but the courage which one brings to them'.[19] Indeed, Wodehouse's familiarity with the figure of the aunt was a felicitous coincidence for a comic writer. For the relationship's distance allowed him to exploit the plot potential of the family structure with a light touch. As Richard Usborne notes, '[i]t is funny when Bertie slides down drainpipes, or to America, to escape his Aunt Agatha's wrath. It would be sad if he were thus frightened by his mother'.[20]

Being a nephew, for Wodehouse, brought other literary benefits. Wodehouse's aunts did a great deal of visiting, particularly as four of them were vicars' wives. Wodehouse was often taken along on these social rounds, which included making calls to the local Great Houses. 'Even at the age of ten', Wodehouse remembers, ' I was a social bust, contributing little or nothing to the feast of reason and flow of soul. [...] There always came a moment when my hostess, smiling one of those painful smiles, suggested that it would be nice for your little nephew to go and have tea in the servants' hall. And she was right. I loved it. My mind today is fragrant with memories of kindly footmen and vivacious parlour-maids. In their society, I forgot to be shy and kidded back and forth with the best of them. [...] Sooner or later in would come the butler [...] "The young gentleman is wanted", he would say morosely, and the young gentleman would shamble out'.[21] It was in this way that Wodehouse gained so much knowledge of the life of servants behind the baize door. Characters such as the portly Beach,

the Blandings butler, Angus McAllister, the gardener and 'human mule', and the chef Anatole, 'God's gift to the gastric juices', all owe their provenance to these childhood visits.

At twelve, Wodehouse was moved from Guernsey to a small private school at Kearsney, near Dover. 'I was supposed to be going into the Navy', he recalls.[22] The school was not a success at the time, but Wodehouse was later to use Malvern House as the alma mater of Bertie Wooster and several of his friends. Armine, meanwhile, was sent to a more academic boarding school in South London, Dulwich College. It was on another of Wodehouse's unhappy holidays, paying a visit to his elder brother, that Wodehouse first saw and fell in love with Dulwich. He pleaded with his father to allow him to attend. It was to be the beginning of 'six years of unbroken bliss'.[23]

1 Ethel Wodehouse to PGW, u.d. (Wodehouse Archive).
2 *Over Seventy* (1957), repr. in *Wodehouse on Wodehouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 474.
3 Benny Green, *P. G. Wodehouse: A Literary Biography* (New York: Rutledge, 1981), p. 8.
4 See Colin Crisswell and Mike Watson, *The Royal Hong Kong Police Force* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 57.
5 David Jasen, *Portrait of a Master* (New York: Mason & Lipscomb, 1974), p. 5.
6 P. G. Wodehouse, *Notes and Phrases* (Wodehouse Archive).
7 See N. T. P. Murphy, *The Wodehouse Handbook*, Vol. I (London: Popgood & Groolley, 2006), p. 16.
8 Rudyard Kipling, 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', *The Week's News* (Allahabad), 21 December 1888.
9 Jasen, p. 8.
10 Jasen, p. 5.
11 The comment about *Helen's Babies* is George Orwell's. See 'Riding Down from Bangor', *Tribune*, 22 November 1946.
12 PGW to Paul Reynolds, 3 December 1937 (Columbia).
13 PGW to Richard Usborne, 9 May 1958 (Wodehouse Archive).
14 PGW to Richard Usborne, 3 June 1955 (Wodehouse Archive).
15 Jasen, p. 8.
16 This was P. G. Wodehouse's adult advice to a ten-year-old German girl, Reinhild von Bodenhausen, in 1941. See *P. G. Wodehouse: The Unknown Years* (Stamford Lake: Sri Lanka, 2009), p. 14.
17 P. G. Wodehouse, *The Mating Season* (1949), Chapter 1.
18 PGW to Richard Usborne, 14 January 1955 (Wodehouse Archive).
19 *The Mating Season*, Chapter 1.
20 Richard Usborne, *Wodehouse at Work* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1961), p. 31.
21 *Over Seventy*, p. 512.
22 PGW to Richard Usborne, 1 September 1956 (Wodehouse Archive).
23 *Over Seventy*, p. 477.

CHAPTER TWO

Dulwich

Wodehouse arrived at Dulwich College when he was twelve and a half, and the six years spent there, he recalls, 'went like a breeze'.[1] He described it as 'a resolutely middle-class school'. Its pupils were sons of 'respectably solvent' parents, who had sent their sons to be educated in the knowledge that 'we all had to earn our living later on'.[2] With this ethos came a spirit of determined hard work, strong discouragement of 'putting on side', and good sportsmanship. Situated in the suburbs of South-East London, the imposing red-brick Victorian building is surrounded by sixty-five acres of rolling green fields, chestnut-lined avenues and cricket pitches. At the time Wodehouse arrived, the school was thriving, with more than six hundred boys.

Much of its success could be attributed to its extraordinary headmaster, Arthur Herman Gilkes. Wodehouse recalls Gilkes as 'a man with a long white beard who stood six-foot-six in his socks and he had one of those deep musical voices. I can still remember how he thrilled me when he read us that bit from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* which ends "But I, mine Werther, am above it all". It was terrific. But he also scared the pants off me!'[3] Gilkes had a magnetic presence, instilling the importance of fair play, as well as a love of sport and a thirst for knowledge. Harsh on slang and smoking, he was also generous and charismatic. He was often to be found umpiring on the cricket pitch, or giving the boys individual 'tutorials' for which they had to read an essay aloud – an experience which was, Wodehouse remembered, 'akin to suicide'.[4]

At Dulwich, things went well from the start. Wodehouse excelled in the open examination, winning a £20 scholarship, and was placed in a form of boys older than himself. While Wodehouse's brother, Armine, flourished in the sixth form, Gilkes took Wodehouse minor under his wing, banning him from cycling (due to his poor eyesight) and suggesting boxing as an alternative. But it was during his years in the sixth form that Wodehouse made his mark. He represented the

school in the First XV for rugby football and the First XI at cricket, and also busied himself writing poetry. In 1899, he was chosen to be one of the editors of the school magazine, under the eye of William Beach Thomas, a Dulwich master later to become a famous war correspondent.

Wodehouse relished the social and gastronomic aspect of school as well. For most of his time he was a boarder, initially sharing a dormitory, and then a study bedroom, with one or two other boys. There were 'open fires in winter, a kettle for tea or cocoa, a toasting fork, a twice-daily delivery of bread, milk, and what the boys called "spreads" such as dripping, meat extracts, or honey. There was a Buttery in the Centre Block for milk and jam or chocolate "splits" during morning break, and "warm" cake for afternoon tea; and there was a meat meal and often sponge or suet puddings [...] at long trestle tables in the Great Hall at 6pm.'[5]

Though Pelham Grenville was seen as the more sportingly inclined of the brothers, he had his heart set on a place at Oxford, and was equally committed to his studies. 'We might commit mayhem on the football field, but after the game was over we trotted off to our houses and wrote Latin verse.'[6] He also showed an early thirst for literary journalism and remembered 'stroll[ing] down to the station' after school, to 'read the weeklies and the magazines on the bookstall' [see plate 4].[7] The shelves would have been full. The Education Acts of the 1870s led to an explosion in the numbers of newspapers and journals catering for every sector of society. Writing in 1955, Wodehouse recalls the number of boys' magazines. *Chums* was a particular favourite, a weekly periodical modelled on *The Boy's Own Paper*, which included advice on 'How to Train for the Football Season' and 'The Right Way to Carry a Boa-Constrictor', as well as serials which made 'an enormous impression' on him as a young reader, such as Max Pemberton's *Iron Pirate* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

> Then – in 1900 – the *Captain* appeared, and in the first number was a serial by Fred Swainson called *Acton's Feud*. It began, I remember, 'Shannon, the old international, had brought a hot side down to play the school ...' and if there has ever been a better opening line than that, I have never come across it. It was

> something entirely new in school stories – the real thing – and it inflamed me to do something in that line myself. If it hadn't been for *Acton's Feud*, I doubt if I would ever have written a school story.[8]

Wodehouse's first piece of published writing – an essay entitled 'Some Aspects of Game-Captaincy' – appeared as a prize-winning contribution to *The Public School Magazine* when he was still at Dulwich. His fee – 10/6 – was recorded in a notebook entitled *Record of Money Received for Literary Work*, in which he was to log his income for the next seven years. The essay is a masterpiece of classification, characterising the various types of football-playing schoolboys according to their genus: 'the keen and regular player', 'the partial slacker, and lastly, the entire, abject and absolute slacker'.[9] Almost all of Wodehouse's early published writings – *The Pothunters*, *Tales of St Austin's*, *The Gold Bat* and *The Head of Kay's* – were school stories and, like his very first piece, were based on his life at Dulwich and the fiction that he read during his time there.

Apart from a certain frostiness on the part of 'Scotty Gibbon', the football captain, or the 'scratching' of the annual match against Bedford owing to poor weather, there was little to mar the Dulwich years.[10] The biggest potential shadow came early on in his time at the school, with the news of his parents' return. In 1895, Ernest retired early from the Civil Service due to ill-health, and the Wodehouses took a house near the school at 62 Croxted Road, where Wodehouse was later to set several of his novels. Pelham had to adapt quickly, not only to life as a day boy, but also to living with his parents and a new younger brother, Dick, who had been born in 1892. Relations with Ernest, Wodehouse remembers, were always amicable, despite his father's habit of occupying the toilet for two hours every morning. He found his mother to be a more difficult character. 'I met her as virtually a stranger', he recalls, 'and it was not easy to establish cordial relations'.[11] But London life did not suit Ernest and Eleanor, and within a year they moved to the countryside, settling in the Old House in the Shropshire village of Stableford. Wodehouse returned to being a boarder.

An English family home meant that finally the Wodehouse boys could be reunited in the school holidays. Wodehouse loved the countryside,

and often used it as the backdrop for his school stories, drawing on the architecture and spirit of Dulwich and relocating them to Shropshire.[12] Even while home for the vacation, he was keen to stay in touch with his school friends. Wodehouse was popular with all of his year, but he formed a particular bond with two boys, Eric Beardsworth George and William Townend, both of whom were later to become artists and writers. Together, they styled themselves the 'three genii'. Wodehouse and Townend's friendship (rather like that of Bertie Wooster and Bingo Little) would last a lifetime [see plate 5].

Wodehouse often returned to his old school to attend rugby and cricket matches, and followed the progress of his old school teams with keen interest. In many ways, Wodehouse never left Dulwich at all. 'I sometimes feel', Wodehouse confided, 'as if I were a case of infantilism. I haven't developed mentally at all since my last year at school. All my ideas and ideals are the same. I still think the Bedford match the most important thing in the world.'[13]

1 PGW to William Townend, 7 March 1946 (Dulwich).
2 Jasen, p. 11.
3 Jasen, pp. 18–19.
4 Margaret Slythe, 'P. G. Wodehouse: The Dulwich Factor', *Plum Lines*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Winter 2008), p. 8.
5 Ibid., p. 9.
6 Jasen, p. 15.
7 PGW to Saville, 31 August 1969 (private archive).
8 PGW to Richard Usborne, 3 June 1955 (Wodehouse Archive).
9 P. G. Wodehouse, 'Some Aspects of Game-Captaincy', *The Public School Magazine*, February 1900, p. 12.
10 PGW to Richard Usborne, 11 January 1952 (Wodehouse Archive).
11 Jasen, p. 9.
12 'Preface' (1969) to *Something Fresh* (1915).
13 PGW to William Townend, 9 February 1933 (Dulwich).

1899–1900:
'set thy beetle-crusher on the ladder of fame'

'All through my last term at Dulwich I sprang from my bed at five sharp each morning, ate a couple of petit beurre *biscuits and worked like a beaver at my Homer and Thucydides.' Aged seventeen, Wodehouse was preparing for university scholarship examinations, aiming to win a place at an Oxford college. Eric George had been in the year above Wodehouse, and had left Dulwich in 1899 to take up a place at Oriel, which was now Wodehouse's college of choice. Armine was also up at Oxford, having won a scholarship to Corpus Christi College that year.*

The slangy intimacy of this early correspondence takes its tone from the prevailing culture of schoolboy expression, which would be familiar to any reader of The Boy's Own Paper. *Wodehouse combines this with his borrowings from, and homage to, established writers of the Victorian age. Wodehouse's nickname for George – 'Jeames' – is taken from Thackeray's parodic* Punch *sketch, 'The Diary of C. Jeames de la Pluche Esq.' (1845), the story of a footman turned millionaire. In a playful extended allusion to his separation from Eric George, Wodehouse impersonates Jeames' jilted admirer, the 'hilliterit cookmaid', Maryanne Hoggins, who laments Jeames' absence in doggerel – 'But O! imagine vot I felt / Last Vensday veek as ever were; I gits a letter, which I spelt / "Miss M. A. Hoggins, Buckley Square."'*

TO ERIC GEORGE

Old House,
Stableford,
Salop.

[Summer 1899]

My only Jeames.
I am badly in need of some funny drorks to write pottery about.[1] Send some at your earliest convenience, or sooner if you can.

I am vorking till Vensday at St Margaret's Bay.[2] I am going to try

for a Schol at Oriel. At least that is my ambition. I don't think I shall get one. When does the exam come off, do you know? It would be ripping if we could both (or as the Scotch say 'baith') be at the same college. 'It would be monstrous nice now'. I wrote a pome to you some time ago about the inadvisability of painting 'them saints & suchlike'. It is since dead!

Do you know, Jeames, I think your pome anent Mr Roop is a gem of the first water.[3] I consider the splendid burst of triumphant joy in the last line, where our author says 'There ain't no wulgar among the blest' is without a par (or ma) in the English langwidge! Have just finished *Pendennis* & *Esmond*. Rattling good books both of them. Now how kind it is of me to encourage an obscure author by such a favourable criticism, isn't it. I presume you know both by heart. I think that place where Blanche says to Foker: 'How lovely it must be to have a Father, Mr Foker!' & he says: 'Oh! uncommon!!' is grand.[4] I heard from our unique V.T. some time ago & answered his letter with promptitude, so to speak. He is rather sick at leaving. I think it shows what an awfully fine chap he is that he gives up going to Varsity. I know he would have liked to go awfully, poor chap. I don't know what I shall do without him at the House.[5] We used to have rows every other day, but they never lasted long, generally departing with his toothache!

I read some Browning today. I still like Tennyson better, though. I think some of the descriptions of nature in T. are absolutely whacking. Eg in the 'Voyage of Maeldune',

'The whole isle-side flashing down from the peak without ever a tree'.

Heck mon, its just beutiful! [*sic*]

Goodbye now.

Write soon and often.

Yrs till chaos

P. G. Wodehouse.

1 George was a talented artist. His letters to his friends were abundantly illustrated with 'drorks'.

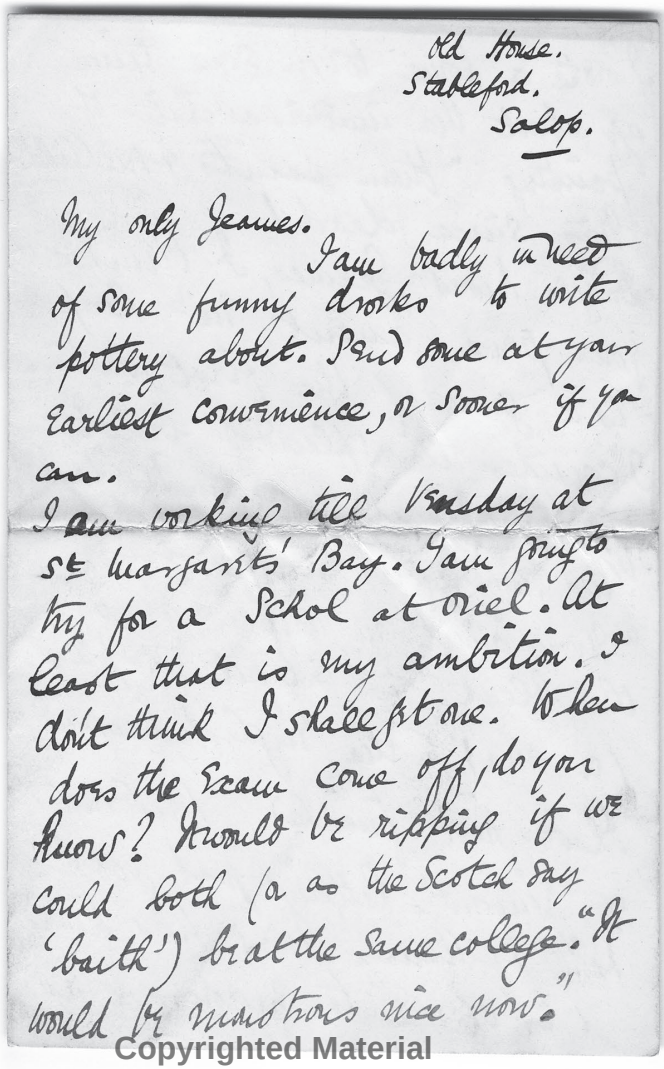
2 PGW was presumably staying with his Aunt Edith Deane and her husband, Commander Augustus Bradshaw, who took a house at St Margaret's Bay in Kent.

3 George's poem about 'Mr Roop', a joke between the pair, alludes to the Indian 'rupee'. Until his retirement and return to England in 1895, PGW's father, Ernest Wodehouse, had been a judge in Hong Kong, and his Civil Service pension was paid in rupees. PGW recalls

that this currency 'was always jumping down and throwing fits [...] "Watch that rupee!" was the cry in the Wodehouse family' (*Over Seventy*, p. 477).

4 W. M. Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852). PGW quotes Miss Amory's declaration: 'Oh how delightful it must be to have a father – a father, Mr Foker!' from *The History of Pendennis* (1848).

5 William Townend (V.T.), PGW's best friend at Dulwich College, had turned down a place at Cambridge University ('Varsity') in order to study to be a commercial artist.



Old House.
Stableford.
Salop.

My only Jeames.
I am badly in need of some funny drooks to write pottery about. Send some at your earliest convenience, or sooner if you can.
I am working till Monday at St Margarets' Bay. I am going to try for a Schol at Oriel. At least that is my ambition. I don't think I shall get one. When does the exam come off, do you know? It would be ripping if we could both (as the Scotch say 'baith') be at the same college. "It would be manners nice now."

P. G. Wodehouse to Eric Beardsworth George, summer 1899.

TO ERIC GEORGE

Old House.
Stableford.
Salop.

Sept. 1899.

Jeames, friend of me boyhood, & companion of me youthful years, list, I prithee. Your letter was very welcome & prompt. I have not answered it before because I have been wurking! That scholarship at Horiul, Jeames me lad, is a certainty. I am a genius. I always knew it.

I haven't read *Faust* but I have read *Palamon and Arcite* right through, 3000 lines if it's an inch! It is rather a good poem full of blud and luv!

I will apprise you of the visiting Sunday when I get back, as I don't know yet when it is. It has always been the ambition of my life to share your 'storied urn & animated bust'.[1] I shall sponge on you frightfully when I come up for my Schol! I am going to spend nearly all next term up at Oxford trying for various Schols! Ho yus, Jeames, I mean to do it in style.

Have you done your Saints yet? If not have you done anythink in the papers?

I come back to school on Tuesday. I arrive about 5, so if I come to drag you out for a walk, be not afraid with any amazement, as they say in the marriage service.[2] Which I know you've been married heaps of times, Jeames, so you ought to know it.

I heard yesterday that Shakespeare was not alive. It steeped me in profound gloom. But I thought eftsoons that I was alive so it was all right for the Literature of the World. I am writing a 9-act tragedy called *Julius Othello or Lycidas regained*. Talking of Browning, Jeames, (not that we were talking of him), he is not nearly so obscure as a bloke called Henley.[3] Have you read any of his rot. Here is a sample: –

'A sigh sent wrong,
A kiss that went astray,
A pain life-long
So they say!'