Keeping it from Harold

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF P.G. WODEHOUSE

P. G. Wodehouse was born in 1881 in Guildford, Surrey, England. He attended Dulwich College for secondary school before starting work at a bank in London. While working as a junior banker, he published 80 articles and stories in two years. After securing a newspaper columnist position and publishing his first novel, he left the bank to write full-time. He began his career writing public-school stories and light romances before turning to farce, his specialty. While most of his fiction is set in England, Wodehouse spent much of his life in the U.S. and France. In 1940, he was captured in France by the Nazis and interned for nearly a year. In 1941 he made several radio broadcasts from Germany to the U.S., giving a humorous account of his imprisonment and subtly making fun of his German captors. These broadcasts over German radio provoked extreme controversy in Britain, and many of Wodehouse's fellow countrymen never forgave him. He moved to the U.S. permanently after the war. Wodehouse was prolific, publishing more than 90 books throughout his life and authoring or collaborating on more than 50 film scripts, plays, and musical comedies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story was first published in 1913, the year before WWI would begin and change the course of history. In this moment, however, relations among the European powers were better than they had been at the turn of the century and war was not inevitable. In May 1913, King George V of England, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Prussia, and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia all reunited warmly in Berlin to celebrate the wedding of the Kaiser's daughter. These monarchs were still popular, and the latter two still ruled their countries; the King and Queen of England were also still the Emperor and Empress of India. Though during and after the war many monarchies would fall, in 1913 much of Europe was still relaxed, optimistic, and confident of standing in the center of the world. The social transformations that followed WWI—including women's suffrage, a revolution in domestic life, and the upheaval of the class system—had yet to come, as can be seen in Wodehouse's portrayal of the Bramble family, who employ domestic servants, wouldn't dream of Jane working after marriage, and worry chiefly about how Bill's profession reflects on their social standing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Contemporaries of Wodehouse in the Edwardian Period, named for King Edward VII and spanning from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to the outbreak of WWI in 1914, included George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*), Rudyard Kipling, and E. M. Forster (*A Passage to India*, *A Room with a View*). Like Wodehouse, these writers reflected and commented on England's social conditions at the height of the British Empire, when the material luxuries enjoyed by the rich contrasted strikingly with the squalid conditions experienced by four-fifths of the English population. Other masters of Wodehouse's specific style of camp include Max Beerbohm and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Among Wodehouse's literary predecessors, meanwhile, are Ben Johnson and Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*). The poem that Harold recites to his mother is variously titled "A Farewell" or "One Grand Sweet Song," by Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), an English clergyman, novelist, and historian. The poem was published in 1856.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Keeping It from Harold
- **When Written:** 1913
- **Where Written:** England and the United States
- **When Published:** December 1913
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Edwardian Literature
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Barnes, London, England
- **Climax:** Jerry Fisher reveals the truth of Bill's career as a boxer to Harold.
- **Antagonist:** Percy Stokes, Jerry Fisher
- **Point of View:** Omniscient narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Americanization. The American publication *Illustrated Sunday Magazine* published an Americanized version of "Keeping It from Harold" in April 1914, in which the Brambles are an American family living in Harlem, New York, Bill is about to fight the Englishman Jimmy Wilkins at Madison Square Garden, and the characters speak in American, rather than British, slang.

The Real "Porky". There was in fact a boxer active at the time "Keeping It from Harold" was published who was known as "Porky": the American Dan "Porky" Flynn, a heavyweight who boxed from 1906 to 1923.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jane Bramble is darning a sock while her son Harold studies.

Harold asks his mother to help him with his recitation of a poem while he reads it aloud it from memory. After he recites a verse, his mother urges him to take a break from studying and go for a walk. He obeys, prompting his mother to reflect on his model behavior and intelligence. Harold's perfection, readers learn, compels Jane and her husband Bill to lie to him about Bill's profession.

The local clergy and Jane's pompous brother, Major Percy Stokes, also steered the Brambles towards deceiving their son. Bill easily agreed to their plan, being a mild and obliging man at heart.

Bill makes his living as a "professional pugilist," or boxer. Though he had formerly been quite proud of his career and had even carried around a number of news clippings testifying to his skills in the ring, after Harold was born he shunned the publicity—afraid that his "little gentleman" of a son would read about him. Harold excels in both his academics at a private school and his religious studies, and his parents thus pretend that Bill has a respectable job as a commercial traveler, or salesman, rather than admit the truth: that he is a boxer known as "Young Porky."

Jane is happily thinking about Bill's plans to retire after his next match when her brother and husband arrive home unexpectedly. Upon asking why Bill isn't training at his gym, Percy responds excitedly about having convinced Bill of the sinful nature of his profession. Bill announces he is indeed not going to fight in his upcoming match, but maintains that it wasn't Percy's lectures about morality that spurred the decision; rather, the big match-up would be covered by major newspapers with his picture, and Harold would see it and realize the truth. While Jane has never liked her husband's career, she points out that it's earned them good money and allowed them to give Harold a superior education. Jane starts to cry even as Bill insists that this is for Harold's own good.

Just then Bill's trainer, Jerry, walks in and furiously pleads with Bill to come back to the gym—urging his client to consider the money, the crowds, the publicity, and Jerry's own reputation as a trainer. Still, Bill refuses. When Harold then returns from his walk, Jerry seeks revenge on Bill by telling the boy the truth about his father's profession.

To the adults' communal shock, Harold reveals that he has already bet on the match—and, as such, his father mustn't spoil his bet by refusing to fight. Harold then laments that Bill kept the truth from him, since being able to brag that his father was "Young Porky" would've surely stopped the other boys at school from taunting Harold by calling him "**Goggles**."

Harold and his friends have followed the sport for years, he continues, before begging his father for a picture of him boxing to show everyone. A relieved Jerry and Bill return to the gym, and Harold resumes practicing his recitation.

CHARACTERS

Harold Bramble – Harold Bramble is a precocious ten-year-old boy whom his parents call "a model of goodness and intelligence." He has won prizes for his spelling and dictation as well as his Sunday school lessons, and he spends his afternoons memorizing poetry and Scripture verses. His father Bill considers Harold "a little gentleman" and believes the boy "would die of shame" if he knew his father boxed for a living. Luckily for Bill, Harold is a "self-centred child" who doesn't question his parents' fiction that Bill is a salesman. However, Bill is proven wrong in believing that Harold would "die of the disgrace" at having a professional boxer for a father. In fact, the boy shocks his parents by declaring that he has "made a study" of the sport since a young age and is betting on his father as "Young Porky" to win his upcoming bout with Jimmy Murphy. If anything, Harold is dying for Bill to give him a signed picture so that he can impress all his friends and shed the nickname "**Goggles**."

Jane Bramble – Jane Bramble is Harold's mother and Bill's wife. Described as both dim-witted and good-tempered, she is also exceptionally proud of and utterly devoted to her son. Jane wants to give Harold "a better start in life" than she or Bill ever had, and as such is self-conscious about her husband's allegedly uncivilized profession as a boxer—even as she understands that this profession allows her to live in comfort with servants doing most of the domestic labor, and to provide her child with "as good an education as any duke ever had." She usually domineers over her mild-mannered husband, overruling his ideas for naming their son, for instance, and being the first to suggest that they hide his career from the boy. However, she cannot change Bill's mind when he decides to withdraw from a big match before Harold could read possibly about it in the newspaper.

Bill Bramble – Bill Bramble is the wife of Jane, the father of Harold, and a professional pugilist, or boxer, who fights under the name Young Porky. In the past, he enjoyed his reputation as an unpredictable fighter with a powerful left hook, confidently boasting that he could beat anyone in London "weighing eight stone four" in a twenty-round contest. Despite his violent vocation, Bill is "the mildest and most obliging of men" in his personal life. He lets his wife name their son and thinks of Harold as being a league above himself. Bill firmly resolves to quit boxing lest Harold learn the truth about his rough profession, although he fears the subsequent wrath of his wife and his trainer, Jerry. He plans to retire and become a boxing instructor for boys' schools or colleges, where his record of respectability and sobriety could be rewarded with a cushy, well-regarded position—and where, ironically, many young men will want boxing lessons.

Major Percy Stokes – The brother of Jane Bramble, Major Percy Stokes is a missionary for the Salvation Army—a

Protestant Christian church and charitable organization that traditionally uses military structure. The Salvation Army prohibits its members from drinking, smoking, taking drugs, and gambling. Despite his purported devoutness and insistence that boxing is sinful, Percy readily borrows money from his sister and interferes uninvited in her family life. Though criticized for being a narcissist who "liked the sound of his own voice" and "could talk the hind leg off a donkey," he is supposedly a "persuasive" missionary nevertheless. He once persuaded a "publican," or pub owner, to donate all his goods to the poor—starting with his "stock in trade," or beer; a large riot quickly ensued. This indicative example of Percy's accomplishments as a missionary—winning free beer for the public—illustrates that he is a laughable preacher who does no real good for the cause. He attempts to persuade his brother-in-law, Bill, to quit boxing by telling him that young Harold will likely read about his next fight in the newspaper, and Bill doesn't want the boy to know about his career as a boxer. Percy proudly refers to Bill a "brand from the burning," or a convert who has been saved from purgatory, but Bill's rationale is more practical than spiritual—he doesn't personally disapprove of his sport's association with violence and gambling. When Bill's trainer Jerry Fisher confronts them, Percy cowers and avoids taking responsibility for the boxer's sudden change of heart.

Jerry Fisher – Jerry Fisher is Bill Bramble's hot-tempered boxing trainer at the White Hart club. He calls Bill "a pleasure to train" and is shocked when the boxer decides to quit right before a huge match. He tries to punch Major Percy Stokes for leading his trainee astray, before his fiery anger lands on Bill. Feeling quite "badly treated" by the boxer, of whom he had formerly been so "fond and proud," he avenges himself on Bill's son Harold, telling him the boy the truth about Bill's secret career as a boxer. He calls Harold "Tommy," a British nickname for young men. When Harold reveals that he is an enormous fan of boxing, Jerry triumphantly brings Bill back to the White Hart to resume training for the match.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MORALITY AND HYPOCRISY

In "Keeping it from Harold," the adults in ten-year-old Harold Bramble's life are greatly concerned with morality. The fact that Harold's father, Bill Bramble (a.k.a. "Young Porky") boxes for a living is considered so indecent that Bill is willing to withdraw from one of the most important matches of his career to avoid confessing his double life to his precocious son—a confession, the adults believe, that would offend young Harold's righteous spiritual principles. Yet throughout the story attempts to abide by dictates of respectability lead only to deception, while the supposedly immoral act of boxing takes on an air of nobility in that it helps the Brambles provide for their son. As such, Wodehouse satirizes pretentious sensibilities that are only concerned with the *appearance* of morality, and, in fact, do little more than encourage hypocrisy.

While the Brambles consider Bill's boxing career to be dishonorable, it is not so objectionable a vocation that they feel bound to renounce it altogether. In fact, boxing proves an invaluable source of income. Upon learning that Bill won't proceed with the match, Jane Bramble admits that while she's never liked her husband's profession, "it's earned you good money and made it possible for us to give Harold as good an education as any duke ever had, I'm sure." Boxing, then, no matter how supposedly offensive, has allowed the Brambles to build the best life they can for their child.

What's more, Bill's decision to stop boxing is presented not as a moral or spiritual awakening so much as a practical resolution to an increasingly difficult problem (that is, of keeping the nature of his work hidden from Harold). Major Percy, Jane's brother and a missionary of the Salvation Army, takes credit for helping Bill see the sinfulness of his profession, yet Bill insists that it was *not* Percy's spiritual arguments that convinced him to skip the match. Instead, it was the fact that the press coverage had become impossible to hide from Harold: "it was Harold that really made me do it." Bill doesn't reject boxing for the sake of his divine soul, but for mundane, earthly reasons. Excessive hand-wringing over the sinful nature of boxing, then, comes across as silly and overwrought, pushing characters further from honesty and deeper into more obvious moral transgressions.

To be sure, had Bill truly been concerned for his soul he would also have ceased another allegedly wicked practice—lying to his son. Yet even the devout Percy doesn't suggest that Bill come clean and repent; on the contrary, Percy tells Bill, "I hope you are keeping it from Harold. It is the least you can do." Condemning boxing while condoning lying seems fairly hypocritical, but the Brambles readily agree with Percy: "They were lovers of truth, but they had realized that there are times when truth must be sacrificed." Even the "senior curate of the parish" urges Bill to lie to his son rather than quit boxing; evidently the clergyman doesn't view Bill's occupation as truly immoral, or he also would have counseled him to cease fighting. The inconsistent judgment of religious figures on the subject of Bill's matches subverts their authority on the matter.

Percy comes across as especially sanctimonious, despite presenting himself as a deeply religious man and, it follows, an arbiter of moral justice. For one thing, he is notably dependent on his sister for money (which, of course, comes from Bill's

boxing career). When Percy announces that he has metaphorically out-wrestled Bill, his physical form is ridiculed: "'You!' said Mrs. Bramble, with uncomplimentary astonishment, letting her gaze wander over her brother's weedy form." Unlike a typical "Major" in the military, Percy cowers and hides from confrontation rather than stand his ground, "diving underneath the table and coming up the other side like a performing seal." Bill and his wife, for their part, are presented as weak-willed and simple-minded, lacking independent thought or conviction. Wodehouse's depiction of all of these adults suggests none are great models of moral authority and skewers the broader religious conceptions of right and wrong that shape their hypocrisy.

Even Harold, whom the adults believe to be a model of innocence, undermines the moral objection to boxing when he defies their expectations and expresses pride in his father's profession. Harold's bookish, spiritual nature is taken for nobility of character that the adults around him would hate to sully. He sings in the church choir and attends "Sunday-school with a vim which drew warm commendation from the vicar." As the narrator puts it, "You simply couldn't take a boy like that aside and tell him that the father [...] was affectionately known to a large section of the inhabitants of London as 'Young Porky.'" Bill says of his son, "He'd die of the disgrace of it. He ain't like you and me, Jerry. He's a little gentleman." But rather than becoming upset upon hearing the news that his father is a boxer, Harold is more disappointed that Bill plans to drop out of the match: "'It's thick,' he said, in the crisp, gentlemanly voice of which his parents were so proud." His "gentlemanly" demeanor doesn't stop him from enjoying the "disgraceful" sport in the least. He studies it as intently he studies his classics and his Bible: "I've made a study of [boxing] since I was a kid [...] All the fellows at our place are frightfully keen on it."

It's clear that Harold doesn't view boxing as obscene or depraved, but rather relishes it. In fact, he even places bets on matches—revealing that even the story's most outwardly righteous figure takes joy in a secret vice. This story thus at once illustrates the hypocrisy of the adults who lie to Harold while comically undercutting the moral case against boxing in the first place.

CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

So seemingly perfect is Harold Bramble that the adults in his life fear that the truth of his father's profession would damage his delicate sensibilities. Harold's mother, Jane Bramble, insists that "his very perfection had made necessary a series of evasions and even deliberate falsehoods on the part of herself and her husband." However, immediately thereafter, the story goes into greater detail about how the couple's charade began: "While he was a baby it had not mattered so much. But when he began to move about and take notice, Mrs. Bramble said to Mr. Bramble, 'Bill, we must keep it from Harold.'" The fact that the Brambles first agreed to hide the truth about Bill Bramble's boxing only when Harold started to "move about and take notice" calls into question their claim that his singular virtue is what prompted them to lie. The story ultimately argues that the supposed immorality of boxing is secondary to the Brambles' general class anxiety, which, itself, is presented as arbitrary and shallow.

Bill's winnings from boxing allow the Bramble family to live in a comfortable and respectable fashion, with sufficient funds to pay for Harold's private school tuition and plentiful books, as well as for servants to take care of the household. As Harold gives a poetic recitation early in the story, Wodehouse illustrates how the boy's brilliant intellect appears to correspond to the grandness of his environment: "He cleared his throat and fixed his eyes upon the cut-glass hangings of the chandelier." Yet the Brambles evidently feel that these middle-class comforts should have a corresponding white-collar foundation, seeing that they invent a traveling salesman job for Bill in place of his true profession.

Harold's apparent "perfection," thoroughly in keeping with his well-to-do upbringing, causes his parents to feel even more insecure about the way of life that had previously suited them. Before Harold was born, Bill happily "had gone about the world with a match-box full of press-notices, which he would extract with a pin and read to casual acquaintances." Now, of course, he is plainly ashamed to admit to Harold, who was born into this rarified lifestyle, that he supports the family by the lowlier profession of boxing. Wodehouse writes, "With an ordinary boy it would have mattered less. But Harold was different [...] The fact was, as Bill himself put it, Harold was showing a bit too much class for them."

So genteel is Harold that his parents "had come to regard him as a being of a superior order." According to Harold's parents, "You simply couldn't take a boy like that aside and tell him that the father whom he believed to be a commercial traveller was affectionately known to a large section of the inhabitants of London as 'Young Porky.'" A boy like Harold, they believe, would never want to be associated with a father whom the public regards with such familiarity and knows by such a crass nickname. That the Brambles consider Harold to belong to a higher "class" or "order" than them specifically suggests they worry that he would look down upon them if he knew how they really earned their means. Beloved by the coarse masses, boxing is a violent, low form of entertainment, not worthy of the highbrow boy who learns poetry by heart in his free time.

As such, the Brambles seek to distance themselves from the commonness associated with boxing. Bill hopes to soon replace his "disgraceful" labor with a more socially-acceptable teaching post "at one of these big schools or colleges. He had a splendid record for respectability and sobriety and all the other qualities which headmasters demanded in those who taught their young gentlemen to box." Ironically, young gentlemen may take boxing

lessons and remain gentleman; only he who boxes *for a living* is seen as a disgrace. The Brambles don't seem to be conscious of this prejudiced paradox at the heart of their standards of respectability. In fact, even the young men of affluence and intellect with whom Harold attends school all glorify these figures of pure strength and grit. Harold testifies, "There's a fellow at our school who goes about swanking in the most rotten way because he once got Bombardier Wells's autograph. Fellows look up to him most awfully, and all the time they might have been doing it to me." When Bill realizes that he has the approval of his "little gentleman," he immediately relents and returns to his training.

This all suggests that the upper classes derive a particular kind of pleasure from this brush with the less civilized side of life, a spectacle that they can observe without ever having to experience such rough circumstances for themselves. The sheltered rich can take even *more* vicarious pleasure in the sport of boxing than everyone else, the story implies, though they're no less "wicked" and bloodthirsty than the fighters in the ring. Ironically, the Brambles' misunderstanding of elite tastes only further reinforces their alienation from the very class they aspire to belong to; "gentlemanly" Harold would have been happy with the truth all along.

PRIDE

Many of the adults in "Keeping It from Harold" profess to act selflessly. Bill and Jane Bramble, for instance, hide the truth of Bill's boxing career from their virtuous son allegedly to save him from feeling offended or ashamed; Percy and Jerry (Bill's trainer), for their part, insist they're only trying to convince Bill to follow the most advantageous course for his future. However, Wodehouse shows that these supposedly noble and unselfish adult concerns are actually prompted by simple pride. The story satirizes the futile taboo against openly acting in one's own best interest. Indeed, only Harold himself—a child ostensibly less aware of or concerned with social propriety—freely acknowledges his opportunism. A healthy amount of human pride is natural and inevitable, Wodehouse ultimately implies, and denying this is useless.

The Brambles are extremely pleased with their bright, well-behaved son, to the extent that they elevate him far above themselves: Wodehouse writes, "Proud of him as they were, both Bill and his wife were a little afraid of their wonderful child." Their high regard for Harold leads them to imagine that he has duly high standards for them. As such, Bill becomes fiercely determined to keep his rough livelihood hidden from his son, lest Harold "die of shame," or "die of the disgrace of it." When Bill is set to retire, Jane is intensely relieved: "For the first time since Harold had reached years of intelligence she was easy in her mind about the future."

Harold's parents badly want to keep their beloved son from feeling disappointed in them. Jane in particular makes her husband and son the core of her existence, and her place in their lives the only purpose from which she can derive any self-worth. From the start readers see that she is a "domestic creature, wrapped up in Bill, her husband, and Harold, her son." When she beholds Harold, Wodehouse notes her "extraordinary resemblance to a sheep surprised while gloating over its young." Likening Jane to a "domestic creature" such as a "sheep" characterizes her as a being who lives only to breed a fitter generation.

Bill formerly had a great deal of pride in his own independent accomplishments, and even carried "a match-box full of press-notices, which he would extract with a pin and read to casual acquaintances." However, since Harold's birth, this vast pride that constantly fed upon the admiration of multitudes can only find like fulfillment in one boy's regard. Believing that this regard would be entirely extinguished should Harold learn the truth of his profession, Bill is willing to back out of a critical match and trade the esteem of millions for his son's respect. Unmoved by Jerry's reminder to think "of all the swells that'll be coming to see [him]," Bill insists, "I've got to think of Harold."

The extent in which Bill's pride in himself is contingent upon Harold is evident when he swears to his son that he won't fight anymore—"Not if the King of England come to me on his bended knees." This devotion to his son is certainly laudable, and in some ways a rejection of his earlier pride in his career; at the same time, though, his decision is fueled by the desire to avoid inducing shame, the opposite of pride, in himself or his child.

Percy, meanwhile, claims that he couldn't help but intervene in Bill's life out of selfless concern for his brother-in-law's fate if he continued to follow his "wicked ways" as "a man of wrath." However, Wodehouse implies that Percy cares more about his personal triumph than Bill's salvation. Throughout the story, Percy emphasizes his *own* achievement rather than Bill's decision: "I been wrestling with Bill, and I been vouchsafed the victory," Percy announces to his sister when he and Bill decamp from the training center. He continues to boast: "'I been vouchsafed the victory,' repeated the major [...] 'At the eleventh hour it has been vouchsafed to me to snatch the brand from the burning.'"

Jerry also maintains that he's invested in Bill's training for Bill's sake. He entreats his trainee: "Think of the purse [...] Think of the Lonsdale belt they'll have to let you try for if you beat this Murphy [...] Think of all the trouble you've took for the last weeks getting yourself into condition." However, when Bill continues to refuse him, Jerry's goodwill sours and he becomes increasingly agitated. After he pleads with Bill to think "of what the papers'll say" and, then, to "think of me," the reader begins to suspect that what most concerns Jerry are his pride and reputation as a trainer. Eventually Jerry seizes the opportunity to get back at Bill for the humiliation of losing his champion

before the biggest fight in his career: "He considered that he had been badly treated, and what he wanted most at the moment was revenge. He had been fond and proud of Bill Bramble, but those emotions belonged to the dead past." His warm pride in Bill only lasts as long as Bill's wins bolster his Jerry's pride in himself.

Harold is the only character who openly admits to serving his pride. When he hears about his father's career, he calls it as he sees it: an opportunity to boost his reputation among his peers. "Pa, can't you give me a picture of yourself boxing? I could swank like anything," he exclaims. Harold's parents have kept the truth about Bill's boxing from him precisely because they've believed he would not be as impressed with Bill's physical feats as all the simple "swells" in London were. They believed that their "perfect" son would be above taking pride in his father's fame. Ironically, Harold is thrilled at the chance to impress the other boys with his famous father—"they'd [...] look up to me like anything," he declares.

Harold's humorously self-serving reaction proves that his parents were wrong to imagine him unaffected by the human weakness of pride. No matter what lengths the adults went to convince themselves that they were acting purely in another's interest, they couldn't escape the force of pride and merely deluded themselves. In the end, everyone is happiest when they are honest with their desires, and their pride is appeased—Harold's parents no longer have to fear his punishing disappointment, Jerry can hope for a championship, and Harold can chuck the taunt of "**Goggles**." Only Percy and his "foolish talk" are foiled, which suggests Wodehouse's disapproval of vain moralizing.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GLASS/GOGGLES

Wodehouse uses glass and glasses to symbolize the intellect and delicacy associated with Harold. Harold's intelligence is identified with his glasses from the very beginning of the story, when Wodehouse writes, "his eyes [were] a trifle cloudy behind their spectacles [...] His powerful brain was plainly busy." Later, Wodehouse notably describes how Harold "fixed his eyes upon the cut-glass hangings of the chandelier" as he prepared to recite his poem. The fragile glass chandelier is thus implicitly associated with Harold's mastery of poetry. Such a chandelier is also a symbol of surplus wealth and luxury, being such an impractically brittle and needlessly lavish source of light. Jane and Bill view Harold like the chandelier—representative of their prosperity and rise in society, and existing in a separate dimension from the hardiness and grit necessary to survive on lesser means; as Bill tells his trainer, Jerry Fisher, "[Harold] ain't like you and me, Jerry. He's a little gentleman."

Wodehouse again emphasizes the connection between glass and Harold by referring to the boy as "[t]the spectacled child," and noting "his spectacles gleaming in the gaslight." However, Harold himself dislikes being strongly associated with his eyeglasses: "[Y]ou don't know how sick a chap gets of having chaps call him 'Goggles,'" he exclaims toward the end of the story. Much to his parents' shock, he ardently follows the rough sport of boxing, despite being unfit to fight himself. He has not "run to muscle" like his father, and his glasses certainly can't take much roughhousing, but he talks about the sport with expertise as well as an "animated expression." His superior intelligence and decorum fail to quell his passion for a visceral clash. Harold's keen enthusiasm for the common sport of boxing despite his appearance of being "a little gentleman" hiding behind delicate spectacles suggests that his parents' lower-class origins have failed to produce a truly refined offspring, despite all the gentility they can imitate; or that gentility is ultimately hollow, and no one is immune to the thrills of a visceral duel.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Strand edition of *Keeping it from Harold* published in 1913.

Keeping it from Harold Quotes

He cleared his throat and fixed his eyes upon the cut-glass hangings of the chandelier.

"'Be good, sweet maid,'" he began, with the toneless rapidity affected by youths of his age when reciting poetry, "'and let who will be clever'—clever, oh yes—'do noble things, not dream them'—dream them, oh yes—'dream them all day long; and so make life, death, and that vast f'rever, one'—oh yes—'one grand, sweet song.'"

Related Characters: Harold Bramble (speaker), Jane Bramble

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

At the start of the story, Harold begins to practice a

recitation in front of his mother, Jane. Having already heard about "his powerful brain" and his recent "spelling and dictation prize," expectation for this recitation have been set high. Wodehouse further raises expectations by associating Harold's recitation with the luxurious glass chandelier, a grand symbol of value and refinement that sits in the Brambles' home. Harold also wears glasses, a universal symbol for uncommon intellect.

Despite these signals of his intelligence and talent, however, Harold's recitation proves far from dazzling. Harold speaks "with the toneless rapidity affected by youths of his age." His interruptions ("'and let who will be clever'—clever, oh yes—") make his recitation of the poem jarring and comical, not dignified or melodious as one might expect from a prize-winning speaker. The fact that Harold shares the same imperfections as other "youths of his age" also foreshadows the later revelation that he appreciates the common sport of boxing as much as the rest of the general public does. Superficial tokens like a luxurious glass chandelier or an intellectual's spectacles, then, can prove to be misleading or meaningless.

> And then Harold had come into his life, and changed him into a furtive practiser of shady deeds. Before, he had gone about the world with a match-box full of press-notices, which he would extract with a pin and read to casual acquaintances. Now, he quailed at the sight of his name in print, so thoroughly had he become imbued with the necessity of keeping it from Harold.

Related Characters: Bill Bramble (speaker), Harold Bramble

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Bill Bramble, known to the boxing world as "Young Porky," used to take a great deal of pride in his triumphs in the ring. His ego was such that he would carry around news articles about his fights to bring out and flaunt before everyone he met. However, following the birth of his son, Harold, Bill's self-worth no longer rested upon the mass admiration of strangers, but upon Harold alone. Assuming that genteel, mild-mannered Harold would disdain boxing as a rough and vulgar pastime, Bill now sees his professional accomplishments as "shady" rather than impressive. He becomes "furtive" and ashamed of his career.

Bill's extreme former egotism and boastfulness, taken to the absurd degree of toting around a collection of newspaper articles, keeps readers from feeling too sorry for him, while his radical reversal—pitifully cowering "at the sight of his name in print"—proves how greatly he is humbled by his son, so readers don't hold his earlier vanity against him. Wodehouse's satire, then, is more mildly humorous than scathing. Each of Bill's outsized emotions come across as rather ridiculous, underscoring that boxing isn't all that offensive in the first place.

> "He's seen the error of his ways," cried Percy, the resilient. "That's what he's gone and done. At the eleventh hour it has been vouchsafed to me to snatch the brand from the burning. Oh! I have waited for this joyful moment. I have watched for it. I—"

Related Characters: Major Percy Stokes (speaker), Harold Bramble, Jane Bramble, Bill Bramble

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Upon barging into the Brambles' home, Percy crows over his supposed conversion of his brother-in-law, Bill, to the righteous doctrine Percy preaches. He comically mixes his biblical references as he boasts of opening Bill's eyes to "the error of his ways" and stepping in at "the eleventh hour" to save "the brand from the burning." That he repeatedly emphasizes his own role in this "joyful" occasion—asserting that Bill's salvation "had been vouchsafed to me" and claiming to "have waited" and "watched" patiently for just the right moment to intervene—implies that Percy behaved out of personal pride rather than genuine selfless concern for another.

His declaration that this is a "joyful" event further ignores his sister's express unhappiness with Bill's decision to quit boxing, as Jane is being abruptly stripped of the only means to elevate her beloved son. Percy's guiding religious principles are evidently divorced from practical ideas of good. Nobody else, least of all the man himself, believed Bill to have been on the cusp of "burning" for his livelihood, and Percy's blindly self-congratulatory talk discourages readers from sympathizing with his intentions. Wodehouse renders religious extremity ridiculous and vain in Percy's absurd, self-absorbed manner.

"Goodness knows I've never liked your profession, Bill, but there is this to be said for it, that it's earned you good money and made it possible for us to give Harold as good an education as any duke ever had, I'm sure. And you know yourself you said that the five hundred pounds you were going to get if you beat this Murphy, and even if you lost it would be a hundred and twenty, was going to be a blessing, because it would let us finish him off proper and give him a better start in life than you or me ever had."

Related Characters: Jane Bramble (speaker), Harold Bramble, Bill Bramble

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Jane Bramble is dismayed at the thought of Bill's premature retirement from boxing because she doesn't want to lose the sizable income he earns from his fights. While she snobbishly disapproves of boxing's barbarity, she is gratified by the upscale lifestyle her husband's profession has afforded them, with servants to attend to their household and tuition money for Harold's private school. Her condemnation of Bill's chosen work is born of her desire to fit in with the higher classes, but ironically enough, she can't aspire to a higher-class lifestyle without the profits from his fights. Trapped by her social-climbing ambition, she can't tell her supremely highbrow son the truth or tell her husband to quit boxing until they've secured their superior place in society.

Jane is nonetheless a sympathetic character, however, because her ambition is firmly tied to her maternal devotion. She is glad to have given Harold "as good an education as any duke ever had," and wished only for this last fight to "let us finish him off proper." She reminds Bill of their objective to provide Harold with "a better start in life than you or me ever had," prompting readers to sympathize with their humble origins and their insecurity in the face of Harold's naturally polished manner. The Brambles' anxiety regarding Harold's opinion of them—and, by extension, the higher classes' opinion of them—is shallow, but it is also a consequence of English hierarchical society in general, which Wodehouse exposes and critiques in his fiction.

"There's a fellow at our school who goes about swanking in the most rotten way because he once got Bombardier Wells's autograph. Fellows look up to him most awfully, and all the time they might have been doing it to me. That's what makes me so jolly sick. How long do you suppose they'd go on calling me 'Goggles' if they knew that you were my father?"

Related Characters: Harold Bramble (speaker), Bill Bramble

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends on a deeply ironic note. When Harold Bramble learns that his father is secretly the professional boxer known as "Young Porky," he is not ashamed of his father like Bill had feared. Instead, Harold is merely angry that he hadn't been told the truth sooner, because he could have awed all his friends with the fact that he was descended from a champion boxer. Harold's parents had assumed that their highly civilized and intellectual son would scorn a rough sport like boxing, but Harold and his private school peers turn out to be surprisingly avid fans. The boys whom Wodehouse calls "young dons," or budding university tutors, glorify powerful boxers like "Bombardier Wells" or "Young Porky."

Harold's thoroughly bookish nature is exemplified by his spectacles, which both mark him as a reader and make him a poor fighter. He hates when the other boys teasingly call him "Goggles," calling attention to his unsatisfactory physical condition. Even among the educated elite that Harold belongs to, visceral strength is still idolized, perhaps even fetishized, by those who will never have to fight for a living themselves. Harold's class-conscious parents underestimate the upper classes' taste for vicarious thrills.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

KEEPING IT FROM HAROLD

The simple-minded, good-natured, and whole-heartedly domestic Jane Bramble is darning a sock while her ten-year-old son Harold Bramble studies. Harold asks his mother to help him with his recitation by looking at a poem while he reads it aloud it from memory. Regarding him with great satisfaction, "like a sheep surprised while gloating over its young," Jane replies, "Mother will hear you, precious." Harold doesn't think his mother's baby-talk is appropriate for addressing "a young man" who is the school spelling champion. While staring at the **glass** chandelier above, Harold delivers his verse "with the toneless rapidity affected by youths of his age when reciting poetry."

Jane's devotion to her family is plainly apparent in her pride in Harold and her absorption in household duties. She takes her maternal adoration over the top, however, and Wodehouse harshly likens her to a mindless gloating "sheep." Harold silently objects to his mother's condescending manner, reminding readers of his conscious pride in himself. He contemplates the chandelier through his spectacles as he recites his poem, suggesting that his refined surroundings correspond to his exceptional intellect. However, his recitation is comically rushed, indicating that he is not so perfect, after all; his excellence is partially in his parents' heads.

Jane urges Harold to take a break before moving on to study his Scripture and go for a walk. He obeys and leaves. After he exits, she reflects on his model behavior and intelligence. Harold's perfection compels both Jane and Harold's father, Bill, to lie to their son about Bill's (as of yet unnamed) profession. This hadn't been a problem when Harold was a baby, but as he grew up and his exceptional virtues quickly became apparent, Jane suggested to her husband that they hide the truth of Bill's occupation. Though lying is distasteful to them both, they feel "there are times when truth must be sacrificed."

Harold's parents also take his devotion to learning his Scripture as evidence of his exceptional character. Harold's perfection, in turn, justifies their ongoing deception regarding Bill's career. Wodehouse stokes readers' curiosity about what such an objectionable career could be by emphasizing how Harold's remarkable qualities of virtue and intelligence are completely incompatible with Bill's line of work.

Harold has already won two prizes in Sunday School, and the local clergy echoes Jane's suggestion about keeping the truth of Bill's job from the boy for his own good. Jane's brother, Major Percy Stokes of the Salvation Army, also steers the Brambles towards deceiving their son when he stops by the house for supper, insisting that it's "the least" they can do. Jane takes offense to Percy's preaching about "men of wrath" while he enjoys a meal at the Brambles' expense. While pompous Percy is said by some to simply love the sound of his own voice, he can nonetheless preach so persuasively he once convinced a pub owner to donate all his property to the poor—starting with his beer.

Wodehouse implies that Bill's mysterious profession is offensive on religious grounds by describing Harold's affinity for church as well as the insistence of two religious figures—a local clergyman and a member of the Salvation Army—that Harold remain ignorant as to how Bill makes a living. However, Percy is quickly shown to be a poor authority on the principles he preaches—he has no qualms about enjoying the fruits of Bill's disreputable boxing income, and his most successful evangelical mission involved distributing beer rather than providing goods for the truly needy.

Bill easily agrees to conceal his career, being a mild and obliging man at heart. Before Harold was born, he'd readily allowed Jane to choose the baby's name despite his own preferences. It is near impossible to not like Bill, yet "his walk in life [is] of such a nature that it simply had to be kept from Harold." The trouble is that Bill is a "professional pugilist." He had formerly been quite proud of his boxing skills, supposedly able to beat anyone in his weight class in a twenty-round contest. He had even carried around a number of news clippings testifying to his impressive accomplishments. However, after Harold was born, Bill shunned the publicity he once enjoyed, being too afraid that Harold would read about his father in the papers and be ashamed.

That Bill is a mellow and easygoing fellow makes the idea of him being employed in distasteful work even more puzzling. Wodehouse intentionally sets up this revelation that Bill is a boxer as an anticlimax, having led readers to imagine worse and worse jobs for Bill to be engaged in that could so badly offend decent sensibilities. Boxing is not nearly so unpleasant an occupation, all things considered—and all the fuss about it seems excessive in retrospect. Wodehouse feeds this reaction by describing Bill's former pride in his profession. Bill didn't always feel that his work was something to be ashamed of; on the contrary, he used to promote his achievements in the ring. Wodehouse thus lays the foundations for the story's taboo against boxing to appear foolish and baseless.

Harold is especially intelligent compared to his rather witless parents. So intelligent is Harold, in fact, that Bill and Jane are intimidated by him, considering him to be of a "superior order." He excels in both his academics at a private school and his religious studies, singing in the church choir and attending Sunday School. Given these superior virtues, his parents feel bound to pretend that Bill has a reputable job as a commercial traveler, or salesman, rather than admit the truth: that he is merely a coarse athlete, known as "Young Porky." Harold, "a self-centred child," doesn't question this story.

Given that neither Jane nor Bill are naturally quick-witted or particularly well-educated, they feel inferior to their bright son. Moreover, Harold shows an enthusiasm for attending church and studying Scripture that they, too, lack, judging by how impressed they are by his zeal. While a merely average intellect and interest in religion aren't necessarily shameful, Harold's parents feel especially sensitive given their lower-class origins and the more prosperous rank they now occupy, as Jane will later testify. They don't want Harold to be conscious of their less sophisticated and enlightened background, so they substitute a successful salesman's profession for Bill's coarser livelihood.

Jane, still darning socks, thinks happily of Bill's plans to retire after his next big match and apply for a respectable and comfortable job as an instructor instead. Suddenly her brother and husband arrive, unexpectedly interrupting her reverie. When she questions why Bill isn't training at his gym, the White Hart, Percy babbles about "wrestling with Bill" and being "vouchsafed the victory," while Jane expresses her confusion and disdain. Percy says he sent letters and pamphlets to Bill and tried to talk to him in person to dissuade him from boxing, but was threatened by Bill's trainer, Jerry Fisher. He asks Bill which treatise finally turned him away from "the primrose path" of sinfulness, but Bill maintains that it was what Percy wrote about Harold that changed his mind, rather than any of Percy's treatises.

Jane approves of Bill's intention to retire from the boxing circuit and become a salaried school instructor. There is a clear element of hypocrisy in how Bill's current career as a boxer is judged compared to how his job as an instructor would be, however, as it will later become clear that the young, upper-class men Bill would teach are themselves interested in learning to box. Bill then corrects Percy to say that he cared more about Harold than Percy's lectures or leaflets on the alleged immorality of boxing.

Jane still doesn't understand what's going on and demands a straight answer from Bill. Finally, Bill admits that he isn't going to fight next week. Jane asks him what about the money he was supposed to earn from the match, and Percy scoffs at the question. She reminds her brother that she has lent him enough money in the past. She tells Bill that she's never liked his career, but it's earned them good money and allowed them to give Harold a superior education. The earnings from the upcoming fight were supposed to guarantee Harold a better start in life than his parents had.

Upon hearing that Bill is quitting boxing sooner than they had agreed, Jane thinks first about the lost earnings from the match. Percy's hypocrisy is evidenced by the fact that he scorns her economic mindset yet can only afford to do so because the Brambles helped him financially in the past. Jane chiefly tolerates Bill's profession because it's profitable, granting them a comfortable lifestyle with luxuries like servants, chandeliers, and private schools for Harold. These benefits, primarily for Harold's sake, have thus far warranted their morally-questionable choice to sacrifice the truth rather than simply leave boxing altogether. Despite the Brambles' concern that boxing is a shameful profession, they add to their unvirtuous course by lying. Their idea of "a better start in life" involves a foundation based on wealth rather than honesty.

Jane starts to cry as Bill explains that he *is* thinking of Harold, and how he decided not to fight after Percy pointed out that the big match-up with the American Jimmy Murphy would likely be covered by the major newspapers with his picture, and Harold would see it and realize the truth.

Once again, morality is not the most important factor behind the Brambles' decisions. They act according to their desires to protect their comfort, status, and pride. Rather than giving up boxing because of its arguable immorality, Bill won't risk Harold becoming ashamed of him, because he couldn't bear the shame he would feel in turn.

Just then Jerry walks in and rushes toward Percy. Percy dives under the table "like a performing seal" while Bill and Jane tell Jerry not to act so rudely. Jerry manages to restrain himself while he pleads with Bill to come back to the gym. Bill tells Percy to explain everything to Jerry, and Percy tells Jane to do it. Jane refuses, and Bill finally confesses again that he's not going to fight. Jerry urges Bill to consider the money, the crowds, the publicity, the title he can contend for if he wins—as well as Jerry's own reputation as a trainer—but Bill refuses.

Percy cowers when faced with Jerry's bluster, showing little courage in his convictions. Neither Bill nor the formerly vocal Percy are eager to inform Jerry of Bill's intention to quit. The fierce boxer and the fiery missionary are comically afraid to stand their ground. Jerry is dumbstruck by Bill's decision to withdraw from the match, which goes against every rationale he knows: wealth, fame, glory, and reputation. Bill insists on withdrawing for Harold's sake, an ostensibly selfless move that nonetheless serves Bill's own pride, hinging as it does upon Harold's opinion of him.

Suddenly Harold returns from his walk, and a furious Jerry seeks revenge on Bill by telling the boy the truth about his father. Bill and Percy try to cut him off, but he talks over them. Bill and Percy tell Harold not to be ashamed because Bill has quit boxing forever, no matter who should plead with him to reconsider—not even the King of England could persuade him to dishonor his son.

Jerry's pride is so bruised by being denied a chance to prove his talents as a trainer that he seeks to inflict humiliation on Bill by exposing the boxer's secret. Bill and Percy try to temper Harold's anticipated distress at the news by assuring him Bill will never fight again under any circumstances. To earn his son's respect, Bill would refuse the King of England.

Harold unexpectedly demands to know what will happen to his bet on the match if Bill quits. He declares that it's quite unfair for his father to spoil his bet after all the research he's done about boxing. Harold also says it's unfair of his father to have kept this secret from him all this time, since the other boys would have fallen all over him if they had known who his father was, instead of looking down on him as "**Goggles**." He urges his father not to withdraw from the match.

Harold indeed bursts out in disappointment, but not the kind his parents imagined. Instead of condemning his father, he astonishes everyone—the reader included—by blasting Bill for quitting and ruining his carefully-planned bet on the upcoming match. He and his friends evidently appreciate good boxing, and Harold wishes he could have capitalized on his father's fame to stop the other boys from calling him "Goggles" after his spectacles. The name is undesirable because of its association with fragility. Harold clearly glorifies the robust fighters, given his extensive knowledge of the boxing league.

Jerry praises Harold's response, and the boy explains that he and his friends have followed boxing for years. Another boy supposedly owns a photo of a boxing champion, and Harold begs his father for a picture of him boxing so he can flaunt it, too, and put an end to the nickname "**Goggles**." Jerry and Bill return to the gym, and Harold resumes practicing his recitation with Jane.

Harold apparently feels no ethical scruples about being a boxing fan. His parents' concerns on his behalf, thus, appear to have been projections of their own anxieties regarding upper-class morality and respectability. Harold is the only character to freely acknowledge his intention to bolster his pride by laying claim to a famous boxer as his father and dispelling an embarrassing nickname. Realizing that Harold idolizes boxers, Bill and his pride readapt, and he returns to the gym. Jane is able to resume her domestic mission, spared the financial derailment that Bill's early retirement had posed. And Percy disappears to stage his next vain intervention. The younger generation's disregard for outdated standards of virtue and propriety relieves everyone from their distress, and the story ends happily.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Kelly, Carolyn. "*Keeping it from Harold*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Nov 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kelly, Carolyn. "*Keeping it from Harold*." LitCharts LLC, November 7, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/keeping-it-from-harold.

To cite any of the quotes from *Keeping it from Harold* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wodehouse, P.G.. Keeping it from Harold. Strand. 1913.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wodehouse, P.G.. Keeping it from Harold. London: Strand. 1913.