



BY THE WAY

Occasional Newsletters from The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

Number 51

March 2013

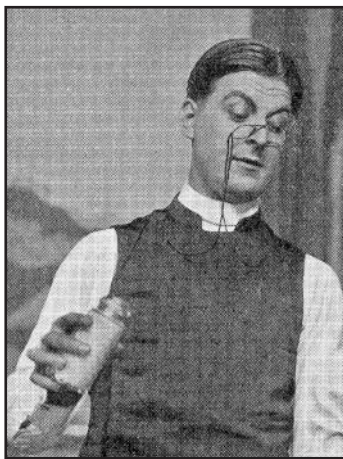
Four Men in Plum's 'Repertory Company'

Eddie Grabham now turns to four of the male actors who played in the three West End comedies by P G Wodehouse and Ian Hay: *A Damsel in Distress* and *Leave It to Psmith*, both adapted from Plum's novels; and *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*, based on the short story 'Locum Tenens' by Ian Hay.

Henry Kendall (1897–1962)

Henry Kendall's parents were on the stage, but they were determined that their son should learn a 'proper' trade, and signed him to an apprenticeship with a tailor. Henry hated it, and felt that World War I came just in time to save him from what he considered to be sheer drudgery. Before he signed up, he was accepted at the Old Vic, where he gained valuable tutoring from the legendary Lilian Baylis and Ben Greet. He was called up for military service in 1916 and, due to the influence of Ivor Novello, he trained as a pilot.

After the war, he first found work in the West End and in 1926 went to New York to play opposite the exotic Corsican actress Irene Bordoni in *Naughty Cinderella*. He was cast as Tony Lagorce in the try-out tour of Valerie Wyngate's original adaptation of



Henry Kendall as Hugo
in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*

Her Cardboard Lover, but after Wodehouse was called in to rewrite the play for Broadway, there were a number of changes in the casting and Henry Kendall, along with the lead actress Laurette Taylor, was replaced.

Nevertheless, on his return to London he was destined to play in two Wodehouse-Hay productions for Basil Foster, who had just

entered management. His first role was Reggie Higgins in *A Damsel in Distress*, which opened at the New Theatre in August 1928, alongside his friend Reginald Gardiner, who played Viscount Tottleigh. To celebrate, the pair went off on holiday together, and managed to be late for the first rehearsal! Nevertheless, the successful play had a run of 242

performances. Kendall also played the lead, Hugo Bonsor, in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*, again at the New, which ran for 115 performances from April 1929.

Now a West End name, Kendall starred in the Arnold Ridley-Bernard Merrivale 'rip-roaring' melodrama *The Flying Fool*. Although the play had a short run, it was filmed in 1931 and Kendall was busily employed in British film studios for most of the 1930s. He continued to be a success in the West End in both revues and plays, and had huge success after the war with Philip King's *On Monday Next*. He had little time to make more films, although as late as 1955 he appeared in the 'star-studded' British comedy *An Alligator Named Daisy*.

Reginald Gardiner (1903–1980)

Reginald Gardiner studied at RADA before making his West End debut in *The Prisoner of Zenda* at the Haymarket in 1923. After a spell in the provinces, he returned to London in 1925 to appear in *Old Heidelberg* at the Garrick. More plays followed before he joined the cast of *A Damsel in Distress* at the New Theatre in 1928, where he stayed to play



Reginald Gardiner
in the film version
of *A Damsel in
Distress*

Osbert in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*. He remained with the company in 1930 when it moved to the Shaftesbury for 156 performances of *Leave It to Psmith*, taking the role of Freddie Bosham.

Gardiner made his film debut in 1932, though he quickly returned to the stage and in 1935 played in *At Home Abroad* and *The Show Is On* on Broadway. He also had success in films in Hollywood, including the screen version of *A Damsel in Distress* in which he now appeared as an older man, the butler Keggs.

He was a popular monologist whose recording of *Trains* was such a success that King George VI commanded him to perform it at Buckingham Palace. It was a popular request on the radio programme *Children's Favourites* during the 1950s.

Clive Currie (1877–1935)

Clive Currie was well established on the London stage by the time he played Lord Marshmoreton in *A Damsel in Distress*. He had made his West End debut in 1896 with *The Sign of the Cross* at the Lyric, before forming his own touring repertory company. He returned to the West End to work under Sir Herbert Tree from 1905 in London and Berlin. He was a founder of the Repertory Players and conducted a Shakespearean School of Acting for children from 1904 to 1915.

He played a wide variety of roles throughout the 1920s, and after his success in *Damsel* he played Walpole Wyndrum, the 3rd Earl of Tuckleford, in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep* and the Earl of Middlewick in *Leave It to Psmith*.



Clive Currie as Lord Marshmoreton in *A Damsel in Distress*

His appearances on film were rare, but included *Good Night Vienna* with Jack Buchanan in 1932, and the 1933 film version of *Leave It to Psmith*, retitled *Leave It to Me*, with his character's name reverting to 'Lord Emsworth'.

Basil Foster (1882–1959)

Basil Foster was a distinguished county cricketer before World War I, but by 1906 he had made his

stage debut in *Mr Poppo of Ippleton*, with his West End debut the following year when he played Lieutenant de Coop in *Miss Hook of Holland* at the Prince of Wales Theatre. Having toured in *The Merry Widow*, he repeated his role as Prince Danilo at Daly's after a brief period during which he had played a different character, the man about town St Brioche. He continued to appear in successful West End musicals until gaining a commission in 1914.



Basil Foster on the front of the programme for *A Damsel in Distress*

After the war Foster returned to the stage, now playing mainly in straight roles and comedies, and then turned to management, where he put his experience to good use.

The first play he presented as a manager was *A Damsel in Distress*, in which he took the part of George Bevan, and he followed this with *The Middle Watch*, by Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall, which ran for 387 performances at the Shaftesbury. He stayed at the Shaftesbury while playing Ronald Eustace Psmith in *Leave It to Psmith*, and then presented *The Midshipmaid*, another success by Hay and King-Hall.

Foster also appeared in a special revival of *Bulldog Drummond* in 1932 for King George V's Pension Fund, in which he reprised his role as Peter Darnell, and in the 1937 adaptation of Dorothy Sayers's *Busman's Honeymoon*, in which he was cast as a somewhat elderly Peter Wimsey.

Having appeared in the 1920 silent film *The Auction Mart*, Foster returned to the screen in 1934 with *Radio Parade of 1935*.