

## **Jerome K. Jerome (1859–1927), novelist and playwright:**

### **Biography and background information in connection with the installation of a commemorative plaque at 32 Tavistock Place**



Jerome Klapka Jerome, by Solomon Joseph Solomon, c.1889

Jerome Klapka Jerome, better known as Jerome K. Jerome, lived at former 19, now 32 Tavistock Place from 1884 to 1885. The original house is still standing. He also lived for a short while across the road at former 33 Tavistock Place, which stood on the site of present day number 11.

He was born Jerome Clapp Jerome on 2 May 1859 at Bradford Street, Walsall, Staffordshire, the fourth child and younger son of Jerome Clapp Jerome, originally Jerome Clapp, nonconformist lay preacher and Staffordshire colliery owner, and Marguerite Jones, daughter of a Swansea solicitor. After the failure of the colliery the family followed Jerome senior to London, where he became an ironmonger. Jerome's first school was the Philological School (later Marylebone grammar school). After his father's death Jerome, aged fourteen, left school and worked as a clerk with the London and North Western Railway. His mother died two years later. Jerome joined an acting company part-time, then full-time. He then turned to journalism, teaching, and secretarial work before finally settling on a literary career. He had changed his middle name to Klapka by the time of the 1881 census.

Jerome's experiences as an actor led to his first book, 'On the Stage—and

Off' (1885), humorous sketches of theatrical life; *Barbara*, the first of many plays, was produced in June 1886. This was quickly followed by a collection of essays entitled 'The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow' (1886), most probably written during his time at number 32. Jerome's reputation as a humorist was firmly established with the publication of the classic 'Three Men in a Boat' (1889), subtitled (to say nothing of the dog), which depicts a series of comic episodes on a riverboat trip up the Thames. It has been translated into many languages and filmed three times, with a television production in 1979. Its combination of light-hearted satire, sharp dialogue, and slapstick has made it perennially popular, and it is the book for which Jerome is remembered.

Jerome married Georgina Elizabeth Henrietta Stanley Marris (1859–1938), daughter of George Nesza, on 21 June 1888, nine days after her divorce from her first husband. She had a five-year-old daughter, Georgina, known as Elsie. A daughter, Rowena, was born in 1897.

Jerome co-edited 'The Idler', an illustrated monthly magazine founded by Robert Barr in 1892. As editor he published, among others, Mark Twain, R. L. Stevenson, Marie Corelli, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Rudyard Kipling, as well as new writers such as Eden Phillpotts and W. W. Jacobs. After a disagreement with Barr, Jerome became sole editor from August 1895 to November 1897. In 1893 he founded the weekly 'To-Day' and added to his contributors the writers Richard Le Gallienne and George Gissing, and the illustrators Aubrey Beardsley and Phil May. His forthright journalism led to a libel action in 1897 which he lost with costs of £9,000, and this forced him to sell his interest in both magazines.

A two-year stay in Germany in 1898–9 resulted in 'Three Men on the Bummel' (1900), an unsuccessful sequel to 'Three Men in a Boat', in which the same characters, minus the dog, go on a cycling tour through the Black Forest. In 1902 he published the autobiographical novel 'Paul Kever', which he considered his best work. Jerome visited Germany, Norway, and Russia and made a successful lecture tour of America, where his books had been well received, in 1908, followed by a second visit in 1914. Despite his work in comic genres Jerome wished to be considered as a serious writer and in his play 'The Passing of the Third Floor Back' (1908), adapted from one of his short stories, he adopted a moral tone which initially alienated the public, although the play went on to become a success.

During the First World War Jerome served as ambulance driver in the French army (being too old for the British army), and recorded his experiences in his autobiography 'My Life and Times' (1926), a book which shows him at his idiosyncratic best. His works reveal that, although in private life he had a melancholy outlook, he could see and appreciate the humour of life. Jerome was made a freeman of Walsall on 17 February 1927, and died on 14 June 1927. He was buried at St Mary's Church, Ewelme, Oxfordshire. His wife died on 29 October 1938, aged seventy-eight, and was buried beside him.

Adapted from Damian Atkinson's biography of Jerome K. Jerome in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004).