

## Carry on, Jeeves

*P.G. Wodehouse*

November 25 - December 3, 2020

I tried a Wodehouse in my teens. I did not like it at all and are still puzzled why so many of my friends seem to take such pleasure in them. It struck me as completely inane, this helpless Bertie Wooster character and his capable manservant Jeeves. As a teenager you take life very seriously, or at least I did, and the spectacle of a completely idle young man about town leading a life of leisure filling his totally vacuous existence with lunches and dinners and whose only agonizing decisions concerns what clothes to wear. If ever one would feel indignant towards the idle classes leading futile and empty lives yet being pampered by responsible working people this was it. But of course the joke is exactly not to take it literally but to appreciate the humor of the ridiculous situation. Yet even that seems to carry things too far, any engagement with fictional characters must be based on some sort of deeper sympathy otherwise the tedium becomes overwhelming. So I am back to my teenage disapproval, suspecting that anyone charmed by those stories must have some sort of identification with the main protagonist and finding that fictional life to have the charm of the wishful, an idyllic world towards which to long and yearn, yet knowing how inaccessible it is and how impossible to achieve. In short some kind of infantile fairy tale for adults. For all and intents and purposes could it not work as well as a regular cartoon, after all it is a matter of short descriptions of locale and then conversation bubbles.

I learn that the charms of the books lie in their diction, the humor not of situations, which are contrived and silly, but of language, with the additional spice of nostalgia for long outdated Edwardian slang. Maybe I was not able to appreciate this when I was young and looking for content in novels not just form an distraction. Now I can do, and sure enough I can see the occasional point and the intermittent wit which may bring a gentle smile to my lips; yet the linguistic virtues do not make up for its vices, but maybe with some practice one may get into the swing of it, meaning slowly developing a taste for the empty but reassuring world of Mr Wooster. Speak about acquired tastes. But maybe my disapproval is just a case of snobbism; on the other hand it could be a case of instinctive repulsion for a potential weakness not to be allowed to be indulged. A divided society in which you happen, by accident of birth, to occupy an undeserved position of unearned privilege, is after all very pleasant once you can suppress feelings of guilt, which are, however, very easily suppressed.

While I have come to understand that a vintage Wooster/Jeeves is extended to a novel, with a carefully constructed plot (and Wodehouse took a very workmanlike attitude to his writing, spending much attention to plot, writing a preliminary sketch, which was then elaborated upon), this book consists of short independent stories which have the advantage of being rather short and hence amenable to frequent stops of relief. The are all rather similar, everyone in Mr. Wooster's extended, yet curiously limited acquaintanceship depends on his financial support on a benevolent, yet cantankerous and demanding aunt or uncle. Getting into a scrap amounts to have this umbilical chord threatened by severage

and being forced to be expelled from a parasitical world into the harsh real world, from which they are all protected. Hard to sympathize with their lot, but therein lies the humor I suspect. Contrived complications ensue but Jeeves is always counted on as the *deus ex machina*. Maybe they would work beautifully not only in comics but as TV-gags, and the latter has no doubt been attempted. The first story is about the hiring of Jeeves, but I believe far from being the first occurrence of the character; while the last is unusual as it is presented from the perspective of Jeeves who plays a cruel joke on his master and whose startling malevolence only dawns upon the reader later on. So maybe the stories of P.G.Wodehouse have some more depth than they pretend to have.

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