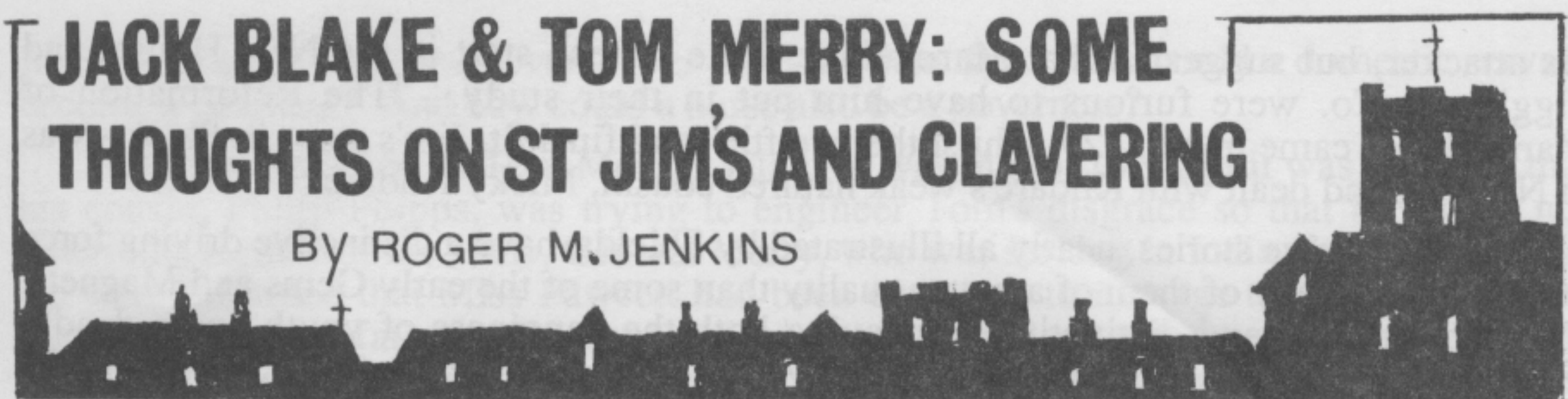


JACK BLAKE & TOM MERRY: SOME THOUGHTS ON ST JIM'S AND CLAVERING

BY ROGER M. JENKINS



Although Charles Hamilton's first stories appeared in print in the late nineteenth century, the first real point of interest today is the tenth of November 1906, when the first St. Jim's tale appeared in Pluck No. 106. The heroes of St. Jim's were Blake and Figgins. The stalwarts of the Shell were then unheard of, and those famous papers the Gem and the Magnet were then unborn. Incidentally, the St. Jim's stories in Pluck were published under the name of Charles Hamilton: the pseudonyms came later.

This first St. Jim's story was entitled "Jack Blake of St. Jim's" and describes his arrival as a new boy. He met Figgins & Co. on his way to school and, having endured the usual quota of insults from them, he proceeded to incur the displeasure of George Herries, Captain of the Fourth. After suffering the usual indignities meted out to new arrivals, Blake was allowed his hour of triumph at the end when he was instrumental in foiling a plot of Monteith against Kildare. Tom Merry first appeared as a rather mollicoddled boy with a quaint manner of speech, but Jack Blake was the same from beginning to end.

The St. Jim's tales were clearly intended to form a series, albeit intermittently. No. 108 continued the Monteith-Kildare feud, and the atmosphere of brooding suspicion came over strongly. No. 110 was about a new boy called Barby, but the new boy in No. 112 was far more important. He addressed Mr. Kidd, the housemaster, in these terms:

"Well, kindly have diwections given for my twunks to be taken up to my wooms," said D'Arcy, with a wave of his hand. "I should like to have my tea sent up immediately. The tea must be stwong and the muffins hot. If the muffins are cold, I will have a complaint made to the doctah. You had also bettah get my bath pwepared, and the bath must be clean. I should also like you to see that the bedclothes on my bed are aired. Now, my man, wheah are my quartahs?"

To the chums of Study No. 6, Gussy confided these remarks:

"I think it most incosdewate of Dr. Holmes to give me so small a woom. But my aunts told me I should have to submit to a gweat many discomforts at a big public school. Now, my boys, what are you all doin' in my woom? I weally can't have my quartahs cwowed like this."

It is not always the case that editors have good ideas, but the day when H.J. Garrish suggested the introduction of a character modelled on Beau Brummel lines was indeed a red-letter day.

No. 114 related how Blake was unjustly suspected of theft, No. 116 saw Monteith at odds with Kildare again, and No. 118 dealt with Mr. Ratcliffe spying on Mr. Kidd in the hope that he could get him dismissed. Incidentally, these three stories were adapted for Gems 253-5, with appropriate changes and additions.

Mr. Kidd stands out in these Pluck stories as a subtle character-drawing, a well-meaning man not always too sure of himself. It was a pity that he later left the school in the same manner as Mr. Bootles later left Rookwood, to be supplanted by a more forthright and straightforward successor. Once Mr. Kidd had left St. Jim's, the soubriquets of Kids and Rats were no longer appropriate for the juniors of the rival houses.

After the first tale of rebellion "Mutiny at St. Jim's" in No. 120, there was a three-week gap until "Missing" in No. 123, when Gussy was kidnapped by a gipsy, and Inspector Skeet made his first blundering investigation. Marmaduke Smythe appeared in No. 125 and was sentenced to expulsion for an attack on Blake. The victim nobly forgave

his attacker, but suggested that Marmaduke make a fresh start in the New House, and Figgins & Co. were furious to have him put in their study. "The Reformation of Marmaduke" came in No. 129, whilst the twelfth - and final St. Jim's story in Pluck - was in No. 132, and dealt with Kildare's weak natured cousin, Micky Kildare.

These twelve stories, nearly all illustrated by Shields, have a distinctive driving force behind them, many of them of a better quality than some of the early Gems and Magnets. They are original and distinctive, portraying both the happiness of youth and a deadly seriousness of purpose, not sophisticated but vital. To leave these Plucks and to turn to the early halfpenny Gems is like putting back the clock.

DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY!



Tom Merry's first appearance was in No. 3 of the halfpenny Gem dated March 30th, 1907. Miss Priscilla Fawcett was taking her darling Tommy by train to begin school at Clavering College, where Mr. Railton was headmaster, Mr. Quelch his form-master, and Wingate later elected School Captain. Tom Merry was dressed in a velvet suit with a pretty bow tie, and Miss Fawcett fussed about his health in a highly exaggerated fashion, whilst Tom Merry spoke a literary style of English that was even more old-fashioned than Miss Fawcett's clothes. When she later sent him a parcel, it was not full of tuck as Tom Merry and his friends had thought: instead, it contained patent medicines, a chest protector, and a hot-water bottle. It seems reasonably certain that Charles Hamilton never expected the fortnightly Tom Merry stories to be long-running or he would not have saddled the hero with such a ridiculous guardian. It was a perfectly acceptable situation for a comic character like Coker to have an old sketch like Aunt Judy doting on him, especially as he was not perceptive enough

to realise what a figure of fun she seemed to be, whereas Tom Merry was sensible enough to realise how Miss Fawcett appeared to the outside world, and his embarrassment was made perfectly clear.

One of the mysteries that lasted all through the Gem to its conclusion was Miss Fawcett's exact status, and why all Tom Merry's relatives left everything to her. In the first story, it was stated that she was his old nurse and that he had had a tutor at home to prepare him for public school entry. By the time of Gem No. 11 she was referred to as his old governess, though the word nurse was occasionally repeated. In Victorian and Edwardian times, a governess was little better than a superior servant, as exemplified in

Jane Eyre, and a nurse was even lower in status than that. How could a domestic servant become a guardian? And how could a nurse also be a governess?

The first mention of Tom Merry's relatives was in No. 14 when it was revealed that his cousin, Philip Phipps, was trying to engineer Tom's disgrace so that he would not inherit the fortune of his uncle, General Merry, who was serving in India. In the year 1910 we were informed that Miss Fawcett had been entrusted to manage the fortune of Tom Merry by his late father. She invested in South American railways on the advice of Crooke's father, and lost all of Tom Merry's fortune. We can only imagine what possessed Mr. Merry to entrust the management of all his money to a nervous, woolly-minded servant. General Merry had been captured by the Afghans, and could not be appealed to for assistance. Cousin Ethel took Miss Fawcett to Eastwood House and Tom Merry, refusing to accept charity, eventually became a down-and-out in London. The whole scenario of a dishonest financial adviser and a young person living rough in the Capital has a remarkably modern air to it. In the end, Lowther got in touch with another uncle of Tom's, an Arizona rancher called Mr. Poinsett, and he came to England to provide a financial rescue (though Miss Fawcett was never to be allowed to handle the capital again) and he reproached Tom for not getting in touch himself, reminding him of Tom's visit to Arizona in the past. And so another uncle was mentioned in the stories, but Miss Fawcett still ran the home at Huckleberry Heath, assisted by the faithful Hannah and a small army of servants. Incidentally, all this was forgotten by 1939, when Miss Fawcett was apparently in possession of a large fortune of her own, and James Silverson was trying to disgrace Tom so that Miss Fawcett would leave her fortune to James. Even this version raises another question: why should Miss Fawcett have taken domestic employment as a nurse or governess if she was so wealthy? Whichever explanation is chosen, there are always more questions than answers.

All this has digressed a long way from the halfpenny Gem where the origins of the problem are to be seen. Clavering College closed its door for the last time in No. 11, when Mr. Railton revealed that a moneylender owned a mortgage on the College and he intended to foreclose, in the manner of a Victorian melodrama. Apparently there was a seam of coal underneath which he proposed to exploit. Presumably the school was privately owned by Mr. Railton and run as a business for personal profit. A person as astute as Mr. Railton might have been expected to arrange finance from a more reliable source, but of course Charles Hamilton had to give some reason for the closure of the school. Mr. Railton arranged for his old friend, Dr. Holmes, to accept the pupils whose parents wished them to move to that school. Most of the Shell seemed to have moved over as well as Herr Schneider and Mr. Railton himself. Miss Fawcett turned up, removed Tom's etons and gave them to a poor person, and left him another velvet suit so that St. Jim's would see him at his best. It is possible that Charles Hamilton was intending to build up Miss Fawcett into an Aunt Judy type of caricature and then changed his mind later. Be that as it may, with No. 11 the St. Jim's stories moved from Pluck to the Gem, which featured the new enlarged school every week from that time. Clearly, Tom Merry could not be placed in the same form as Jack Blake, since one would then have had to be subordinated to the other. So they were placed in different forms, and from this attempt to accord them equality came an almost insoluble problem: with whom was the reader supposed to sympathise?

This amalgamation presented St. Jim's with a problem that never affected Greyfriars or Rookwood. Tom Merry & Co. were rivals to Jack Blake & Co., though both were united against the New House. There were too many centres of interest, and another result of all this rivalry was a tendency for too many stories to be based on ragging and japing between the forms and the houses, so giving an impression of rather juvenile, unsophisticated story-telling, which was certainly not true of the stories as a whole. Indeed, in No. 2 of the penny Gem, Miss Fawcett came to stay at the school to act in the role of peacemaker, much to Tom's embarrassment: even Cousin Ethel had to try hard to avoid laughing at Miss Fawcett. Another factor in all this rivalry was Rylcombe Grammar School which often resulted in fights in the village street, apart from more involved pranks. One has only to consider the part that Highcliffe played in the Magnet to realise the difference - the dramatic situations quite outweighed Ponsonby's spiteful horseplay.

PLUCK

MISSING!
A Tale of Jack Blake, Augustus and Figgins & Co.
ON THE TRACK OF
MARTIN STERN.
A Thrilling Detective Tale.



THE SWELL OF ST. JIM'S WAS A PITIABLE OBJECT TO LOOK AT. "MY HAT!" EXCLAIMED BLAKE. "NOBODY WOULD TAKE YOU FOR A HOWLING SWELL NOW." (See page 15.)
NO. 123. VOL. 5. NEW SERIES

Having merged Clavering and St. Jim's, the author must have realised that he was left with a lot of dead wood to be pruned as soon as possible. On the other hand, he presumably had to take into account the loyalties of old readers, and Martin, who was writing in the Gem, could not be too cavalier with the creations of Charles Hamilton who used to write in Pluck. Accordingly, alterations were made slowly. Mr. Railton became Second Master for the time being, which allowed Mr. Kidd to continue as housemaster of the School House for a few more weeks. Both Digby and Lowther left St. Jim's, allowing Tom Merry and Manners to be called (by the author) the Terrible Two, which was certainly truly alliterative, unlike the Terrible Three.

In the event, this attempt to reduce the number of main characters was doomed to failure, possibly because of pressure from readers. No. 27 of the halfpenny Gem opened with Lowther at home with his uncle at Huckleberry Heath (within sight of Miss Fawcett's Laurel Villa), bemoaning the

fact that he hadn't had a row in weeks. His uncle had rather summarily removed him from St. Jim's and engaged a tutor, but when his uncle went abroad Lowther re-appeared at St. Jim's in disguise as a new boy, and of course he was allowed to remain. It was not until No. 1 of the penny Gem that Marmaduke Smythe and Robert Digby returned, the title of the story appropriately enough being "The Gathering of the clans". Digby's parents who lived in Devonshire, had sent him to a school in that county but eventually gave in to his request to return to St. Jim's. He was certainly a very distinctive character in those days: he had been eating toffee in the train, and deliberately spoiled D'Arcy's lavender gloves by seizing him with both hands, and he declared he was the same old Dig:-

"You'll see me shoving rats into your hat-box, and pouring treacle over your best waistcoat, just as I used to do," said Digby.

"Oh, weally."

"And sitting on your silk hat and sewing up your Sunday trucks, Gussy. Oh, we shall have ripping times now."

Later readers of the Gem saw nothing of Digby's sense of fun: in the end, he became just a name to most of them.

This seems to have been the last time Charles Hamilton attempted to reduce the cast at St. Jim's. With the spotlight firmly on both the Fourth Form and the Shell, there was ample opportunity to spread the new boys around, but in fact the Shell did not attract so many: Talbot, Grundy, and Racke were the most prominent newcomers, but the Fourth received some widely featured characters, such as Levison, Cardew, Clive, Hammond,

Lumley-Lumley, Wildrake, Kuomi Rao. Julian, Trimble, and others, many of whom continually featured in the stories after their first appearance. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, although Tom Merry became established as the leading character, the Fourth form contained the more interesting personalities.

Another problem was the fact that most new boys in the Gem tended to remain as permanent characters, and hence the list became overloaded, as Eric Fayne has pointed out. With unscrupulous boys like Racke and Trimble there was no real difficulty, whilst with those who were intended to be comic, like Grundy (though I tended to regard him as an unmitigated nuisance in the stories), the situation could be managed without upsetting the status quo too much. It was the decent characters like Talbot and Wildrake who began to hog the limelight to the exclusion of the old-established characters, and here Charles Hamilton's touch was a little less than sure.

The ultimate question cannot be avoided - was St. Jim's a failure? I do not think that anyone who has read widely in the Gem would feel himself able to subscribe to that opinion. On balance, it seems that St. Jim's was a success despite all the handicaps from which it suffered. Perhaps the best proof of this is the evidence of contemporary readers who paid out good money to buy the old papers. Whereas the Magnet ran longer than the new series of the Gem, St. Jim's was not only older than Greyfriars but also, in the annals of the Amalgamated Press, the longer-running school.

