Plum's at School

THE POTHUNTERS

A PREFECT'S UNCLE

TALES OF ST. AUSTIN'S

A Selection of
School Stories by
P. G. Wodehouse

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, a peculiarly English popular genre of fiction was the "school story". These stories took place in the universe of an English public school (which is to say: a fee-charging independent school, not a public school in the American sense). The most famous such schools are probably Eton and Harrow, but there are many others, and the stories were generally set at some fictional "minor" school. The reader was assumed to be familiar with the operation of these schools, so no explanation of the details of the setting were deemed necessary. This lack of explanation can lead to a certain degree of puzzlement or even confusion on the part of modern readers or those in other cultures. Therefore we here provide a kind of mini-summary of some of the more important features of these schools, which can generally be assumed to apply to the schools that feature in these stories.

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.

Wodehouse wrote many school stories early in his career. For the most part they are rather good examples of the genre, and many of them bear the light touch of the easy style that became his hallmark. There can be few literary delights on a par with reading Wodehouse constructing a Gordian knot of seemingly insurmountable circumstances for his young protagonists, living as they do in a world whose cares and troubles seem so simple compared to our own, yet which are all-important to the characters themselves.

We hope that you enjoy these stories.

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4 — Harrison's Slight Error

The one o'clock down express was just on the point of starting. The engine-driver, with his hand on the lever, whiled away the moments, like the watchman in *The Agamemnon*, by whistling. The guard endeavoured to talk to three people at once. Porters flitted to and fro, cleaving a path for themselves with trucks of luggage. The Usual Old Lady was asking if she was right for some place nobody had ever heard of. Everybody was saying good-bye to everybody else, and last, but not least, P. St. H. Harrison, of St. Austin's, was strolling at a leisurely pace towards the rear of the train. There was no need for him to hurry. For had not his friend, Mace, promised to keep a corner-seat for him while he went to the refreshment-room to lay in supplies? Undoubtedly he had, and Harrison, as he watched the struggling crowd, congratulated himself that he was not as other men. A corner seat in a carriage full of his own particular friends, with plenty of provisions, and something to read in case he got tired of talking — it would be perfect.

So engrossed was he in these reflections, that he did not notice that from the opposite end of the platform a youth of about his own age was also making for the compartment in question. The first intimation he had of his presence was when the latter, arriving first at the door by a short head, hurled a bag on to the rack, and sank gracefully into the identical corner seat which Harrison had long regarded as his own personal property. And to make matters worse, there was no other vacant seat in the compartment. Harrison was about to protest, when the guard blew his whistle. There was nothing for it but to jump in and argue the matter out *en route*. Harrison jumped in, to be greeted instantly by a chorus of nine male voices. "Outside there! No room! Turn him out!" said the chorus. Then the chorus broke up into its component parts, and began to address him one by one.

"You rotter, Harrison," said Babington, of Dacre's, "what do you come barging in here for? Can't you see we're five aside already?"

"Hope you've brought a sardine-opener with you, old chap," said Barrett, the peerless pride of Philpott's, "'cos we shall jolly well need one when we get to the good old Junct-i-on. Get up into the rack, Harrison, you're stopping the ventilation."

The youth who had commandeered Harrison's seat so neatly took another unpardonable liberty at this point. He grinned. Not the timid, deprecating smile of one who wishes to ingratiate himself with strangers, but a good, six-inch grin right across his face. Harrison turned on him savagely.

"Look here," he said, "just you get out of that. What do you mean by bagging my seat?"

"Are you a director of this line?" enquired the youth politely. Roars of applause from the interested audience. Harrison began to feel hot and uncomfortable.

"Or only the Emperor of Germany?" pursued his antagonist.

More applause, during which Harrison dropped his bag of provisions, which were instantly seized and divided on the share and share alike system, among the gratified Austinians.

"Look here, none of your cheek," was the shockingly feeble retort which alone occurred to him. The other said nothing. Harrison returned to the attack.

"Look here," he said, "are you going to get out, or have I got to make you?"

Not a word did his opponent utter. To quote the bard: "The stripling smiled." To tell the truth, the stripling smiled inanely.

The other occupants of the carriage were far from imitating his reserve. These treacherous friends, realizing that, for those who were themselves comfortably seated, the spectacle of Harrison standing up with aching limbs for a journey of some thirty miles would be both grateful and comforting, espoused the cause of the unknown with all the vigour of which they were capable.

"Beastly bully, Harrison," said Barrett. "Trying to turn the kid out of his seat! Why can't you leave the chap alone? Don't you move, kid."

"Thanks," said the unknown, "I wasn't going to."

"Now you see what comes of slacking," said Grey. "If you'd bucked up and got here in time you might have bagged this seat I've got. By Jove, Harrison, you've no idea how comfortable it is in this corner."

"Punctuality," said Babington, "is the politeness of princes."

And again the unknown maddened Harrison with a "best-on-record" grin.

"But, I say, you chaps," said he, determined as a last resource to appeal to their better feelings (if any), "Mace was keeping this seat for me, while I went to get some grub. Weren't you, Mace?" He turned to Mace for corroboration. To his surprise, Mace was nowhere to be seen.

His sympathetic school-fellows grasped the full humour of the situation as one man, and gave tongue once more in chorus.

"You weed," they yelled joyfully, "you've got into the wrong carriage. Mace is next door."

And then, with the sound of unquenchable laughter ringing in his ears, Harrison gave the thing up, and relapsed into a disgusted silence. No single word did he speak until the journey was done, and the carriage emptied itself of its occupants at the Junction. The local train was in readiness to take them on to St. Austin's, and this time Harrison managed to find a seat without much difficulty. But it was a bitter moment when Mace, meeting him on the platform, addressed him as a rotter, for that he had not come to claim the corner seat which he had been reserving for him. They had had, said Mace, a rattling good time coming down. What sort of a time had Harrison had in *his* carriage? Harrison's reply was not remarkable for its clearness.

The unknown had also entered the local train. It was plain, therefore, that he was coming to the School as a new boy. Harrison began to wonder if, under these circumstances, something might not be done in the matter by way of levelling up things. He pondered. When St. Austin's station was reached, and the travellers began to stream up the road towards the College, he discovered that the newcomer was a member of his own House. He was standing close beside him, and heard Babington explaining to him the way to Merevale's. Merevale was Harrison's House-master.

It was two minutes after he had found out this fact that the Grand Idea came to Harrison. He saw his way now to a revenge so artistic, so beautifully simple, that it was with some difficulty that he restrained himself from bursting into song. For two pins, he felt, he could have done a cake-walk.

He checked his emotion. He beat it steadily back, and quenched it. When he arrived at Merevale's, he went first to the matron's room. "Has Venables come back yet?" he asked.

Venables was the head of Merevale's House, captain of the School cricket, wing three-quarter of the School Fifteen, and a great man altogether.

"Yes," said the matron, "he came back early this afternoon."

Harrison knew it. Venables always came back early on the last day of the holidays.

"He was upstairs a short while ago," continued the matron. "He was putting his study tidy."

Harrison knew it. Venables always put his study tidy on the last day of the holidays. He took a keen and perfectly justifiable pride in his study, which was the most luxurious in the House.

"Is he there now?" asked Harrison.

"No. He has gone over to see the Headmaster."

"Thanks," said Harrison, "it doesn't matter. It wasn't anything important."

He retired triumphant. Things were going excellently well for his scheme.

His next act was to go to the fags' room, where, as he had expected, he found his friend of the train. Luck continued to be with him. The unknown was alone.

"Hullo!" said Harrison.

"Hullo!" said the fellow-traveller. He had resolved to follow Harrison's lead. If Harrison was bringing war, then war let it be. If, however, his intentions were friendly, he would be friendly too.

"I didn't know you were coming to Merevale's. It's the best House in the School."

"Oh!"

"Yes, for one thing, everybody except the kids has a study."

"What? Not really? Why, I thought we had to keep to this room. One of the chaps told me so."

"Trying to green you, probably. You must look out for that sort of thing. I'll show you the way to your study, if you like. Come along upstairs."

"Thanks, awfully. It's awfully good of you," said the gratified unknown, and they went upstairs together.

One of the doors which they passed on their way was open, disclosing to view a room which, though bare at present, looked as if it might be made exceedingly comfortable.

"That's my den," said Harrison. It was perhaps lucky that Graham, to whom the room belonged in fact, as opposed to fiction, did not hear the remark. Graham and Harrison were old and tried foes. "This is yours." Harrison pushed open another door at the end of the passage.

His companion stared blankly at the Oriental luxury which met his eye. "But, I say," he said, "are you sure? This seems to be occupied already."

"Oh, no, that's all right," said Harrison, airily. "The chap who used to be here left last term. He didn't know he was going to leave till it was too late to pack up all his things, so he left his study as it was. All you've got to do is to cart the things out into the passage and leave them there. The Moke'll take 'em away."

The Moke was the official who combined in a single body the duties of butler and bootboy at Merevale's House. "Oh, right-ho!" said the unknown, and Harrison left him.

Harrison's idea was that when Venables returned and found an absolute stranger placidly engaged in wrecking his carefully-tidied study, he would at once, and without making inquiries, fall upon that absolute stranger and blot him off the face of the earth. Afterwards it might possibly come out that he, Harrison, had been not altogether unconnected with the business, and then, he was fain to admit, there might be trouble. But he was a youth who never took overmuch heed for the morrow. Sufficient unto the day was his motto. And, besides, it was distinctly worth risking. The main point, and the one with which alone the House would concern itself, was that he had completely taken in, scored off, and overwhelmed the youth who had done as

much by him in the train, and his reputation as one not to be lightly trifled with would be restored to its former brilliance. Anything that might happen between himself and Venables subsequently would be regarded as a purely private matter between man and man, affecting the main point not at all.

About an hour later a small Merevalian informed Harrison that Venables wished to see him in his study. He went. Experience had taught him that when the Head of the House sent for him, it was as a rule as well to humour his whim and go. He was prepared for a good deal, for he had come to the conclusion that it was impossible for him to preserve his incognito in the matter, but he was certainly not prepared for what he saw.

Venables and the stranger were seated in two armchairs, apparently on the very best of terms with one another. And this, in spite of the fact that these two armchairs were the only furniture left in the study. The rest, as he had noted with a grin before he had knocked at the door, was picturesquely scattered about the passage.

"Hullo, Harrison," said Venables, "I wanted to see you. There seems to have been a slight mistake somewhere. Did you tell my brother to shift all the furniture out of the study?"

Harrison turned a delicate shade of green.

"Your — er — brother?" he gurgled.

"Yes. I ought to have told you my brother was coming to the Coll. this term. I told the Old Man and Merevale and the rest of the authorities. Can't make out why I forgot you. Slipped my mind somehow. However, you seem to have been doing the square thing by him, showing him round and so on. Very good of you."

Harrison smiled feebly. Venables junior grinned. What seemed to Harrison a mystery was how the brothers had managed to arrive at the School at different times. The explanation of which was in reality very simple. The elder Venables had been spending the last week of the holidays with MacArthur, the captain of the St. Austin's Fifteen, the same being a day boy, suspended within a mile of the School.

"But what I can't make out," went on Venables, relentlessly, "is this furniture business. To the best of my knowledge I didn't leave suddenly at the end of last term. I'll ask if you like, to make sure, but

I fancy you'll find you've been mistaken. Must have been thinking of someone else. Anyhow, we thought you must know best, so we lugged all the furniture out into the passage, and now it appears there's been a mistake of sorts, and the stuff ought to be inside all the time. So would you mind putting it back again? We'd help you, only we're going out to the shop to get some tea. You might have it done by the time we get back. Thanks, awfully."

Harrison coughed nervously, and rose to a point of order.

"I was going out to tea, too," he said.

"I'm sorry, but I think you'll have to scratch the engagement," said Venables.

Harrison made a last effort.

"I'm fagging for Welch this term," he protested.

It was the rule at St. Austin's that every fag had the right to refuse to serve two masters. Otherwise there would have been no peace for that down-trodden race.

"That," said Venables, "ought to be awfully jolly for Welch, don't you know, but as a matter of fact term hasn't begun yet. It doesn't start till tomorrow. Weigh in."

Various feelings began to wage war beneath Harrison's Eton waistcoat. A profound disinclination to undertake the suggested task battled briskly with a feeling that, if he refused the commission, things might — nay, would — happen.

"Harrison," said Venables gently, but with meaning, as he hesitated, "do you know what it is to wish you had never been born?"

And Harrison, with a thoughtful expression on his face, picked up a photograph from the floor, and hung it neatly in its place over the mantelpiece.