RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Meet Mr Mulliner

P.G. Wodehouse

CONTENTS

About the Book

In the Angler’s Rest, drinking hot scotch and lemon, sits one of Wodehouse’s greatest raconteurs. Mr Mulliner, his vivid imagination lubricated by Miss Postlethwaite the barmaid, has fabulous stories to tell of the extraordinary behaviour of his far-flung family: In particular there’s Wilfred, inventor of Raven Gypsy face-cream and Snow of the Mountain Lotion, who lights on the formula for Buck-U-Uppo, a tonic given to elephants to enable them to face tigers with the necessary nonchalance. Its explosive effects on a shy young curate and then the higher clergy is gravely revealed. And there’s his cousin James, the detective-story writer, who has inherited a cottage more haunted than anything in his own imagination. And stuttering George the crossword whizz. And Isadore Zinzinheimer, head of the Bigger, Better & Brighter Motion Picture Company. Tall tales all – but among Wodehouse’s best.

About the Author

The author of almost a hundred books and the creator of Jeeves, Blandings Castle, Psmith, Ukridge, Uncle Fred and Mr Mulliner, P.G. Wodehouse was born in 1881 and educated at Dulwich College. After two years with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank he became a full-time writer, contributing to a variety of periodicals including *Punch* and the *Globe.* He married in 1914. As well as his novels and short stories, he wrote lyrics for musical comedies with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern, and at one time had five musicals running simultaneously on Broadway. His time in Hollywood also provided much source material for fiction.

At the age of 93, in the New Year's Honours List of 1975, he received a long-overdue knighthood, only to die on St Valentine's Day some 45 days later.

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
A Damsel in Distress
Do Butlers Burgle Banks
Doctor Sally
Eggs, Beans and Crumpets
A Few Quick Ones
French Leave
Frozen Assets
Full Moon
Galahad at Blandings
A Gentleman of Leisure
The Girl in Blue
The Girl on the Boat
The Gold Bat
The Head of Kay's
The Heart of a Goof
Heavy Weather
Hot Water
Ice in the Bedroom

If I Were You
Indiscretions of Archie
The Inimitable Jeeves
Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit
Jeeves in the Offing
Jill the Reckless
Joy in the Morning
Laughing Gas
Leave it to Psmith
The Little Nugget
Lord Emsworth and Others
Louder and Funnier
Love Among the Chickens
The Luck of Bodkins
The Man Upstairs
The Man with Two Left Feet
The Mating Season
Meet Mr Mulliner
Mike and Psmith
Mike at Wrykyn
Money for Nothing
Money in the Bank
Mr Mulliner Speaking
Much Obliged, Jeeves
Mulliner Nights
Not George Washington
Nothing Serious
The Old Reliable
Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin
A Pelican at Blandings
Piccadilly Jim
Pigs Have Wings
Plum Pie
The Pothunters
A Prefect's Uncle
The Prince and Betty

Psmith, Journalist
Psmith in the City
Quick Service
Right Ho, Jeeves
Ring for Jeeves
Sam me Sudden
Service with a Smile
The Small Bachelor
Something Fishy
Something Fresh
Spring Fever
Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves
Summer Lightning
Summer Moonshine
Sunset at Blandings
The Swoop
Tales of St Austin's
Thank You, Jeeves
Ukridge
Uncle Dynamite
Uncle Fred in the Springtime
Uneasy Money
Very Good, Jeeves
The White Feather
William Tell Told Again
Young Men in Spats

Omnibuses

The World of Blandings
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

Paperback Omnibuses

The Golf Omnibus
The Aunts Omnibus
The Drones Omnibus
The Jeeves Omnibus 1
The Jeeves Omnibus 3

Poems

The Parrot and Other Poems

Autobiographical

Wodehouse on Wodehouse (comprising Bring on the Girls, Over Seventy, Performing Flea)

Letters

Yours, Plum

Meet Mr Mulliner

P.G. Wodehouse

TO THE

EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH

1 THE TRUTH ABOUT GEORGE

TWO MEN WERE sitting in the bar-parlour of the Angler's Rest as I entered it; and one of them, I gathered from his low, excited voice and wide gestures, was telling the other a story. I could hear nothing but an occasional 'Biggest I ever saw in my life!' and 'Fully as large as that!' but in such a place it was not difficult to imagine the rest; and when the second man, catching my eye, winked at me with a sort of humorous misery, I smiled sympathetically back at him.

The action had the effect of establishing a bond between us; and when the story-teller finished his tale and left, he came over to my table as if answering a formal invitation.

'Dreadful liars some men are,' he said genially.

'Fishermen,' I suggested, 'are traditionally careless of the truth.'

'He wasn't a fisherman,' said my companion. 'That was our local doctor. He was telling me about his latest case of dropsy. Besides' – he tapped me earnestly on the knee – 'you must not fall into the popular error about fishermen. Tradition has maligned them. I am a fisherman myself, and I have never told a lie in my life.'

I could well believe it. He was a short, stout, comfortable man of middle age, and the thing that struck me first about him was the extraordinarily childlike candour of his eyes. They were large and round and honest. I would have bought oil stock from him without a tremor.

The door leading into the white dusty road opened, and a small man with rimless pince-nez and an anxious expression shot in like a rabbit and had consumed a gin and ginger-beer almost before we knew he was there. Having thus

refreshed himself, he stood looking at us, seemingly ill at ease.

‘N-n-n-n-n-n—’ he said.

We looked at him inquiringly.

‘N-n-n-n-n-n-ice d-d-d-d—’

His nerve appeared to fail him, and he vanished as abruptly as he had come.

‘I think he was leading up to telling us that it was a nice day,’ hazarded my companion.

‘It must be very embarrassing,’ I said, ‘for a man with such a painful impediment in his speech to open conversation with strangers.’

‘Probably trying to cure himself. Like my nephew George. Have I ever told you about my nephew George?’

I reminded him that we had only just met, and that this was the first time I had learned that he had a nephew George.

‘Young George Mulliner. My name is Mulliner. I will tell you about George’s case – in many ways a rather remarkable one.’

My nephew George (said Mr Mulliner) was as nice a young fellow as you would ever wish to meet, but from childhood up he had been cursed with a terrible stammer. If he had had to earn his living, he would undoubtedly have found this affliction a great handicap, but fortunately his father had left him a comfortable income; and George spent a not unhappy life, residing in the village where he had been born and passing his days in the usual country sports and his evenings in doing crossword puzzles. By the time he was thirty he knew more about Eli, the prophet, Ra, the Sun God, and the bird Emu than anybody else in the country except Susan Blake, the vicar’s daughter, who had also taken up the solving of crossword puzzles and was the first girl in Worcestershire to find out the meaning of ‘stearine’ and ‘crepuscular’.

It was his association with Miss Blake that first turned George's thoughts to a serious endeavour to cure himself of his stammer. Naturally, with this hobby in common, the young people saw a great deal of one another: for George was always looking in at the vicarage to ask her if she knew a word of seven letters meaning 'appertaining to the profession of plumbing', and Susan was just as constant a caller at George's cosy little cottage – being frequently stumped, as girls will be, by words of eight letters signifying 'largely used in the manufacture of poppet-valves'. The consequence was that one evening, just after she had helped him out of a tight place with the word 'disestablishmentarianism', the boy suddenly awoke to the truth and realized that she was all the world to him – or, as he put it to himself from force of habit, precious, beloved, darling, much-loved, highly esteemed or valued.

And yet, every time he tried to tell her so, he could get no farther than a sibilant gurgle which was no more practical use than a hiccup.

Something obviously had to be done, and George went to London to see a specialist.

'Yes?' said the specialist.

'I-I-I-I-I-I-I—' said George.

'You were saying—?'

'Woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo—'

'Sing it,' said the specialist.

'S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s—?' said George, puzzled.

The specialist explained. He was a kindly man with moth-eaten whiskers and an eye like a meditative cod-fish.

'Many people,' he said, 'who are unable to articulate clearly in ordinary speech find themselves lucid and bell-like when they burst into song.'

It seemed a good idea to George. He thought for a moment; then threw his head back, shut his eyes, and let it go in a musical baritone.

‘I love a lassie, a bonny, bonny lassie,’ sang George. ‘She’s as pure as the lily in the dell.’

‘No doubt,’ said the specialist, wincing a little.

‘She’s as sweet as the heather, the bonny purple heather – Susan, my Worcestershire bluebell.’

‘Ah!’ said the specialist. ‘Sounds a nice girl. Is this she?’ he asked, adjusting his glasses and peering at the photograph which George had extracted from the interior of the left side of his under-vest.

George nodded, and drew in breath.

‘Yes, sir,’ he carolled, ‘that’s my baby. No, sir, don’t mean maybe. Yes, sir, that’s my baby now. And, by the way, by the way, when I meet that preacher I shall say – “Yes, sir, that’s my—”’

‘Quite,’ said the specialist, hurriedly. He had a sensitive ear. ‘Quite, quite.’

‘If you knew Susie like I know Susie,’ George was beginning, but the other stopped him.

‘Quite. Exactly. I shouldn’t wonder. And now,’ said the specialist, ‘what precisely is the trouble? No,’ he added, hastily, as George inflated his lungs, ‘don’t sing it. Write the particulars on this piece of paper.’

George did so.

‘H’m!’ said the specialist, examining the screed. ‘You wish to woo, court, and become betrothed, engaged, affianced to this girl, but you find yourself unable, incapable, incompetent, impotent, and powerless. Every time you attempt it, your vocal cords fail, fall short, are insufficient, wanting, deficient, and go blooey.’

George nodded.

‘A not unusual case. I have had to deal with this sort of thing before. The effect of love on the vocal cords of even a normally eloquent subject is frequently deleterious. As regards the habitual stammerer, tests have shown that in ninety-seven point five six nine recurring of cases the divine passion reduces him to a condition where he sounds like a

soda-water siphon trying to recite Gunga Din. There is only one cure.'

'W-w-w-w-w—?' asked George.

'I will tell you. Stammering,' proceeded the specialist, putting the tips of his fingers together and eyeing George benevolently, 'is mainly mental and is caused by shyness, which is caused by the inferiority complex, which in its turn is caused by suppressed desires or introverted inhibitions or something. The advice I give to all young men who come in here behaving like soda-water siphons is to go out and make a point of speaking to at least three perfect strangers every day. Engage these strangers in conversation, persevering no matter how priceless a chump you may feel, and before many weeks are out you will find that the little daily dose has had its effect. Shyness will wear off, and with it the stammer.'

And, having requested the young man – in a voice of the clearest timbre, free from all trace of impediment – to hand over a fee of five guineas, the specialist sent George out into the world.

The more George thought about the advice he had been given, the less he liked it. He shivered in the cab that took him to the station to catch the train back to East Wobsley. Like all shy young men, he had never hitherto looked upon himself as shy – preferring to attribute his distaste for the society of his fellows to some subtle rareness of soul. But now that the thing had been put squarely up to him, he was compelled to realize that in all essentials he was a perfect rabbit. The thought of accosting perfect strangers and forcing his conversation upon them sickened him.

But no Mulliner has ever shirked an unpleasant duty. As he reached the platform and strode along it to the train, his teeth were set, his eyes shone with an almost fanatical light of determination, and he intended before his journey was

over to conduct three heart-to-heart chats if he had to sing every bar of them.

The compartment into which he had made his way was empty at the moment, but just before the train started a very large, fierce-looking man got in. George would have preferred somebody a little less formidable for his first subject, but he braced himself and bent forward. And, as he did so, the man spoke.

‘The wur-wur-wur-wur-weather,’ he said, ‘sus-sus-seems to be ter-ter-taking a tur-tur-turn for the ber-ber-better, der-doesn’t it?’

George sank back as if he had been hit between the eyes. The train had moved out of the dimness of the station by now, and the sun was shining brightly on the speaker, illuminating his knobbly shoulders, his craggy jaw, and, above all, the shockingly choleric look in his eyes. To reply ‘Y-y-y-y-y-y-y-yes’ to such a man would obviously be madness.

But to abstain from speech did not seem to be much better as a policy. George’s silence appeared to arouse this man’s worst passions. His face had turned purple and he glared painfully.

‘I uk-uk-asked you a sus-sus-civil quk-quk-quk,’ he said, irascibly. ‘Are you d-d-d-d-deaf?’

All we Mulliners have been noted for our presence of mind. To open his mouth, point to his tonsils, and utter a strangled gurgle was with George the work of a moment.

The tension relaxed. The man’s annoyance abated.

‘D-d-d-dumb?’ he said, commiseratingly. ‘I beg your p-p-p-p-pup. I t-t-trust I have not caused you p-p-p-p-pup. It m-must be tut-tut-tut-tut-tut not to be able to sus-sus-speak fuf-fuf-fuf-fuf-fluently.’

He then buried himself in his paper, and George sank back in his corner, quivering in every limb.

To get to East Wobsley, as you doubtless know, you have to change at Ippleton and take the branch-line. By the time the train reached this junction, George's composure was somewhat restored. He deposited his belongings in a compartment of the East Wobsley train, which was waiting in a glued manner on the other side of the platform, and, finding that it would not start for some ten minutes, decided to pass the time by strolling up and down in the pleasant air.

It was a lovely afternoon. The sun was gilding the platform with its rays, and a gentle breeze blew from the west. A little brook ran tinkling at the side of the road; birds were singing in the hedgerows; and through the trees could be discerned dimly the noble façade of the County Lunatic Asylum. Soothed by his surroundings, George began to feel so refreshed that he regretted that in this wayside station there was no one present whom he could engage in talk.

It was at this moment that the distinguished-looking stranger entered the platform.

The new-comer was a man of imposing physique, simply dressed in pyjamas, brown boots, and a mackintosh. In his hand he carried a top-hat, and into this he was dipping his fingers, taking them out, and then waving them in a curious manner to right and left. He nodded so affably to George that the latter, though a little surprised at the other's costume, decided to speak. After all, he reflected, clothes do not make the man, and, judging from the other's smile, a warm heart appeared to beat beneath that orange-and-mauve striped pyjama jacket.

'N-n-n-n-nice weather,' he said.

'Glad you like it,' said the stranger. 'I ordered it specially.'

George was a little puzzled by this remark, but he persevered.

'M-might I ask wur-wur-what you are dud-doing?'

'Doing?'

'With that her-her-her-her-hat?'

‘Oh, with this hat? I see what you mean. Just scattering largesse to the multitude,’ replied the stranger, dipping his fingers once more and waving them with a generous gesture. ‘Devil of a bore, but it’s expected of a man in my position. The fact is,’ he said, linking his arm in George’s and speaking in a confidential undertone, ‘I’m the Emperor of Abyssinia. That’s my palace over there,’ he said, pointing through the trees. ‘Don’t let it go any farther. It’s not supposed to be generally known.’

It was with a rather sickly smile that George now endeavoured to withdraw his arm from that of his companion, but the other would have none of this aloofness. He seemed to be in complete agreement with Shakespeare’s dictum that a friend, when found, should be grappled to you with hooks of steel. He held George in a vice-like grip and drew him into a recess of the platform. He looked about him, and seemed satisfied.

‘We are alone at last,’ he said.

This fact had already impressed itself with sickening clearness on the young man. There are few spots in the civilized world more deserted than the platform of a small country station. The sun shone on the smooth asphalt, on the gleaming rails, and on the machine which, in exchange for a penny placed in the slot marked ‘Matches’, would supply a package of wholesome butter-scotch – but on nothing else.

What George could have done with at the moment was a posse of police armed with stout clubs, and there was not even a dog in sight.

‘I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a long time,’ said the stranger, genially.

‘Huh-huh-have you?’ said George.

‘Yes. I want your opinion of human sacrifices.’

George said he didn’t like them.

‘Why not?’ asked the other, surprised.

George said it was hard to explain. He just didn’t.