



P.G. Wodehouse  
by A.E. Hotchner

from *Post Road 6*

Selected by Jessica Shattuck, author of *Perfect Life* and *The Hazards of Good Breeding*.

*I liked reading this because made me think of a writer I haven't thought of in years, a kind of literary Charlie Chaplin, whose seemingly esoteric appeal is weirdly transcendent: I remember discovering and loving Wodehouse as an anxious gen-X fourteen-year-old at a giant inner city public high school. If that doesn't speak to something universal in his writing, I don't know what does. I disagree with Hotchner about the dearth of contemporary humor writing (Ian Frasier? David Sedaris?), but the sweet, wry, innocence of Wodehouse is something special and worth recommending to anyone who loves books. – JS.*

I am one of the foremost lamenters of the passage of humorous writing from the pantheon of American literature. In my early years, beginning with Mark Twain, I doted on Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, Nunally Johnson, Robert Benchley, Ring Lardner, Damon Runyan, George Kaufman, S. J. Perelman and their whimsical compatriots,

practitioners of the art of portraying the foibles of the people of their times. Although I have tried reading the books of current authors reviewed and advertised as "humorous", even "hilarious," I have never been able to manage so much as a smile over most of them. As for The New Yorker, once the bastion of high humor, where oh where are the humorists of yesteryear?

Last month, while browsing the acres of books in my local Barnes & Noble, I made eye contact with a volume, which, without leaving the shelf, set me chortling. I shall always cherish its author and the exquisite pleasure I derived in the past from Bertie Wooster and his sophisticated, improbable man-servant, Jeeves, created by mischievous, unpredictable P.G. Wodehouse, who wonderfully exaggerated a time and a genus of upper-class Englishman now virtually extinct but deliciously preserved in a Wodehousian wrap.

The particular Wodehouse on the bookshelf that day was The Code of the Woosters, a sprightly account of addle-minded Bertie Wooster's uninvited visit to the mansion of a hostile Sir Watkyn Bassett for the express purpose of stealing an antique silver cow-creamer for the collection of his imperious Aunt Dahlia. There is no possible way to convey the wonderfully zany impact of Wodehousian prose other than to quote it verbatim. One of the menaces facing Bertie is a savage terrier named Bartholomew who has trapped Jeeves and Wooster in the midst of riffling his master's bedroom, causing them to leap to safety, Jeeves winding up on top of the cupboard, Bertie astride the dresser.

"Are you afraid of a tiny little dog, Jeeves?"

He corrected me respectfully, giving it as his opinion that the undersigned was not a tiny little dog, but well above the average in muscular development. In particular, he drew my attention to the animal's teeth. I reassured him.

"I think you would find that if you were to make a sudden spring, his teeth would not enter into the matter. You could leap on to the bed, snatch up a sheet, roll him up in it before he knew what was happening, and there we would be."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, are you going to make a sudden spring?"

"No, sir."

The Wodehouse language in Bertie's mouth is a potpourri of vintage slang, malaprops, misguided quotes, and vapid observations. But patiently and affectionately, Jeeves' response is astute and well-versed, invariably leading to a solution for Bertie's endless imbroglios. The following exchange occurs while Wooster is being dressed for dinner:

"Jeeves," I said, "who was it you were telling me about the other day, on whose head all the sorrows of the world had come?"

"The Mona Lisa, sir."

"Well, if I met the Mona Lisa at this moment, I would shake her by the hand and assure her that I knew just how she felt. You see before you, Jeeves, a toad beneath the narrow."

“Yes, sir. The trousers perhaps a quarter of an inch higher, sir. One aims at the carelessly graceful break over the instep. It is matter of the nicest adjustment.”

“Like that?”

“Admirable, sir.”

I sighed.

“There are moments, Jeeves, when one asks oneself, ‘Do trousers matter?’” “The mood will pass, sir.”

“I don’t see why it should. If you can’t think of a way out of this mess, it seems to me that it is the end. Of course,” I proceeded, on a somewhat brighter note, “you haven’t really had time to get your teeth into the problem yet. While I am at dinner, examine it once more from every angle. It is just possible that an inspiration might pop up. Inspirations do, don’t they? All in a flash, as it were?”

“Yes, sir. The mathematician Archimedes is related to have discovered the principle of displacement, on which he had been working without success for many years, quite suddenly one morning while in his bath.” “Well. There you are. And I don’t suppose he was such a devil of a chap. Compared with you, I mean.”

“A gifted man, I believe, sir. It has been a matter of general regret that he was subsequently killed by a common soldier.”

“Too bad. Still, all flesh is as grass, what?” “Very true, sir.”

After I finished *The Code of the Woosters*, I felt compelled to immerse myself in a bath of Wodehouses, going from *Jeeves in the Morning* to *Uncle Fred in Springtime*. It's an immersion I highly recommend for anyone who would like a momentary escape into an earlier world, where, in Bertie's words, "The snail was on the wing and the lark on the thorn—or, rather, the other way round—and God was in His heaven and all right with the world."

A.E. Hotchner was born in St. Louis. He is the author of *Papa Hemingway*; *The Man Who Lived at the Ritz*; *Choice People: The Greats, Near Greats and Ingrates I Have Known*; and *Blown Away: The Rolling Stones and the Death of the Sixties*, among others. He lives in Connecticut.