

## Jeeves and the PhD

On the subject of the Wooster brain, opinions seem to diverge somewhat. Considering that I am almost constantly occupied in pondering fruity schemes of great pith and moment, as the fellow said, in various capacities as counsellor and *intermédiaire*<sup>1</sup> to my many friends, it might come as a surprise to an innocent bystander that derogatory epithets have been applied to the said Wooster brain.

One, of course, doesn't really attach any importance to those comments when originating from the mouth of hardly human specimens such as my Aunt Agatha, who chews broken bottles and might well be a thinly-disguised werewolf, not to be approached when the moon is full, or her son young Thos, whose hateful behavior is widely reported in the larger Metropolitan papers when he visits London.

However, when I overhear Jeeves himself sharing rather unnecessarily with some new acquaintance the notion that the young master's intellect is 'quite negligible', the spirit of the Woosters stands to its full height and demands immediate reparation for this unwarranted slander.

Of course, it is not easy to squarely confront the un-feudal fellow and throw a glove to his face. Not only would I be rather sorry to lose Jeeves, but there's also something in his countenance that seems to make the idea hard to envision. Quite possibly, he might be an expert sportsman and as easy with the *fleuret* or with the pistol as he is with the hook when he takes it into his mind to do the local denizens of the deep a bit of no good.

Thus it was that while I was chewing somewhat the lower lip and frowning the brow to no little extent while taking a walk in Picadilly Circus after another of those disturbing events, thinking that those slanderous statements had to be nipped in the bud now, I came to be embroiled in this horrific adventure, the mere remembrance of which causes my knees to turn into jelly and my spine to quiver alarmingly, reducing by comparison even the most horrendous of my previous experiences to some innocuous kind of friendly skirmish, rather joyous and light-hearted as a game of Rugby among the local gentry. I speak, if my tongue cleave not to the roof of my mouth before I can utter the words, of the chilling episode of the Ph.D...

I was indeed chafing quite a bit on this dark-fated afternoon; not only had Jeeves delivered once more those aforementioned derogatory comments, but only the day before, while I was musing in front of him on the subject of the kilt that my friend Angus MacLevy was going to bring back for me from the Highlands where he had retired for a few months on the ancestral lands of the clan Macbeth, there was a decidedly rummy smile on his face, and he had expressed the feeling, quite unasked for, that such a garment would not become the dapper *silhouette* of the last of the Woosters. It seemed quite probable that he would, as in the past he had been prone to do in the matter of white jackets and purple socks, spare no underhanded dirty work to deprive me of this inestimable costume.

While I was thus trying to devise some means to put down this proud man's contumely of his, if 'contumely' means what I think it does, by some definitive and spectacular *coup*

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<sup>1</sup> Words in italic are in French in the original

*d'éclat*, a distinct sound of Wooster-hallo-ing came to my ears, and turning in the general direction of those friendly cries, I beheld a black figure in a strange cloak gesturing towards me and making way with the manifest intention of establishing some communication with me. I was quite taken aback by such an appearance and was debating the comparative merits of a quick dash in the opposite direction or of making front, when I descried the features of the apparition and identified the said person with my old school friend Walter Alastair Appleton.

— Halloa halloa Wooster! said he, as he came within speaking distance.

— What ho what ho what ho!, I replied civilly, smiling benignly as I approved his evident gaiety and merriment.

And I will tell you why I applauded this g. and m. Indeed, it had been times when, after we had gone our diverse ways after school, he deciding to continue in the pursuit of knowledge and what not while I sagely preferred to call it a day as far as education was concerned, I had heard news of his advancement on this path and looked askance at what was revealed to me. Unnatural and unhealthy, all this business of studying and researching seemed to be, and apt to turn a chap into a somber and melancholy fellow, out of reach of the simple pleasures of life, such as removing the helmets of policemen during boat race night, and in many respects hardly happier than a prisoner in a dungeon waiting for the tumbrel to bring him to the gallows, except for the fact that no such vehicle would come to conveniently end all this ghastly business. But today it was clear that some change had come to this gallant lad. Evidence of his high and joyful spirits were present in his whole demeanor. Feet were, even while speaking to me, engaged in some sophisticated sort of cha-cha-cha which I appraised with high approval, being not far from an expert on this topic. Eyes were gleaming. In short, a happy bloke if ever there was one.

— What ho, what ho, I repeated. What is this apparel, old man?

— Hullo, hullo, Bertie, he replied. I've just finished defending my Ph.D.

I frowned at this strange name, taking it to be some kind of exotic species of strawberry, the presence of which in our conversation seemed rather far-fetched and damageably indicative of some kind of goofiness or sheer lunacy. Perceiving my doubts, he hastened to dispel them.

— Philosophiae Doctorae, I mean. The crowning title of students everywhere. And I will tell you what was my thesis: "*Italian fashion of the Renaissance and the later works of Leonardo*".

His ample robe and square hat, he added quickly, were the usual clothing at such events and denoted his entry into the confederation of scholars.

— I was just taking a breath of fresh air and rejoicing about all that before the reception and refreshments. Will you come with me? I'll introduce you to my advisor, Prof. Charlotte Mistletoe, F.R.S, of Trinity College. She's incredible.

No man is quicker than Bertram Wooster to bury his dark thoughts and troubles to congratulate a chap who just won the first prize, especially so if the congratulation is to take place among wines and spirits of various kinds. I therefore accepted the offer with unfeigned enthusiasm.

I wonder if it has also happened to you; strange, I call it; I mean, this way that the fact of knowing their *métier* creates some image of a person in your mind. Had Alastair happened to mention her name in another venue, such as the pool room of the Drones Club, without intimation of her spectacular status as specialist of the dress habits of the Renaissance, I might have come close to expect what I saw in the room where his recent good luck was celebrated, but somehow, it was a rather stout matron of somewhat donish and well-padded exterior — suggested maybe by some dim recollection of one of those well-meaning Hollywood movies I had seen after failing to read the plot summary in the Times — that I was anticipating to see in the person of Miss Charlotte Mistletoe. The actual sight of her was considerably more impressive; indeed, oomph and curves and all the hot stuff generally came in with delightful *abandon*, and it is probable that in fact many a Hollywood producer would have gladly dumped the romantic interest in his latest effort to have Miss Mistletoe's name and profile starring instead on the billboard and on the screen, and I have no doubt that she was fairly inundated by flattering proposals and film scripts.

Such was the effect of this vision on me that it seemed that there must be something after all in all this idea of learning and studying. Add to this that the binge was not bad at all, as far as beverages were concerned at least, and you will understand that I was suddenly strangely interested. Of course, most of the other blokes looked like excerpts from the obituaries section, but my eyes were not intent on getting the large, wide view.

Alastair, meanwhile, had introduced me, and I was trying to act in a cool and sophisticated fashion, dropping a line of Hamlet here and there, as I managed to remember from Jeeves's many nice turns of phrase.

— And what are you planning to work on, now that this bright gentleman has left his mother's nest? asked another of those professors gathered around the table, a strongly dislikable sort of guy, much too jokey, I found, when conversing with Miss Charlotte.

— Ah, that's a good question, she replied with zest and a tingling laugh which sent tremors through the Wooster frame. I have some interesting hunches about the early history of the kilt. I need a brilliant student like Alastair to work on it with me. It would be a great subject for a Ph.D.

I don't know if she actually sent a glance in my direction, but as usual my nimble and subtle mind had cut to the quick of the matter: if I became this student, not only would I be able to put Jeeves back to his proper place, considering that for all his reading of Spinoza and the poet Burns he didn't have a Ph.D., the crowning achievement of serious scholarship, but there would certainly be no more loose talk and distasteful hints about the adequacy of kilts in our midst. Besides, I could envision long studious hours in the company of this spectacular girl, which could well bring me who knows where? And moreover, although Alastair, not quite the perfect gentleman, didn't wear this robe and hat convincingly, I could see that it would be perfect for such an accomplished cavalier as Bertram.

Those who know me best know the swiftness of my footwork. "Give Wooster an idea", they'll confirm, "and he will act on it". The thought was hardly twenty minutes passed that, having ascertained with Alastair that this business of a Ph.D was a pretty trivial task for one with the necessary dedication, I proposed myself to Prof. Mistletoe as the very person

for a serious and thorough study of the early history of the kilt. She quickly approved and added that she could get me some kind of fellowship. I dismissed this idea with an airy gesture, adding in a spirited way that some ancient Wooster of long ago had done the square thing by the family and wasted his own days accumulating enough of the stuff to give his posterity complete leisure to gaily participate in the pleasures of life.

— Jeeves, I said, lightly, after coming back. It will no doubt interest you to know that I have decided to engage myself in some serious studies. I have just started a Ph.D. on the subject of the early history of the kilt, under Prof. Charlotte Mistletoe, F.R.S, of Trinity College.

— Indeed, Sir?

I eyed him sternly and drew myself up to a rather satisfying *hauteur*. I could hear through the disguised indifference of his tone. The man was seeing how his position *in re* kilts, which he certainly considered inexpugnable and took great pleasure in when savouring his hot chocolate come evening in the kitchen, was now exposed and overturned, putting him into the delicate situation of this Roman general whose name I forgot, who had to surrender his whole army after thinking he had outmanoeuvred his enemies.

— What do you mean, Jeeves?

— Sir?

— You do not deceive me. You are objecting to this project. Explain yourself.

— Well, Sir, he said in a muffled tone, I fear that the situation of a student working towards a Ph.D. will no be congenial to you. It is a hard and unmerciful occupation, the reward of which comes late and after much misery.

— You are talking through your hat, Jeeves. It is a noble endeavour which advances the wisdom and science of mankind. You dislike the idea that your master may prove to be an original thinker and respected scholar in his field. Say no more. My decision is firm.

— Very well, Sir. May I last venture, Sir, that *Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme*? I fear your motives in this are not such as will help you to attain your goal.

— Spare me these disgruntled comments, Jeeves. I will now spend a few hours in the British Library acquainting myself with the works of some of my predecessors.

And I ventured out whistling a cheerful air very much in vogue at that time, which went along the general lines of “There is a something in the air/Rhymes with trees and bees”.

I found the first months very entertaining. My heart was entirely in the hands of Charlotte and we were working splendidly together, when on a Wednesday evening, as I was taking my umbrella and leaving my office at Trinity College to go to a costume party given by my friend Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright, during which I anticipated a well-deserved triumph of my kilt, Charlotte interrupted the song on my lips by asking me to come into her office to read some five hundred pages of old Scottish folkloric tales she had just received from Edinburgh by express carrier.

— Sorry, terribly sorry, but I have to go. A party...

— A party? You surprise me, Bertram. I thought you more dedicated. There is no time for party during a Ph.D. Science is its own world, complete in itself, and requires relentless attention and constant passion. It can not tolerate such diversions. You are wedded to

Science now. All else is shadows. Come on. We have work awaiting.

As that formidable Ancient Mariner you may have heard about, she held me with her glittering eye, and I could not choose but follow her into her study and waste the evening and the night. But when I finally got out, a nameless fear was grasping my soul. This word, “wedded”, induced my hands to tremble noticeably and perspiration to spout in good imitation of the larger whales from my brow. Could she actually mean...? Was it the twisted turn of events which the laughing Fates had devised for Bertram when choosing the trap into which to ensnare each man in his turn? Having been saved ten times at the eleventh hour from engagements to marry the worse impersonations of ghastliness of the British Empire, Florence Craye as well as Honoria Glossop or Madeline Bassett, had I been tricked by some sleight of hand into a spooky matrimony with hardly less to cry for?

Arriving at the Wooster home, I thought of waking Jeeves and asking him; he must know. But I refrained on the threshold. Could the man be trusted in this? Certainly not. He would play with my feelings as on a stringed instrument. I clasped my head. Alastair! I thought. He was the person to ask. Trembling, I composed his phone number. Oddly enough, he was still up.

— Hullo hullo Bertie, he pipped. How are you?

— Alastair, I managed to articulate. This is no time for jest or jokes. One thing bears heavily on my mind. Charlotte has just said tonight that I was wedded to Science by working on this dreadful Ph.D. Is that true?

— Oh no, old chap, she was greatly exaggerating.

I sighed deeply. Of course, Charlotte was one of those literary types, who are prone to deal in metaphors and little known figures of speech. Unpleasant, certainly – I had had to check Jeeves sometimes about similar foibles – and likely to create misunderstandings aplenty, but all rather innocent.

— You’re just engaged, continued Alastair. It’s the defense which is the actual wedding.

My jaw dropped as a ton of lead as those words filtered through the thought processes of the cucumber.

— Sorry, I must leave you now, he added, indifferent to the tragedy. I am packing to leave tomorrow to Calcutta where some striking fabrics are to be found in the bazaars, I’ve heard. Pip pip!

The talking apparatus fell from my hand, while this nameless fear started preying with renewed zest on my inner organs. There fell the pride of the Woosters, with hardly a stiff upper lip.

Certainly, many a dishonourable bloke, reading this, will laugh at my distress, but consider the facts: I had it positively from Alastair that my current status was akin to an engagement and would only be altered as I defended my Ph.D. to become wedded to Science. But, there’s the rub, for the code of the Woosters is stern and inflexible: whatever the price, a gentleman’s honourable obligations must be kept, and engagements fully belong to this category. In the past, it was true, I had been relieved of similar obligations by the hand of the party of the second part, although usually not without some stiff mental work on Jeeves’s part. But here, this immaterial Science would be hard put to do the broad,

generous gesture.

I sank therefore into an armchair.

A light cough was heard in the vicinity. Starting sharply, I saw Jeeves appearing in the frame of the door.

— Is there any problem, Sir?

I hesitated an instant. We had had some disagreements lately. However, there was no denying that he was there, and there was this *je ne sais quoi* in his voice which denoted a willingness to rally round the young master. I did not waver long.

— Jeeves, I said, in a hurried and distracted voice. Hear me.

— Yes, Sir. If I can be of any succor.

— Jeeves, I repeated, trying to gather my thoughts. You were right. I do not feel quite the same interest in Science suddenly. However, mark me closely, I have been informed by Mr. Walter Alastair Appleton that by starting this Ph.D. I have contracted moral obligations equivalent to an engagement. Do you confirm this, Jeeves?

— Indeed, Sir, it has been the received opinion of the most prominent philosophers since Aristotle. The best treatment of the matter, in my opinion, is found in the treatise “*Critic of Pure Reason*” of the philosopher Kant. He argues...

— Let us keep this for later discussion, Jeeves. Is there no way to be honourably discharged of said obligation?

He eyed me quietly.

— Come on, Jeeves. You know what I mean. Such things have happened before, in different ways, in this place. You have never faltered. Is there hope?

— Well, Sir, it is widely considered that, should it occur that a student discovered that the results he had been working on for his Ph.D. had been anticipated by some other scholar, he could then consider himself exonerated of his responsibilities. Of course, it is usually expected that he then choose some other subject and renew his pledge, but a certain amount of leeway is definitely granted if he should feel discouraged by this stroke of bad luck.

— Agad, Jeeves, is it possible? I cried, hope filling my entire being.

But not for long. What hope was that? Before someone got interested again in this cursed subject of the early history of the kilt, long would grow the beard of the poor Bertram, and weary his eyes of decyphering old Scottish tales. I inclined the good old head a good deal.

— No hope, Jeeves, I said. No hope.

A slight cough attracted again my eyes to his person, and I saw him produce a thick and tightly bound volume which he proffered to me.

— It may interest you, Sir, to know that my disapproval of your idea of a kilt was not a mere whim but was based on previous thorough studies of the interesting story of this most particular garment?

I glanced at the title. “*The early history of the kilt in the Highlands*”, it read, with the precision *Presented for the title of Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh, 1905* with Jeeves’s name appended in calligraphic flourishes.

— It is somewhat more specialized in its geographical emphasis, but you will find that it contains most of your research.