

# P. G. Wodehouse Conquers Sweden

by Bengt Malmberg

In a letter to Georg Svensson, chief editor of the publishing house Bonniers, P. G. Wodehouse wrote:

I am glad of this opportunity to tell you how grateful I am to you for all the trouble you have taken to put me over with the Swedish public. I am so intensely spiritual that money means nothing to me, but I must confess that the cheques that Mr. Watt sends me for my Swedish sales do give me a gentle thrill. Whenever a book of mine is going what my publisher calls 'slowly' in the USA, I cheer up because I know that everything is going to be all right in Sweden, thanks to you.

In 2012 we celebrated 100 years of Wodehouse in Swedish. In October 1912 the weekly magazine *Allers Familj-Journal* published 'Ruth in Exile' (*Strand*, July 1912) as 'Ruth i landsflykt', only three months after the original. Probably the first translated Wodehouse story in the world, and we had it republished in the Swedish Society's yearbook *JEEVES 2012*.

In January 1913, the daily newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda* published 'Spådomen' ('Pots O' Money', *Strand*, December 1912). Up to 1940, more than 40 stories appeared in Swedish magazines. And 1920 the first novel appeared, *Piccadilly Jim*, which was followed by another five books until 1925, each the first to be translated into another language. Indeed, Sweden saw the first or second translation of 50 Wodehouse novels the following years. Another fan and I have searched more than 4,500 magazines and many years of newspapers from 1912 onwards for translations of Wodehouse. So far we have found almost 100 short stories and four serialized novels, the first being *Jill the Reckless (Glada Jill)* as early as 1922.

The readers of the magazines evidently liked his stories so the editors were quite eager to bring them to their Swedish readers, and many of them were published very soon after their first appearance in English or American magazines. We have even found examples of stories that were published in Sweden very soon after *Cosmopolitan* in USA and before *Strand* in UK! Through these publications Wodehouse reached a vast public in Sweden.

For unknown reasons, *Young Men in Spats* never appeared in Sweden, but magazines published all the 11 stories shortly after the originals appeared in *Cosmopolitan* and *Strand Magazine*. In 2010, with the permission of the Wodehouse Estate, we collected these in *Drönarhistorier* (Drones Stories), the 79th Swedish Wodehouse publication. And in 2011 another anthology, *Bland lordar och drönare* (Among Lords and Drones), came out with 14 of PGW's short stories previously published only in Swedish magazines. In 2013 our Society brought out an anthology of Wodehouse's seven parodies of Sherlock Holmes stories. So, up to now we have 81 books in Swedish in 193 different editions. You can find all about Swedish translations of Wodehouse in books, magazines, articles, movies etc. on this site: [www.wodehousebibliografier.nu](http://www.wodehousebibliografier.nu)!

Why did Sweden become the first country where Wodehouse's stories were translated? What made him very popular in Sweden as early as the 1920s, in a country with fewer than six million inhabitants and where German was the first foreign language you studied at school? Humorous and detective stories were very popular in Sweden a hundred years ago. Authors like Arthur Conan Doyle were well known, so editors kept an eye on what was published in England and the USA, and translations often appeared in magazines selling over 200,000 copies. By this means, Wodehouse reached many readers, a lot more than through his published books. The combination of humour, love and 'crime' appealed to Swedish readers.

In 1933 Georg Svensson became chief editor of Bonniers, Sweden's leading publisher. A Wodehouse fan, he engaged Vilgot Hammarling to translate Wodehouse. Hammarling had been the London correspondent for a Swedish newspaper, spoke English like a native, was a brilliant stylist who knew Britain inside out, and was familiar with every facet of British society. He knew clubs and pubs, and he loved Wodehouse's novels. Hammarling's translations captured the spirit of Wodehouse, and his first book, *Leave It to Psmith*, went into 12 editions during 54 years! Further translations of five more novels and several short stories ensured Wodehouse's popularity in Sweden in the 1930s.

When Hammarling became counselor of the Swedish Embassy in London in 1938, Svensson found his successor, Birgitta Hammar, who had the same empathy with Wodehouse's style. She translated 48 Wodehouse books over 58 years; the last, in 1996, was 20 stories from *The Golf Omnibus*. Her translations were labours of love. She analysed every sentence for allegorical nuances, hidden personal allusions, and quotations from world literature.

To understand the popularity of Wodehouse in Sweden, you must appreciate the quality of the translations, and we were very lucky to have two such brilliant translators. Yet, remarkably, a lot of Swedes still prefer to read Wodehouse in English.

Wodehouse never lost his Swedish readers after the Berlin broadcasts. In Sweden he was regarded as true anti-Nazi since the late 1930s. Thus, when, in September 1941, the left-oriented magazine *Folket i Bild* printed Wodehouse's article 'My War with Germany' (*Saturday Evening Post*, July 19, 1941) under the headline 'Mitt krig med Hitler' (My War with Hitler), it was with a positive introduction. You can see Wodehouse's ironic smile against the little Führer.



Similarly, *Money in the Bank* (1942) was published simultaneously with the first US edition, four years before the UK edition. And, just to reinforce the point, hundreds of articles about Wodehouse have appeared over the years, the latest in April 2012 in a magazine with half a million subscribers.

The Swedish film industry also wanted to benefit from his popularity and 1938 and 1945 two movies were made in Sweden based on his stories.

In February 1984, four golf-playing students at the University of Uppsala founded *Wodehouse's Friends*, now the Swedish Wodehouse Society, four years after the US society but 13 years before the UK society. One ambition of the Society, now about 220 members, was that Wodehouse should be posthumously awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and for many years the Society petitioned the Swedish Academy nominating him for the prize. However, he clearly did not fit their criteria since he is *known, intelligible, and funny*, and the Academy picked some unknown poet instead.

Wodehouse himself anticipated this in an article in *Vanity Fair* already in July 1916, *The Alarming Spread of Poetry*. Eventually, after many of our appeals, the Academy decided in 2011 that no author would receive a posthumous Nobel Prize in literature. Sorry, Wodehouse!

So, Wodehouse's writing came to Sweden over a century ago and has done well ever since. He is still very popular, and in Uppsala November 1-15, 2013 a brand new musical play, *FORE!* got its world première based on four of his golf stories from 1921-24, among them *The Clicking of Cuthbert* as the finale. Wodehouse had anticipated the possibility of playing golf indoors in *A Plea for Indoor Golf*, *Vanity Fair* May 1919, and this was the case on the scene. Two English artists, John Fiske and Paul Kessel, were responsible for text & direction and music from the 1930's is used for the song-texts. After 9 full performances they are going to put it up again with another 9 in January 30 – February 15, 2014. This is the second musical by Wodehouse in Uppsala after *Anything Goes* in 2005.

Wodehouse is thus still 'marching on' in Sweden!