

Quest and The Knightly Quest of Mervyn

On different versions of a Wodehouse-story

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Background

In our project of searching for Wodehouse texts in Swedish magazines Bengt Malmberg and I found the story "Jordgubbar i december" (Strawberries in December) in Bonniers Novell Magasin June 1931.

This is a **Freddie Widgeon** story. The translation is anonymous and I wanted to see how close it was to the original "Quest". This short story was never published in a book. Its first appearance was in Cosmopolitan (USA) in April 1931. Two months later, in June 1931 the translation "Jordgubbar i december" appeared in Bonniers Novell Magasin. In Britain, it appeared one month later, in July, in Strand. Two years later, 1933, a Mulliner version: "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn" was included into Mulliner Nights.

The plot

Freddie is perseveringly proposing to a girl who rejects him as an unserious blockhead. He asks her for a Quest to prove himself. The girl tells him that if he can bring her fresh strawberries she will at least take his proposal into consideration. When Freddie, after many troubles, has got a box of strawberries the girl makes him wait for her. Freddie is absentminded and tastes a berry. It was good! His mind is diverted by a promising dogfight outside and suddenly he discovers that the box is empty. This is a typical story of a Freddie Widgeon failure in a love affair!

" 'I'll bet that if all the girls Freddie Widgeon has loved and lost were placed end to end – not that I suppose one could do it – they would reach half-way down Piccadilly'.

'Further than that' said the Egg. 'Some of them were pretty tall.' "

("Good-Bye To All Cats" in "Young Men in Spats")

One Freddie Widgeon version and one Mulliner version

Jasen and McIlvaine give the following information about this short story in magazines:

- Strand July 1931: Both Jasen and McIlvaine report the title "Quest".
- Cosmopolitan April 1931: Jasen reports only the title "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn". McIlvaine reports the title "Quest", together with "The Knightly Quest of

Mervyn" in brackets. From this I got the impression that Strand contained the Widgeon version and that Cosmopolitan contained the Mulliner version. But this is wrong!

- In Neil Midkiff's list of short stories (reached by a link from The Wodehouse Society USA homepage) he reports the title "Quest" *both* for Strand July -31 and for Cosmopolitan April -31 and reports the title "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn" just for "Mulliner Nights". Tony Ring gives the same information on the website of The Wodehouse Society UK.

- Midkiff's and Ring's information is **correct** which I later could see when I read the stories in both Cosmopolitan and Strand.

- This means that Jasen's information about the Mulliner version in Cosmopolitan is **wrong!**

- McIlvaine's remark inside brackets can unfortunately be understood as if she means that it is just a question of two different names on the same text, which it is **not**.

In my opinion it's directly misleading to treat these two versions as if it is just two different names on *one* short story. It's the same plot and most of the text is the same, but the differences are so important that I think they should be regarded as two separate versions, for instance in bibliographies, as Midkiff and Ring do.

Also others have made the same mistake. Probably they have just trusted the information in Jasen and McIlvaine.

- On the website of the Russian Wodehouse Society you can find the title "Quest", but the information is about "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn" and about the persons in this version. On this webpage it is further said that this story (= the Mulliner version) first was published with the title "Quest" in Cosmopolitan och Strand!

- In the bibliography "THE WORLD OF MR. WODEHOUSE" by Bjarne Nielsen (Antikvariat Pinkerton, Copenhagen 1987) the author refers to Connolly's books, Jasen and McIlvaine. In his alphabetical index of short stories you can find "Quest" but the information is: "Quest (magazine title for "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn)".

Differences between the Cosmopolitan version and the Strand version.

I looked for copies of Strand July 1931 and Cosmopolitan April 1931. I first found a copy of Strand so I started comparing it with the version in BNM although the original to the BNM version must have been the story in Cosmopolitan. (Strand published the story one month later than BNM.) The illustrations by James Montgomery Flagg in BNM are also the same as in Cosmopolitan while Strand has another illustrator. I found that most of the Swedish translation was quite close to the Strand version, *but there were deviations, smaller and bigger*. Some sentences were for instance omitted and some others added. From Tony Ring I got a photocopy of the

story in *Cosmopolitan* (Thanks Tony!). I could then establish that these deviations in fact were deviations between the *Cosmopolitan* and the *Strand* versions. It showed that these two versions **are not** identical. The BNM translation is clearly based on the *Cosmopolitan* version.

I have compared the *Cosmopolitan* and *Strand* versions of "Quest" and I found that they are very similar but certainly **not identical**. I have compared them sentence by sentence and found *around 40 deviations between them*. Then I didn't count typographical differences and changes in grouping into paragraphs. There are a range of deviations, from exchanges of single words to addition and deletion of whole paragraphs. But of course it's the same story and *almost* the same text. Nothing is changed in the plot. I will give a few examples of smaller and bigger differences:

1) Already in the second sentence in the story in *Strand* the words "*on a chilly afternoon*" is added.

2) The girl tells Freddie that she wants strawberries. In *Cosmopolitan* you can read: "*Freddie gulped a bit, 'Strawberries?' he said.*" This is omitted in *Strand*.

3) *Cosmopolitan*: "... *I shall know there's more in you than sawdust – which the casual observer wouldn't believe –*". The underlined text is omitted in *Strand*.

4) When Freddie first visits Oofy you can read in *Strand*: "*Freddie uttered a hollow groan. 'Don't gargle,' said Oofy. 'Or if you must gargle, gargle outside.'*" The underlined text is omitted in *Cosmopolitan*.

5) In the *Strand* version there is a long passage about Freddie's deportation to Blicester Regis: "*And in this, Freddie tells me, there was a good deal of rugged sense. Blicester Castle, a noble pile, is situated at least half-a-dozen miles from anywhere, and the only time anybody ever succeeded in disgracing the family name, while in residence, was back in the reign of Edward the Confessor, when the then Earl of Blicester having lured a bevy of neighbouring landowners into the banqueting hall on the specious pretence of standing the mulled sack, had proceeded to slug them one and all with a battleaxe, subsequently cutting their heads off and, in rather loud taste, sticking them on spikes along the outer battlements.*" This text is omitted in *Cosmopolitan*.

6) In *Cosmopolitan* there are some sentences when Freddie leaves Oofy after his second visit: "*As he surveyed the passing populace, he suddenly got on to what those Bolshevik blokes were driving at. They had spotted – as he had spotted now – that what was wrong with the world was that all the cash seemed to be centered in the wrong hands and needed a lot of broad-minded redistribution.*" These sentences are omitted in *Strand*.

7) Only in *Strand* you can read this about dog-fighting: "*He had always maintained that you got the best dog-fights down at the Eaton Square neighbourhood, because there tough animals from the Kings' Road, Chelsea, district were apt to wander in – dogs who had trained on gin and flat-irons at the local public-houses and could be relied on to give their best.*"

8) A paragraph occurs only in *Strand* when Freddie examines the parcel from Oofy to the girl: "*I don't know if any of you fellows recollect, when at school, reading a bit of*

poetry by a fellow whose name has escaped my memory, dealing with a bird called Cortez, who discovered the Pacific, if I recall the ocean rightly, and took a look at it and whistled a bit, and took his pals to look at it, and then they all looked at one another and were, generally speaking, pretty well steamed up about the whole thing. Well, if Freddie had had anybody there to look at, he would have looked at him just as those fellows looked at one another."

Why the differences between Cosmopolitan and Strand?

"Quest" was published a couple of months later in Strand than in Cosmopolitan. My first thought was that maybe Wodehouse reworked the whole short story once more to adapt it to the British audience. I suggested this to Tony Ring but he thought that the two magazines got the same "master version" of the story and that the changes were made by editors at the magazines in order to:

- adjust the text to the frames of references of the American respectively the British audiences,
- adjust the text to available space in the magazine.

In my mind Wodehouse was a well established author so I didn't think that editors in magazines dared to make unauthorized changes in his manuscripts. But I realize that this was a bit naïve! Tony Ring is with all probability right. Examples 5 and 7 above are very British and are omitted in Cosmopolitan but included in Strand. But this adaption *could* have been made by Wodehouse himself?

The comparison with the Mulliner version gives more important support for the idea of a "master version". I compared "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn" to the 8 examples of differences between the Cosmopolitan and Strand versions of "Quest":

- 1) A brand new introduction, not relevant.
- 2) The extra text in Cosmopolitan is there.
- 3) The extra text in Cosmopolitan is there.
- 4) The extra text in Strand is there.
- 5) The extra text in Strand is there.
- 6) The extra text in Cosmopolitan is there.
- 7) The extra text in Strand is there.
- 8) The extra text in Strand is omitted!

(I disregard from change of names of persons and places.)

In the Mulliner version you can find almost all pieces of texts that occur in either of the Strand or Cosmopolitan version! It seems very likely that Wodehouse had a "master version" of "Quest" that was sent to both magazines and that contained all the pieces of text that occurred in either one of the two versions. It was obviously this "master version" that he later used when he made "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn". Maybe some of the bigger omissions in Strand and Cosmopolitan were made with Wodehouse's permission? We can't know for sure.

The Mulliner version is well known as it has been published in books several times. But the Freddie Widgeon version is, in my opinion, unjustly forgotten. The Widgeon version is not reprinted in any book, so if you want to read the Widgeon version you need to get a copy of *Cosmopolitan* or *Strand* magazine!

I don't know if McIlvaine and Jasen really read "Quest" in *Cosmopolitan* and *Strand* and compared them to "The Knightly Quest of Mervyn"? Even if most of the text is identical there *are* differences, and I think these differences are *not unimportant*. The two versions belong to two different series, two different circles of motives. The introduction in the Mulliner version is funny with the poem, **but as a whole I find the story more appropriate as a Freddie Widgeon story as it originally was written**, for the following main reasons:

- Like the other stories about Freddie it is a story about a failure in courting, one in the long row. The Mulliner stories are one the contrary normally success-stories.

- English is not my native tongue but in my ears the language of the narrator, the choice of words in some sentences, sounds more like that of a Crumpet talking to other drones than that of Mr Mulliner addressing the visitors at the Anglers' Rest. When Wodehouse some years later got the idea (from the editor of "Mulliner Nights"?) to make a Mulliner story of it, he rewrote the introduction, changed names, places and narrator, but he didn't bother to adapt the language of the narrator to that of Mr Mulliner.

The Mulliner version got printed in books, not the Widgeon version. That is of course why this version is well known while the Widgeon version is "forgotten". I think that this is a pity! I don't think it was a coincident that Wodehouse first wrote it as a Widgeon story. And I don't think he revised it because he was not satisfied with it. Probably he was asked by the publisher to add another story to "Mulliner Nights" and he did what he was used to do: took an old good story and recycled it.

It's a pity that this "master version" of the Freddie Widgeon story never was printed in a book. It would be very interesting to know if the "master version" of "Quest" is saved somewhere. Perhaps it is saved in the archives of Wodehouse Estate? It would be very nice if it could be published so Wodehouse enthusiasts can get the opportunity to read the original version.