

## S.F. UKRIDGE, ENTREPRENEUR

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The current Masterpiece Theater series, "Jeeves and Wooster," is a welcome reminder of the comedic talents of the "master," P.G. Wodehouse. Perhaps Wodehouse will now enjoy something of an American renaissance. While America was Wodehouse's adopted home, he has gradually faded from the public consciousness here.

One of the little known aspects of Wodehouse is his attitude toward this whole notion of Commerce. Before he became a writer full time, Wodehouse worked for two years at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in London. His heart must not have been in his work, for he published some eighty items during this brief period — verses, short stories, articles. From all accounts, these were the two unhappiest years of his life. In *Over Seventy*, one of his three autobiographical books, Wodehouse wrote:

*At the end of two years... [the bank trainees] were sent out East to Bombay, Bangkok, Batavia and suchlike places. This was called getting one's orders, and the thought of getting mine scared the pants off me. As far as I could make out, when you were sent East you immediately became a branch manager or something of the sort, and the picture of myself managing a bank was one I preferred not to examine too closely. I couldn't have managed a wheelk-stall."*

"On September 9, 1902," Wodehouse wrote in his diary, "having to choose between the *Globe* and the bank, I chucked the latter and started out on my wild lone as a freelance. This month starts my journalistic career."

Banking's loss has been the priceless gain of tens of millions of readers throughout the world. By the time of his death in 1975 at the age of ninety-three, Wodehouse had written ninety-six novels, more than three hundred short stories and over five hundred essays and articles. He also had a prolific and highly successful career on Broadway, writing the books and lyrics for a large number of very successful musicals.

Fortunately, Wodehouse did not entirely turn away from the world of Commerce. Through the character of Stanley Featherstonehaugh Utridge — "the man with the big, broad, flexible outlook — along with a number of gilt-edged schemes," Wodehouse explored the business world with a bewildered and hilariously jaundiced eye.

While the enterprising Utridge never was able to bring to fruition any of his sensational business

ideas in the England of the 1920s, he may have been just the sort of unfettered visionary who might have succeeded famously in the more freewheeling modern business environment. After all, pet rocks and contact lenses for chickens are no less far fetched than the schemes which follow.

Herewith are but two examples of Ukridge's business acumen:

*"..Yessir, I've hit upon a great scheme. The idea of a thousand years."*

*"What's that?"*

*"I'm going to train dogs."*

*"Train dogs?"*

*"For the music-hall stage. Dog acts, you know. Performing dogs. Pots of money in it. I start in a modest way with these six. When I've taught 'em a few tricks, I sell them to a fellow in the profession for a large sum and buy twelve more. I train those, sell 'em for a large sum, and with the money buy twenty-four more. I train those —"*

*"Hey, wait a minute." My head was beginning to swim. I had a vision of England paved with Pekingese dogs, all doing tricks. "How do you know you'll be able to sell them?"*

*"Of course I shall. The demand's enormous. Supply can't cope with it. At a conservative estimate, I should think I ought to scoop in four or five thousand pounds the first year. That, of course, is before the business really starts to expand."*

*"I see."*

*"When I get going properly, with a dozen assistants under me and an organized establishment, I shall begin to touch the big money. What I'm aiming at is a sort of Dogs' College out in the country somewhere. Big place with a lot of ground. Regular classes and a set curriculum. Large staff, each member of it with so many dogs under his care, me looking on and superintending. Why, once the thing starts moving it'll run itself, and all I shall have to do is sit back and endorse the checks. It isn't as if I shall have to confine my operations to England. The demand for performing dogs is universal throughout the civilized world. America wants performing dogs. Australia wants performing dogs. Africa could do with a few, I've no doubt. My aim, laddie, is gradually to get a monopoly of the trade. I want everybody who needs a performing dog of any description to come automatically to me. And I'll tell you what, laddie. If you like to put up a bit of capital, I'll let you in on the ground floor."*

*"No, thanks."*

*"All right. Have it your own way. Only don't forget that there was a fellow who put nine hundred dollars in the Ford Car business when it was starting and he collected a cool forty million."*

In this next scheme, Ukridge hits upon an apparently fail-safe, self-sustaining and synergy-rich scheme:

*"..Between ourselves, Corky, I have my eye on what looks like the investment of a lifetime."*

*"Yes?"*

*"Yes. I was reading about it the other day. A cat ranch out in America."*

*"A cat ranch?"*

*"That's it. You collect a hundred thousand cats. Each cat has twelve kittens a year. The skins range from ten cents each for the white ones to seventy-five for the pure black. That gives you twelve million skins per year to sell at an average price of thirty cents per skin, making your annual revenue at a conservative estimate three hundred and sixty thousand dollars (sic). But, you will say, what about overhead expenses?"*

*"Will I?"*

*"That has all been allowed for. To feed the cats you start a rat farm next door. The rats multiply four times as fast as cats do, so if you begin with a million rats it gives you four rats per day per cat, which is plenty. You feed the rats on what is left over of the cats after removing the skins, allowing one fourth of a cat per rat, the business thus becomes automatically self-supporting. The cats will eat the rats, the rats will eat the cats —"*

*There was a knock upon the door.*

*"Come in," bellowed Ukridge irritably. These captains of industry hate to be interrupted when in conference.*

*It was the butler who had broken in upon his statistics.*

Sources: "Ukridge's Dog College,"(pp 253-254) and "Buttercup Day" (pp 303) in *The Most of P.G. Wodehouse*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971