

P. G. Wodehouse's Percyphobia

by Percy Kemp

As someone whose first name is Percy, I was delighted to read the news in *Wooster Sauce* last year of the unveiling of a plaque commemorating Percy Jeeves (1888–1916), after whom Wodehouse named his inimitable and unsurpassable manservant character. Brian Halford, who has researched this dapper cricketer's life thoroughly, depicts Jeeves as “a man who, alongside all his considerable merits, belongs to one of the smallest categories of the human race: that of whom nobody had a bad word to say”.

Overjoyed as I was, though, at the news that a namesake of mine (or, rather, half a namesake) was the inspiration for PGW's Jeeves, I was also bewildered – for I had long suspected Wodehouse of Percyphobia. I may be wrong, of course (and I readily confess that my knowledge of Wodehouse's writings is sketchy), but it does seem to me that none of his characters answering to the name of Percy (and there are quite a few of them) comes across as being particularly likeable.

The first unsavoury Percy that comes to mind is Percy Pilbeam, the slimy private investigator with the foul moustache and the loud check suits. Then there is Percy Gorringe, Florence Craye's soupy, side-whiskered suitor, and Florence's father, Percy Craye, the freshly elevated earl and shipping magnate who sails close to the wind and who once chased the young Bertie for five miles across country with a hunting crop after finding him smoking one of his cigars. There is also Percy, Lord Belpher, the stuffed killjoy in *A Damsel in Distress*, and Percy, the rude and cheeky office boy in *The Girl in Blue*. Not to mention Percy, Lord Stockheath, who would win any Upper Class Twit of the Year competition with flying colours.

The only two exceptions I can recall to this “foul Percy rule” are Percy the bulldog, in *Indiscretions of Archie*, and Percy Bulstrode, the chemist in the Blandings stories. Yet even then, neither can be said to be in any way likeable. In truth, all the Percys that figure in Wodehouse's stories come across as being either plain stupid or simply foul, Wodehouse having not seen fit to endow any of them with a single redeeming feature or saving grace that might endear him to the reader.

Which begs the question of whether Wodehouse did so by accident, or by design. The answer to this question is given to us in ‘The Custody of the Pumpkin’, where we are told that Lord Emsworth's prize pumpkin, Blandings Hope, is cruelly nicknamed Percy by his son Freddie.

I rather suspect, then, that the name Percy must have conjured up in Wodehouse's mind unnerving and irritating images of some obnoxious Percy he may have known – a school bully, possibly, or else a squealer or whipping boy, if not a loathed neighbour or relative, a shady businessman or a crooked publisher – and that this, in turn, induced him to give the name of Percy to those of his characters for whom he felt no sympathy.

If I'm right in assuming that Wodehouse associated this name with unpleasant memories, then *Wooster Sauce* would be well advised to refrain from calling the gallant Percy Jeeves by his first name, and to refer to him instead as PJeeves. As for me, I should probably cast aside my full name, and henceforth go under the name of PKemp.