

Jerome Klapka Jerome, 1859-1927

- author of *Three men in a boat*



JK's father's surname was originally Clapp but he decided that this was not a suitable surname for a preacher so the Rev Jerome Clapp became the Rev Jerome C. Jerome.

JK's middle name of Klapka is also something of a fudge. In adult life he let it be known that this had been given to him as a homage to General Gyorgi Klapka – a hero of the 1849 Hungarian War of Independence, who moved to England in 1850 and became a friend of the family. But JK was born in 1859 and was actually baptised with Clapp as his middle name. The change of Clapp to Klapka came about when he began his writing career. Like his father, he seems to have decided that Clapp was not good name to have.

EARLY LIFE

JK was born in Walsall on May 2nd 1859, the last of the 4 Jerome children. The family had been wealthy and middle class, but the Rev Jerome was not a successful entrepreneur, and had frittered away his wife's considerable fortune so JK's childhood was quite Dickensian in its poverty.

His father died in 1873, and although JK stayed on at school for another year, he was very happy to leave and go to work, aged 14, as a clerk at Euston Station.

However, he found the work boring and was not happy - even less so when his mother died suddenly the following year, leaving him quite alone, aged 16. It was soon after this that he took up acting in a local repertory company in his spare time and developed a love of the theatre, so much so that he gave up his secure job at Euston and took up the uncertain life of a full time actor with a travelling company.

He enjoyed this, but the company failed and the penniless JK was reduced to living rough for a time. Luckily, an acquaintance introduced him to penny-a-line journalism i.e. freelance reporting, which gave him time to begin his own writing. Initially, he suffered the fate of most budding authors- a fine collection of rejection slips. But he persevered and in 1885, aged 26, his first work appeared in print. This was 'On the Stage and Off – the Brief Career of a Would-Be Actor' - based on his own experiences. The following year saw the publication of both a play and a book and JK was off-and-running.



Two years later, and now a full time writer he met Georgina Elizabeth Henrietta Stanley Marris, (known as Ettie).

Ettie had a Spanish father and an Irish mother - which one would expect to be a fiery combination.

When she met JK, she was married with a 5 year old daughter called Elsie, but sued for, and won, a divorce from her husband. This was a most unusual and very brave thing for a lady to do in the 1880s. Despite this, when they married 9 days after the divorce, she immediately receded totally into the background and spent the rest of her life taking care of JK and being a doormat of a wife.

SUCCESS!

JK and Ettie honeymooned by travelling along the Thames - which gave him the germ of an idea. 'Three Men in a Boat - not forgetting the Dog' is an amalgam of various trips he made along the Thames - some of them with 2 friends (the Three Men), some with his wife and some alone.

JK had originally intended to write a 'straight' book to be called 'The Story of the Thames' but the publisher threw out the informative sections, kept the funny anecdotes, and it

became the book we all know. (You may remember that he describes Marlow as ‘one of the pleasantest river centres’.) The book was not altogether a success with the critics when it was published in 1889, but was a resounding success with the public and was translated into German, French, Russian, Danish, Portuguese, Afrikaans and even Erse, and is still in print today.

JK continued to be successful and even became a magazine editor and publisher himself, but in 1897 a libel action against his magazine was his financial ruin. Although the jury awarded damages of just 1 farthing to the plaintiff, both sides had to pay their own costs - which in JK’s case were £9000. He had to sell everything but fortunately the continued healthy royalties from ‘Three Men in a Boat’ helped to keep them afloat.

Ettie gave birth to their only child in 1898– a daughter, Rowena. After living abroad for a few years, they moved back to England - to a house called Gould’s Grove, overlooking the Thames near Wallingford.

In 1907 he wrote ‘The Passing of the Third Floor Back’ - a book of related stories, which he later turned into his most successful play. By now, he was a leading literary light, and friendly with, amongst others, H G Wells, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

MARLOW



JK and his portrait at Monk's Corner

In about 1908, the family moved to Monk's Corner on Marlow Common. We know about this because of May Walker, who was interviewed as part of the Memories of Marlow audio recordings that the Marlow Society has been making of elderly Marlow residents for 20 years. Mrs Walker, had very clear memories of her early life in the Jerome household. When she was 2 years old, her parents (Gertrude and Edward Hammond) went to Goulds Grove, Gertrude to be housekeeper and Edward to be gardener and chauffeur to the Jeromes. Later, after a fire at Goulds Grove, they all moved to Monks Corner where the Hammonds had a large bed-sitting room over the kitchen with a small room off to the side for May

Ettie Jerome took a great fancy to little May, unlike her husband and two daughters - all of whom were polite to May, but remote. Mrs Jerome decided May's bedtime, bathed her, brushed her hair and dressed her each morning. She bought

her dresses from Harrods or had them made specially. She paid for dancing lessons and music lessons and bought her special toys. May became her special 'pet'.

May was very fond of Mrs Jerome, and loved her childhood at Monks Corner, which came to an end when May was seven years old. Her mother became pregnant and gave in her notice. Although May's father continued to work for the Jeromes, the Hammond family moved to a small cottage on Marlow Common. Mrs Jerome at first continued to feature in May's life – buying clothes for her and enrolling her in a private school. However, Mrs Hammond had had enough, so she took May away from the private school, moved the family to Bovington Green and sent May to the village school.

JK was 55 years old when WW1 broke out, but he was very keen to serve, volunteered for active service, but was, of course, refused because of his age. He learnt that the French Army was not so fussy about rules and regulations, offered himself to them and was delighted to be accepted as an ambulance driver. After some training, he sailed for the front in 1916.



"Ambulance Driver Nine"

It was a terrible time - the cold, the rain, the mud, the rats, the lice, the noise of the guns, the ghastly wounds of the soldiers: all made him realise that war is anything but the adventure he had expected. He lasted a year before returning home to Monk's Corner in 1917, a changed man. His heart had been weakened and he was quite depressed. He made speeches and wrote articles in favour of 'a reasonable peace' then and picked up his novel and play-writing career again.

In late 1918/early 1919 the family moved, for a short time, to Wood End House on Marlow Common, then in mid 1920 to Ridge End House also on Marlow Common.

May Walker was 17 by this time and was working as a between maid for Lady Terrington at Spinfield House. Ettie persuaded May to join the Jeromes at Ridge End House as a

housemaid. May was not at all happy - she could not accept the change from being a pampered pet to being a drudge, and so did not stay long. She lived in Marlow the rest of her life, having 7 children and many grandchildren (amongst whom are a sister and brother called Rowena and Jerome!).

The Jerome family stayed at Ridge End House for almost 3 years before moving back to London, initially to St John's Wood, then Chelsea then Belsize Park, where JK wrote his autobiography 'My Life and Times', published in 1926. In February of the following year, he was made a Freeman of Walsall - his birth place, but did not have long to enjoy it as he died in June of that year, aged 68. He was buried in Ewelme churchyard, as were his wife and daughter later.

JK wrote approximately 20 volumes of stories and essays, 8 novels, 12 plays and 3 biographies but will always be best remembered for 'Three Men in a Boat – not Forgetting the Dog'.

Produced in 2008 by Hazel Malpass for the Local History Group of The Marlow Society