

# POP'S OFFICE: A REMINISCENCE

## Interview with *Helen Kelly Phares*

Interviewed by **Robert Grip**

*Thomas Merton's grandfather, Samuel Adams Jenkins (1862-1936), whom the young Merton called "Pop," worked at the publishing house of Grosset & Dunlap in New York. He was instrumental in the promotion of books on the movies and of children's series, such as Tom Swift, the Bobbsey Twins and others. Jenkins gave Merton Grosset & Dunlap stock, among other things, in 1930 which allowed him the financial independence to pursue his education. Merton describes his visits to his grandfather's office in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.*

**Grip:** When did you work for Grosset & Dunlap?

**Phares:** I went to Grosset & Dunlap in 1918.

**Grip:** And what did you do?

**Phares:** Well, I was credit manager for Grosset & Dunlap and my immediate boss was the treasurer of the concern. Tom Merton's grandfather, Samuel Jenkins, was publicity manager in the concern. Occasionally, he would bring his little grandson downtown to Grosset & Dunlap (we were at 1140 Broadway at that time, which was 26th Street and Broadway in New York) and he was a very sweet little boy, full of life like little fellows are, and he'd run around the office and come over to my desk and ask, "Miss Kelly, can you tell me stories?" And I said, "Well, we have a lot of stories here, so would you like to see some of the books that we have?" And I'd take him down to the display room with all the books. He liked the Bobbsey Twins, and the Rover Boys and Tom Swift. I've sort of forgotten all the other little . . .

**Grip:** So Sam Jenkins wasn't *your* boss . . .

**Phares:** No, Sam Jenkins wasn't my boss and his office was quite a way away from my office.

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**SAMUEL ADAMS JENKINS**

Detail from Group Photo

He'd come down through the office with a great fanfare and say, "Has anybody seen my glasses?" And we'd all laugh because this was the usual thing with him, because he'd have them up on his head like this, and forget all about his glasses.

**Grip:** Was that the kind of person he was, kind of loud and . . .

**Phares:** Loud, yes! He was loud and came around snapping his fingers, and looking for ideas all of the time and of course we were not impressed so much with Sam Jenkins, but we were with his little grandson (*laughter*).

**Grip:** He was always like that, then always . . .

**Phares:** Always.

**Grip:** Full of energy?

**Phares:** Always, yes, yes. I never knew a day that Sam Jenkins wasn't in the office. He had some great ideas, as I recall. He suggested putting some of the novels that Grosset & Dunlap published into motion pictures, as I recall. They had some connection there. I was not involved in that end of the business at all, but the concern made a lot of money. The motion picture people at that time, there were a lot of motion picture people in Fort Lee, New Jersey and in New York. This was before Hollywood got so big and famous. They really made a lot of money through his idea of using some of the novels that we published.

**Grip:** Like Tom Swift and the Rover Boys?

**Phares:** Yes, yes. Of course, that was before the talking movies (*laughter*). They all had subtitles.

**Grip:** The piano player would play . . .

**Phares:** Oh, yes. There were motion picture houses and there was a piano player. Of course there were some very famous authors who used to come into the office. Sam Jenkins would interview them. I'm sorry I don't have too much to tell you about it.

**Grip:** Did you ever talk at any length with Sam Jenkins about anything?

**Phares:** No, I never did. I never did talk at length with Sam Jenkins.

**Grip:** He lived in Douglastown?

**Phares:** He lived in Douglaston, — t-o-n, — Long Island, yes. I lived in Jamaica Estates on Long Island. But I had no personal contact with him, as such. I never did see his wife: [Mrs. Phares here attempted to cover the microphone.] I never did have much respect for Sam Jenkins.

**Grip:** Why?

**Phares:** Well, we won't go into that (*laughter*).

**Grip:** Oh, why, tell me please . . .

**Phares:** Unfortunately . . .

**Grip:** Was it his personality, or his character, or . . .

**Phares:** Character. It's not very well known, though everybody in the office knew it, but . . .

**Grip:** Was he fooling around?

**Phares:** He was a smart man.

[*Interviewer's note:* She would not discuss the matter further on tape. After the taped interview concluded, Mrs. Phares related the following: "Sam Jenkins was much too familiar with a young girl at the concern. He was so old at the time and she was so young. All of us knew what was going on, and we were all disgusted . . . I had no respect for him."]

**Phares:** I had the most wonderful boss, Mr. Buckland. He was the treasurer of Grosset & Dunlap. Quiet and considerate. They had a big farm down in Jersey, they raised tomatoes. The Bucklands. He commuted every day from Jersey. I've forgotten the name of the town they were in, but . . . I wish I could tell you more about Tom. I just loved the boy and years later, when he became so famous, I was real thrilled that I had known him as a little fellow.

**Grip:** Did you ever try to drop him a note or anything?

**Phares:** No, no, I never did.

**Grip:** Did you get the impression that Sam Jenkins was a church-going man?

**Phares:** No. Definitely not.

**Grip:** By the way he just talked in the office, or . . .

**Phares:** My contact with Sam Jenkins was business, in the concern. Outside of that I knew nothing about him — his home. I knew it was in Douglaston, but I did not know very much at all about Sam, except what went on in the office (*laughter*).

**Grip:** But you didn't get an impression he was very — a kind of "holy" fellow?

**Phares:** No, not at all. (*Laughter*). Not at all!

**Grip:** You mentioned that Tom would come into the office, little Tom. What kind of young fellow was he? Was he full of energy like his grandfather?

**Phares:** Oh, yes, he was full of energy. Oh, yes, a vivacious little boy. He seemed to be a very happy little fellow, and was so interested in reading all the time and telling stories. Even at that time, he had lived in the southern part of France. They traveled quite a good deal. His father went from one place to another as an artist and he was not very affluent. But that was one thing Sam Jenkins did. He did help them financially.

**Grip:** He was a good money manager?

**Phares:** Oh, yes. Yes, and he, as far as I know, he helped Tom all through his early life. I don't even know. Sam Jenkins died in '35 or '34 . . .

**Grip:** '36.

**Phares:** '36. I left Grosset & Dunlap in 1927. So I would not have had any further contact with him.

**Grip:** Let me read you a little bit of what Merton wrote about his memories of Grosset & Dunlap, and if you . . . if something jogs your mind just stop and we can talk about it, OK? "Pop's office always seemed to me a fine place. The smell of typewriters and glue and office stationery had something clean and stimulating about it. The whole atmosphere was bright and active, and everybody was especially friendly, because Pop was very well liked . . ."

**Phares:** Yes, he was. He was greatly admired.

**Grip:** "The term 'live-wire' was singularly appropriate for him . . ."

**Phares:** That's very true (*laughter*).

**Grip:** "He was always bristling with nervous energy, and most people were happy when he came shouting through their departments, snapping his fingers and whacking all the desks with a rolled up copy of the *Evening Telegram* . . ."

**Phares:** (*Laughter*). That's very much like Sam Jenkins. His office was like down in the alley, almost a half a block away and he'd come down this alley, and the outer office was here, and my office was over in the corner, and that was the credit office, and past the elevators, and that little boy always made a headline [sic] to my desk, because I don't know what the attraction was, except that I made a great fuss over him and at that time could tell him stories that I had read, you know, about little boys in some of the books that we had published. But . . . he came frequently with his grandfather . . .

**Grip:** Was his mother still alive then?

**Phares:** Oh, no, his mother had died. I believe she died shortly after John Paul was born, not too long after. The child was a year old or two years old, I've sort of forgotten, but it seems to me there was about three or four years difference in their age, Tom and John Paul. It may even have been four years. John Paul was a baby when she died. [*Editor's Note: John Paul Merton was nearly three years old when his mother died. He was two months short of four years younger than his brother*].

**Grip:** Did John Paul ever come into the office?

**Phares:** No, no, no, I never did see John Paul. He just brought Tom with him.

**Grip:** It says "Pop worked for Grosset & Dunlap, publishers who specialized in cheap reprints of popular novels, and in children's books of an adventurous cast. They were the ones who gave the world Tom Swift and all his electrical contrivances, together with the Rover Boys and Jerry Todd and all the rest."

**Phares:** (*Laughter*). They don't mention the Bobbey [sic] Twins, do they?

**Grip:** No. "And there were several big showrooms full of these books . . ."

**Phares:** That's right.

**Grip:** ". . . where I could go and curl up in a leather armchair and read all day without being disturbed until Pop came along to take me down to Child's and eat chicken a la king."

**Phares:** Child's was right around the corner from us and these showrooms were in an area far away from Sam Jenkins's office. His office would be way down there, and he'd have to come all along this hall, through the main office, and down in that direction to these showrooms where they had all the books. Of course, when the salesmen came in, they'd bring them down there, and hope to sell many of them (*laughter*).

**Grip:** Child's was a restaurant on Broadway?

**Phares:** No. It was on Fifth Avenue, which was right around the corner. You see Broadway and Fifth Avenue came together about 24th Street, 23rd Street, and you could go through the building next to ours from Broadway to Fifth Avenue, and then Child's was right in back, almost in back of our building. And of course Child's was well known, everybody went to Child's like we go to Morrison's. . . [*Interviewer's Note: Morrison's is a Mobile-based chain of cafeteria-style restaurants*].

**Grip:** Nobody seemed to mind that Sam Jenkins brought Tom with him to work?

**Phares:** Oh, no, no, no, not at all. No, because he was welcome any time. He didn't interfere with Sam's work. You know, he was just there, and once in a while, he'd come looking for the little fellow, but then they'd head down to the showrooms and Tom would disappear for a long time. I suppose Grandpa told him to stay there and read (*laughter*). He wasn't disrupting any of the work, so far as I know. He didn't disrupt mine, that's for sure.

**Grip:** But he loved to talk, Tom did . . . ?

**Phares:** Yes, yes, yes. He loved to talk, and he loved to listen, too, if you had something interesting to tell him. He was a very vivacious little fellow. Nice looking and fair haired, of course. Sam was gray — gray and bald (*laughter*). I couldn't tell you who he took after, I didn't know his mother. I didn't know his father, just knew his grandfather, and the little fellow.

**Grip:** Did it surprise you later on when you realized that little Tom was the fellow who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*?

**Phares:** Yes, and I was so proud. My brother has a stepson who is a monk at Gethsemani. And I believe they can only visit him twice a year. Unless you go to Gethsemani with the intention of embracing the religion then you spend maybe three months at the monastery. They weed people out, that was my understanding of it. Of course Arnold, my brother, goes every six months to visit him.

**Grip:** What is his stepson's name?

**Phares:** I don't know what name. They take different names from what they were given. [*Interviewer's Note: Mrs. Phares called later to say the name is Brother Alban*]. Of course, my brother I don't see very often. I haven't seen him in two years and for many years I didn't see him. He lived in Cleveland and his wife had been married and widowed before my brother married her and this was his wife's son who went to Gethsemani. I think I'll call Arnold and find out what his name is — his stepson. I understand that he's crippled. There's something medically wrong, and he contacts the people who come to the monastery, so that you would see and know and talk to him I'm sure from what Arnold tells me. I've never been to Gethsemani, but my brother goes twice a year.

**Grip:** How old would this monk be — in his sixties — in his forties?

**Phares:** I would imagine, let me see now, I would imagine he must be in his fifties or early sixties. As I've said, I've never met him. He went into the seminary before I even went to Cleveland to visit them. And his mother is dead. My brother re-married.

**Grip:** What was your maiden name?

**Phares:** Helen Kelly (*laughter*).

**Grip:** How old are you?

**Phares:** How old am I? Guess.

**Grip:** Seventy-five.

**Phares:** You flatter me. I'm eighty-seven!