

Romance at Droitgate Spa

On different versions of a Wodehouse-story

Tomas Prenkert 27/2 2014

Last year Tony Ring in an email made me aware of that there is a Mulliner version of this story with the same title in the American collection "The Crime Wave at Blandings". Neil Midkiff gives the same information in his list of Short Stories (link from TWS USA). I was curious and managed to get a copy of this book. According to Jasen the short story in "The Crime Wave at Blandings" is the same as in Sat. Eve. Post but this is *wrong*.

The short story was first published in Sat. Eve. Post February 1937, but I have found no information about when it was *written*. Jasen tells that in the start of 1936 Wodehouse wrote "a flow of short stories". In October 1936 he returned to Hollywood. At first he worked for MGM again, and had time to write also for himself. In the end of November he started writing "Summer Moonshine" which was finished March 1937. In a letter to Leonora December 28th 1936 (Yours Plum) he wrote: "*In the intervals of working on the picture, I have managed to revise and sell to the Saturday Evening Post a couple of short stories which I wrote the last year.*" He tells the same thing in a letter to Townend (Performing Flea). It seems probable that this story was written sometimes 1936-1937. The Mulliner version was published June 1937, just four months later than the version in Sat. Eve. Post. I have no information on when this Mulliner version was written either. It must have been written at the latest in spring 1937. But at the earliest? Could it even have been written before the non-Mulliner version and be the original version? There are some other short stories which Wodehouse first wrote in a non-Mulliner version, and later on "Mullinerized", but I have never heard of a story that was "de-Mullinerized". (See "Information sheet nr 9" at the website of The Wodehouse Society UK.) To me it is obvious that the non-Mulliner version was the first one, otherwise Freddie would surely have been a Mulliner not a Fitch-Fitch in this version.

The "non-Mulliner" story was thus published first, in Sat. Eve. Post (USA) February 1937. (Thanks Tony Ring for sending me a copy!) Vilgot Hammarling very soon translated it and it was published in July 1937 in the Swedish magazine Vårt

Hem nr 27. In August 1937 the short story was published in Strand, and some years later in the anthology "Eggs, Beans & Crumpets" 1940. This is another example of that Swedish magazines sometimes were even quicker to publish a short story by Wodehouse than British magazines. The Swedish translation is also published in the anthology "Bland lordar och drönare" 2011.

The story is about Frederick Fitch-Fitch. His uncle Sir Aylmer Bastable is Freddie's trustee and Freddie needs his money to marry Annabel Purvis. He visits his uncle who spends time at Droitgate Spa to cure a gouty foot. Sir Aylmer is in a bad mood because he has found that a man with just a gouty foot is treated like a pariah among the patients at the Spa. His status becomes quite changed when it shows that the girl Freddie wants to marry has an uncle who is a very famous medical case, written about in articles in medical journals, and he gladly gives his blessings. In my opinion the funniest feature of the story is Sir Aylmer's grumpy way to treat Freddie and especially his rejections of Freddie's use of metaphors. Just one example, with a biblical metaphor:

"Ah, well, all flesh is grass."

"No it isn't. It's nothing of the kind. The two things are entirely different. I've seen flesh and I've seen grass. No resemblance whatever."

The two British editions, in Strand and in "Eggs, Beans & Crumpets", are identical except for one short line by Freddie: *"It's up your sleeve."* This line is missing in Strand. It is probably just a printing error?

When I compared with the text in Sat. Eve. Post I found only two small deviations:

Saturday Evening Post (USA)

Strand/Eggs, Beans & Crumpets (UK)

"... there was a crash of brass..."

"... the conductor's baton fell..."

"... to be given ..."

"... to get..."

The rest is identical. Both magazines clearly used the same Wodehouse original and it must have been some editor(s) who for unknown reasons made these insignificant changes.

Hammarling's translation is, as always, very good, and follows the original pretty closely, with priority to catch the spirit more than to use the exact words. However, there are some sentences and also a few paragraphs that are omitted in the Swedish translation. I don't think Hammarling would take such liberties and probably the editor of the Swedish magazine needed to make the story somewhat shorter.

The Mulliner version was never printed in any magazine, only in the anthology "The Crime Wave at Blandings" June 1937, just four months after the other version of the short story was published in Sat. Eve. Post. Wodehouse wrote a new introduction of a few pages, also using some stuff from the introduction in the first version, but

when the story gets going it is identical until the last word with the non-Mulliner version. The two differences SEP <-> Strand/EB&C above? In the Mulliner version Wodehouse in the first case used the same words as in Sat. Eve. Post and in the second the same words as in Strand/EB&C!

Wodehouse didn't bother to change the names of the persons, so Freddie's surname is still Fitch-Fitch, not Mulliner. He is not a relative to Mr Mulliner, but a "*distant connection*"! This is an exception among the Mulliner stories! There are no added "said Mr Mulliner" in the text, and no comments, no moral conclusions by Mr Mulliner at the end of the story.

WHY did Wodehouse bother to make a Mulliner version? "The Crime Wave at Blandings" it is not a Mulliner anthology so it seems improbable that this could not have been the reason to make a Mulliner version. This collection contains only one Mulliner story. Why didn't he use the old version? Is the Mulliner version funnier? Is the new introduction funnier than the first one? *I don't think so.* In my opinion it doesn't add any new value to the story. To me it seems to be a "half-hearted" revision, made in a hurry. It makes me wonder **WHY?**

I hoped to find anything about this short story, and especially about the Mulliner version, in the biographies or in Wodehouse's letters. I searched Jasen, Donaldson, Usborne, Connolly, Phelps, Green, McCrum and Wodehouse's own *Over Seventy* for the actual period (1936-1937) and found not one single word about it.

I have also searched Plum's letters from that period (in Ratcliffe, "Yours Plum" and "Performing Flea") and *nowhere have I found anything* about this short story in either version.

The Mulliner version of "Romance at Droitgate Spa" seems furthermore to have been forgotten!

- It is for instance omitted in the collection "The World of Mr Mulliner".

(As Bengt Malmberg has pointed out, and you can find at Midkiff's homepage, also another Mulliner story is omitted in this collection: "Shock dogs" in *Punch* 14 Febr 1940!)

- "Information sheet nr 9" at the website of The Wodehouse Society UK, reports eight short stories that were not Mulliner stories when they were first published but later were published as Mulliner stories in *book collections*. "Romance at Droitgate Spa" is not mentioned here either. ("Shock dogs" is not either mentioned, but that's correct as it never was published in a *book collection*).

- Also in Wikipedia these two stories are omitted.

Was it just a shortcoming by the editors of "The World of Mr Mulliner", an effect of negligent research? And is it so simple that others later supposed that "The World of Mr Mulliner" is complete and repeated the mistakes without questioning?

There are some unanswered questions about this short story, and the one that intrigues me most is:

- *Why did Wodehouse make this Mulliner version at all?* What is the story behind writing the Mulliner version?

But I'm also curious about:

- *When* did he write the two versions?

So far I have found no answers to these questions and I would very much like to be enlightened. **It would be very interesting to get the story of how and when this short story was written, and especially the story behind the creation of the Mulliner version!**

If you who read this essay at my webpage have any information, I would be very grateful for some kind of message!