

# BY THE WAY



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## *With the launch of a boxed set of DVD's of ITV's Jeeves and Wooster series, it's time to look at Sir Watkyn and Madeline Bassett*

It is a quite remarkable thought that Madeline Bassett, this droopy, sentimental girl, who sometimes expressed the most extraordinary views on commonplace objects such as stars, moons, daisy chains and rabbits, was educated in the rough, tough environment of Roedean, with her friend Hilda Gudgeon.

Undoubtedly she was an eyeful.

However much Bertie Wooster despaired at the thought of being tied to her for life, he conceded willingly that that she did not try the eye. She was svelte, with delicately moulded features, sentimental, melting, lustrous, saucer-like eyes, and blonde hair, nose, teeth and ears well up to if not above average.

But there was a catch, and for any right-thinking man, she was not it. Within that outer crust, and despite her educational background, we learn that she was the woman whom God forgot and went on forgetting.

Can there be another explanaton as to why

she proved to be the world's sloppiest, mushiest, sentimentalest young Gawd-help-us, whose favourite reading into adulthood was *Christopher Robin* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*?

Maybe it was because she had known Spode since she was so high, and escaped into her own world to avoid listening to his poisonous political arguments. It is unlikely, we must concede, that she could have believed that she would be able to change him, as Florence Craye and others tried with Bertie Wooster.

Madeline first appeared on Bertie Wooster's horizon when they met separately vacationing at Cannes, and reappeared a few days after Bertie's return to the UK through the doings of Gussie Fink-Nottle. It was he who dethorned her dog's paw (or, as

*When I was a child, I used to think that rabbits were gnomes, and that if I held my breath and stayed quite still, I should see the fairy queen.*

Madeline would have put it, 'my doggie's paw'), following which act of chivalry she immediately fell in love with him, only to become distressed when he was too shy to follow up the opening which had occurred to meet her again. So to be fair, she was in the mood to misunderstand Bertie when, on Gussie's behalf, he sought to speed matters along, and as a result, to create a lifelong belief that Bertie yearned for her and wanted to make her his.

Madeline's uncanny skill in misinterpretation (which would have served her well had she chosen a career in politics) resulted in numerous further wrong conclusions being drawn from the actions of several of her contemporaries, and led to her becoming engaged on at least a dozen occasions in about two years (four times to Bertie, five to Gussie and three to Spode), and disengaged, almost as a

routine, on at least eleven. In only one book in

which she featured, *The Mating Season*, did she not break at least one engagement, being tied to Gussie somewhat loosely throughout.

The latest information is that she is still headed for the altar to become the Countess of Sidcup, and we must hope that until the blessed event has come to pass she does not catch Roderick Spode stroking a cat against the nap of its fur, or making some other *faux pas* which incurs her displeasure.

Madeline played prominent roles in five novels (*Right Ho, Jeeves*; *The Code of the Woosters*; *The Mating Season*; *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*; and *Much Obligated, Jeeves*) and had a cameo appearance in the *Playboy* version of the short story *Jeeves and the Greasy Bird*.

*I shall always be a fragrant memory, always something deep in your heart that will be with you like a gentle, tender ghost as you watch the sunset on summer evenings while the little birds sing their off-to-bed songs in the shrubbery.*

*"I said 'Didn't [Gussie] think that the little wreaths of mist covering the grass were the elves' bridal veils?'"*

At the opening of the recorded part of the Jeeves and Wooster saga Sir Watkyn Bassett, CBE, was still the resident beak at Boshier Street police/magistrates court, where he enjoyed the first of his many encounters with Bertie Wooster. Bertie had been charged with trying to separate a policeman from his helmet on Boat Race night, but the occasion cut no ice with Sir Watkyn, who according to Bertie added Bertie's fiver to his already substantial collection of fines. Shortly afterwards, Bertie claims, he must have amassed sufficient fines on which to retire, for he put it about that he had inherited a pot of money from a distant relative and bought Totleigh Towers, in Gloucestershire.

*Don't you sometimes feel that the stars are God's daisy chain?*

Being a small man physically, Sir Watkyn sought to compensate for his lack of inches by wearing striking clothes, and whereas his check tweeds might be overlooked, his purple dressing-gown covered with yellow frogs was sufficient to disturb the dog Bartholomew's piece of mind and add to Bassett's discomfort. The mental state of this half-sized tyrant can be judged from his action in deliberately seeking to marry into a family of which his bosom pal Spode was a member, for he attached himself romantically to Spode's aunt, Mrs Wintergreen. It is perhaps not surprising that the cerebral excitement from which he was clearly suffering extended to a faulty memory, and it was his persistence in maintaining that Bertie had been guilty of bag-snatching rather than helmet-pinching that was to cause numerous misunderstandings of Bertie's actions.

*Every time a fairy sheds a tear, a wee bit star is born in the Milky Way.*

Perhaps, though, he deserved his daughter Madeline and his ward Stiffy Byng, for they and their friends did nothing to reduce the tension in his life. After Madeline's fiancé Gussie Fink-Nottle had enterprisingly made a list of his personal feelings about Bassett in a leather-covered note-book, for instance, with equal enterprise he gave it to Bassett to read!

Through a mutual passion for old silver, Bassett was a personal acquaintance (but no more) of Tom Travers, for both were serious collectors of the species. But whereas Tom was essentially honest, generally cloaking his frustrations with no more than occasional vituperative remarks about the

income tax, Bassett was guilty of sharp practice on a number of occasions, and not just in relation to his collection. The ethical practices committee of his professional association should surely have looked into his actions long before his retirement.

His actions in obtaining the cow-creamer, his boasting about swindling Plank in relation to the amber statuette, his use of blackmail to try to obtain the services of first Anatole and then Jeeves, his deliberate carnage amongst the newts by flushing them down the bath waste-pipe and his cavalier attitude to promises he gave to Harold Pinker in relation to the vicarage which would have enabled him to marry Stiffy, to name but a few instances, all go to show that it was he rather than Harold who most merited the nickname 'Stinker'. He deserved what he got, and what he got, the shrimp-faced little son of a what-not, was plenty, including a hard-boiled egg and a jam-filled doughnut on the left cheekbone at the school treat.

### *The Depths to which Bassett would Stoop*

"I broke the tank I keep my newts in in my bedroom, and the bath was the only place to lodge the newts. Newts need elbow-room. But Bassett went to take a bath. It never occurred to me that anyone would be taking a bath as late as this. And I was in the drawing-room, when he burst in shouting: 'Madeline, that blasted Fink-Nottle has been filling my bath-tub with tadpoles!' And I lost my head a little, I'm afraid. I yelled: 'Oh, my gosh, you silly old ass, be careful what you're doing with those newts. Don't touch them. I'm in the middle of a most important experiment.'

"I went on to tell him how I wished to ascertain whether the full moon affected the love life of newts. And a strange look came into his face, and he quivered a bit, and then he told me that he had pulled out the plug and all my newts had gone down the waste pipe."

Try as we might to find a good word to say about the ex-magistrate, the nearest we can come to doing so is to sympathise with the fact that his daughter turned out the way she did, and charitably assume that this brought out the worst in him. Perhaps when she finally marries he will once again become a paid-up member of the human race.

Sir Watkyn's most prominent appearances were in *The Code of the Woosters* and *Stiff Upper Lip*, Jeeves.