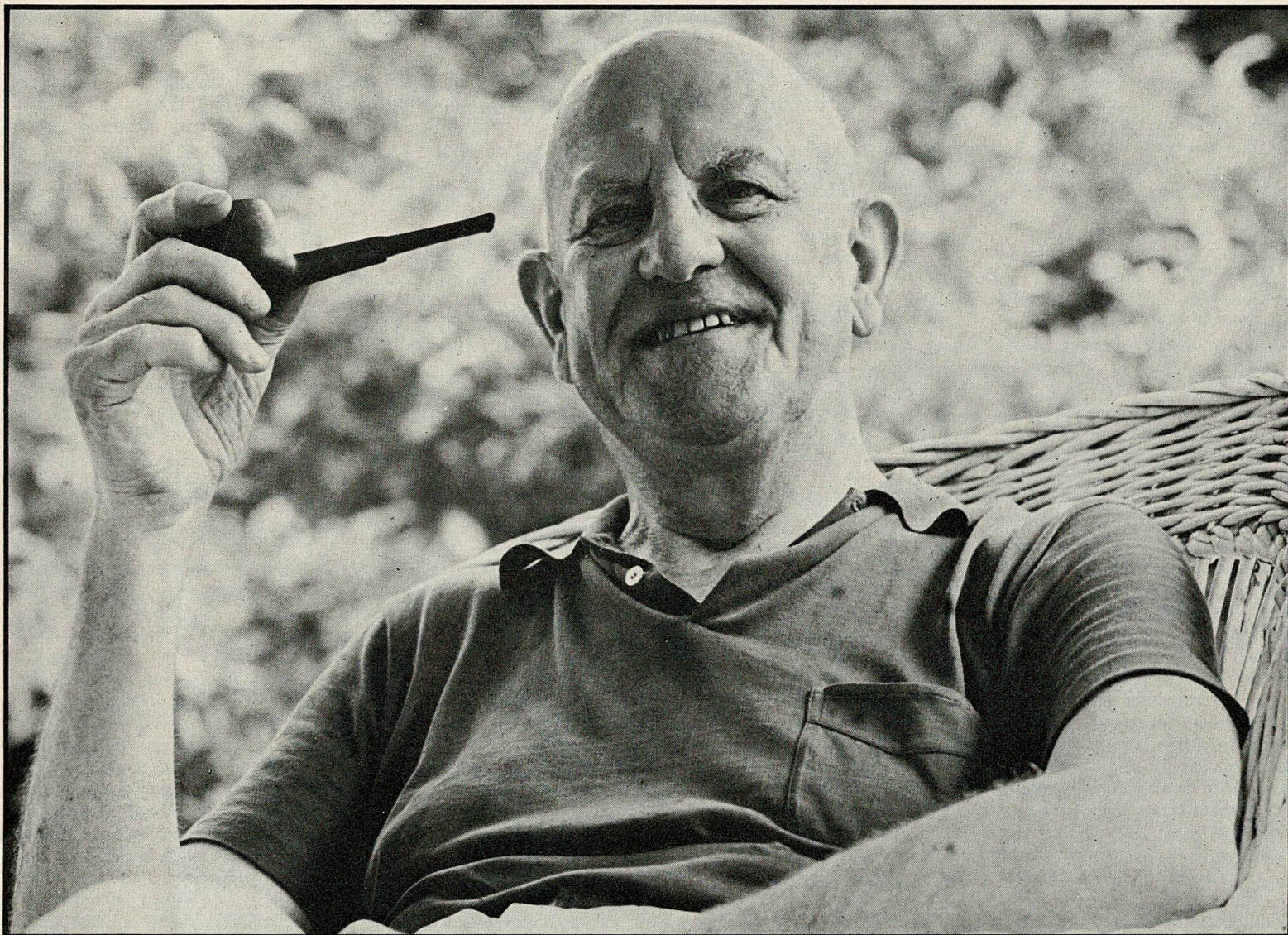


P. G. Wodehouse at home

by Wilfred De'Ath

Author of more than 100 books, of which over 70 are still in print, P. G. Wodehouse will be 92 this year. He lives on Long Island, where he continues to work for a few hours each morning on the books which he completes at the rate of about one a year.



BERNARD GOTTFRYD

The peaceful hamlet of Remsenburg, at the eastern end of Long Island, is about three hours' drive from New York City. Somewhere along the way you turn off the Southern State Parkway and on to Sunrise Highway which soon becomes Montauk Highway and you make a right turn at a place called Speonk and find yourself in quiet countryside which, like P. G. Wodehouse, appears largely untouched by the ravages of the twentieth century.

A little dazed, yet exhilarated, by the unaccustomed speed and smoothness of the American freeway system, I decided to leave the car at the tiny Remsenburg post office and, to give my thoughts time to adjust to the coming encounter, proceed on foot to the Wodehouse establishment in Basket Neck Lane—a distance of about three-quarters of a mile (though Wodehouse, in his immensely entertaining autobiography *Over Seventy*, has it down as two miles).

I was well down Basket Neck Lane and within sight of the Wodehouse drive and my first glimpse of the great man and, I hoped, the first sip of the Martini that cheers when Ethel Wodehouse, aged 87, only four years younger than her husband, whom she calls "Plum", swooped down upon me in a huge car with an equally huge dog in the back and insisted on taking me on a shopping expedition. She is a formidable woman to whom one tends to defer on all occasions: a mixture of Mistress Quickly and Florence Nightingale, with perhaps a bit of Lady Macbeth thrown in. We bought some ham and wine for lunch and some chopped liver for the pets and then she insisted on taking me to see the Bide-A-Wee animal shelter in Westhampton, where dwell what seemed like 500 cats and dogs, a good part of which has actually been financed by the Wodehouse millions.

Not an animal lover at the best of times. I began to get a bit

panicky as we swept off down the Montauk Highway in the direction of Westhampton; I began to wonder if I had flown 3,500 miles and driven three hours for nothing. "I hope you don't mind," I said politely, looking anxiously at my watch, "but I have actually come to see your husband and I should hate to keep him waiting." She nodded and turned the car round. I was thankful not to be put back on the road to New York. I had a strong feeling that I had successfully passed some kind of inspection.

P. G. Wodehouse is waiting to greet us in the house, a large, bald, amiable-looking man who gives off an extraordinary impression of benevolence and innocence and goodwill towards men. Much later in our talk I did get him to admit that he has from time to time encountered some "swine" in the world, but it is impossible to imagine him thinking badly of anyone for long; he just does not react to human beings in that sort

of way. He had a fall in his garden quite recently and hurt his legs and he's a bit deaf, but for 91, he was really in remarkable shape. He was wearing very smart American clothes—I wondered if these were his normal Saturday togs or whether he'd put them on for my benefit—which he somehow contrived to make look British by the way he wore them.

Ethel (he calls her "Bunny") pours me a Martini that might have been mixed by the hand of Jeeves himself and Plum, after some pleading against the idea of sherry, is allowed one too. He visibly perks up after the first lifegiving sip. How long has he been married to Ethel? "Fifty-seven years. It took place quite near here. The only thing I can remember about the ceremony is the clergyman telling us he had just won \$10,000 on the New York Stock Exchange. I wondered a bit about this at the time because it was a Saturday and the Exchange isn't open on a Saturday..." ➤

P.G. Wodehouse at home

He is anxious to hear news of the magazine scene in England, especially of this publication. "The *ILN* seems to me one of the very few publications that has kept up its quality over the years and I think it works even better as a monthly. I always enjoy Sir Arthur Bryant." What about *Punch*? "I still see it but I think it's become very vulgar, particularly during the last year. What they don't seem to understand is that you can't do a send-up, like the recent one they did of *Cosmopolitan*, without becoming even more vulgar than what you're sending up. Anyway the *Havard Lampoon* did it before them."

I show him a British edition of his new book *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*, which I have brought with me, but Osbert Lancaster's cover distresses him, since it does not relate to a particular scene in the book, being set outside a country house, when it should be inside. The sight of it seems to irritate him increasingly and I put the book out of sight, but not before he has spotted the price, £2.20, which I translate for him as £2 4s which he considers exorbitant. He worries a good deal about how the British are coping with decimalization and is horrified to hear that they are shortly to be inflicted with the metric system as well. "I hate change," he says.

The conversation turns to his writing. He manages to work for two or three hours most mornings and produces his changeless comedies at an average rate of one a year. "I feel better if I write every day," he says. He still enjoys plotting a book as much as writing it and even *Monty Bodkin* involved 400 pages of notes before the actual composition began. To help him with his writing he watches every weekday at 2.30 pm a long-running American thriller soap-opera called *Edge of Night* which is very cleverly plotted. Some years ago the television serial failed to appear on a particular day and, instead, "an oafish figure named Khrushchev filled the screen". His last visit to New York City a year or two ago was to attend, as guest of honour, the 15th birthday party for *Edge of Night*, but unfortunately his hired car driver was unfamiliar with Long Island and managed to lose Ethel and himself on the way home. It is unlikely that they will attempt such an adventure again.

We discuss Malcolm Muggeridge, a friend since the war years—they met in Paris just after the Liberation when P. G. Wodehouse's legal position after his wartime broadcasts from Berlin was somewhat dubious, to put it mildly, and have remained close ever since. "But hasn't Malcolm become some kind of priest?" he asks me, almost plaintively. I tell him yes, I think

this is so. He looks very puzzled. "I really don't understand that at all, I am what I suppose you would call an agnostic. My attitude has always been 'We'll have to wait and see'."

We move through to lunch. Conversation is difficult because there are only the four of us—Wodehouse, Ethel, Wodehouse's sister-in-law Nella, who lives with them, and myself—around a huge table and it is necessary to shout to make oneself heard. Wodehouse seems to retire into a world of his own as he eats and Ethel dominates the conversation. Photographs of my children are passed round the table for inspection and loudly approved of. Ethel had complained to me earlier, in the car, of a lack of servants, but there does not seem to be any lack. The food is excellent and Wodehouse, I notice, still has a hearty appetite. For a moment I feel that an English country house luncheon-party circa 1920 has been transported lock, stock and barrel to Remsenburg, Long Island, which, I suppose, is pretty well what has happened. It is one of the things you can do if you have enough money.

Wodehouse never seems to have been short of the stuff, as he admits. "Funds used to get a bit low from time to time, but there were so many more markets for a writer when I was a young man. There was the whole pulp-magazine market, for instance." The breakthrough for Wodehouse came in 1915, the same year as his marriage, when he sold *Something Fresh* to the *Saturday Evening Post*. "George Horace Lorimer, its world-famous editor, paid me the stupefying sum of \$3,500 for it, at that time the equivalent of 700 gleaming gold sovereigns. I was stunned. I had always known in a vague sort of way that there was money like \$3,500 in the world, but I had never expected to touch it. If I was 100 bucks ahead of the game in those days, I thought I was doing well . . . I put my full name, Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, to that book for the first time and I expect that's what did it. A writer in America in those days who went about without three names was practically going around naked."

I am still interested to know what he thinks is the secret of his fantastic success all over the world. (Recent sales of his books in Sweden, for instance, have broken all records.) "Is it something to do with the fact that people enjoy a clean story, simply told, do you think?" he asks innocently. "It's because there's no sex in your books," chips in Nella, "People are tired of sex." I suggest that it is because his books are, in a fundamental way, *unsensational* and the creator of Jeeves and Bertie Wooster nods happily, in apparent agreement with me. We recall Evelyn Waugh's elegant 80th birthday tribute to Wodehouse: "The

gardens of Blandings Castle are that original garden from which we are all exiled." "Did you ever meet Evelyn Waugh?" Wodehouse asks me. No, I tell him. "He came here only once. A very strange man."

After lunch Ethel settles us in the conservatory with coffee, cigars, liqueurs and a beautiful view of the extensive garden. I sit next to Plum on a wooden seat and shout into his right ear. She pops in from time to time to make sure I am not tiring him out. I have an overriding impression of a genuinely naïve, totally apolitical man, who is obviously ill-fitted to live in an age of ideological conflict. If his wartime broadcasts from Berlin to his readers in America were exploited in the interests of Nazi propaganda, then this was surely a reflection of foolishness, political naïvety, rather than any wickedness on his part. Apart from that wartime experience, he's never been sufficiently exposed to stress, has been protected against most of the unpleasantnesses of life, as he is the first to admit. He is immensely dependent on Ethel but is capable of asserting his will in matters of importance such as the pre-lunch Martini. He's soft-centred, but a hard worker.

He is painfully anxious to hear about England and I find myself reluctant to tell him about motorways and high-rise blocks and development areas or in any way to spoil his illusions of a pristine Edwardian world. "What is this Common Market?" he asks, "is it a good thing?" He is always theoretically planning to return to England, but I doubt if he ever will. His attitude is like that of a man who has parted in painful circumstances from someone he loves and whom he both longs and dreads to see again. He would never agree to fly (he has never been in an aeroplane) and Ethel thinks he would not enjoy being photographed at the docks in a wheelchair. Since his fall in the garden even his daily walk with the dog to Remsenburg post office to pick up the afternoon mail has been curtailed.

He loves animals. The Wodehouses have three dogs and seven cats at Remsenburg, apart from their proprietary interest in the Bide-A-Wee home. He seems to judge the dogs by their good nature or otherwise, a quality that, when you see him fondling an animal, is almost like a reflection of his own good nature. He is an extraordinarily kind man. "The world has always treated me well," he says, "and I think I've been lucky to have been as successful as I have. And in spite of everything I'm still an optimist in human affairs. There are some swine in the world, as we've agreed, but I believe that things will sort themselves out in the end." He supports President Nixon.

At times, interviewing Wode-

house, it is difficult not to feel that the whole thing is an enormous put-on, that even his deafness is only diplomatic, that he struggles as hard to be innocent as Ethel does to be worldly-wise. Why, I wanted to know, had he chosen to make his home in America? "I loved America always and the *idea* of America. When as a young man all my friends were going on about the Left Bank in Paris, all I ever wanted to do was to visit America. I managed to get here for the first time as early as 1904. It didn't disappoint me. I found it a most exciting place, although I was never intoxicated by visions of cowboys and Indians or anything like that. America has been very kind to me. I have always missed England, but I have all I want here in Remsenburg."

After half an hour's further conversation he was clearly tired and, although he said he had enjoyed my visit and wanted me to stay, I felt it was time to leave him to Ethel's ministrations. He signed my copy of *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* with a remarkably firm, clear hand and commented once more on his dislike of the cover and the price. Then Ethel took him to his bedroom and gave him his oxygen which he has every afternoon, not because he is ill, but because it helps him with his breathing. Immensely touched by the kindness he had shown me, I said goodbye to him there and, as I did so, he was already sliding into a deep sleep like a huge baby that has just been fed its bottle. I left him there to his thoughts and dreams, a sleeping dinosaur.

As with all imaginative people, and with highly original writers in particular, there is an area of inner reserve in Wodehouse that one never penetrates. The scars of his time in the stocks during the war years are probably hidden there. There is a revealing passage in his autobiography which, though it is intended to be humorous, gives, by a process of double-bluff, a good deal of himself away: "At a certain point at every American party everyone puts on paper hats and as the smiling hostess clamps mine on my brow, a sense of the underlying sadness of life sweeps over me. 'Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble,' I say to myself. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' I say to myself, and, of course, this tends to prevent me being sparkling. The malaise is due, I think, principally to my spectacles. You can't wear spectacles and a paper hat and retain any illusion that you are a king among men. If hostesses would only skip the red tape and allow me to remain bare-headed I might be a social success and fascinate one and all." Comedy is for ever barking its shins on tragedy, and beneath the benign exterior of our greatest comic writer there beats, I believe, a melancholy heart ●