

Lord Emsworth, an evil-doer?

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Introduction

We know Lord Emsworth as a very kind, loveable and harmless soul. Still, a park-keeper in Kensington Gardens once characterized him as: “*a dangerous criminal, the blackest type of evil-doer on the park-keeper’s index.*” How is it possible that he could provoke such a harsh judgement? What terrible deeds had he committed? Are there other incidents in the “Blandings Saga” when people consider Lord Emsworth’s activities as evil deeds, skulduggery or crime? In the following I present occasions when Lord Emsworth in the opinion of other people might be regarded as guilty of misdemeanour. I am just presenting a list of possible accusations, not prosecuting nor judging him. I don’t claim the list to be exhaustive, and all comments, corrections and complements from readers are most welcome. You find my email above.

Criminal acts frequently occur in Wodehouse’s stories and are often important ingredients in the plot. A bunch of criminals, for instance Chimp Twist and the couple Dolly and Soapy Molloy, are recurring as minor characters in many novels. However, not only crooks commit criminal acts. Wodehouse’s heroes and heroines as well sometimes commit crimes. Finding themselves deep in the soup they resort to acts like theft and blackmail as a way out from tight places. Besides, many young men regard certain offences, like pinching a policeman’s helmet, as a test of courage and thus as an excusable peccadillo, especially on the night after the Boat Race. To occasionally spend a night in the quod is nothing unusual for a Drone and is not regarded as a blot on his escutcheon.

But now, what about the amiable and absentminded Clarence, the ninth earl of Emsworth? If we associate him with crime and transgressions we usually think of him as a victim for criminal acts such as pig theft and blackmail. In *Service with a Smile* (1962) Plum wrote: “*Lord Emsworth was a man with little of the aggressor in his spiritual make-up.*” But, when upset, Lord Emsworth’s judgement is obscured and on some occasions he is wandering astray in the back-country around and outside the limits of the law. He is not either totally devoid of aggressiveness.

In *The Clicking of Cuthbert* (1922) Plum wrote: “*There is an ethical as well as a legal code, and this it was obvious that Raymond Parsloe Devine had transgressed.*” In line with this thought I present transgressions of legal rules as well as of common social rules and ethical codes, such as lying. Besides, it depends on one’s perspective if you regard a certain act as an evil deed. Plum pointed out that the opinion about fox-hunting very much depends on at which end of the rifle you are. The perpetrator and the victim may have opposing views on the same act. My perspective is that of the victim, and I include deeds which from a victim’s point of view might be regarded as evil even if Lord Emsworth certainly had no evil intentions. His sister, Lady Constance, has very rigid views on which ethical and behavioural code that is appropriate for the head of her family. In *A Pelican at Blandings* (1969) she is called “*the Führer of Blandings Castle*”. I just look at his lordship’s possible transgressions of legal and common ethical codes and don’t treat violations of her rules.

Now over to Clarence’s *curriculum vitae* as a “perpetrator”. The following incidents are not listed chronologically nor after the evilness of the deeds, but quite at random. Intentional as well as unconscious malefactions are mixed. Deeds just planned and deeds actually committed are mixed. Crimes are mixed with peccadilloes.

Theft/unlawful misappropriation

A few times the absentminded Lord Emsworth happens to bag an object that doesn’t belong to him. In *Something Fresh* (1915), the first novel in which Lord Emsworth is the main character, he commits two unconscious thefts. The first incident occurs in his club, where he pockets a fork, something the head steward makes him aware of. Later, in the home of Mr. Peters, he pockets an Egyptian scarab. When, at home, he discovers the scarab he remembers Mr. Peters showing it to him and supposes that he got it as a gift. The plot in the novel then circulates around Mr. Peters’ efforts to get the scarab back. Mr. Peters promises a reward to the one who gets it back and several persons engage in stealing attempts.



Clarence and the Duke of Dunstable

In the short story *The Custody of the Pumpkin* (1924) the absentminded Lord Emsworth again falls foul of the law. He is in Kensington Gardens in London. Mesmerized by the beauty of all the flowers he forgets where he is and begins picking flowers. A park-keeper watches him, horrified: “... *the stranger was in reality a dangerous criminal, the blackest type of evil-doer on the park-keeper's index. He was a Kensington Gardens flower-picker.*” The park-keeper yells, a crowd gathers, a policeman materializes and asks the sinner for his name. When he gives it, his statement is rewarded with a roar of laughter from the crowd. Fortunately, Lord Emsworth's gardener Angus McAllister is at hand and can confirm the poor peer's identity. The policeman, who is a glowing admirer of blue blood, chooses to turn a blind eye. This incident evidently stuck in Lady Constance's memory. Later (in *Service with a Smile*, 1962) she exclaims: “*I forgot to tell Clarence to be sure not to pick the flowers in Hyde Park. He will wander off there, and he will pick the flowers. He nearly got arrested once for doing it.*”

Forgive me a short digression from the topic, only a reflection. Plum didn't mention it, but perhaps a memory of the incident in Kensington Gardens subconsciously appeared in Lord Emsworth's (Plum's) mind some time later? Perhaps a dim reminiscence and a deep feeling that flower-picking should be allowed for real flower-lovers cropped out when his lordship once met a small girl from London who was punished for picking “flarze” in the garden of Blandings. Lord Emsworth this time showed a for him unusual heroism, revolted against the authorities, took command and declared that young Gladys was allowed to pick all the flowers she wished. (*Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend*, 1928).

Extortion/blackmailing/taking bribes

In the short story *The Birth of a Salesman* (1950) Lord Emsworth visits his younger son Freddie in New York. A young lady, selling encyclopædias of Sport, knocks at the door and Lord Emsworth courteously, but carelessly, promises to help her. A neighbour, “*named Griggs or Follansbee or something*”, is having orgies in his house while his wife is away. Clarence begins with this neighbour, who several times have noticed Lord Emsworth drooping over his (the neighbour's) fence. He (Lord E) was really admiring the flowers, but the neighbour suspects that he (still Lord E) is a private eye snooping around on behalf of his (the neighbour's) wife and he (the neighbour again) tries to bribe him (Lord E). His (Lord E's) mind is absorbed by the idea of selling encyclopædias and when the neighbour asks “*How much?*” he (Lord E) interprets it as “*How many?*” Lord Emsworth emphasizes that the encyclopædias could be used as appreciated gifts and suggests a number of one gross, 144 copies, which the neighbor accepts. The earl is happy that he has been able to help the young lady and is absolutely unaware of that he had been bribed by the neighbour to keep silent and that the neighbour regarded his lordship's suggestion of such a great number as blackmail.

Armed threat

In *Summer Lightning* (1929) Lord Emsworth is quite convinced that his secretary Rupert Baxter has gone mad as a coot as well as violent, and furthermore that he has stolen the Empress of Blandings. Armed with a gun Lord Emsworth forces the unhappy, angry and humiliated Baxter to crawl out from his hiding place under a bed.

In *Service with a Smile* (1962) Plum tells us how Clarence enters his sister Connie's room: “*He was a light mauve in colour, and his eyes, generally so mild, glittered behind their pince-nez with a strange light. It needed but a glance to tell her that he was in one of his rare berserk moods.*” We know nothing about his earlier fits of rage and it seems that Lord Emsworth luckily avoided to commit serious crimes during them. This time his rage is aroused by discovering that his pigman, Wellbeloved, is plotting to steal the Empress. Clarence naturally fires him, not at him, and furiously tells him that he will be after him with a shotgun if he isn't out of the place in ten minutes. He clearly has forgotten that he himself once participated in plotting of pig-napping! (See further down.)

Firing at people

Lord Emsworth doesn't only use guns as a threat, but actually fires them. Fortunately, he never causes serious wounds.

In *Something Fresh* (1915) he empties a revolver with six shots in the darkness of the night in the hall at Blandings. He heard some noise and believes he is firing at burglars. As a matter of fact, it is poor Baxter, who, in his turn in pursuit of what he believes are burglars, has overturned a table and fallen on the floor. Luckily no living person was hit by any of the bullets, but one bullet hit a portrait of his lordship's maternal grandmother in the face and “*improved it out of all knowledge*”. In Plum's unfinished novel *Sunset at Blandings* (1977) a person catching a burglar says: “*It's all right shooting a burglar. I asked my solicitor.*” I'm not sure whether this is true, but anyhow, when Lord Emsworth fired the revolver in the hall it was at random, in complete darkness and no burglar had actually been revealed.

In the short story *The Crime Wave at Blandings* (1936) he actually shoots his former secretary and tormentor Rupert Baxter in his backside, fortunately with an air gun. Lady Constance had confiscated the gun from his lordship's grandson, who had shot Baxter with it. Furthermore, his lordship commits the crime twice! The first time,

he was holding the confiscated gun in his hands, reviving his youth, and wondered if his marksmanship was still intact. Seeing the nuisance Baxter turning his back to him a bit away outside an open window, the temptation overpowered him. It may be considered a mitigation that his victim was such a menace. The wounds were insignificant, but the shot caused a sharp pain, a kangaroo-jump up in the air and wounded pride. The second time Lord Emsworth shot Baxter, he wanted to prove his marksmanship to his butler Beach, and Baxter was already leaving Blandings on his motor-bicycle. This farewell salute was both a further revenge and a message to Baxter to stay away from Blandings for all future, which purpose he achieved. The crime wave of the story doesn't only consist of Lord Emsworth and his grandson shooting Baxter. Beach does the same thing and even Lady Constance yields to an impulse to test her accuracy of aim. She shoots at the backside of Beach, really a not very challenging target to hit. She believes her shot was a hit. It wasn't, but Connie's shot gave Clarence the ability to get away from the events without consequences.

Lies

Lord Emsworth's most frequent violation against common ethical values is probably to lie and stoutly deny what he has done, even if this is not so often told explicitly in the "saga". Blank denial has become almost a reflex when he is accused, especially by Lady Constance, for having done something.

"He was a great believer in stout denial and very good at it." **Pigs have wings** (1952).

In the short story *The Crime Wave at Blandings* (1936) Connie asks him if he shot Baxter and Clarence flatly denies it: *"Of course I didn't."* He further adds to his lie by telling that he doesn't even know how to load the gun. He fabricates two other explanations, either that Baxter was stung by a wasp or that he once more had relapsed into hallucinations. One of his lordship's nieces happened to see when he shot Baxter, who was overhearing it when she told Lord Emsworth. Although revealed, Lord Emsworth flatly denies it again. Baxter asks him: *"Do you deny that you shot me, Lord Emsworth?"* and his lordship remorselessly lies: *"Certainly I do."*

Attempted dog-napping

Lord Emsworth once makes an unsuccessful attempt to steal a dog. His son Freddie has (again) got into the soup. This is told in the short story *First Aid for Freddie* (1966). Eager to sell dog biscuits Freddie gave away a dog, to a young lady in the neighbourhood, despite the fact that the dog belonged to his wife Aggie. Freddie's intention was to replace the dog by buying another. But Aggie announces her early return before he had time to fix this. If the dog isn't at Blandings when she arrives, a possible outcome is divorce and that Freddie loses his job in USA. Lord Emsworth faces the frightful prospect of having Freddie living at Blandings again. The dog has to be brought home quickly. Freddie has got a sprained ankle so Clarence has to perform the theft. Of course, he fails. Snooping around the house where the dog is, he gets caught, is believed to be a crook and is locked into the coal cellar. Beach rescues him from both cellar and disgrace. The young lady fortunately returns the dog in time, because it had bitten one of her father's favourite dogs.

Plotting of pig-napping

To the horror of Lord Emsworth his prizewinning pig The Empress of Blandings has been stolen. The perpetrator is his sister's son Ronnie Fish, but this Lord Emsworth doesn't know. Ronnie's plan is to "find" the pig, return it and then be able to extract money from a most thankful uncle. Clarence and Gally are absolutely convinced that Lord Parsloe-Parsloe at Matchingham Hall lies behind the theft, in order to make his own sow, The Pride of Matchingham, become the prizewinner as the fattest pig at the coming exhibition. Gally and Clarence conspires about appropriate contra strikes and decides that stealing The Pride of Matchingham would give them a good position to negotiate. The idea came of course from Gally and Clarence is naturally out of question as participant in the pig-napping act, but he has no objections of any kind against the plans. However, the plans were never executed, because the Empress was found in Baxter's camping van. (*Summer Lightning* 1929).

Damaging property of others

Ignoring her brother's protests, Lady Constance has allowed the Church Lads to camp by the lake in *Service With a Smile* (1962). Clarence caught a Church Lad red-handed, occupied with the worst possible sort of cruelty to animals Lord Emsworth could imagine: The Lad had put a potato on a string and jerked it away from the Empress when she tried to eat it! Another Church Lad took advantage of Lord Emsworth's dim eyesight and prompted him to jump into the lake, with his clothes on, to save a fellow Lad from drowning. The presumed drowning Lad was a floating log. Lord Emsworth broods on revenge. Inspired by Lord Ickenham he sneaks out early in the morning and cuts off their tent ropes while the Church Lads are asleep. The Church Lads, and Lady Constance, consider this as an appalling skullduggery. Afterwards, his lordship has no remorse whatsoever, but he is scared to death that Connie somehow will get to know the identity of the perpetrator.

Intrusion

A deep rift had arisen in the lute between Freddie and his wife Aggie. One of Aggie's female "friends" has informed her that she had seen Freddie in a restaurant together with a glamorous female movie star and she advocates divorce. It was an innocent meeting, for a good, but secret, reason, so Freddie had not informed Aggie about it. She has moved out to a hotel suite. Divorce is threatening and Lord Emsworth again fears to become stuck with Freddie living at Blandings. This is told in the short story *Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best* (1926). Aggie refuses to see Freddie, who asks his father to go to her and plead for him and convince her that the whole thing was innocent. His lordship and Aggie had never met before. Confronted with the threat of having Freddie at Blandings Lord Emsworth reluctantly goes to Aggie's hotel suite. No one hear him knocking at the door to the suite, but he finds out that the door isn't quite closed. So, he enters the suite, uninvited, as an intruder. The drawing-room is empty and his attention is caught by the beautiful flowers. He potters around putting his nose into the flowers, snuffing. The "friend" enters, takes him for a burglar and threatens him with a pistol. She doesn't believe him when he tells his name. Soon, Freddie arrives and confirms his lordship's identity. The rift is eliminated, the "friend" is disposed of, and his lordship happily escapes the horror of having Freddie living at Blandings.

Some final comments

Exceptionally, Lord Emsworth is regarded as an evil-doer. Wodehouse created him a kind of unobtrusive hero, without the normal characteristics of a hero. He is timid, not bold; whimsical, not decisive; evasive, not action-oriented; usually striving just to be left alone and to do no harm. According to Wikipedia, an anti-hero is "*a protagonist in a story who lacks conventional heroic qualities and attributes such as idealism, courage, and morality. Although antiheroes may sometimes do the right thing, it is not always for the right reasons, often acting primarily out of self-interest or in ways that defy conventional ethical codes*". Lord Emsworth for sure lacks conventional heroic qualities. I regard Lord Emsworth as a kind of comical anti-hero, even if anti-heroes normally are crooks and are more complicated souls than the harmless, simple-minded peer, who just wants to please everybody, but now and then fails.

Often Lord Emsworth is absentminded and unaware of his transgressions, but a few times he commits them deliberately. If his reasons are strong enough Lord Emsworth doesn't hesitate even to commit crime. To prevent Freddie from settling down at Blandings, (in his lordship's opinion a disaster worse than if the Castle should suffer from an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and an invasion of green-flies at the same time), he is prepared to transgress both legal and ethical codes.

His lordship can be vindictive. If an opportunity appears, and he thinks he can get away with it, he can take revenge. His transgressions are however very rare. They are mostly provoked by others, and his victims are often unsympathetic characters and we feel that they have deserved to be "punished".

It is very easy to feel sympathy for the amiable and whimsical peer, to understand and forgive him. Almost all the time he is kind and benevolent to all and sundry. However, this doesn't mean that he never has hostile intentions. He avoids quarrels and fights if possible, *but* there is a limit for what he can stand, and he is no saint. Under enough pressure, if pushed and cornered, also this meek man at times can feel compelled not to turn his other cheek. I for one can't blame him.

By writing an essay on this topic, with this headline, it may be that some friends of Lord Emsworth accuse me for being an evil-doer against his lordship. I certainly have no evil intentions and really enjoy spending time with him. However, Plum didn't create Lord Emsworth an infallible hero. When upset, when his "world" and way of life is threatened, his mind and judgement may become obscured and his acts too hasty. Why should we close our eyes to these very human qualities? His weaknesses, in my opinion, just make him more loveable. Among all the heroes and anti-heroes in the world which Wodehouse created for our joy, he is my favourite.