More Plum's at School

THE GOLD BAT

THE HEAD OF KAY'S

THE WHITE FEATHER

A Further Selection of
School Stories by
P. G. Wodehouse

Introduction

This volume is a sequel to *Plum's at School*, and contains the complete text of three more books of school stories by P. G. Wodehouse.

Although Wodehouse eschewed the school story once his career blossomed, these early stories contain more than the occasional flash of nascent greatness. For the modern reader, though, there are some difficulties: principally the change in societal attitudes that have occurred in the hundred years since these stories were penned, and the lack of familiarity of the milieu that provides the setting for the stories.

The modern reader is likely to cringe at the line: "You must work like niggers in the field", and can easily be positively repulsed by: "He really was a nigger" (although it is clear from the context of the latter that Wodehouse was simply making a statement about the color of a boy's skin, using words that were the norm at the time). But a writer cannot foresee the future, and we must be careful not to read meaning into words that they would not generally be supposed to have had when they were written. Wodehouse was a consummate humorist, and no humorist writes with the intention of annoying or otherwise alienating his reader, who, it is worth remembering, is reading the author's stories as a form of escape from the complexities of the "real" world. Fortunately, such difficult turns of phrase are rare, even though the society of which Wodehouse writes is substantively different from our own.

As to the latter difficulty, we repeat some of the background concerning the schools about which Wodehouse writes from our introduction to *Plum's at School*:

1. The action typically occurs amongst the residents at a boarding school (although many schools also catered to a percentage of "day

boys" who resided at home but attended lessons at the school — day boys are typically regarded as a kind of lesser species and rarely feature strongly in these stories).

2. This is a male-dominated society. All the teachers and the students are expected to be male. There will generally be a female matron (a kind of nurse) and possibly one or two other minor female characters, but these stories are overwhelmingly concerned with the activities of boys of a certain class.

3. The boys typically come from families that are relatively prosperous, although not overwhelmingly so. These are the sons of the people who made the British Empire function, and it was assumed as a matter of course that eventually the boys who feature in the stories would go on to do the same.

4. The academic curriculum of the schools would be essentially unrecognizable to modern readers. Overwhelmingly, the education — at least as it features in the typical school story — consisted of studying Latin and Greek, with an occasional nod to such minor subjects as mathematics or English. Science is generally regarded as the province of "swots", who rarely play a significant part in the stories.

5. Each school is divided into a number of "houses" for sporting and other purposes. Each boy is a member of a house, and the stories often feature inter-house rivalries as an important aspect.

6. Sporting prowess is generally elevated beyond academic ability. In particular there is usually a "winter sport" and a "summer sport", each of which is of overwhelming importance in its season. Generally the former is Rugby football (often abbreviated simply to "football"); the latter is universally cricket.

7. References to the First Fifteen (or XV) are to the school's principal Rugby football team; similarly, the First Eleven (or XI) is the principal cricket team.

8. Older pupils were given privileges such as a shared study, instead of being forced to share a "common room" with the rest of the pupils in their year. Younger pupils "fagged" for older ones, meaning that they had to perform menial tasks such as preparing tea or carrying messages on behalf of the older pupils. There is no undercurrent of sexuality associated with the term.

Most of the original readers of these stories can reasonably be supposed to be boys of the very class and age that feature within the stories: these would be the same people who as adults would form the first generation of lovers of the later Wodehouse stories of Bertie Wooster and Reginald Jeeves, of Galahad Threepwood and the retinue at Blandings Castle, and the many other creations of Wodehouse's fertile mind. The first generation, but not the last, for even today many of P. G. Wodehouse's books remain in the very first rank of humorous tales written in the English language.

We hope that you enjoy these stories.

— Engine House Books
June, 2010

About a Name

The name of one character who appears in *The Gold Bat* and *The White Feather* presents a problem for typesetters. There are at least four ways in which the character's name may be typeset:

M‘Todd
McTodd
M’Todd
Mᶜ Todd

Historically, the most correct of these is “M‘Todd”, which makes use of the character known as the “turned comma”. However, such usage is so rare as to be almost non-existant in modern English typography, and its use seems likely to distract the modern reader.

The most common rendering in modern books is the simple “McTodd”. This is an understandable choice for typescripts and other media in which only a limited selection of typographical glyphs is available; however, it is an odd choice for books typeset using modern digital methods.

Several earlier publishers used the form “M’Todd” which has little to recommend it: it is both historically incorrect and is likely to prove distracting to the reader. Presumably it was used because a turned comma was unavailable, or because its use required more work than the publisher was willing to expend.

We have therefore chosen to render the name as “Mᶜ Todd”. This variant informs the reader of the usual pronunciation of the name, while retaining the spirit of the original orthography.

— Engine House Books

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8 — A Naval Battle and its Consequences

What a go is life!

Let us examine the case of Jackson, of Dexter's. O'Hara, who had left Dexter's at the end of the summer term, had once complained to Clowes of the manner in which his house-master treated him, and Clowes had remarked in his melancholy way that it was nothing less than a breach of the law that Dexter should persist in leading a fellow a dog's life without a dog licence for him.

That was precisely how Jackson felt on the subject.

Things became definitely unbearable on the day after Sheen's interview with Mr. Joe Bevan.

'Twas morn — to begin at the beginning — and Jackson sprang from his little cot to embark on the labours of the day. Unfortunately, he sprang ten minutes too late, and came down to breakfast about the time of the second slice of bread and marmalade. Result, a hundred lines. Proceeding to school, he had again fallen foul of his house-master — in whose form he was — over a matter of unprepared Livy. As a matter of fact, Jackson *had* prepared the Livy. Or, rather, he had not absolutely *prepared* it; but he had meant to. But it was Mr. Templar's preparation, and Mr. Templar was short-sighted. Any one will understand, therefore, that it would have been simply chucking away the gifts of Providence if he had not gone on with the novel which he had been reading up till the last moment before prep-time, and had brought along with him accidentally, as it were. It was a book called *A Spoiler of Men*, by Richard Marsh, and there was a repulsive crime on nearly every page. It was Hot Stuff. Much better than Livy....

Lunch Score — Two hundred lines.

During lunch he had the misfortune to upset a glass of water. Pure accident, of course, but there it was, don't you know, all over the table.

Mr. Dexter had called him—

(a) clumsy;
(b) a pig;

and had given him

(1) Advice — "You had better be careful, Jackson".
(2) A present — "Two hundred lines, Jackson".

On the match being resumed at two o'clock, with four hundred lines on the score-sheet, he had played a fine, free game during afternoon school, and Mr. Dexter, who objected to fine, free games — or, indeed, any games — during school hours, had increased the total to six hundred, when stumps were drawn for the day.

So on a bright sunny Saturday afternoon, when he should have been out in the field cheering the house-team on to victory against the School House, Jackson sat in the junior day-room at Dexter's copying out portions of Virgil, Æneid Two.

To him, later on in the afternoon, when he had finished half his task, entered Painter, with the news that Dexter's had taken thirty points off the School House just after half-time.

"Mopped them up," said the terse and epigrammatic Painter. "Made rings round them. Haven't you finished yet? Well, chuck it, and come out."

"What's on?" asked Jackson.

"We're going to have a boat race."

"Pile it on."

"We are, really. Fact. Some of these School House kids are awfully sick about the match, and challenged us. That chap Tomlin thinks he can row."

"He can't row for nuts," said Jackson. "He doesn't know which end of the oar to shove into the water. I've seen cats that could row better than Tomlin."

"That's what I told him. At least, I said he couldn't row for toffee, so he said all right, I bet I can lick you, and I said I betted he couldn't,

and he said all right, then, let's try, and then the other chaps wanted to join in, so we made an inter-house thing of it. And I want you to come and stroke us."

Jackson hesitated. Mr. Dexter, setting the lines on Friday, had certainly said that they were to be shown up "tomorrow evening." He had said it very loud and clear. Still, in a case like this.... After all, by helping to beat the School House on the river he would be giving Dexter's a leg-up. And what more could the man want?

"Right ho," said Jackson.

Down at the School boat-house the enemy were already afloat when Painter and Jackson arrived.

"Buck up," cried the School House crew.

Dexter's embarked, five strong. There was room for two on each seat. Jackson shared the post of stroke with Painter. Crowle steered.

"Ready?" asked Tomlin from the other boat.

"Half a sec.," said Jackson. "What's the course?"

"Oh, don't you know *that* yet? Up to the town, round the island just below the bridge, — the island with the croquet ground on it, *you* know — and back again here. Ready?"

"In a jiffy. Look here, Crowle, remember about steering. You pull the right line if you want to go to the right and the other if you want to go to the left."

"All right," said the injured Crowle. "As if I didn't know that."

"Thought I'd mention it. It's your fault. Nobody could tell by looking at you that you knew anything except how to eat. Ready, you chaps?"

"When I say 'Three,'" said Tomlin.

It was a subject of heated discussion between the crews for weeks afterwards whether Dexter's boat did or did not go off at the word "Two." Opinions were divided on the topic. But it was certain that Jackson and his men led from the start. Pulling a good, splashing stroke which had drenched Crowle to the skin in the first thirty yards, Dexter's boat crept slowly ahead. By the time the island was reached, it led by a length. Encouraged by success, the leaders redoubled their already energetic efforts. Crowle sat in a shower-bath. He was even moved to speech about it.

"When you've finished," said Crowle.

Jackson, intent upon repartee, caught a crab, and the School House drew level again. The two boats passed the island abreast.

Just here occurred one of those unfortunate incidents. Both crews had quickened their stroke until the boats had practically been converted into submarines, and the rival coxswains were observing bitterly to space that this was jolly well the last time they ever let themselves in for this sort of thing, when round the island there hove in sight a flotilla of boats, directly in the path of the racers.

There were three of them, and not even the spray which played over them like a fountain could prevent Crowle from seeing that they were manned by Judies. Even on the river these outcasts wore their mortar-boards.

"Look out!" shrieked Crowle, pulling hard on his right line. "Stop rowing, you chaps. We shall be into them."

At the same moment the School House oarsmen ceased pulling. The two boats came to a halt a few yards from the enemy.

"What's up?" panted Jackson, crimson from his exertions. "Hullo, it's the Judies!"

Tomlin was parleying with the foe.

"Why the dickens can't you keep out of the way? Spoiling our race. Wait till we get ashore."

But the Judies, it seemed, were not prepared to wait even for that short space of time. A miscreant, larger than the common run of Judy, made a brief, but popular, address to his men.

"Splash them!" he said.

Instantly, amid shrieks of approval, oars began to strike the water, and the water began to fly over the Wrykyn boats, which were now surrounded. The latter were not slow to join battle with the same weapons. Homeric laughter came from the bridge above. The town bridge was a sort of loafers' club, to which the entrance fee was a screw of tobacco, and the subscription an occasional remark upon the weather. Here gathered together day by day that section of the populace which resented it when they "asked for employment, and only got work instead". From morn till eve they lounged against the balustrades, surveying nature, and hoping it would be kind enough to

give them some excitement that day. An occasional dog-fight found in them an eager audience. No runaway horse ever bored them. A broken-down motor-car was meat and drink to them. They had an appetite for every spectacle.

When, therefore, the water began to fly from boat to boat, kind-hearted men fetched their friends from neighbouring public houses and craned with them over the parapet, observing the sport and commenting thereon. It was these comments that attracted Mr. Dexter's attention. When, cycling across the bridge, he found the south side of it entirely congested, and heard raucous voices urging certain unseen "little 'uns" now to "go it" and anon to "vote for Pedder", his curiosity was aroused. He dismounted and pushed his way through the crowd until he got a clear view of what was happening below.

He was just in time to see the most stirring incident of the fight. The biggest of the Judy boats had been propelled by the current nearer and nearer to the Dexter Argo. No sooner was it within distance than Jackson, dropping his oar, grasped the side and pulled it towards him. The two boats crashed together and rocked violently as the crews rose from their seats and grappled with one another. A hurricane of laughter and applause went up from the crowd upon the bridge.

The next moment both boats were bottom upwards and drifting sluggishly down towards the island, while the crews swam like rats for the other boats.

Every Wrykinian had to learn to swim before he was allowed on the river; so that the peril of Jackson and his crew was not extreme: and it was soon speedily evident that swimming was also part of the Judy curriculum, for the shipwrecked ones were soon climbing drippingly on board the surviving ships, where they sat and made puddles, and shrieked defiance at their antagonists.

This was accepted by both sides as the end of the fight, and the combatants parted without further hostilities, each fleet believing that the victory was with them.

And Mr. Dexter, mounting his bicycle again, rode home to tell the headmaster.

That evening, after preparation, the headmaster held a reception. Among distinguished visitors were Jackson, Painter, Tomlin, Crowle, and six others.

On the Monday morning the headmaster issued a manifesto to the school after prayers. He had, he said, for some time entertained the idea of placing the town out of bounds. He would do so now. No boy, unless he was a prefect, would be allowed till further notice to cross the town bridge. As regarded the river, for the future boating Wrykinians must confine their attentions to the lower river. Nobody must take a boat up-stream. The school boatman would have strict orders to see that this rule was rigidly enforced. Any breach of these bounds would, he concluded, be punished with the utmost severity.

The headmaster of Wrykyn was not a hasty man. He thought before he put his foot down. But when he did, he put it down heavily.

Sheen heard the ultimatum with dismay. He was a law-abiding person, and here he was, faced with a dilemma that made it necessary for him to choose between breaking school rules of the most important kind, or pulling down all the castles he had built in the air before the mortar had had time to harden between their stones.

He wished he could talk it over with somebody. But he had nobody with whom he could talk over anything. He must think it out for himself.

He spent the rest of the day thinking it out, and by nightfall he had come to his decision.

Even at the expense of breaking bounds and the risk of being caught at it, he must keep his appointment with Joe Bevan. It would mean going to the town landing-stage for a boat, thereby breaking bounds twice over.

But it would have to be done.