

Dr Karl Marx, your Lordship

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In point of technique, the great triumph of the Wodehouse novels was in the use of first-person narrative. It is curious how little he in fact used the first person. As Osborne has noted,¹ the novels consist of *Laughing Gas* (1936) which, involving a switch of personalities, really needs something like this, *Love Among the Chickens* (where Wodehouse was very nervous about it) and the Wooster-Jeeves cycle. The stories told by the Oldest Member, Mr Mulliner and the Drones Club Crumpet have very little action by the narrator: from time to time the Oldest Member plays a small part in one of his own stories (although on the only occasion when Mr Mulliner does so, to any degree, in 'George and Alfred', the result is poor). The Ukridge short stories give a good deal of action to Corky. The Reggie Pepper episodes brought out the weakness and strength of the technique. Wodehouse brooded on the problem when writing his first Jeeves novel²:

By the way, it's not all jam writing a story in the first person. The reader can know nothing except what Bertie tells him, and Bertie can know only a limited amount himself.

What he came to do was to capitalise on this, turning the novels into a series of shock discoveries, part thriller, part increase of psychological perceptions. Osborne very properly notes the great debt to Conan Doyle at this point (*ibid.*, 152-3). The model is clearly *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle's one unflawed Holmes novel. If Wodehouse learned from Moriarty that an absent Aunt Agatha could be far more effective than her presence, he also drew the lessons on how to keep the Holmes figure off-stage for much of the action, especially when the mysteries loomed darkest. In fact, Jeeves's absence is a feature of several novels, and a variety of devices are employed to achieve this: his departure from Bertie's employment (*Thank You, Jeeves*, Ch. 1), Bertie's loss of confidence in him (*Right Ho, Jeeves*), his secondment to Lord Worplesdon (*Joy in the Morning*, J, 79), his absence on critical missions during which other events supervene,³ his holiday,⁴ his need to play another impersonation role and hence to be convincingly apart from Bertie (*The Mating Season*). Some of these devices are variants of the Holmes reason for being off-stage in the *Hound*. More impor-

¹Wodehouse at Work, 152.

²Wodehouse to Townend, 6 March 1932, *Performing Flea*, P, 73.

³*Code of the Woosters*, P, 215-23. *Joy in the Morning*, J, 87-107. *The Mating Season*, P, 122-22, 125-26, 127-70.

⁴'The Love that Purifies', *World of Jeeves*, ch. 28 (and indeed *ibid.*, ch. 3). *Jeeves in the Offing*.

tant still, the absence of Holmes results in self-dependence on Watson's part with effective results in the clearing up of minor mysteries and sub-plots, and Bertie from time to time disposes of difficulties on his own. Both Conan Doyle and Wodehouse saw that it would not do for the Watson/Bertie figure to get everything wrong. The subtlety of the novel is increased when the reader is given an expectation of some modicum of success being possible in their enterprises. Thus Watson shrewdly and doggedly clears up the Selden-Barrymore matter, and Bertie on his own retrieves Gussie's disastrous letter from Madeline in *The Mating Season* before she can read it (Chs. 15-17). The final achievement of the novels was to leave Bertie where Conan Doyle found Watson: as the protagonist with whom the reader can identify. Doyle used Watson as the vehicle through whom the reader could open up a personal involvement with Holmes; folklore ultimately wrote Watson down as a fool, and a proverbial one, but the initial success of the stories was owing to a credible Watson into whose person the reader could easily enter. Wodehouse, on the other hand, began by portraying Bertie as a ludicrous drone, even less admirable than Reggie Pepper who has to flounder out of his messes with no Jeeves to help him. By the time of *Thank You, Jeeves* the reader is much closer to Bertie, if only because of being centred on each step of his Odyssey of misfortunes. He loses sympathy very badly in *Right Ho, Jeeves* as the plot demands; but by *The Code of the Woosters*, significantly the first book without Jeeves in the title, Bertie is speaking for his readers. He still retains a splendid degree of asininity. The great confrontation with Spode is initially botched by his failure to remember the critical word which will bring Spode to heel. But his remarks on that occasion may have bitten home very deeply. They involved an attack on Fascism. It was an isolationist attack which condemned dictators as unEnglish. It may well have spoken for a generation of the 1930s one of whose leaders A. J. P. Taylor would later immortalise in the lines 'Eden did not face the dictators. He pulled faces at them':⁵

He asked me if I had called him a slob, and I said I had.

'A fat slob?'

'A fat slob. It is about time', I proceeded, 'that some public-spirited person came along and told you where you got off. The trouble with you, Spode, is that just because you have succeeded in inducing a handful of half-wits to disfigure the London scene by going about in black shorts, you think you're someone. You hear them shouting "Heil, Spode!" and you imagine it is the Voice of the People. That is where you make your bloomer. What the Voice of the people is saying is: "Look at that frightful ass Spode swanking about in footer bags! Did you ever in your puff see such a perfect perisher?"'

He did what is known as struggling for utterance.

⁵*Code of the Woosters*, P, 118. For Taylor, see bibliography to his *English History 1914-1945*.

Orwell concluded Wodehouse had not made the identification of Fascism with Germany: it is clear from this that he had, and that he disliked it. It was not, as Orwell claimed, that he was Edwardian to the degree of ignorance: it was that he had an Edwardian response as well as other responses. There is in this form of attack an oblique version of the foreigners-are-funny joke which Frank Richards in his reply to Orwell was to justify as one of the best means of fighting back against Hitler.⁶ Wodehouse had always tended to lampoon foreigners in a friendly fashion: the xenophobia of the 1920s and 1930s found its echo in his earnest French waiters and drunken French viscounts. Sometimes the caricature becomes sympathetic: the stage Russian novelist in 'The Clicking of Cuthbert' becomes a general object of affection, partly by being the means of the hero's triumph, partly because he is subjected to the kind of persecution by literary societies which Wodehouse was attacking in the name of all writers. And there is a splendid moment of identification:

Vladimir Brusiloff proceeded to sum up.

'No novelists any good except me. Sovietski—yah! Nastikoff—bah! I spit me of zem all. No novelists anywhere any good except me. P. G. Wodehouse and Tolstoi not bad. Not good, but not bad. No novelists any good except me' (*The Clicking of Cuthbert*, Ch. 1).

Orwell sees this story as evidence of Wodehouse's readiness to poke good-natured fun at the Russian revolution at a time when it was eliciting a good deal of hysteria elsewhere. But in fact the story is earlier than he thought, and while it appeared well after the revolution, during the civil war, Brusiloff's attitudes have much more in keeping with the well-known readiness of the great nineteenth-century Russians to damn each others' achievements in wholesale terms.

Later references to the U.S.S.R. are less polite. Stalin from time to time receives sarcastic mention, notably when at the end of *Thank You, Jeeves* Bertie states his readiness to accept Stalin as a valet rather than Brinkley, elsewhere referred to by him as 'Moscow's Pride'. Stalin's name is coupled with that of Al Capone in the valet stakes. Less pleasantly, in the tedious Mulliner story 'Archibald and the Masses', the moment where the temporary Socialism of Archibald Mulliner fades brings an ungenerous juxtaposition:

Panic lent him wings. There was a moment or two when he heard footsteps clattering in his rear, and once a hard-boiled egg missed him by a hair's-breadth, but eventually he won to a clear lead, and presently was at leisure to halt and give himself up to his meditations.

These, as you may readily imagine, were not of the kindest. Sir Stafford Cripps would not have liked them. Stalin, could he have been aware of them, would have pursed his lips. For they were

⁶Orwell 'Boys' Weeklies' and Richards's reply in Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, edited Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. (P) Vol. 1, pp 505-540, especially pp 538-39.

definitely hostile to the Masses. All his pitying love for the martyred proletariat had vanished (*The World of Mulliner*, 509).

In this sense Spode is convicted of bringing unwanted German political nastiness into England much as Cripps is doing the same for the Russian variety. But having said that, there is an important contrast. Wodehouse's funny reds are largely harmless, with the exception of Brinkley; and Brinkley's homicidal mania is not implied as induced by his Bolshevism. Indeed, his main desire to murder Bertie arises from his belief that Bertie is the Devil, which suggests a fundamentalist theological basis for his alienation rather than a political one. (So do the hymns he sings when sober, and Bertie's dislike of them is a nice counterpoint to his own earlier irritation of Jeeves with the banjolele.) In *Much Obligated*, Jeeves Bingley (as he is now) is described as having been Socialist but as having sold out on his beliefs on acquiring wealth, and this is adduced as a fresh reason to dislike him (J, 37-38).

On the other hand, Spode in *The Code of the Woosters* is not only unpleasantly unEnglish in his politics—the footer bags or Black Shorts which constitute the uniform of his Saviours of Britain probably originate in *Lederhosen*—but personally he has a bullying savagery exceptional in Wodehouse :

‘ . . . If the thing disappears, however cunningly you and your female accomplice may have covered your traces, I shall know where it has gone, and I shall immediately beat you to a jelly. To a jelly’, he repeated, rolling the words round his tongue as if they were vintage port (P, 85-86).

There is a significant *reprise* :

‘Said he would beat you to a jelly, did he?’

‘That was the expression he used. He repeated it, so that there should be no mistake.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t for the world have you man-handled by that big stiff. You wouldn’t have a chance against a gorilla like that. He would tear the stuffing out of you before you could say “Pip-pip”. He would rend you limb from limb and scatter the fragments to the four winds.’

I winced a little.

‘No need to make a song about it, old flesh and blood’ (100).

And finally, there is an interesting contrast with Brinkley :

I remember once, during a temporary rift with Jeeves, engaging a man from the registry office to serve me in his stead, and he hadn’t been with me a week when he got blotto one night and set fire to the house and tried to slice me up with a carving-knife. Said he wanted to see the colour of my insides, of all bizarre ideas. And until this moment I had always looked on that episode as the most trying in my experience. I now saw that it must be ranked second.

This bird of whom I speak was a simple untutored soul and Spode a man of good education and upbringing, but it was plain that

there was one point at which their souls touched. I don't suppose they would have seen eye to eye on any other subject you could have brought up, but in the matter of wanting to see the colour of my insides their minds ran on parallel lines. The only difference seemed to be that whereas my employee had planned to use a carving-knife for his excavations, Spode appeared to be satisfied that the job could be done all right with the bare hands (123).

The attack in itself is one on Mosleyism and other forms of British Fascism rather than on Nazism direct. Wodehouse's isolationism, all the stronger because it stemmed from two isolationist countries, the U.K. and the U.S.A., rather than one, found it impossible at this stage to take more than a tourist leap into Europe. But this recognition of challenge to isolation was far stronger than was to be found in most isolationist writers. And with 1938 as publication date, it was very timely.

Spode reappears in some of the post-war Jeeves novels, having abandoned his Fascism and his ladies' underwear emporium. In *Much Obligated, Jeeves*, written when Wodehouse was in his ninetieth year, he took a very curious final look at British politics. Spode is by now in the Lords, and is much sought-after as 'one of those silver-tongued orators you read about' (J, 52). Specifically he is called upon to speak for the Conservative candidate and has hopes of a nomination should he abandon his peerage. And in the end, he finds his ardour cooled by a rowdy election meeting:

'He's not going to give up his title and stand for Parliament. Getting hit in the eye with that potato changed his plans completely. It made him feel that if that was the sort of thing you have to go through to get elected to the House of Commons, he preferred to play it safe and stick to the House of Lords . . .' (178).

At long last, Spode was brought to hear the voice of the people; Wodehouse found a means of gently reminding everyone that the antecedents of some of his own establishment critics would bear little investigation; and he had made the *amende honorable* to the masses. The yahoos who elected Mr Bickersdyke in 1910 were answered by the splendid citizens who put paid to Spode's career in the Commons sixty years after.

I found myself in two minds. On the one hand I felt a pang of regret for having missed what had all the earmarks of having been a political meeting of the most rewarding kind: on the other, it was like rare and refreshing fruit to hear that Spode had got hit in the eye with a potato. I was conscious of an awed respect for the marksman who had accomplished this feat. A potato, being so nobbly in shape, can be aimed accurately only by a master hand (169).

And yet, one has the feeling they were the same mob.

It is ungenerous to the Jeeves short stories, notably those in *Very*

Good, Jeeves, to deny their high standard, but only one or two of them are comparable in quality and human observation to the novels. In the case of the Blandings cycle, the problem is more complex. The short stories never had much of a chance. A novel sequence was clearly on the way here once Psmith had done his work for the last time. Yet there is a case for the Blandings short stories which the Jeeves ones lack.

For one thing, there was much apprentice-work in the early Jeeves pieces. Maturity does not arrive until the later stories in *Carry On, Jeeves*, mastery not until the next volume. The apprentice stage of Blandings, on the other hand, was firmly worked through in *Something Fresh*, in the near-Blandings novel *A Damsel in Distress*, and in *Leave it to Psmith* on which Wodehouse made drastic revisions after serialisation. (I regret that I have not as yet been able to collate the *Saturday Evening Post* text with the book version.) In point of execution the six Blandings short stories in *Blandings Castle*⁷ and 'The Crime Wave at Blandings', (*Lord Emsworth and Others*, Ch. 1), are little masterpieces. The six form two excellent groups of three, in each case two of the three being counterparts while the third offers a memory or a foreshadow of a theme in one of its fellows. Thus 'The Custody of the Pumpkin' is a tale of Lord Emsworth's injustice to his head gardener, and 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend' a story of the head gardener's injustice to him. In each case the crisis is pointed up by one defending a girl whose presence is under attack by the other: and in each case the girl precipitates a challenge to the social norms, one being an American cousin of McAllister's destined to marry Emsworth's son and the other being a Cockney waif whom Emsworth befriends, and who wants to pick flowers guarded jealously by McAllister. The subordinate theme of the first story, the Hon. Freddie's marriage, is made the basis for a sequel 'Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best'. (One of the minor motifs in several of the Blandings sequence is raised here: the Austenian similarity of members of the same family who are infuriated by any suggestion of that similarity—Emsworth and Freddie here, Gally and Ronnie in *Summer Lightning* (J, 189-90, 200) and *Heavy Weather* (J, 161).) The counterparts in the second set are even neater: in 'Company for Gertrude' Emsworth's niece wants to marry a poor curate, in which she is supported by his fellow-Oxonian Freddie Threepwood and opposed by her mother and her aunt; in 'The Go-Getter' she is temporarily diverted to a free-lance crooner, and is opposed in this by the curate, Freddie, and her mother (who has discovered in the interim that the curate is heir to a fortune). Emsworth's own priorities—pigs and a quiet life—dictate the outcome of the first story in complete indifference to the niece, apart from irritation at her melancholia, and this is also the central theme of 'Pig Hoo-o-o-ey!' save that there the niece—another one—is vituperative rather than morose. Wodehouse saw it as concerned with

⁷'The Custody of the Pumpkin', 'Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best', 'Pig Hoo-o-o-ey!', 'Company for Gertrude', 'The Go-Getter', 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend'.

some perfectly trivial thing which is important to a man and the story is apparently how he gets it. But in the process of getting it he gets entangled in somebody else's love story and all sorts of things happen, but he pays no attention to them, being wholly concentrated on his small thing.⁸

(Considering that the 'small thing' is in fact the girth of the prize pig, Empress of Blandings, Wodehouse was showing a particularly felicitous style in plot-classification.)

The keynote of all these six stories is aristocratic obsessions and indifference to the normal social needs outside them. The Earl's amnesia, which supplies much of the humour about Emsworth in *Something Fresh* and *Leave it to Psmith*, is now more a detail than a matter of major impact on the plot: the obsessed Earl, whose all-eclipsing fascination with flowers was the cause of Psmith's going to Blandings, is the figure to be considered now. The gentleness with which the portrait of Emsworth is drawn disguises the point; and the increasing affection with which Wodehouse comes to regard him in the later novels retrospectively blunts the social criticism at the heart of these short stories. (And yet it ought not to have done: Emsworth is taken off the hook because he is an oppressed figure, and the nastiest of his oppressors is that pattern of aristocratic selfishness and vigorous malevolence, the Duke of Dunstable, more obnoxious with each successive appearance.)⁹

The composition date of these six stories is the 1920s when the shadows of his formal novels of social criticism, notably *Something Fresh*, were still over him to some degree. It is worth reminding ourselves that the most enduring of his earliest short stories, *The Man Upstairs* (1914), dating from the decade of World War I, were sympathetically concerned with the struggles of bourgeois figures, very often petit-bourgeois. He was read by the lower middle classes and at first often wrote about them. In the 1920s many of the same values are retained. Lord Emsworth's absence of social responsibility is intended to be amusing, but not admirable. The force of this view weakens with *Summer Lightning*, where the Hon. Galahad Threepwood captures the audience's affections in the classic manner of Sheridan's aristocratic rakes, but even there and in *Heavy Weather* Wodehouse is still coming back to the same point:

'Does this miserable pig mean more to you than your nephew's whole future?'

'Of course it does', said Lord Emsworth, surprised at the foolish question (J, 253).

But by this stage Wodehouse has fallen a little in love with Sue Brown himself, and hence the vigour of this reassertion is lost in the charm of the ensuing sentences:

⁸Wodehouse to Townend, 27 July 1927, *Performing Flea*, P, 40.

⁹*Uncle Fred in the Springtime, Service with a Smile, A Pelican at Blandings* (published 1969).

'Besides, what's wrong with his future? His future's all right. He's going to marry this nice little girl here; I've forgotten her name. She'll look after him.'

(It was this matter of Sue and the other characters' attitudes to her which probably prompted Orwell's classification of *Summer Lightning* as 'light comedy rather than pure farce'¹⁰ although it is one of the funniest books Wodehouse ever wrote.)

Of the six short stories reprinted in *Blandings Castle* the one most overtly critical of Emsworth is, as we have noted, 'The Custody of the Pumpkin', although there Emsworth does wake up to his social responsibilities sufficiently to make a strong effort to prevent his son Freddie from marrying the head gardener's cousin. Yet there is not much suggestion of blue blood having weight with him, either here or later; what activates him is dislike of his son. He finally becomes enthusiastic about the marriage when he discovers it will involve Freddie's emigration to Long Island City:

'Inform Frederick that he has my best wishes.'

'I will.'

'Mention that I shall watch his future progress with considerable interest.'

'Exactly.'

'Say that I hope he will work hard and make a name for himself.'

'Just so.'

'And,' concluded Lord Emsworth, speaking with a paternal earnestness well in keeping with this solemn moment, 'tell him—er—not to hurry home' (*Blandings Castle*, J, 33-34).

The story, as we have seen earlier, involves grave injustice to McAllister in the furtherance of Emsworth's obsession with dislike of Freddie and desire to thwart him; it is significant that injustice is a violation of feudal paternalism, as is stressed in Beach's protest. Interestingly, Wodehouse sees the confrontation as feudal Norman *versus* Scottish resistance, and implies that there was little true paternalism in the feudal relationship (it must be remembered that aristocratic social theory over the fifty years previous to this story had stressed the pre-eminence of paternalism):

And, though normally a fair-minded and reasonable man, well aware that modern earls must think twice before pulling the feudal stuff on their employers, he took on the forthright truculence of a large landowner of the early Norman period ticking off a serf.

'Listen, McAllister! Listen to me! Either you send that girl away to-day or you can go yourself. I mean it!'

A curious expression came into Angus McAllister's face—always excepting the occupied territories. It was the look of a man who has

¹⁰Orwell, 'Wodehouse', *Collected Journalism*.

not forgotten Bannockburn, a man conscious of belonging to the country of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. He made Scotch noises at the back of his throat.

'Y'r lorrudsheep will accept ma notis,' he said with formal dignity.

'I'll pay you a month's wages in lieu of notice and you will leave this afternoon,' retorted Lord Emsworth with spirit.

'Mphm!' said Mr McAllister (*Ibid.*, 17-18).

If there was a case for inheritance of courage and dignity, it was the head gardener who proved to be the custodian of these aristocratic virtues. Indeed Bertie Wooster's maunderings about his ancestors' achievements during the Hundred Years' War, and Lord Ickenham's more satirical comments on the same subject, are directly comparable with this passage. The difference is that in McAllister's case one has a deep empathy with his invocation of his origins, which in the cases of Bertie and Uncle Fred are merely absurd. Undoubtedly Emsworth's invocation of his courageous forebears when he confronts McAllister in 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend' (*Ibid.*, 160) achieves a corresponding effect to that in the earlier story: but this time it is Emsworth's cause, the cause of the little slum girl, that is good.

In passing, it may be remarked that whenever Bertie Wooster uses the term 'feudal spirit', he means Jeeves's willingness to do something beyond the limits of the duties for which a valet is paid. In plain language, to Wodehouse the feudal spirit meant a means by which the aristocracy could get something out of their employees for nothing. As the title *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* (1954) suggests, it is one piece of anti-aristocratic thought which always remained with him. Interestingly, in the very earliest Jeeves stories, Jeeves used to quibble about some actions being 'hardly my place, sir';¹¹ later on he simply refuses, when he wants to. Similarly, when Sir Jasper Finch-farrowmere had been left boiling in a Turkish bath by his valet in 'A Slice of Life':

A grim frown appeared on the baronet's vermilion face.

'I'll bet he hasn't explained why he left me to be cooked in that infernal Turkish Bath. I was beginning to throw out clouds of smoke when Murgatroyd, faithful fellow, heard my cries and came and released me.'

'Though not my work,' added the butler (*World of Mulliner* 32-3).

The Freddie obsession is directly ascribed to the aristocratic condition:

Unlike the male codfish, which, suddenly finding itself the parent of three million five hundred thousand little codfish, cheerfully resolves to love them all, the British aristocracy is apt to look with a somewhat jaundiced eye on its younger sons (*Blandings Castle*, J, 13).

¹¹E.g. 'The Aunt and the Sluggard', *World of Jeeves*, 140.

And when, in 'Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best', the Earl resolves, against his initial judgment, to intercede with Mrs Freddie in order to save the marriage, his motives are clear :

And somewhere in the small hours of the morning he sat up in bed, quaking. A sudden grisly thought had struck him.

Freddie had stated that, in the event of his wife obtaining a divorce, he proposed to retire for the rest of his life to some quiet spot. Suppose by 'quiet spot' he meant Blandings Castle! The possibility shook Lord Emsworth like an ague. Freddie had visited Blandings for extended periods before, and it was his lordship's considered opinion that the boy was a worse menace to the happy life of rural England than botts, green-fly, or foot-and-mouth disease. The prospect of having him at Blandings indefinitely affected Lord Emsworth like a blow on the base of the skull (*Ibid.*, 45).

Even after the Hon. Galahad had done his work and the criticism of aristocracy had been softened, the novels still made much use of this aspect of family relations. *Full Moon* concludes with Lord Emsworth's niece Prudence Garland being able to marry Bill Lister, the music hall Strong Woman's son, because Lord Emsworth finances a pub for them rather than have Freddie return to Blandings, which Gally represents as the alternative.

Pigs, pumpkins and peace—and Freddie, his image of its antithesis—are Emsworth's obsessions. But in fact all the characters of the Blandings family tree who appear in the six *Blandings Castle* short stories have comparable obsessions which equally stand in the way of human values. Lady Alcester, Gertrude's mother, wants a moneyed marriage for her daughter, with virtually no reference to the other qualities of her suitors. (Lord Emsworth initially endows the marriage because of one of the Rev Beefy Bingham's qualities—that of being a pestilential nuisance from motives of benevolence—in the hope that if given a vicarage he will infuriate one of his parishioners, Sir Gregory Parsloe-Parsloe, who has stolen Emsworth's pigman.) Lady Alcester's other obsession is that of dogs to the point of being 'a sort of honorary dog herself' (*Ibid.*, 135). Lady Constance Keeble is equally obsessed by snobbery, cultural and familial. Her choices of marriage-partners for her wards are almost invariably duds, although in *Pigs Have Wings* Lord Vosper proves a decentish fellow while not a soulmate for Freddie's sister-in-law (the supply of nieces was running out: Lord Emsworth had been plagued by complications in the courtships of six of them up to then).¹² Most notable of all, Freddie Threepwood, once his marriage has been made secure, proves to be as monomaniacally

¹²The Hon. Lancelot Threepwood's Millicent (*Summer Lightning*), Lady Jane's Angela ('Pig Hoo-o-o-ey!'), Georgiana, Lady Alcester's Gertrude ('Company for Gertrude', 'The Go-Getter'), Lady Charlotte's Jane ('The Crime Wave at Blandings'), Lady Dora Garland's Prudence and Lady Hermione Wedge's Veronica (*Full Moon*).

obsessed by dog-biscuits, manufactured by his father-in-law, as is Lord Emsworth about pigs. Even where his sympathies are enlisted on behalf of his friend Beefy Bingham, the dog-biscuit motif is constantly reappearing, and it is only as a result of one of its spin-offs that Beefy Bingham, quite fortuitously, wins back the love of Gertrude. Freddie has set up the scene which in his absence leads to the dog-fight ultimately stopped by Beefy. It may be remarked that the passage in question is one of the noblest uses of the mock-heroic in all of Wodehouse. The confrontation of the two dogs recalls Macaulay's 'Horatius', or a modern- and canine-dress Rodney Stone :

In underrating Bottles's qualities and scoffing at him as a fighting force, Lady Alcester had made an error. Capable though he was of pusillanimity in the presence of female Pekingese, there was nothing of the weakling about this sterling animal. He had cleaned up every dog in Much Matchingham and was spoken of on all sides—from the Blue Boar in the High Street to the distant Cow and Caterpillar on the Shrewsbury Road—as an ornament to the Vicarage and a credit to his master's Cloth. . . .

Nor was the Airedale disposed to hold back. He, too, was no stranger to the ring. In Hyde Park, where, when at his London residence, he took his daily airing, he had met all comers and acquitted himself well. Dogs from Mayfair, dogs from Bayswater, dogs from as far afield as the Brompton Road and West Kensington had had experience of the stuff of which he was made. Bottles reminded him a little of an animal from Pont Street, over whom he had once obtained a decision on the banks of the Serpentine; and he joined battle with an easy confidence (*Blandings Castle*, J, 134-5).

It is one of the very few moments in his writing when Wodehouse showed himself the great dog-lover he was.

The case of the last story of the six, 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend', is, from the point of view of the searcher for social criticism, the most rewarding of all. It is also one of the most moving stories Wodehouse ever wrote, maintaining something of his earlier sentimentality but in this instance bringing it into perfect equilibrium with the farce and irony of later years. It introduces the little slum waif with the chilling hard realism Wodehouse was by now using very rarely :

She was a small girl, of uncertain age—possibly twelve or thirteen, though a combination of London fogs and early cares had given her face a sort of wizened motherliness which in some odd way caused his lordship from the first to look on her as belonging to his own generation. She was the type of girl you see in back streets carrying a baby nearly as large as herself and still retaining sufficient energy to lead one little brother by the hand and shout recriminations at another in the distance (*Ibid.*, 145).

On one level, it is a very charming anecdote of how two victims of social convention come together as allies, each bringing some advantages from their widely divergent points of class origin. Yet on another, it is grim. Lord Emsworth's woes are the transient trivialities of a wealthy man with few acknowledged responsibilities. The world which has taken youth from the little girl will continue to give her very little, grateful though she is for the little she gets. The comedy, and the tragedy, both revolve around Lord Emsworth's complete inability to see the deprivation from which she comes:

'I'm from London, sir.'

'Ah? London, eh? Pretty warm it must be there.' He paused. Then, remembering a formula of his youth: 'Er—been out much this Season?'

'No, sir.'

'Everybody out of town now, I suppose? What part of London?'

'Drury Line, sir' (*Ibid.*, 146).

(Dialect is needed in this case too: it is curiously unobtrusive, even though the author normally used it so little and disliked it so much. Anyway, Lord Emsworth begins to use it himself, in a symbolic breakdown of class barriers whose linguistic basis would have drawn approval from Shaw and should have interested Orwell.)

The obsession is still here, in this instance in its facet of peace. Emsworth is, as ever, anxious to sacrifice anything to avoid harassment. It is the little girl's achievement that she leads him to face real responsibilities, which include the rejection of bogus ones. And the story was probably the turning-point in Wodehouse's feeling for Emsworth, for whom thereafter he had an affection increasing to the point that after the idyllically peaceful ending to *A Pelican at Blandings* he stated he would trouble that peace no more. And indeed he never did. Beach, too, reflects something of this change. He is a tedious snob in *Something Fresh* and an equally tedious hypochondriac in *Leave it to Psmith*, but his sense of the rights of McAllister in 'The Custody of the Pumpkin' gives him a moral force in the short stories. He determines on bringing Lord Emsworth to face social reality over his beard in 'Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best'. He declines to go pig-calling for Emsworth in 'Pig-Hoo-o-o-o-ey!', but does it for his niece: if Beach himself does not see it, he is being used as a symbol for aversion from the self-centred obsessions of Emsworth and for involvement in the human needs of the lovers whose lives are at stake. In this story he is startled by the appearance of the little girl in Emsworth's company, but very gently takes it on himself to add some reality to Emsworth's assumptions as to his new friends' aristocratic palates:

'And she has a brother, Beach.'

'Indeed, your lordship?'

'She will want to take some stuff away for him.' Lord Emsworth turned to his guest. 'Ernest would like a little chicken, perhaps?'

‘Coo!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘And a slice or two of ham?’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘And—he has no gouty tendency?’

‘No, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘Capital! Then a bottle of that new lot of port, Beach. It’s some stuff they’ve sent me down to try,’ explained his lordship. ‘Nothing special, you understand,’ he added apologetically, ‘but quite drinkable. I should like your brother’s opinion of it. See that all is put together in a parcel, Beach, and leave it on the table in the hall. We will pick it up as we go out.’ . . .

‘Now, is there anything else you can think of that Ernest would like?’ he asked. ‘If so, do not hesitate to mention it. Beach, can you think of anything?’

The butler, hovering respectfully, was unable to do so.

‘No, your lordship. I ventured to add—on my own responsibility, your lordship—some hard-boiled eggs and a pot of jam to the parcel’ (*Ibid.*, 156-7).

It is remarkable that a writer who enshrined so much of bourgeois hostility to aristocracy could have written so sensitive a portrait of aristocratic alliance with representatives of working-class culture. The phenomenon is well known. Lady Gregory and Sean O’Casey give one a good instance of it. In many respects it tended to evolve from common dislike of the conformist cultural pattern which the bourgeoisie was by now succeeding in imposing on all classes. It is curious that Lady Constance Keeble, normally the pattern of *snoblesse oblige*, is symbolic of the aristocratic capitulation to bourgeois demands. The bourgeoisie continue to give deference to aristocrats and make efforts to ape their culture, but the aristocracy must deliver. McAllister’s gravel path for the yew alley, demanded in place of Emsworth’s traditionalist moss walk, receives her support. The conformity exacted may be bourgeois, but she accepts it because it is conformity. The aristocracy is required to be stage aristocracy playing its role: Emsworth must wear a top hat and a hard collar, he must make a speech, he must go through the aristocratic motions the bourgeoisie demands if he is to be tolerated. With the assistance of the little working-class girl Emsworth rebels, symbolically knocking off his top hat in the process. Wodehouse makes it clear that the alliance between aristocrat and worker remains on aristocratic terms, although acknowledging working-class priorities when these are perceived. It may be added that Lady Constance’s role here is not a violation of her normal status, despite her constant championship of aristocratic values. (For instance, her efforts to destroy Galahad Threepwood’s memoirs are in defence of implicated aristocrats, not of herself; her sister Lady Julia only takes the same view when she discovers that her husband’s excesses are written up in them (*Heavy Weather*, J, 171-2).) Lady Constance is the

'show' aristocrat, but her two marriages are both to non-aristocratic millionaires.¹³

Wodehouse's social criticism in the Blandings stories began crudely in *Something Fresh*, which with its juvenile weaknesses on its head still remains an excellent source for the historian of the governing classes in the early twentieth century. (The same is not true of his later country house settings, although they do perform other services.) In 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend' he reached his peak as a social critic. Yet the ethics of the story are curious. He remains consistent in questioning the value of trying to bring social revolution by hectoring crowds on Clapham Common or wandering round the East End with feelings of superficial enthusiasm for the dictatorship of the proletariat. His answer to class distinction was the kindness of an old man to a little girl who rescued him from a dog, a kindness the greater because he remained himself throughout. And having given his answer, Wodehouse turned Blandings into an enchanted castle whose relevance to social realities grew farther and farther away. The novels increased this tendency, as did his one Blandings *novella* the hilarious pseudo-detective story 'The Crime Wave at Blandings'. But it is important to remember that Blandings began as an exercise in realism, and that in one immortal moment it made its contribution to the literature of the class struggle.

¹³Joseph Keeble (*Leave it to Psmith*) and James Schoonmaker (*Service with a Smile*). Schoonmaker was 'Johnny' to the Hon. Galahad (*Summer Lightning*, I, 163-64, 177, 179, 182).