

Stories for a Self-Made Merchant

Owen Dudley Edwards

Psmith, Journalist is history; and it is crusade. But it also has its place as the best novel Wodehouse had written to date. *Psmith* was the god from the machine; but he was also the god who made the machine. Instead of leaving a good idea to rot in the background of the failure which *The Prince and Betty* in the American edition is (and there is even less to be said for it in the English one),¹ Wodehouse had hacked his material into shape, introduced his god to bring it to life, and maintained a splendid pace alternating excitement and humour. He had simultaneously been working on another social document, appropriately named *Something Fresh*, analysing the almost Byzantine absurdities of English country-house drones and the snobbery of their servants which helped to maintain them. It is important to stress that this, the first view of Blandings Castle, is in fact an extremely hostile one. We must view Wodehouse as the disciple of Conan Doyle in social attitudes to some degree; and just as Holmes is frequently employed to show up the effete aristocrats and immoral millionaires, Wodehouse time and again returns to the theme of resolute and hard-working young men and women as a foil to aristocratic drones. In both cases, it is the bourgeois attack on the privilege and non-productivity of the aristocracy. In this sense Wodehouse, both in relation to Britain and to America, was in 1915 very much a figure of that eminently bourgeois phenomenon which the Americans have termed Progressivism. Wodehouse was seldom quite so pointedly hard-hitting as he was in *Something Fresh*. But the argument continues to be made, pleasantly, yet firmly. *Big Money*, published in 1931, involves, as we have seen, a crooked and treacherous millionaire: but the major theme is a contrast—Lord Biskerton and his equally work-shy family,² *versus* his conscientious friend Berry Conway. To Berry, a loan is something to be returned at all costs; to the Biscuit, a loan is a wind-fall to be collared and spent without a thought for its return. It is elegantly underlined when Mr Robbins, trying to buy off Berry from marriage to Ann Moon, offers the money to the Biscuit whom he mistakes for Berry:

‘When do I get it?’ asked the Biscuit at length.

‘Now.’

‘Now?’

¹The English edition was reissued in 1921 but is now defunct.

²Apart from Lady Vera Mace, who gossip-writes and chaperones and finally marries Mr Frisby. The last, at least, looks like work.

'I have a cheque with me. See!' said Mr Robbins, pulling it out and dangling it.

He had no need to dangle long.

'Gimme!' said the Biscuit hoarsely, and snatched it from his grasp.

Mr Robbins regarded him with a sorrowful loathing. He had expected acquiescence, but not acquiescence quite so rapid as this. Despite the fact that he had stressed his disinclination for heroics, he had not supposed that this deal would have been concluded without at least an attempt on this young villain's part to affect reluctance.

'I think I may congratulate the young lady on a fortunate escape,' he said, icily.

'Eh?' said the Biscuit.

'I say I may congratulate. . . .'

'Oh, ah,' said the Biscuit. 'Yes. Thanks very much.' (*Big Money*, P., 209.)

The irony of this passage is that the Biscuit, by virtue of his title, is the person in the interest of whose hoped-for marriage to Ann, Berry Conway is being bought off. And while the comedy here is on the surface simply one of mistaken identity, the mordant point behind it is that the Viscount is in fact the mercenary lover. The Biscuit, in the nicest way, is anxious to marry Ann because of her money; if he gets money he will have no need to marry her. Hence Mr Robbins really made his offer to the right person. The bourgeois lover, and not the aristocratic one, has the real claim whatever might be thought by Mr Frisby—who in any case is corrupt too, and hence no acceptable arbiter.

Leave it to Psmith also involves such values. Psmith has to lose his inherited wealth and become dependent on his own efforts, unlike the Hon. Freddie Threepwood (once again cast for the drone as he was in *Something Fresh*). In many ways *Leave it to Psmith* resembles *Psmith, Journalist* in being a novel in which Psmith rescues an earlier plot from oblivion. Usborne has noted some of Ashe Marson's conversational similarities to Psmith³ (not surprisingly considering he was created when the third Psmith novel was on the stocks). Baxter's misadventures in *Something Fresh* and the unhappy conclusions thence drawn by his employer prefigure the much more cataclysmic events in the second novel. The worthy young man and his vulnerable young lady, to be rescued by the hero and his much tougher young lady, are present in both, as is the rivalry between hero and heroine to obtain the same result. Theft of an expensive object in the interest of its owner is the quest in each. Crooks and their betrayal of aristocratic trust are constant factors. There is the difference that the lampooning of social conventions below stairs, which distinguishes *Something Fresh*, is largely absent from *Leave it to Psmith* save in relation to another theme, which in one form or another takes up much of Wode-

³Wodehouse at Work, 67-68.

house's interest: the communications media, in this instance poets (whose impact on the servants' hall is admirably described, much less heavily than the below-stairs material in *Something Fresh*). Where the novels differ more markedly is in the fact that the earlier book was unable to sustain sparkle; the latter carried it triumphantly through. In *Something Fresh* Wodehouse had a good scene in the Baxter *dénouement*; but it was introduced by elaborate explanations and standard devices, such as a laborious funny-dream sequence. *Leave it to Psmith* works with much more economy and much greater deliberation: the reader has fewer errors to reckon with while awaiting the comedy of them, and more time to ponder the finer points of the flower-pots and the lemon-coloured pyjamas, whose brilliant use and re-use in varying effects charm, much as clues from which Holmes extracts half a dozen divergent but harmonising conclusions can charm. It is impressive to see the workman re-examining his earlier material: Baxter's downfall in *Something Fresh* is directly occasioned by an actual fall downstairs, and his misfortunes in *Leave it to Psmith* derive from another one. But whereas the former merely precipitates him into a fight, the latter has the seemingly much less dramatic effect of leading him to switch on the light, thus alerting Eve to her peril and setting the next sequence of events in motion. Restraint at the outset enhances the totality. The crudity of the fall in the first story crudifies the next phase; the reduction of the fall to its proper place, since a fall is ordinary, enables us to savour the real delights of the original material in *Leave it to Psmith*. Fighting in the dark amid a mass of foodstuffs is only good buffoonery; flower-pots and lemon-coloured pyjamas stamped the arrival of the Master. The very multiplicity of their uses reminds one appropriately of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty on the need to have words do more kinds of work than one, and thereby Wodehouse followed Humpty Dumpty in establishing his claim to mastery.

Once with Psmith's aid Wodehouse had established himself as a comic novelist, and re-established the comic novel at the same time, was his work thereby trivialised and robbed of social purpose? The answer, I think, must be a mixed one. It made him much more dependent on pure farce, and in any event the temper of the times was now more hostile to the old-fashioned social novel of which he was still up to this point a votary. He was to continue to satirise and to describe the follies of the worlds of letters, fine art, the theatre, and film, of which more later. He certainly did not drop the theme of worker *versus* drone, although he was to become kinder about the drones whose club became much more agreeable than it was in, say, *Leave it to Psmith*. But he did retain the argument of the worker's virtue. In this connection we must consider his American audience. The *Strand* magazine established Sherlock Holmes—and *vice versa*—and the *Strand* also put Wodehouse on his feet as a short-story writer. But it was American money which resurrected Holmes, and it was American money—specifically the *Saturday Evening Post*—which gave Wodehouse his sure basis as a working novelist. *Something*

Fresh merited its title not only in its introduction of Blandings but also in being the first of his many novels to win serialisation there. And the magazine was very much the creature of its lord, George H. Lorimer.

Lorimer's social ethics are readily available to us in his famous book *Letters of a Self-Made Merchant to his Son*. The success of that volume was due to more than the social acceptability of its frank espousal of hard work, common sense, good business practices and a retention of puritan values in the midst of wealth. There is also involved in it a strong attack on inherited wealth: what preoccupies the merchant is the danger of his son's destruction by that wealth he himself has built up. Wodehouse knew what he was about when he presented Lorimer with a succession of heroes whom the self-made merchant would applaud for their self-reliance, if not for their cheerful irreverence. A curiously persistent theme in several of the books at this point is the hero's enthusiasm for physical exercises: Ashe Marson in *Something Fresh*, Wally Mason in *Jill the Reckless* (1921), and in *The Small Bachelor* Hamilton Beamish (who is certainly a much more heroic figure than George Finch who gives the book its title). Even when this rather obvious attribute has been discarded, the hero still has to evince a belief in Lorimer's values. What though he win a fortune from reasons other than his industry, the industry has to be an established fact. Psmith's fish-market pays lip-service, or at least nostril-service, to this principle. Most revealingly of all, the drones are ultimately given fine hives to go to, but after they have become reformed. Bingo Little, having been given a landed estate in *Very Good, Jeeves*,⁴ is rather oddly forced to become a magazine editor before he becomes the hero of any stories in his own right. Freddie Widgeon finally wins a girl in *Ice in the Bedroom* (1961), but only when he has become a producer. Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps has a similar fate in *Barmy in Wonderland* (1952). *Uncle Dynamite* assumes a comparable transformation for Pongo Twistleton. The most drastic instance of it is the Hon. Freddie Threepwood, who becomes a go-getter of a dynamic character after marriage. It is interesting to notice that America—the frontier, so to say—often plays a critical part in such a transformation, notably in the cases of Freddie Threepwood and Barmy. And it is not assumed that intelligence appears in the wake of industry: Freddie Threepwood in *Full Moon* is a dynamic protagonist, but also remains clearly the 'cloth-headed young imbecile' his uncle Galahad terms him. Much of the appeal of Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps in *Barmy in Wonderland* is that he is a very decent ass.

One of the nicest points in drone *versus* worker, and the need for drone reformation before happiness, is the dual sequence *Summer Lightning* and *Heavy Weather*. The problem about these books is that Wodehouse couples his most delightful heroine (other than mischief-makers of the Bobbie Wickham variety) with a very decided drone. Sue Brown is as sympathetic and attractive a girl as one would wish: indeed in her first appearance she gives up her job in the chorus to

⁴'Jeeves and the Old School Chum', *World of Jeeves*, ch. 29.

ensure a hard-up colleague can retain hers, and the possible mawkishness here is beautifully held at bay by her own personality. Wodehouse well knew how to grasp that nettle. The novel turns on the lost love of Galahad Threepwood for her mother, and the author, clearly moved enough by the theme, guarded against an excess of sentiment. He begins by sardonically warning the audience when introducing her boss, Mortimer Mason :

But what endeared her more particularly to him was the fact that she was Dolly Henderson's daughter. London was full of elderly gentlemen who became pleasantly maudlin when they thought of Dolly Henderson and the dear old days when the heart was young and they had had waists. (*Summer Lightning*, J., 43.)

Yet in the swirl of the great climax (featuring Baxter under bed, Lord Emsworth with shotgun, Lady Constance Keeble racing her brother upstairs, Pilbeam climbing the water-spout) we hardly notice the force of Galahad's discovery :

'My dear,' he cried, and there was an odd sharpness in his voice. 'Was your mother Dolly Henderson, who used to be a Serio at the old Oxford and the Tivoli?' (309)

That odd sharpness is very touching; but Wodehouse dared not linger on it, and in fact we are swept away into the nauseating embarrassment of Ronnie Fish, Gally's nephew and Sue's beloved, at the mention of what Ronnie regards as Sue's family skeleton. By the time we are back to Gally, sentiment is firmly under control :

The Hon. Galahad was advancing on her with outstretched hands. He looked like some father in melodrama welcoming the prodigal daughter.

A nice counterpoint, since few better examples of a prodigal (unrepentant) than the Hon. Galahad could be found. And after he makes his necessary explanation :

It was a scene which some people would have considered touching. Lady Constance Keeble was not one of them.

And we are back to the battlefield once more. It is only on the final fade-out that sentiment is given its day :

'I never saw your mother after she was married,' he said.

'No?'

'No. She left the stage and. . . Oh, well, I was rather busy at the time—lot of heavy drinking to do, and so forth—and somehow we never met. The next thing I heard—two or three years ago—was that she was dead. You're very like her, my dear. Can't think why I didn't spot the resemblance right away.'

He became silent. Sue did not speak. She slid her hand under his arm. It was all that there seemed to do. A corncrake began to call monotonously in the darkness. (314)

Inevitably, the theme is re-introduced in *Heavy Weather*, but is quickly forced up against reality in a way commentators such as Orwell do not associate with Wodehouse. Lady Julia Fish, infuriated with Lady Constance for acquiescing in her soul's betrothal to Sue, inquires as to Galahad's motives:

'To explain that, I must ask you to throw your mind back.'

'Better not start me throwing things.'

'Do you remember, years ago, Galahad getting entangled with a woman named Henderson, a music-hall singer?'

'Certainly. Well?'

'This girl is her daughter.'

Lady Julia was silent for a moment.

'I see. Galahad's daughter, too?'

'I believe not. But that explains his interest in her.' *Heavy Weather*, J., 79.)

Heavy Weather was criticised for being simply another *Summer Lightning*. But in fact it had remarkable merits, notably the realistic rejection of Galahad's assumption at the end of the previous novel that Ronnie's mother would support Lady Constance even in the event of compromise. Lady Julia Fish, on appearance, obtained her own place by being cast as a highly impressive blend of Galahad and Constance—the attitudes of the latter, and the manner of the former.

'Your attitude about young Sue infuriates me. Can't you see the girl's a nice girl . . . a sweet girl . . . and a lady, if it comes to that.'

'Tell me, Gally,' said Lady Julia, 'just as a matter of interest, is she your daughter?'

The Hon. Galahad bristled.

'She is not. . . .' (170)

But the main reason for the novel was that Ronnie Fish simply could not be allowed to win his bride without doing something effective himself. The *Summer Lightning* solution gave Sue a worthless husband as a result of the diplomacy of his uncle, who saw that for himself:

'You look on him just as something quite ordinary.'

'If that,' said the Hon. Galahad critically. (*Summer Lightning*, 315.)

Heavy Weather resolves the question as a result of Ronnie's initiative, not Gally's. Gally, thinking of Lady Julia, sums up:

'I saw her bite a governess once.'

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘In two places. And with just that serene, angelic look on her face which she wore just now. A great woman, Beach.’

‘I have always had the greatest respect for her ladyship, Mr Galahad.’

‘And I’m inclined to think that young Ronnie, in spite of looking like a minor jockey with scarlatina, must have inherited some of her greatness. Tonight has opened my eyes, Beach. I begin to understand what Sue sees in him. Stealing that pig, Beach. Shows character. And snatching her up like this and whisking her off to London. There’s more in young Ronnie than I suspected. I think he’ll make the girl happy.’

‘I am convinced of it, sir.’

‘Well, he’d better, or I’ll skin him. Did you ever see Dolly Henderson, Beach?’

‘On several occasions, sir, when I was in service in London. I frequently went to the Tivoli and to the Oxford in those days.’

‘This girl’s very like her, don’t you think?’

‘Extremely, Mr Galahad.’

The Hon. Galahad looked out over the moon-flooded garden. In the distance there sounded faintly the splashing of the little waterfall that dropped over fern-crusting rocks into the lake.

‘Well, good night, Beach.’

‘Good night, Mr Galahad.’ (*Heavy Weather*, 255-56.)

(But neither here nor in the predecessor could Wodehouse go out on a note of sentiment. *Heavy Weather* ends with the prize pig, Empress of Blandings, in a final mock-heroic vignette; *Summer Lightning* closes with an epitome of Percy Pilbeam’s feelings towards what he takes to be a derisive owl mocking his loss of a fee for a theft no longer required.)

Ronnie Fish’s vindication is partly a caricature of the values the Lorimer hero requires, but the caricature does not negate the values. In some ways the Lorimer ethics receive a sharper challenge in the case of Monty Bodkin, who makes his *début* in *Heavy Weather*. There the problem is that a slightly Lorimer father of his intended, Gertrude Butterwick, insists on Monty’s holding down a salaried post for a year. This, plus Gertrude’s jealousies, keeps Monty on trial in *The Luck of the Bodkins* and still more pointedly so in *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*. Ultimately Gertrude rejects Monty for good, but by this stage he has fallen in love with his former secretary, Sandy Miller, so all can end happily. In fact, Monty is cut out with Gertrude by a very Lorimer young man, who though of impressive social antecedents had elected to go into the police force. Did this mean that by 1972, the date of the last novel, that Wodehouse was finally rejecting the Lorimer argument?

I think not. The pattern of his heroes does not significantly vary from the usual alternatives of reformed drone and hard-working young men of spirit. Monty is in the first category (things happen to him,

whereas the young men of spirit share Psmith's quality of being primarily makers of events rather than their prisoners, while none of them have Psmith's invulnerability). But his reformation is clear. Wodehouse is in fact making the case against Lorimer appearance as opposed to Lorimer reality. The Puritans, as Macaulay pointed out, were open to being imposed upon by hypocrites because of the stress placed on external appearance; the Lorimer method was equally vulnerable. Wodehouse is perfectly ready to portray unpleasant activists on various levels: work *per se* is not a virtue. The noxious, treacherous, avaricious, lecherous and blackmailing detective Percy Pilbeam is a worker: he exemplified it on his first appearance by his activity for Lord Tilbury's scandal-sheet *Society Spice*. His successive appearances in *Bill the Conqueror*,⁵ *Summer Lightning* and *Heavy Weather* are more loathsome and simultaneously more hilarious on each occasion. The young man seeking to work his way up to the Big Four at Scotland Yard from the bottom is in fact a satire on such characters in Edgar Wallace. Memories of the idiotic Stilton Cheesewright in *Joy in the Morning*⁶ ensure that Chisholm in *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* will not be mistaken for the true Lorimer figure, as opposed to the bogus. Monty Bodkin received two curious metamorphoses in the 37 years that separated the two novels whose hero he is: his name was changed from Montague to Montrose (a lapse of memory probably prompted by Wodehouse's American domicile),⁷ and his former aristocratic connections (he was nephew to the much-abused Sir Gregory Parsloe-Parsloe with momentous results in *Heavy Weather*) are jettisoned in favour of impeccably bourgeois origins. The latter alteration is symbolic of Wodehouse's fidelity to the Lorimer principle: an aristocrat can lose his dronishness, but a bourgeois is more easily redeemable. It is, in fact, Monty's final rejection of Gertrude which establishes him as a man.

Interestingly, this theme of last-minute change of affections by constantly-recurring couples is a consistent feature of the later Wodehouse. Madeline Bassett and Gussie Fink-Nottle finally find other partners (*Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, 1963); so do Stilton Cheesewright and Florence Craye.⁸ There were various reasons for this. In his prime, Wodehouse was cautious about having secondary couples play return dates. Tuppy Glossop and Angela had two short stories and a novel;⁹ Pauline Stoker and Chuffy made only one appearance.¹⁰ When Made-

⁵Published 1924. There is also an interesting reference to him in *Sam the Sudden*, which appeared next year. See P, 152-53.

⁶Published 1947. See J, 59: 'I could not see him as a member of the Big Four. Far more likely he would end up as one of those Scotland Yard bunglers who used, if you remember, always to be getting into Sherlock Holmes's hair'.

⁷By the way, was there an origin for something in M. Bodkin: contemplating the many dinner courses 'Monty did not take them all, but he took enough of them to send him to the boat deck greatly refreshed and in a mood of extreme sentimentality. He felt like a loving python'. (*Luck of the Bodkins*, P, 126.)

⁸*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* (published 1954), although by the end of *Much Obligated, Jeeves* Florence is on the loose again.

⁹'Jeeves and the Song of Songs', 'The Ordeal of Young Tuppy' and *Right Ho, Jeeves*.

¹⁰*Thank You, Jeeves*. Pauline has but one sibling, Dwight, here, but a sister Emerald is rather pointlessly ascribed to her in *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. Emerald is all right, but not as a Stoker, either Washburn or Pauline variety.

line Bassett was permitted on stage again in *The Mating Season* (1949) after two major appearances in the past, it was very briefly. But after that it seemed almost impossible to get rid of her. When she and Florence Craye are finally and irrevocably jettisoned by their men (despite Boko Fittleworth's insistence respecting Stilton that 'when a man with a head as fat as that loves, it is for ever') (*Joy in the Morning*, J., 152), Bertie's peril of matrimony from them is sharpened; and the peril has been growing a little blunted with repetition, so the sharpening is necessary. Yet it also seems probable that Wodehouse enjoyed surprising constant readers by unexpected new departures from familiar material. In his old age the Reggie Pepper story 'Helping Freddie' of *My Man Jeeves* (written before World War I), later transformed with little change into a Wooster-Jeeves story 'Fixing it for Freddie' in *Carry On, Jeeves* (1925), was given a final treatment as a Drones Club story: but this time at the last second the girl, instead of being reconciled to the boy, put her foot on a child's toy, executed a purler, sent him into roars of laughter and sundered their romance for good, both of them subsequently making highly satisfactory marriages elsewhere. Old customers who complained of finding an ancient plot revamped had their irritation charmed away by the joke plainly at their expense. He also amused himself by changing names of old characters slightly (Whiffle of *The Care of the Pig* to Whipple (*Service with a Smile*, 1961), Brinkley of *Thank You, Jeeves* to Bingley in *Much Obligated, Jeeves*—the scene of the latter being Aunt Dahlia's long-established residence at Brinkley Court) and his explanations were charmingly evasive:

'There are no men of ill will in the Junior Ganymede, sir.'

I contested this statement hotly.

'That's what *you* think. How about Brinkley?' I said, my allusion being to a fellow the agency had sent me some years previously when Jeeves and I had parted company temporarily because he didn't like me playing the banjolele. 'He's a member, isn't he?'

'A county member, sir. He rarely comes to the club. In passing, sir, his name is not Brinkley, it is Bingley.'

I waved an impatient cigarette holder. I was in no mood to split straws. Or is it hairs?

'His name is not of the essence, Jeeves. What *is* of the e is that he went off on his afternoon out, came back in an advanced state of intoxication, set the house on fire and tried to dismember me with a carving knife.'

'A most unpleasant experience, sir.' (*Much Obligated, Jeeves*, 1971, 12.)

To test social content as Wodehouse became firmly in command of the comic novel we may examine the movement of short stories to novels set around the same characters. I will argue later that the short-story sequence which in general holds the high ground of social criticism is the Mulliner group, but it was never sent beyond its original confines. We must turn to the Jeeves and the Blandings cycles.