

# BY THE WAY



Occasional Newsletters from The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

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## Wodehouse's Russian References: Culture

*In this issue and the next two June issues we will be presenting a selection of Wodehouse's references to matters Russian, to accompany Masha Lebedeva's series of articles in Wooster Sauce.*

### From *Piccadilly Jim*, ch9 (1917)

It was a fascinating feature of Mrs Pett's at-homes and one which assisted that mental broadening process already alluded to that one never knew, when listening to a discussion on the sincerity of Oscar Wilde, whether it would not suddenly change in the middle of a sentence to an argument on the inner meaning of the Russian Ballet.

### From *The Voice from the Past in Mulliner Nights* (1933)

The colonel's subjects were sheep (in sickness and in health), manure, wheat, mangold-wurzels, huntin', shootin', and fishin'; while Sacheverell was at his best on Proust, the Russian Ballet, Japanese prints, and the Influence of James Joyce on the younger Bloomsbury novelists.

### From *The Mating Season*, ch9 (1949)

[Gussie said] "Here's another bit of incoherent raving. 'My sister's in the ballet.' 'You say your sister's in the ballet?' 'Yes, begorrah, my sister's in the ballet.' 'What does your sister do in the ballet?' 'She comes rushing in, and then she goes rushing out.' 'What does she have to rush like that for?' 'Faith and begob, because it's a Rushin' ballet.'"

### From *Bachelors Anonymous*, ch10 (1973)

Mr Llewellyn paused. Mr Trout had begun to float about the room like something out of *Swan Lake*, and Mr Llewellyn disapproved of this. He was apt to be a martinet in his dealings with his legal advisers, demanding that lawyers should behave like lawyers and leave eccentric dancing to the professionals.

### From *A Pelican at Blandings*, ch7(3) (1969)

Abandoning the shoe, [the cat] applied its head to Lord Emsworth's dressing gown with a quick thrusting movement, and Lord Emsworth, filled with much the same emotions as had gripped him in his boyhood when a playful schoolmate, creeping up behind him in the street, had tooted the motor horn in his immediate rear, executed one of those sideways leaps which Nijinsky used to be so good at in his prime.

### From *The Girl on a Boat*, ch16(5) (1922)

It was not Bream who spoke but a strange voice – a sepulchral voice, the sort of voice someone would have used in one of Edgar Allen Poe's cheerful little tales if he had been buried alive and were speaking from the family vault. Coming suddenly out of the night it affected Bream painfully. He uttered a sharp exclamation and gave a bound which, if he had been a Russian dancer, would probably have caused the management to raise his salary. He was in no frame of mind to bear up under sudden sepulchral voices.

### From *Ukridge's Dog College in Ukridge* (1924)

... the door suddenly opened. As I was just giving a final bang at the moment, I entered the house in a manner reminiscent of one of the Ballet Russe practising a new and difficult step.

### From *Keeping in with Vosper in The Heart of a Goof* (1926)

For fully a minute, it seemed to him, Mrs Fisher fiddled and pawed at the ball; while Bradbury, realizing that there are eighteen tees on a course and that this Russian Ballet stuff was consequently going to happen at least seventeen times more, quivered in agony and clenched his hands till the knuckles stood out white under the strain.

### From *Jeeves in the Offing*, ch4(1) (1960)

I [ie Bertie Wooster] knew Chekhov's *Seagull*. My Aunt Agatha had once made me take her son Thos to a performance of it at the Old Vic, and what with the strain of trying to follow the cockeyed goings-on of characters called Zarietchnaya and Medvienko\* and having to be constantly on the alert to prevent Thos making a sneak for the great open spaces, my suffering had been intense.

\* in Chekhov's original – Medvedenko

### From *Uneasy Money*, ch6 (1916)

[Miss Leonard] does Greek dances – at least, I suppose they're Greek. They all are nowadays, unless they're Russian. She's an English peeress.

**From *Something Fishy*, ch23 (1957)**

[Keggs said] "When Mr Bunyan made her acquaintance, she was playing a small role in a translation from the Russian."

[Lord Uffenham replied] "Oh, my God! An aunt of mine once made me take her to one of those. Lot of gosh-awful bounders standing around saying how sad it all was and wondering if Ivan was going to hang himself in the barn. Don't tell me that Roscoe Bunyan, a free agent, goes to see plays translated from the Russian."

**From *Big Money*, ch7(1) (1931)**

It is not pleasant, when one is face to face with one's soul, to see a lot of fatheads enjoying themselves. Berry had achieved by this time a frame of mind which would have qualified him to walk straight into a Chekhov play and no questions asked.

**From *The Nodder in Blandings Castle* (1935)**

And the sight of Mabel Potter, recalling to him those dreams of happiness which he had once dared to dream and which now could never come to fulfilment, plunged him still deeper into the despondency. If he had been a character in a Russian novel, he would have gone and hanged himself in the barn.

**From *The Clicking Of Cuthbert in The Clicking Of Cuthbert* (1922)**

Cuthbert was an optimist at heart, and it seemed to him that, at the rate at which the inhabitants of that interesting country were murdering one another, the supply of Russian novelists must eventually give out.

**From *Rodney Fails to Qualify in The Heart of a Goof* (1926)**

The sound of a high tenor voice, talking rapidly and entertainingly on the subject of modern Russian thought, now intruded itself on the peace of the night.

**From *Monkey Business in Blandings Castle* (1933)**

I have a tender heart [said Mr Mulliner], and I dislike to dwell on the spectacle of human beings groaning under the iron heel of Fate. Such morbid gloating, I consider, is better left to the Russians.

**From *Jill the Reckless*, ch8(1) (1920)**

Surveying Freddie, as he droops on his spine in the yielding leather, one is conscious of one's limitations as a writer. Gloom like his calls for the pen of a master. Zola could have tackled it nicely. Gorky might have made a stab at it. Dostoevsky would have handled it with relish. But for oneself the thing is too vast.

**From *Pigs Have Wings*, ch1(4) (1952)**

Lord Emsworth was approaching, on his face that dying duck look which was so often there in times of stress. Something, it was plain to [Galahad], had occurred to upset poor old Clarence. . . . Poor old Clarence was patently all of a doodah . . . "Strike me pink, Clarence", he exclaimed, "you look like something out of a Russian novel. What's on your mind? And what have you done with Parsloe? Did you murder him, and are you worried because you don't know how to get rid of the body?"

**From *The Code of the Mulliners in Young Men in Spats* (1936)**

Here [Archibald Mulliner] was, adored – one might say fawned upon – by this lovely girl [Aurelia Cammarleigh], and simple decency made it impossible that he should marry her. And if you could tie that, even in Russian novel, he would like to know how.

**From *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*, ch15 (1974)**

"Trash," said [Vanessa Cook]. "It really is time you began reading something worthwhile. I don't expect you to start with Turgenev and Dostoevsky," she said, evidently alluding to a couple of Russian exiles she had met in London who did a bit of writing on the side, . . .

**From *The Girl on a Boat*, ch2 (1922)**

Sam regarded him blankly. He had not seen him for some years, but, going by his recollections of him at the University, he had expected something cheerier than this. In fact, he had rather been relying on Eustace to be the life and soul of the party. The man sitting on the bag before him could hardly have filled that role at a gathering of Russian novelists.

**From *The Love Among the Chickens*, ch10 (1920)**

It would be interesting to know to what extent the work of authors is influenced by their private affairs. If life is flowing smoothly, are the novels they write in that period of content coloured with optimism? And if things are running crosswise, do they work off the resultant gloom on their faithful public? . . . If Maxim Gorky were invited to lunch by Trotsky, to meet Lenin, would he sit down and dash off a trifle in the vein of Stephen Leacock?

*Space restrictions will prevent the inclusion in By The Way or Wooster Sauce of all the quotations with references to Russia which Masha traced. A full list of the references can be obtained on application to the Editor.*