

Stig Tossed Doodle-Gammon

BY KAREN SHOTTING

Norman Murphy was the first to read this article and he wrote, "Firstly, I have been wondering what on earth the phrase meant from the time I first read it and I reckon a lot of Wodehouseans will agree with me. Secondly, the first version, the writer's vituperative condemnation of his local team, will never fade from my memory. He was so annoyed that, when the English language was insufficient, he invented his own words. They don't write like that anymore! Thirdly, Wodehouse was fascinated by American terminology from his earliest days and adapted it for his purposes—and never better than in this case. Fourthly, Karen's impressive research brings to light the way newspapers of the time promptly adopted it and equally promptly misquoted it—a perfect example of how a language changes through misreading and misprinting. Philologists have earned their doctorates on findings less enjoyable than this. No wonder Wodehouse enjoyed picking up what he called 'Americanisms.' I am grateful to Karen for finding the origin of this most strikingly American Americanism."

I AM HAPPY to report to our faithful readers that I have tracked down the source of an item that I consider to be one of PGW's most opaque quotes, i.e., Jimmy Crocker's statement in chapter 5 of *Piccadilly Jim* that "You start the day with the fairest prospects, and before nightfall everything is as rocky and ding-basted as stig tossed full of doodlegammon." (Emphasis added.) I recently reread that story, and the thing hit me smack in the eye again. I was sure it wasn't Wodehouse (it just doesn't scan properly), and as I had previously consulted *A Wodehouse Handbook* regarding this item and knew that Norman Murphy was similarly perplexed, I determined that I was going to summon the resources of the worldwide web and figure out where the dashed-blank thing originated.

Before I get to the source quote, I'd like to point out that Wodehouse, with his unerring ability to find the mot juste in any given situation, chose this (mis)quote appropriately. *Piccadilly Jim* has a baseball subtext; both Jimmy Crocker and his father, Bingley Crocker, are avid baseball fans. It will not then surprise you to learn that Wodehouse chose a phrase right out of the sports pages for Jimmy to describe his enfeebled state after a night out on the tiles.

The source for this quote was a newspaper article about a baseball game between the Quincy Browns

and the Omaha Omahogs that appeared in the *Quincy Daily Herald* on May 24, 1895. The Quincy team gave up fifteen runs to Omaha after eight errors by the Browns, including five errors by the shortstop, Hickey. The author of the piece was far from grunted, to say the least, by the home team's abysmal performance and started off his piece with the words, "Donnerwetter and sapristi!" (German and French words, respectively, of extreme exasperation.) There follows a masterful rant, an edited excerpt of which is set forth below:

Drat the measly, pestiferous luck anyhow! The glass-armed toy soldiers of Quincy were fed to the pigs yesterday by the cadaverous Indian grave-robbers from Omaha. . . . Hickey had more errors than Coin's Financial School [a pamphlet about monetary policy] and led the rheumatic procession to the morgue. The Quincys were full of straw and scrap iron. They couldn't hit a brick wagon with a pick-axe and they ran bases like pall-bearers at a funeral. . . . The geezers stood about and whistled for help and were so weak they couldn't lift a glass of beer if it had been all foam. . . . Everything was yellow, rocky and whang-basted like a stigtossel full of doodle-gammon. The game was whiskered and frostbitten. The Omahogs were bad enough but the Brown Sox had their fins sewed up until they couldn't hold a crazy quilt unless it was tied around their necks. . . . Here is the whole dad-binged business and how it was done . . . [followed by the scorecard].

The article has been quoted and misquoted ever since, generally under the heading of "how the American language has been taxed to describe the game of baseball." I found it quoted in *Life* magazine and the Davenport, Iowa, *Daily Republican*. The East Aurora Citizen pretty much plagiarized the *Herald's* language to describe a game between East Aurora and Elma "Buffalo's bedroom" New York. (That one I found quoted in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of July 23, 1895.) Both *America for Americans* (1915) and *Little Masterpieces of American Wit and Humor*, Volume V (1903), cite it for its unique use of nomenclature for describing baseball, but both misquote it just slightly. "Everything was yellow, rocky and whangbasted, like a stigtossel full of dogglegammon." (The *America for Americans* version is almost the same, adding an "I" to whangbasted to give us whangblasted.) The *Citizen* gives us "whambasted," "stigtosel" (omitting an "s" from "stigtossel"), and "greasers" instead of "geezers";

various other sources prefer “doggie-gammon” or “dogglegammon.”

The piece even crossed the Atlantic to England where *The British Printer* (with which is incorporated *The Bookbinder, The British Bookmaker, and The Printers’ International Specimen Exchange*), in the July–August 1895 issue, had the following take on it (quoting and misquoting) in an article titled “Enviably Descriptive Powers!”:

The wealth of playful expression and delicate refinement sometimes displayed by “the great American language,” completely puts in the background our methods of forcible description by means of “the Queen’s English.” Illustrating this, we note that *The Daily News* makes some selections from a report of a baseball match in *The Quincy Herald*, Illinois, which are interesting as betokening the flowers of speech indulged in by Quincy journalists: “Quincy was playing Omaha, a neighbouring city, and had the worst of it. Hence the wrath of the Quincy critic. ‘The glass-armed toy soldiers of this town were fed to the pigs by the cadaverous grave-robbers from Omaha.’ Quincy is ‘the Gem City,’ and her players ‘had their shins toasted by the basilisk-eyed cattle-drivers from the West.’ These ‘grisly yaps’ (the Omaha men) ‘ran the bases’ victoriously. Hickley, the Quincy captain, ‘led the rheumatic procession to the Morgue.’ Quincy ‘ran bases like pall bearers at a funeral.’ They are styled ‘geesers’ and ‘hoodos,’ and are said to be ‘whangbasted like a glass full of doodlegammon.’ ‘The game was whiskered and frostbitten; the Quincy Brown Sox had their fins sewed up.’

“An American critic says the American language is, at present, ‘unsettled.’ It does seem to be a trifle whangbasted, as it were, a little frosty and whiskered; too rich in doodlegammon. The citizens of the Gem City should establish an Academy, on the French model, right now. It might not be safe for a cricket critic to call Mr. Mordaunt a ‘geeser,’ or to presume on his belief that Mr. Fry had ‘his fins tied up.’ It will be long before we ‘get even’ with such eloquence!”

Here we have “glass full” instead of “stigtossel full.” (Note the assumption by the British writer that Hickley (sic) was the team captain because he “led the procession.” C. B. Fry and G. J. Mordaunt were famous

cricket players. Mordaunt, like Mike Jackson, came from a cricket-playing family: two brothers, two uncles, and his father, son, nephew, and grandson were all cricketers, according to cricketarchive.com.)

Like so many things in Wodehouse, the reference likely would have been recognizable at the time it was written. It is clearly just nonsense, and the garbled versions probably arose because it *was* nonsense. It was even more garbled by 1915 (*Piccadilly Jim* appeared in 1916), when the quote had a resurgence, under the heading of “here’s how they wrote about baseball 20 years ago.”

As far as I can tell, it was at that time that the made-up nonsense word “stigtossel” (which was meant to convey some sort of vessel) became “stig tossed”—the *Lincoln Daily News*, June 10, 1915, gives this variation on the theme: “Everything was yellow, rocky and whangbasted like stig tossed full of doodlegammon.” The ever-so-important indefinite article “a” is lost here and the noun “stigtossel” changed to two words: an entirely different meaningless noun “stig” and the verb “tossed.”

According to syndicated newspaper columnist Jay E. House (“On Second Thought,” *Hutchinson News*, Hutchinson, Kansas, October 24, 1932), the word “stigtossel” was created by Eugene Brown of Quincy, Illinois (who may have been an editor of the *Herald*). House likened Brown’s creation of the word “stigtossel” to Shakespeare’s creation of the word “petard.” (For more on Shakespeare’s tendency to do this, please see, “All About Shakespeare,” by P. Brooke-Haven—aka P. G. Wodehouse—in *Vanity Fair*, April 1916: “When he was pushed for time, William Shakespeare just shoved down anything and trusted to the charity of the audience to pull him through.”)

I also found a reference to the phrase “stigtossel full of doodle-gammon” in *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poet’s Life*, by Scott Donaldson (2007), p. 239. In a letter from his friend Ridgely Torrence (described as a man who “had a gift for pure, divine nonsense”), Torrence says, “I wish you and I were sitting around some heavenly board . . . with about a half stigtossel of doodlegammon . . . between us.” No date is given for this letter, but it appears to have been written around 1903.

The article is still being (mis)quoted well into the 21st century. I found the *Little Masterpieces of American Wit and Humor* version quoted in sportswriter John Sterling’s blog in a post dated 2009 (which is also where I found the link to the *British Printer* article.)

So, there you go, more than you ever wanted to know about stig tossing and doodle gammon.