



BY THE WAY

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Unresolved – After a Hundred Years

On 18 September 1915, the American weekly *Saturday Evening Post* published a short story, ‘Extricating Young Gussie’, by Pelham Grenville Wodehouse. It later appeared in England’s *Strand* magazine (January 1916) and was included in the book collection *The Man with Two Left Feet and Other Stories* the following year.

What is indisputable is that this story, whose centenary coincides with this edition of *By The Way*, introduced Jeeves to the reading public for the first time – modestly, it has to be said, as he only had two lines. The first line of dialogue in the story is: “Mrs Gregson to see you, sir.” It is followed some four pages later by a rather more fulfilling exchange with Bertie, his employer.

Jeeves came in with the tea. “Jeeves,” I said, “we start for America on Saturday.”

“Very good, sir,” he said; “which suit will you wear?”

What has never been finally resolved, however, is who ‘Bertie’ was. It is one of those questions that make people shuffle their feet and look at the ground. Most people assume that Bertie is Bertie Wooster, and those who shy away from the assumption wish they could find the evidence to prove it. A number of the intelligentsia have offered justifications for the view but in their heart of hearts have always known that they failed to convince.

So, with the centenary in mind, in this edition of *By The Way* Tony Ring summarises the evidence, looks at some of the suggested explanations made over the years, and invites readers to submit their comments to the Editor of *Wooster Sauce* at editor@pgwodehousesociety.org.uk, either in support of one of the proposals in this article, or to provide their own new analysis.

Extricating Young Gussie

The principal characters in the story are Bertie, his Aunt Agatha (Mrs Spencer* Gregson), Jeeves, and Bertie’s cousin – Gussie Mannering-Phipps.

[* generally Spenser in later stories]

Aunt Agatha is stated to be the sister-in-law of Gussie’s mother, Julia, and it follows that she was the

sister of his father, Cuthbert. Bertie refers to him as “Uncle Cuthbert” and also as the head of the family. The Mannering-Phippses are described as one of the best and oldest families in England, and we discover from Bertie that they were “an old-established clan when William the Conqueror was a small boy going round with bare legs and a catapult”.

Bertie and Aunt Agatha discuss the vaudeville origins of Gussie’s mother, and, noting that Gussie has himself become engaged to an American vaudeville artist, Bertie suggests that “perhaps the thing is going to be a regular family tradition . . . a sort of Curse of the Mannering-Phippses, as it were.” In lieu of a reply, Agatha sends Bertie to America to stop Gussie marrying his girl. “Have you no sort of feeling for the family?” she asks him.

Summary of Evidence to Date

- a) Bertie has not been given a surname.
- b) Aunt Agatha was born Agatha Mannering-Phipps.
- c) ‘Mannering-Phipps’ is an old English family.
- d) The head of Bertie’s family is a Mannering-Phipps.
- e) There is no sign of a Wooster anywhere.

Subsequent Appearances of Jeeves in Stories about Bertie

The next four appearances of Jeeves and ‘Bertie’ were in:

- a) ‘Leave It to Jeeves’ (5 February 1916, in *Saturday Evening Post* and *My Man Jeeves*);
- b) ‘The Aunt and the Sluggard’ (22 April 1916, in *Saturday Evening Post* and *My Man Jeeves*);
- c) ‘Jeeves Takes Charge’ (18 November 1916 and *Carry On, Jeeves*); and
- d) ‘Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest’ (9 December, 1916 and *My Man Jeeves*).

All of these, other than ‘Jeeves Takes Charge’ (which is the story in which Jeeves arrives in Bertie’s London apartment, having been sent by the agency to replace the sock-sneaking Meadows), are set in New York.

At the start of 'Leave It to Jeeves', Bertie explains that after the debacle concerning his cousin Gussie, he had thought it wise to stay on in New York, out of Aunt Agatha's way. But a few pages later, he is addressed by Muriel Singer as "Mr Wooster". The Wooster surname also appears in the other two New York stories mentioned but, intriguingly, not in 'Jeeves Takes Charge', which merely describes how 'a' Jeeves first came to work for 'a' Bertie.

Possible Solutions to the Dilemma

a) Bertie Mannering-Phipps and his Aunt Agatha were distinct characters, whose lives have many coincidental similarities to those of Bertie Wooster and his Aunt Agatha. This solution is presented unquestioningly and without comment by Dan Garrison in *Who's Who in Wodehouse*.

[Aside: Nobody, as far as I am aware, has sought to argue that the Jeeves of 'Extricating Young Gussie' is also a different Jeeves to the man in Bertie Wooster's employment for so long. There are probably enough matters to debate without that complication, but it should be borne in mind that this story offered no particular examples of what we recognise as Jeeves's special skills, and since the only reference to Jeeves's Christian name was deferred until 1961, when it was disclosed by Bingley in Much Obligated, Jeeves, it might actually be possible to develop a parallel argument.]

b) Richard Osborne, in *Wodehouse at Work*, stated that in the first story in which Bertie appeared, his surname was undoubtedly 'Mannering-Phipps'. He believes this to be a misjudgement by Wodehouse, "probably . . . caused by an over-anxiety to please America. In Wodehouse's early New York days the resounding and seemingly aristocratic English name was something of a joke. Americans liked to think that 'Courtney de Vere-Vere' was a typical English name. We liked to think that Silas Q. Higgs was a typical American name. Wodehouse mentions the business of English names in America in one or two of his essays, and in 'In Alcalá' [appearing in *People's Magazine* in November 1909] the somewhat autobiographical English hero has his name cut down by the American heroine from Rutherford Maxwell to George. . . . Gussie himself says he feels a fearful ass in New York when he has to sign his name as Augustus Mannering-Phipps. He starts calling himself George Wilson."

c) Geoffrey Jaggard, in *Wooster's World*, suggested that in the 19th century the ancient Mannering-

Phipps and Wooster families had merged and adopted the then fashionable double hyphenation, such as Wooster-Mannering-Phipps. "For a short period they dropped the Wooster. . . . With the rationalisation of English society usage consequent on two world wars, matters have become simplified. Wooster-Mannering-Phipps, following the trend, have commendably retained only their oldest patronymic, which is Wooster."

[Aside: two problems here – the name Wooster first appeared during the First World War, not after the Second, as implied by Jaggard; and while the Woosters came over with the Conqueror, the Mannering-Phippses seem already to have been here.]

d) The late John Fletcher preferred a more complex explanation, suggesting (in his article 'Wodehouse in Woostershire') that "nearly all the problems can be explained if it is accepted that Bertie's grandmother was married twice". He argued that her first husband was a Mannering-Phipps, by whom she had three children: Cuthbert, Agatha, and Dahlia. She then married an earlier Lord Yaxley, who was her entrée into the Wooster family.

John sought to use the evidence of lack of titles to justify his conclusions, but remained silent on the question of why Agatha and Dahlia, having been born Mannering-Phippses, both changed their names to Wooster, presumably when their mother remarried. He believed this explains why Agatha and Dahlia did not have courtesy titles from the Yaxley peerage, pointing out that an inveterate snob like Aunt Agatha would certainly have used any to which she was entitled. John added the interesting aside that it might also explain why, in the early pages of 'The Love That Purifies' (in the collection *Very Good, Jeeves!*), Bertie refers to Mr Anstruther as an old friend "of Aunt Dahlia's late father", rather than simply to "my grandfather".

Conclusion

Whatever the true explanation, no commentator has suggested that, at the time that 'Extricating Young Gussie' appeared in print, Bertie was anything other than a Mannering-Phipps. So perhaps a valid conclusion is that, although 18 September 2015 is the centenary of Jeeves's first appearance, we should regard 5 February 2016, as the centenary of the first proven appearance in print of a Bertie Wooster story, and thus of the first featuring 'Jeeves and Bertie Wooster'.