RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Heart of a Goof

P.G. Wodehouse

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About the Book

From his favourite chair on the terrace above the ninth hole, The Oldest Member tells a series of hilarious golfing stories. From Evangeline, Bradbury Fisher's fifth wife and a notorious 'golfing giggler', to poor Rollo Podmarsh whose game was so unquestionably inept that 'he began to lose his appetite and would moan feebly at the sight of a poached egg', the game of golf, its players and their friends and enemies are here shown in all their comic glory.

About the Author

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (always known as ‘Plum’) wrote more than ninety novels and some three hundred short stories over 73 years. He is widely recognised as the greatest 20th century writer of humour in the English language.

Wodehouse mixed the high culture of his classical education with the popular slang of the suburbs in both England and America, becoming a ‘cartoonist of words’. Drawing on the antics of a near-contemporary world, he placed his Drones, Earls, Ladies (including draconian aunts and eligible girls) and Valets, in a recently vanished society, whose reality is transformed by his remarkable imagination into something timeless and enduring.

Perhaps best known for the escapades of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, Wodehouse also created the world of Blandings Castle, home to Lord Emsworth and his cherished pig, the Empress of Blandings. His stories include gems concerning the irrepressible and disreputable Ukridge; Psmith, the elegant socialist; the ever-so-slightly-unscrupulous Fifth Earl of Ickenham, better known as Uncle Fred; and those related by Mr Mulliner, the charming raconteur of The Angler’s Rest, and the Oldest Member at the Golf Club.

Wodehouse collaborated with a variety of partners on straight plays and worked principally alongside Guy Bolton on providing the lyrics and script for musical comedies with such composers as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. He liked to say that the royalties for ‘Just My Bill’, which Jerome Kern incorporated into Showboat, were enough to keep him in tobacco and whisky for the rest of his life.

In 1936 he was awarded The Mark Twain Medal for ‘having made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the happiness of the world’. He was made a Doctor of Letters by Oxford University in 1939 and in 1975, aged 93, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. He died shortly afterwards, on St Valentine’s Day.

To have created so many characters that require no introduction places him in a very select group of writers, lead by Shakespeare and Dickens.

Also by P.G. Wodehouse

Fiction

Aunts Aren't Gentlemen
The Adventures of Sally
Bachelors Anonymous
Barmy in Wonderland
Big Money
Bill the Conqueror
Blandings Castle and Elsewhere
Carry On, Jeeves
The Clicking of Cuthbert
Cocktail Time
The Code of the Woosters
The Coming of Bill
Company for Henry
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Do Butlers Burgle Banks
Doctor Sally
Eggs, Beans and Crumpets
A Few Quick Ones
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The Girl in Blue
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The Inimitable Jeeves
Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit
Jeeves in the Offing
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Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin
Piccadilly Jim
Pigs Have Wings
Plum Pie
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The Prince and Betty
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Psmith in the City
Quick Service

Right Ho, Jeeves
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Summer Lightning
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Uncle Fred in the Springtime
Uneasy Money
Very Good, Jeeves
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Young Men in Spats

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The World of Jeeves
The World of Mr Mulliner
The World of Psmith
The World of Ukridge
The World of Uncle Fred
Wodehouse Nuggets (edited by Richard Usborne)
The World of Wodehouse Clergy
The Hollywood Omnibus
Weekend Wodehouse

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Yours, Plum

The Heart of a Goof

P. G. Wodehouse

TO
MY DAUGHTER

LEONORA

WITHOUT WHOSE NEVER-FAILING
SYMPATHY AND ENCOURAGEMENT
THIS BOOK
WOULD HAVE BEEN FINISHED
IN
HALF THE TIME

PREFACE

BEFORE LEADING THE reader out on to this little nine-hole course, I should like to say a few words on the club-house steps with regard to the criticisms of my earlier book of Golf stories, *The Clicking of Cuthbert*. In the first place, I noticed with regret a disposition on the part of certain writers to speak of Golf as a trivial theme, unworthy of the pen of a thinker. In connection with this, I can only say that right through the ages the mightiest brains have occupied themselves with this noble sport, and that I err, therefore, if I do err, in excellent company.

Apart from the works of such men as James Braid, John Henry Taylor and Horace Hutchinson, we find Publius Syrius not disdaining to give advice on the back-swing ('He gets through too late who goes too fast'); Diogenes describing the emotions of a cheery player at the water-hole ('Be of good cheer. I see land'); and Doctor Watts, who, watching one of his drives from the tee, jotted down the following couplet on the back of his score-card:

Fly, like a youthful hart or roe,
Over the hills where spices grow.

And, when we consider that Chaucer, the father of English poetry, inserted in his Squiere's Tale the line
Therefore behoveth him a ful long spoone

(though, of course, with the modern rubber-cored ball an iron would have got the same distance) and that Shakespeare himself, speaking querulously in the character of a weak player who held up an impatient foursome, said:

Four rogues in buckram let drive at me

we may, I think, consider these objections answered.

A far more serious grievance which I have against my critics is that many of them confessed to the possession of but the slightest knowledge of the game, and one actually stated in cold print that he did not know what a niblick was. A writer on golf is certainly entitled to be judged by his peers – which, in my own case, means men who do one good drive in six, four reasonable approaches in an eighteen-hole round, and average three putts per green: and I think I am justified in asking of editors that they instruct critics of this book to append their handicaps in brackets at the end of their remarks. By this means the public will be enabled to form a fair estimate of the worth of the volume, and the sting in such critiques as ‘We laughed heartily while reading these stories – once – at a misprint’ will be sensibly diminished by the figures (36) at the bottom of the paragraph. While my elation will be all the greater should the words ‘A genuine masterpiece’ be followed by a simple (scr.).

One final word. The thoughtful reader, comparing this book with *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, will, no doubt, be struck by the poignant depth of feeling which pervades the present volume like the scent of muddy shoes in a locker-room: and it may be that he will conclude that, like so many English writers, I have fallen under the spell of the great Russians.

This is not the case. While it is, of course, true that my style owes much to Dostoievsky, the heart-wringing qualities of such stories as ‘The Awakening of Rollo Podmarsh’ and ‘Keeping in with Vosper’ is due entirely to the fact that I have spent much time recently playing on the National Links at Southampton, Long Island, U.S.A. These links were constructed by an exiled Scot who conceived the

dreadful idea of assembling on one course all the really foul holes in Great Britain. It cannot but leave its mark on a man when, after struggling through the Sahara at Sandwich and the Alps at Prestwick, he finds himself faced by the Station-Master's Garden hole at St. Andrew's and knows that the Redan and the Eden are just round the corner. When you turn in a medal score of a hundred and eight on two successive days, you get to know something about Life.

And yet it may be that there are a few gleams of sunshine in the book. If so, it is attributable to the fact that some of it was written before I went to Southampton and immediately after I had won my first and only trophy – an umbrella in a hotel tournament at Aiken, South Carolina, where, playing to a handicap of sixteen, I went through a field consisting of some of the fattest retired business-men in America like a devouring flame. If we lose the Walker Cup this year, let England remember that.

P. G. WODEHOUSE

The Sixth Bunker
Addington

1 THE HEART OF A GOOF

IT WAS A morning when all nature shouted ‘Fore!’ The breeze, as it blew gently up from the valley, seemed to bring a message of hope and cheer, whispering of chip-shots holed and brassies landing squarely on the meat. The fairway, as yet unscarred by the irons of a hundred dubs, smiled greenly up at the azure sky; and the sun, peeping above the trees, looked like a giant golf-ball perfectly lofted by the mashie of some unseen god and about to drop dead by the pin of the eighteenth. It was the day of the opening of the course after the long winter, and a crowd of considerable dimensions had collected at the first tee. Plus fours gleamed in the sunshine, and the air was charged with happy anticipation.

In all that gay throng there was but one sad face. It belonged to the man who was waggling his driver over the new ball perched on its little hill of sand. This man seemed careworn, hopeless. He gazed down the fairway, shifted his feet, waggled, gazed down the fairway again, shifted the dogs once more, and waggled afresh. He waggled as Hamlet might have waggled, moodily, irresolutely. Then, at last, he swung, and, taking from his caddie the niblick which the intelligent lad had been holding in readiness from the moment when he had walked on to the tee, trudged wearily off to play his second.

The Oldest Member, who had been observing the scene with a benevolent eye from his favourite chair on the terrace, sighed.

‘Poor Jenkinson,’ he said, ‘does not improve.’

‘No,’ agreed his companion, a young man with open features and a handicap of six. ‘And yet I happen to know that he has been taking lessons all the winter at one of those indoor places.’

‘Futile, quite futile,’ said the Sage with a shake of his snowy head. ‘There is no wizard living who could make that man go round in an average of sevens. I keep advising him to give up the game.’

‘You!’ cried the young man, raising a shocked and startled face from the driver with which he was toying. ‘*You* told him to give up golf! Why I thought—’

‘I understand and approve of your horror,’ said the Oldest Member, gently. ‘But you must bear in mind that Jenkinson’sis not an ordinary case. You know and I know scores of men who have never broken a hundred and twenty in their lives, and yet contrive to be happy, useful members of society. However badly they may play, they are able to forget. But with Jenkinson it is different. He is not one of those who can take it or leave it alone. His only chance of happiness lies in complete abstinence. Jenkinson is a goof.’

‘A what?’

‘A goof,’ repeated the Sage. ‘One of those unfortunate beings who have allowed this noblest of sports to get too great a grip upon them, who have permitted it to eat into their souls, like some malignant growth. The goof, you must understand, is not like you and me. He broods. He becomes morbid. His goofery unfits him for the battles of life. Jenkinson, for example, was once a man with a glowing future in the hay, corn, and feed business, but a constant stream of hooks, tops, and slices gradually made him so diffident and mistrustful of himself, that he let opportunity after opportunity slip, with the result that other, sterner, hay, corn, and feed merchants passed him in the race. Every time he had the chance to carry through some big deal in hay, or to execute some flashing *coup* in corn and feed, the fatal diffidence generated by a hundred rotten

rounds would undo him. I understand his bankruptcy may be expected at any moment.'

'My golly!' said the young man, deeply impressed. 'I hope I never become a goof. Do you mean to say there is really no cure except giving up the game?'

The Oldest Member was silent for a while.

'It is curious that you should have asked that question,' he said at last, 'for only this morning I was thinking of the one case in my experience where a goof was enabled to overcome his deplorable malady. It was owing to a girl, of course. The longer I live, the more I come to see that most things are. But you will, no doubt, wish to hear the story from the beginning.'

The young man rose with the startled haste of some wild creature, which, wandering through the undergrowth, perceives the trap in his path.

'I should love to,' he mumbled, 'only I shall be losing my place at the tee.'

'The goof in question,' said the Sage, attaching himself with quiet firmness to the youth's coat-button, 'was a man of about your age, by name Ferdinand Dibble. I knew him well. In fact, it was to me—'

'Some other time, eh?'

'It was to me,' proceeded the Sage, placidly, 'that he came for sympathy in the great crisis of his life, and I am not ashamed to say that when he had finished laying bare his soul to me there were tears in my eyes. My heart bled for the boy.'

'I bet it did. But—'

The Oldest Member pushed him gently back into his seat.

'Golf,' he said, 'is the Great Mystery. Like some capricious goddess—'

The young man, who had been exhibiting symptoms of feverishness, appeared to become resigned. He sighed softly.

'Did you ever read ''The Ancient Mariner''?' he said.

‘Many years ago,’ said the Oldest Member. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said the young man. ‘It just occurred to me.’

Golf (resumed the Oldest Member) is the Great Mystery. Like some capricious goddess, it bestows its favours with what would appear an almost fat-headed lack of method and discrimination. On every side we see big two-fisted he-men floundering round in three figures, stopping every few minutes to let through little shrimps with knock knees and hollow cheeks, who are tearing off snappy seventy-fours. Giants of finance have to accept a stroke per from their junior clerks. Men capable of governing empires fail to control a small, white ball, which presents no difficulties whatever to others with one ounce more brain than a cuckoo-clock. Mysterious, but there it is. There was no apparent reason why Ferdinand Dibble should not have been a competent golfer. He had strong wrists and a good eye. Nevertheless, the fact remains that he was a dub. And on a certain evening in June I realised that he was also a goof. I found it out quite suddenly as the result of a conversation which we had on this very terrace.

I was sitting here that evening thinking of this and that, when by the corner of the club-house I observed young Dibble in conversation with a girl in white. I could not see who she was, for her back was turned. Presently they parted and Ferdinand came slowly across to where I sat. His air was dejected. He had had the boots licked off him earlier in the afternoon by Jimmy Fothergill, and it was to this that I attributed his gloom. I was to find out in a few moments that I was partly but not entirely correct in this surmise. He took the next chair to mine, and for several minutes sat staring moodily down into the valley.

‘I’ve just been talking to Barbara Medway,’ he said, suddenly breaking the silence.

‘Indeed?’ I said. ‘A delightful girl.’

‘She’s going away for the summer to Marvis Bay.’

‘She will take the sunshine with her.’

‘You bet she will!’ said Ferdinand Dibble, with extraordinary warmth, and there was another long silence.

Presently Ferdinand uttered a hollow groan.

‘I love her, dammit!’ he muttered brokenly. ‘Oh, golly, how I love her!’

I was not surprised at his making me the recipient of his confidences like this. Most of the young folk in the place brought their troubles to me sooner or later.

‘And does she return your love?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t asked her.’

‘Why not? I should have thought the point not without its interest for you.’

Ferdinand gnawed the handle of his putter distractedly.

‘I haven’t the nerve,’ he burst out at length. ‘I simply can’t summon up the cold gall to ask a girl, least of all an angel like her, to marry me. You see, it’s like this. Every time I work myself up to the point of having a dash at it, I go out and get trimmed by someone giving me a stroke a hole. Every time I feel I’ve mustered up enough pep to propose, I take ten on a bogey three. Every time I think I’m in good mid-season form for putting my fate to the test, to win or lose it all, something goes all blooey with my swing, and I slice into the rough at every tee. And then my self-confidence leaves me. I become nervous, tongue-tied, diffident. I wish to goodness I knew the man who invented this infernal game. I’d strangle him. But I suppose he’s been dead for ages. Still, I could go and jump on his grave.’

It was at this point that I understood all, and the heart within me sank like lead. The truth was out. Ferdinand Dibble was a goof.

‘Come, come, my boy,’ I said, though feeling the uselessness of any words. ‘Master this weakness.’

‘Ican’t.’

‘Try!’

‘I have tried.’

He gnawed his putter again.

‘She was asking me just now if I couldn’t manage to come to Marvis Bay, too,’ he said.

‘That surely is encouraging? It suggests that she is not entirely indifferent to your society.’

‘Yes, but what’s the use? Do you know,’ a gleam coming into his eyes for a moment, ‘I have a feeling that if I could ever beat some really fairly good player – just once – I could bring the thing off.’ The gleam faded. ‘But what chance is there of that?’

It was a question which I did not care to answer. I merely patted his shoulder sympathetically, and after a little while he left me and walked away. I was still sitting there, thinking over his hard case, when Barbara Medway came out of the club-house.

She, too, seemed grave and pre-occupied, as if there was something on her mind. She took the chair which Ferdinand had vacated, and sighed wearily.

‘Have you ever felt,’ she asked, ‘that you would like to bang a man on the head with something hard and heavy? With knobs on?’

I said I had sometimes experienced such a desire, and asked if she had any particular man in mind. She seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying, then, apparently, made up her mind to confide in me. My advanced years carry with them certain pleasant compensations, one of which is that nice girls often confide in me. I frequently find myself enrolled as a father-confessor on the most intimate matters by beautiful creatures from whom many a younger man would give his eye-teeth to get a friendly word. Besides, I had known Barbara since she was a child. Frequently – though not recently – I had given her her evening bath. These things form a bond.

‘Why are men such chumps?’ she exclaimed.

‘You still have not told me who it is that has caused these harsh words. Do I know him?’

‘Of course you do. You’ve just been talking to him.’

‘Ferdinand Dibble? But why should you wish to bang Ferdinand Dibble on the head with something hard and heavy with knobs on?’

‘Because he’s such a goop.’

‘You mean a goof?’ I queried, wondering how she could have penetrated the unhappy man’s secret.

‘No, a goop. A goop is a man who’s in love with a girl and won’t tell her so. I am as certain as I am of anything that Ferdinand is fond of me.’

‘Your instinct is unerring. He has just been confiding in me on that very point.’

‘Well, why doesn’ the confide in *me*, the poor fish?’ cried the high-spirited girl, petulantly flicking a pebble at a passing grasshopper. ‘Ican’t be expected to fling myself into his arms unless he gives some sort of a hint that he’s ready to catch me.’

‘Would it help if I were to repeat to him the substance of this conversation of ours?’

‘If you breathe a word of it, I’ll never speak to you again,’ she cried. ‘I’d rather die an awful death than have any man think I wanted him so badly that I had to send relays of messengers begging him to marry me.’

I saw her point.

‘Then I fear,’ I said, gravely, ‘that there is nothing to be done. One can only wait and hope. It may be that in the years to come Ferdinand Dibble will acquire a nice lissom, wristy swing, with the head kept rigid and the right leg firmly braced and—’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I was toying with the hope that some sunny day Ferdinand Dibble would cease to be a goof.’

‘You mean a goop?’

‘No, a goof. A goof is a man who—’ And I went on to explain the peculiar psychological difficulties which lay in the way of any declaration of affection on Ferdinand’s part.

‘But I never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life,’ she ejaculated. ‘Do you mean to say that he is waiting till he is good at golf before he asks me to marry him?’

‘It is not quite so simple as that,’ I said sadly. ‘Many bad golfers marry, feeling that a wife’s loving solicitude may improve their game. But they are rugged, thick-skinned men, not sensitive and introspective, like Ferdinand. Ferdinand has allowed himself to become morbid. It is one of the chief merits of golf that non-success at the game induces a certain amount of decent humility, which keeps a man from pluming himself too much on any petty triumphs he may achieve in other walks of life; but in all things there is a happy mean, and with Ferdinand this humility has gone too far. It has taken all the spirit out of him. He feels crushed and worthless. He is grateful to caddies when they accept a tip instead of drawing themselves up to their full height and flinging the money in his face.’

‘Then do you mean that things have got to go on like this for ever?’

I thought for a moment.

‘It is a pity,’ I said, ‘that you could not have induced Ferdinand to go to Marvis Bay for a month or two.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it seems to me, thinking the thing over, that it is just possible that Marvis Bay might cure him. At the hotel there he would find collected a mob of golfers – I used the term in its broadest sense, to embrace the paralytics and the men who play left-handed – whom even he would be able to beat. When I was last at Marvis Bay, the hotel links were a sort of Sargasso Sea into which had drifted all the pitiful flotsam and jetsam of golf. I have seen things done on that course at which I shuddered and averted my eyes – and I am not a weak man. If Ferdinand can polish up his game so