



EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY

P G WODEHOUSE SPEAKING PERSONALLY

I was asked the other day how I'd like to make a hit record, which made me smile a little because I think I mistrust the sound of my own voice very much. I wonder if everybody has this experience? I always feel one's voice comes out entirely different from anything you'd expected. There was a time when my wife bought me a dictating machine – you know, one of those things Edgar Wallace used to have. And I started to dictate a Jeeves novel and I had to stop after the first paragraph – it sounded too awful – it sounded like a very pompous clergyman. And I'd supposed the first paragraph of this novel was rather amusing – it's a, you know, a light sort of comedy thing, and then this awful voice came out. Still, it's the only one I've got and the public will have to bear it as best they can.

I can't remember a time when I didn't want to write. I was writing at the age of five. I don't know what I was doing before that – just loafing I suppose. If you're an author, you're supposed to have had a hell of a time at your public school. But I never did at mine – I simply loved my six years at Dulwich. Originally I was supposed to try for the navy but I would have been repealed for my eyesight. And I fell in love with the grounds of Dulwich when I went to see my brother there and I asked my father if I couldn't give up all idea of the navy and go to Dulwich.

Before – I've always been rather lucky – before that I was – my parents were in Hong Kong, you see, they had to go out to Hong Kong. And I was left with some people in Croydon. And, rather like Kipling – only Kipling had a frightfully bad time and I enjoyed my time thoroughly there. Anyway I finally got to Dulwich. I had this excellent time there. And then the trouble was - what was to become of me after I left school? Because the wolf was not actually whining at the door and there was always a little something in the kitty for the butcher and the grocer, but the finances would not run to something in the nature of a splash.

My father had retired and was living on a pension. And it was paid to him in rupees. And of all the dirty tricks, being paid in rupees is the worst, because it was always jumping up and down and throwing fits. Just about the time when I was leaving Dulwich, I was going to try for a scholarship at Oxford – I think I'd have probably got one. Suddenly the rupee started going down. He decided there wasn't enough cash to send me to Oxford, even if I got a scholarship, so I went into the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank.

You may think this was a bit of luck for the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank but it wasn't so, because I think I must have been about the worst clerk that ever was. I became a sort of legend in the place. I mean, to this day, whenever there's a discussion in the manager's office about a new clerk and the idea is that he's rather bad at his work, somebody's bound to say, "Oh, but you ought to have seen P.G Wodehouse. They don't make them like that now – they've lost the pattern."

I was alright when they put me in the – they started me off in the postal department, which meant that I had to stamp and address letters and I was very well-fitted for that. But when they took me out and put me in the inward bills and cash and all that sort of thing, I was no good whatever.

The cross all young writers have to bear is that while they know they're going to be spectacularly successful some day, they find it impossible to convince their nearest and dearest they'll every amount to a row of beans. "Write in your spare time, if you really must write", parents say, and they pull that old one about literature being a good something, but a bad crutch. I do not blame mine for feeling that a son in a bank making his eighty pounds a year, just like finding it in the street, was a sounder commercial proposition than one living at home and spending a fortune on stamps.

So for two years I continued to pass my days in Lombard Street and write at night in my bed-sitting room. And a testing experience it was, for all I got out of it was a collection of rejection slips which I could have papered the walls of a good-sized banqueting hall. The best you could say of them was some of them were rather pretty. But what I always feel about rejection slips is that their glamour soon wears off – when you've seen one, you've seen them all.

The handicap under which most beginner writers struggle is they don't know how to write. I was no exception to the rule. Worse bilge than mine may have been submitted to the editors of London in 1901 and 1902, but I should think it really unlikely. I was sorry for myself at the time, when the stamped and addressed envelopes came homing back to me, but my sympathy now is for the men who had to read my contributions.

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