

Ye Olde Plum News

No 17 July 2021

WODEHOUSE ON RUSSIAN AUTHORS

RUSSIAN AUTHORS

"It was one of those grim, ironical, hopeless, gray, despairful situations which the Russian novelists love to write about." (Ukridge's *Accident Syndicate*, 1923.)

Lord Uffeham: "An aunt of mine once made me take her to one of those (Russian plays). Lots of gosh-awful bouncers standing around saying how sad it all was and wondering if Ivan was going to hang himself in the barn." (Something Fishy, 1957, ch 23.)

"Gloom like this calls for the pen of a master. Zola could have tackled it nicely. Gorky might have a stab at it. Dostoevsky would have handled it with relish." (Jill the Reckless, 1920, ch 8.)

"Strike me pink, Clarence," he (Gally) exclaimed, 'You look like something out of a Russian novel.'" (Pigs Have Wings, 1952, ch 5.)

"In fact, he had rather been relying on Eustace to be the life and soul of the party. The man sitting on the bag before him could hardly have filled that role at a gathering of Russian novelists." (The Girl on the Boat, 1922, ch 2.)

"He looked like the hero of a Russian novel debating the advisability of murdering a few near relations before hanging himself in the barn." (Money for Nothing, 1928, ch 7.)

Bertie Wooster said about "Catsmeat" Pirbright: "Yet now, as I say, he was low-spirited. It struck out a mile. His brow was sicklier o'er with the pale cast of thought and his air that of a man who, if he had said 'Hullo, girls', would have said it like someone in a Russian drama announcing that Grandpapa had hanged himself in the barn." (The Mating Season, 1949, ch 2.)

GORKIJ

Wodehouse hinted already 1906 about Gorkij being a gloomy Russian author. He asks himself if Gorkij even could be humouristic to please influential people? "If Maxim Gorky were invited to lunch by the Czar, would he sit down and dash off a trifle in the vein of Mr. Dooley?" (Love Among the Chickens, 1909, ch 8.)

In the second version of this novel, 1920, Wodehouse exchanged the Czar for the actual regime: "If Maxim Gorky were invited to lunch by Trotsky,

to meet Lenin, would he sit down and dash off a trifle in the vein of Stephen Leacock?" (Love Among the Chickens, 1920, ch 8.)

TOLSTOI

"No wonder Freddie experienced the sort of abysmal soul-sadness which afflicts one of Tolstoi's Russian peasants when, after putting in a heavy day's work strangling his father, beating his wife, and dropping the baby into the city reservoir, he turns to the cup-board, only to find the vodka-bottle empty." (Jill the Reckless, 1920, ch 8.)

Bertie Wooster said about Florence Cray: "Even when we were merely affianced, I recalled, this woman had dashed the mystery thriller from my hand, instructing me to read a perfectly frightful thing by a bird call Tolstoy." (Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit, 1954, ch 3.)

When Bertie Wooster was engaged to Vanessa Cook he told Jeeves: "The trouble is that she is greatly under the influence of a pal of hers called Tolstoy ... Do you know anything about this fellow Tolstoy? You ever heard of him? 'Oh, yes sir. He was a very famous Russian novelist.'" (Aunts aren't Gentlemen, 1974, ch 14.)

"Vladimir (Brusiloff) specialized in grey studies of hopeless misery, where nothing happened till page three hundred and eighty, when the moujik decided to commit suicide." ... "Vladimir Brusiloff proceeded to sum up. 'No novelists any good except me. Sovietski - yah! Nastikoff - bah! I spit me of zem all. No novelists anywhere any good except me. P. G. Wodehouse and Tolstoi not bad. Not good, but not bad. No novelists any good except me.'" (The Clicking of Cuthbert, 1922.)

DOSTOEVSKY & TURGENEV

Bertie asked Jeeves of his opinion on Lady Florence Craye's novel 'Spindriff' and Jeeves said: "My personal tastes lies more in the direction of Dostoevsky and the great Russians." (Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit, 1954, ch 1.)

His fiancée Vanessa Cook told Bertie: "It really is time you began reading something worth while. I

don't expect you to start off with Turganieff and Dostoevski," she said, evidently alluding to a couple of Russian exiles she had met in London." (Aunts aren't Gentlemen, 1974, ch 15.)

CHEKHOV

Bobbie Wickham told Bertie about Phyllis: "To give you an instance, a couple of days ago he took her to Birmingham to see the repertory company's performance of Chekhov's 'Seagull', because he thought it would be educational. I'd like to catch anyone trying to make me see Chekhov's 'Seagull', but Phyllis just bowed her head and said 'Yes, Daddy.' Didn't even attempt to put up a fight" ... Bertie thought: "I knew Chekhov's *Seagull*. My aunt Agatha had once made me take her son Thos to a performance of it at the Old Vic, and ... my suffering had been intense." (Jeeves in the Offing, 1960, ch 4.)

"At the time when I was engaged to Florence Craye and she was trying to jack up my soul, one of the methods she employed to this end was to take me on Sunday nights to see Russian plays; the sort of things where the old home is being sold up and people stand around saying how sad it all is." (The Mating Season 1949, ch 22.) Masha Lededeva identifies this as Chekhov's play 'The Cherry Orchard'.

A TRUE PICTURE?

To tar everything with the same brush was one of the comic stylistic devices of Wodehouse. He had experienced gloomy Russian authors, so he referred to Russian authors when he needed a reference to something gloomy.

In her excellent essay "P G Wodehouse's Russian Salad, Part 2", (Ashok Kumar Bathia's blog <https://ashokbhatia.wordpress.com/>, [search for Lebedeva](#)), Masha Lebedeva tells that in Gorkij's play 'The Lower Depths' one of the characters hangs himself in the barn, and in Tolstoy's story 'Polikushka' a moujik commits suicide. But these are the only cases of suicide she has found in novels and plays by famous Russian authors.
