

Tomas Prenkert 17/8 2014

The short story “En flicka i knipa”. How much of it is by Wodehouse?

“A Damsel in Distress”, study 2

I. Introduction

The Swedish magazine Filmjournalen nr 13 1938 contains a short story “**En flicka i knipa**” based on the Hollywood film “**A damsel in Distress**” from 1937. The film is in turn based on the novel by Wodehouse from 1919. The short story is accordingly a “third generation” of the same story. I found it interesting with this transformation of a story, first into a film and then from a film into a short story. In the study “Ten versions of a Wodehouse story” I have presented different versions of this story and made some comparisons.

The question in this study is: **To which extent can the short story “En flicka i knipa” be regarded as a work by Wodehouse?** To answer this I need to examine:

- 1) To which extent can the film be regarded as a work by Wodehouse?
- 2) Which are the similarities/differences between the short story and the film?
- 3) Is the short story based on the earlier condensations (Screen Romances or Movie Story magazine)?

In his excellent book “P. G. Wodehouse and Hollywood” Brian Taves devotes a chapter to this film and makes a very good and comprehensive comparison of the story in it with that of the novel. I have acquired a DVD with the film to be able to compare the film with the short story. Wodehouse gets credit in the film as screen-writer together with two other persons. Question 1) above can also be formulated: **Which influence did Wodehouse really have on the screenplay and on the film?**

II. A story in many versions (For more information see “Ten versions of a Wodehouse story”.)

1. The novel was published 1919.
2. A silent film was made already 1919.
3. A condensed home movie version was released 1924 in France with the name Mam’zell Milliard.
4. In 1928 the novel was dramatized into a theatre play by Ian Hay and Wodehouse. Richard Burnip (2011) has written a very interesting article about this play and it’s first stage-setting, and also compares it with the novel and with the film from 1937.

5. A second **film** was produced in 1937 in Hollywood with Wodehouse as the main screenwriter. It was released November 16th.
6. November 1937, before the release of the film, a one-hour **radio** version of the film was sent in USA by CBS.
7. In the magazine Screen Romances dec 1937 there is a **condensed version** of the story from a screenplay by Morrie Riskin based on the Wodehouse novel.
8. Taves (2005 p 88) tells that there is also a **condensed version** in December issue of Movie Story Magazine. I have not been able to read a copy of this version.
9. Just a few weeks after the Swedish premiere of the film, a "**short story**" was published in Film-journalen (nr 13 1938), with the same Swedish title as the film and with the subtitle: *A short story after the R.K.O. radio movie, which is based on a novel by P. G. Wodehouse*. This story is the object for this study.
10. **A stage musical** along the lines George Gershwin had proposed was created and performed with the title "Reaching for the moon" 1987 and in a rewritten version with the title "A Foggy Day", performed 1998 and 1999. (Taves 2006 p 96-97, and Mueller.)

III. The theatre play and the film

The work to transform narrative text into dialogue was already done in the play, so one could expect Wodehouse to use lines from the play in the film. I have watched the film scene by scene and compared the lines with those in the play and I can't find that this has been the case, with some exceptions.

For instance is Belfer Castle changed to Tottleigh Castle, and this change remains in the film. The plot of the play is quite close to the novel. Much bigger changes are made in the film. The dialogue in the play follows the spirit and style of the novel but is nevertheless *almost totally rewritten*. Some lines in the play are close to lines in the novel but also these lines are almost always somewhat reformulated. As a matter of fact, I have only been able to find just a few lines from the novel that are quite identical in the play. **The film is evidently based on the novel** and the use of the play is really insignificant.

IV. Some comparisons between the 1937 film and the novel

This comparison is vital to evaluate: **How much of Wodehouse is there in the film?** I compared them in the study "Nine versions of a Wodehouse story" and will just make a few comments here.

There are **many** and **big** differences between the film and the novel, much bigger than between the play and the novel! Some names have for instance been changed and below I will use the names from the film (and the short story).

The novel

Belfer Castle

Lady Maud, female leading part

George Bevan, male leading part, a composer

The film

renamed to Tottleigh Castle (as in the play)

renamed to Lady Alycia

renamed to Jerry Halliday, a dancer (Astaire)

To make room for the comedians Burns and Allen, Jerry is supplied with a press agent and his secretary. Taves wrote: *“While their participation was definitely outside the original, and the humor different from the Wodehouse style, Burns and Allen provide the picture with needed additional amusement.”* (2006, p. 90). The dialogue for these comedians is new for the film. They are funny, but is it typical Wodehouse humor? Like Taves I have doubts. There are a lot of new scenes and new dialogue in the film that has no correspondence at all with the novel. What was Wodehouse’s contribution to this? Generally speaking: How important is his contribution to the film? How much of it is Wodehouse’s?

McCrum and Taves don’t hesitate that the film is a work by Wodehouse: *“Wodehouse’s screenplay basically followed the plot of the novel, but merged or dropped many of its characters, so that the film bears only a passing resemblance to the original.”* (McCrum 2004 p. 247) Note his formulation *“Wodehouse’s screenplay”*! Taves (2001): *“Like the Ian Hay stage version, A Damsel in Distress retained the basic plot outline of the novel, but unlike the play, the movie deleted and merged a number of characters, and added others, becoming a second, separate Wodehouse variation on the novel.”*

V. Wodehouse’s contributions to the screenplay

At first RKO had employed someone else to write the screenplay. It turned out very badly and Wodehouse was engaged. Wodehouse gets credit in the film as the first name of the screenwriters and reasonably he contributed to, or at least accepted, most of the extensive changes in the screenplay of both story and dialogue compared to the novel. But there are lots of questions. How much in the screenplay comes from Wodehouse and how much from the other screenwriters? How did they co-operate? Who did what? How much freedom did he get from the producer? How did Wodehouse regard this script?

In his autobiography *“Over Seventy”* (1957) Wodehouse devotes a chapter (pp. 160 – 166) to his Hollywood experiences. But in this chapter he only tells us about his work for M-G-M in 1930. He never mentions his shorter visit in 1937 or his work at RKO. It’s quite clear that he disliked the time at M-G-M very much. He wrote to Townend 1937 *“There seems to be a curse over M-G-M, so far as I am concerned.”* (Wodehouse 1954, p. 95). However, when he worked for RKO with *“A Damsel in Distress”*, he wrote some letters in which he tells about his work and here the tone is quite another. He seems delighted!

In July 1937 Wodehouse wrote to Leonora and told her: *“I must say it is altogether different working at RKO on a picture based on my own novel from being on salary at MGM . . . !”* . . . *“I like my boss, Pandro Berman, very much. He is the first really intelligent man I have come across here -”* . . . *“Everything is made very pleasant for me, and I like the man I am working with – a chap called Pagano. The way we work is, we map out a sequence together, then I go home and write the dialogue, merely indicating business, and he takes what I have done and puts it into screen shape. Thus relieving me of all that ‘truck shot’ ‘wipe dissolve’ stuff.”* (Wodehouse 1990, p. 67, Ratcliffe 2011, p. 268 and McCrum 2004, pp. 245-246).

Ernest Pagano was a film veteran who apparently took care of everything technical, like the placement and slidings of cameras etc. I interpret the word “*business*” in the letter as “stage directions”, including scenery and the movements of the actors. It seems that the plot and the dialogue was Wodehouse’s main task. Wodehouse didn’t mention any other of the co-writers than Pagano in any of his published letters.

In mid-August 1937 Wodehouse wrote in another letter to Leonora: “*I finish my job on the ‘Damsel in Distress’ tomorrow, after ten weeks all but two days, . . .*” *I only expected to get a couple of weeks polishing the existing script. But that script turned out so badly that they threw it away, and I and another man started doing a new picture from the bottom up, following the story of the book pretty closely. But much better is the fact that I have really come across with some good stuff, . . .*” *It was a very pleasant job as I was working under a producer, Pandro Berman, who really has got intelligence, taste and everything. I think the picture is going to be good. . . .*” *I think I have made a big hit in my work on this picture.*” (Wodehouse 1990, p. 69).

Wodehouse clearly liked the script and regarded it to a considerable part as **his** work. It seems probable that a lot of dialogue in the film is Wodehouse’s work. The most obvious exception is the dialogue with Burns and Allen. The story and the “sequences” (some linked scenes) which he mentions in the July letter seems more to be a product of cooperation than the dialogue.

As a matter of fact it was just before he finished the work with the screenplay, he wrote that the script was “*following the story of the book pretty closely*”! But there **are** big differences between the film and the novel! Either Wodehouse didn’t regard these differences as important, or some important changes were made after Wodehouse left the work with the screenplay. Burnip (2011) notes : “*Wodehouse was one of several (credited and uncredited) writers who worked on the script, neither the first nor the last;*” A most interesting question is what happened to the script during the five weeks between August 16th, when Wodehouse left the work, and September 25th when the script was finished. Maybe the film contains scenes that were changed or added during these weeks? He never mentioned in the letters any objections against the revisions of the story in the film.

A little later, in September 1937 Wodehouse wrote in a letter to Townend: “*I don’t like doing pictures. A Damsel in Distress was fun, because I was working with the best director here – George Stevens – and on my own story, but as a rule pictures are a bore.*” (Wodehouse 1954, p. 99 and Jasen 1975, pp. 155-156). The words “*my own story*” show in my opinion that he regarded the screenplay as **his story** and to a high degree a result of **his own work**.

Taves have compared the plot in the film with that in the novel (2006 pp. 89-93). Taves however gives no explicit references to the **screenplay**. He regards the film and the screenplay as the same thing and as a work by Wodehouse. Taves also noted that some changes in the film compared to the novel were made already in the stage play.

McCrum tells that there is also another picture of the screenwriting given by Allan Scott. “*The producer Pandro Berman, wary of the novelist as a screenwriter, and unsure of Pagano’s usefulness, had taken the precaution of assigning Allan Scott, one of the co-writers on the Fred Astaire – Ginger Rogers musicals, to babysit the production.*” (2004, p 247). Scott afterwards gave the impression that

he was the main screen-writer and Wodehouse's roll was reduced to make cheers and suggest small changes. Scott is *not* mentioned in the pretexts of the film, not mentioned as a contributing screen-writer, and not mentioned by Taves. It seems that Scott for some reason exaggerated his contribution a great deal.

The condensed version in Screen Romances dec 1937 is said to be based on a "screenplay by Morrie Riskin". This person is, like Scott, neither mentioned in the pretexts of the film, nor mentioned as a contributing screen-writer, and is not mentioned by Taves or by IMDb. I think we can disregard very much from his contribution to the script. One possibility (see **VIII** page 7) is that he wrote some dialogue for Burns and Allen. This doesn't change the picture of Wodehouse as the main screenwriter, but a screenplay by Morrie Riskin makes me wonder how many different screenplays there were for this film and how they related to the released film.

I think it is likely that Wodehouse was the main screenwriter, also to new scenes, and to some new dialogue. The sentence "*I have really come across with some good stuff*" in the letter to Leonora August 1939 reasonably refers to new scenes and new lines. But, as Burnip (2011) notes: "*Wodehouse was one of several (credited and uncredited) writers who worked on the script, neither the first nor the last;*".

VI. His change of opinion

Almost 40 years later Wodehouse in a new preface to a paper-back edition of the novel dissociated himself from the film and claims that the story in the film was distorted and bungled by the film company (Wodehouse 1975, pp. 5-6 and Green 1981, p. 178). **How come? Is there any truth in his accusations that "his" screenplay was bungled?** Taves rejects the accusations and his explanation is that Wodehouse became very disappointed of the failure of the film, especially as his name was used in the marketing. I devote the study "Why did Wodehouse change his mind about the film?" to look deeper into this. **I think it is possible that some changes Wodehouse didn't approve of were made by others during the last five weeks of screenwriting.** Still, Wodehouse must be regarded as the main screenwriter.

VII. A comparison between the short story and the 1937 film

The comparisons are made with the version of the film I have got on a DVD from 2010 but with copyright from 1937. I have also compared it with the condensed version in Screen Romances and they are very different. The short story in Filmjournalen is a **very condensed version of the film**.

The plot in the short story follows the film pretty well. The condensation is focused on the key scenes. Other scenes are excluded or related summarily. The condensation naturally brought omissions. For instance:

- Some characters in the film have been excluded. Gracie Allen doesn't appear at all in the short story. Nor has her character any greater importance for the basic plot in the film, she is just a funny character. Reggie doesn't either appear in the short story.
- All "show numbers", with song and dance are of course removed.
- The scenes with Keggs' urge to sing opera arias are omitted.

In my opinion the plot in the short story is closer to the novel than the film is, due to the fact that the major part of the short story consists of those scenes in the film that were retained from the novel in the film and added scenes in the film are omitted.

The Dialogue dominates in the short story. I estimate that the dialogue is around 70% and the narrative text is around 30 % of the text. The dialogue is of course also considerably shortened compared to the film. The omission of scenes means omission of dialogue. Also lines in the remaining scenes are shortened, rewritten or removed. Some action in the film and some dialogue are transformed into narrative text. For instance, all dialogue between George and Gracie is omitted. So are all lines of Reggie and almost all of Lady Caroline together with the scenes where they appear in the film. There is not much dialogue left from the **novel**, but that was the case already in the film. The few lines that were kept from the novel in the film, mostly remains also in the short story.

There are some minor, but intriguing, deviations in the short story compared to the film that hardly can be explained as the result of condensation:

- Alfred hides in the back of Keggs' car when Keggs follows lady Alyce to London. In the film he rides a bike.
- Jerry knocks Keggs' hat off with an umbrella. In the film he does it with his hand.
- In the film lady Alyce just falls out of love with her American and realizes that she is in love with Jerry instead. In the short story lady Alyce tells Jerry that the reason for the interest she had shown the American guy was just acting, caused by her wish to tease Lady Caroline! She was evidently never in love with him! **This explanation is unique for the short story.**
- In the sweepstake scene in the short story there is a short dialogue between Keggs and a Mrs. Rummit. **This lady does not appear in the film or in the novel!**

These deviations are mystifying! They can hardly be just consequences of a condensation. The last example is in fact an addition. **What is the reason** for these deviations? **Why** do they occur?

- Did the editor of the short story try to make it "better"? Hardly probable.
 - Is the short story based on something else than the film in the DVD-version I've got? Quite possible, but NOT on the story in Screen Romances.
 - Is it based on another version of the film, **another cut**?
 - Is it based on some other material like a **synopsis** instead of the released version of the film?
 - Is it based on some **promotional material** that was produced by RKO before the shooting was finished, and in turn **based on the screenplay as it was when the promotion material was written**?
- I'm not sure that there is archive material saved anywhere to answer these questions.

To summarize:

- The short story is a decent summary of the film, condensed to the essentials.

- The biggest changes in the story compared to the novel occurred already when it was transformed to the film.
- The condensation from the film to the short story means that **those scenes that are most close to the novel are, as a matter of fact, more dominant in the short story than they are in the film.**

Unfortunately, there is no information available about **who** made the transition of the film into the short story. It might have been someone at Filmjournalen, but it might very well be a translation from some other original, for instance in an American film magazine. As I remarked above, the differences compared to the film are peculiar. Why does for instance a Mrs Rummit appear in the short story? Why let Alyce tell that she was just teasing lady Caroline? **I think these deviations indicate that the short story perhaps was not just a condensation made from the released version of the film.**

The short story in Filmjournalen is perhaps a translation of an earlier “fictionization” made in USA? Taves tells (2006, p 88) that text versions of the film (or screenplay?) were published in December 1937 issues of two movie fan magazines: Movie Story Magazine and Screen Romances. I have only been able to read the stories Screen Romances and make a short comparison below. It would be very interesting to compare also Movie Story Magazine with the short story in Filmjournalen!

VIII. A short comparison between Filmjournalen (FJ) and Screen Romances (SR)

- Many scenes appear of course in both condensations. In those scenes the plot in FJ is usually just condensed but in SR both the plot and the dialogue sometimes deviates from the film, for instance in the cab scene. The dialogue in FJ is mostly closer to the film. This also means that these scenes in FJ also are closer to the novel.
- Some scenes that are omitted in FJ appears, sometimes with changes, in SR. For instance, scenes and dialogue/gags between George Burns and Gracie Allen are given plenty of space in SR but are excluded in FJ. Reggie and the madrigal singers are also given space in SR.
- Some scenes are omitted in SR but not in FJ, for instance the sweepstake in the beginning of the film that is instead told about by Alyce in the cab.
- There are also some scenes that are added in SR but doesn't appear in the film. For instance a scene with George and Gracie discussing trays of food. In FJ this type of additions examples are very insignificant as I accounted for above.

The condensation in FJ is much more true to the film but also to the novel. The story in SR is said to be based on a screenplay by Morrie Riskin. How many different screenplays were there? Riskin is not given any credit in the pretexts in film and his name is not mentioned by either Taves or the IMDb. This makes me wonder what contribution Riskin made to the script and to the film. Riskin (also spelled Ryskind) was a screenwriter, for instance for films with the Marx Brothers, perhaps the most important of them was *A Night at the Opera* 1935. There are similarities in the crazy type of humor in the dialogue in Marx Brothers films and that in the dialogues between Allen and Burns in *A Damsel in Distress*! This humor is quite another than Wodehouse's own and like Taves I have above expressed doubts about that Wodehouse wrote these dialogues. Maybe the main contributions by Riskin were the Burns-Allen dialogues? As the SR-condensation is based on “his” screenplay this could also explain

why these scenes are gives so much space here. Maybe Riskin even was the anonymous editor of the SR story?

Anyhow, the story in Filmjournalen is very clearly NOT a translation from Screen Romances, but an independent condensation, more close to the film and to the novel.

IX. Back to the first questions about the short story

Wodehouse gave two different opinions about the film. While he was working with the screenplay he wrote about the film as **his** work and was happy with it. Later he wrote that the filmmakers had abandoned his script and that all the changes made the film a mess. Maybe this rejection was an expression of his disappointment. Even *if* there should be a kernel of truth in these accusations, the changes were probably not very big and I think **Wodehouse should be considered to be a main creator behind the film.**

It is possible to recognize Wodehouse's work in major parts of the film, if we disregard from the "show scenes". The scenes in the film where Wodehouse's genius are most visible are some key scenes which are retained from the novel, even if they appear in new clothes. The short story is a summary of the film concentrated mostly to those scenes in the film that have their origin in the novel. As I accounted for above there are some new stuff in the short story that doesn't come from the film but these additions are few and not very significant. Thus I think that Wodehouse should also be considered to be a main creator behind the short story "En flicka i knipa". Even if the short story is condensed and rewritten by an unknown editor, in my opinion **the focus on the key scenes get the effect that the short story appears to a still higher degree to be a work by Wodehouse than the film is!**

- It is easy to recognize the original novel "A Damsel in Distress" in the short story "En flicka i knipa" and still easier of course to recognize the film.

- Not much of the dialogue in the novel is left, but it disappeared already in the film.

If we regard the film as a work by Wodehouse (which writers like McCrum and Taves do) then I think that this short story can to about the same degree be regarded as a work by Wodehouse!

Of course this short story cannot be compared to those where he wrote every word. It is just an adaptation from a Wodehouse original, made by somebody unknown, but quite a lot of Wodehouse remains in it.

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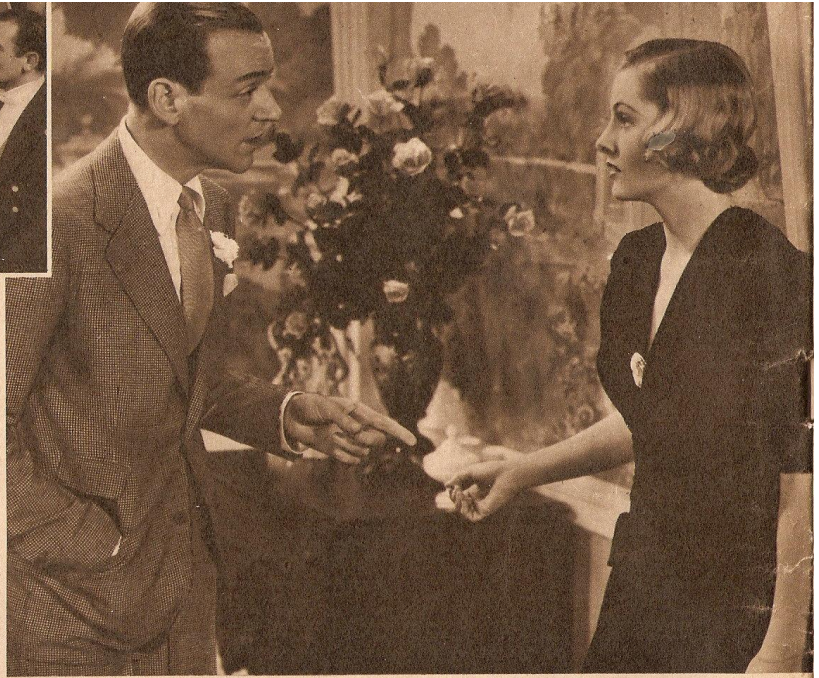
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»Vi har samlats för att dra lott om vem som skall bli lady Alyces tillkommande», sade mr Keggs högtidligt.



Reggie blev attackerad av en obekant herre.



»Jag tänkte jag kunde hjälpa er om ni är i svårigheter», sade Reggie.

EN FLICKA I KNIPA

Mina damer och herrar», sade den magnifika mr Keggs, förste hovmästaren på Totleigh Castle, »ni vet alla varför vi samlats här i dag.»

Herrarna och damerna i slottets stora tjänstepersonal som satt församlad längs det långa bordet i tjänarnas matsal betraktade

*Novell efter R. K. O. Radio-
filmen som bygger på en roman
av P. G. Wodehouse*

»Säg inte det mr Keggs. Det kan komma tillbaka och ha 23 andra med sig.»

Albert såg i detta ögonblick så inpiskad ut att mr Keggs uppmärksamt började betrakta honom.

»Är det något särskilt du menar, din lille lymmel?» frågade han med låg röst.

From the first page of the "Short story" (= Novell in Swedish) in Filmjournalen nr 13 1938