



Classics in Short No 132: How about spending Christmas with the Savages?

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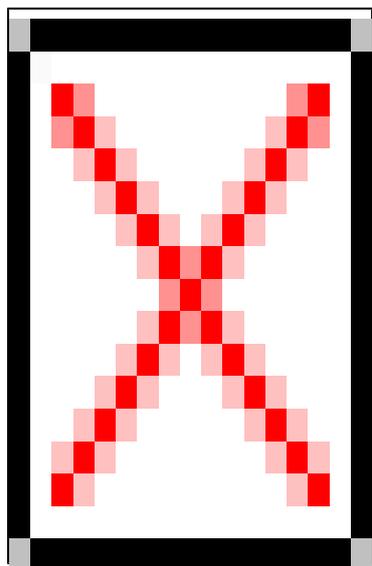
Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

A festive special

Brian Alderson introduces an unusual family, and a distinctive voice.



Before we begin

I must reassure sensitive readers that the Savages in what follows are a family with a capital 'S'. I have no wish to find myself no-platformed for recommending a story about missionary activities among cannibals. And perhaps I should defend my author too who, I am glad to say, is not in the business of appropriating a character to herself whose sex and social status she does not share.

Mary Clive

in fact was born into the gentry and inhabited the country-house milieu in which such as the Savages might spend their Christmases. She was a Pakenham, daughter of the Fifth Earl of Longford (her brother, the Sixth Earl was the Labour peer and prison reformer), and, following the death of her father at Gallipoli, spent a clouded youth shuttling between family houses in Oxfordshire and Ireland. Her presentation as a debutante in 1935 however awoke in her a spirit of satire of which the semi-autobiographical account of young Evelyn's visit to Lady Tamerlane's Christmas house-party bears fruit as a children's book.

Evelyn is bidden there

because (the usual authorial dodge) her father has been taken ill in Scotland. Her mother, who must of course stay with him, arranges for her to spend Christmas at a country house down Herefordshire way with the Lady Tamerlane and her great brood of grandchildren. She is an elderly friend, one who ?although she was old was brisk, and although she was not playful she sometimes gave me half-crowns. She and my mother used to do acrostics and read Italian poetry together.?

That voice

is really the making of the book. Much of the circumstantial detail of the visit may indeed owe much to a *recherche du temps passé* but the words have an immediacy of a child who seems much closer to the action than is the storyteller. For Evelyn is an only child from a sheltered London home, as much in touch with her governess and her Swiss nursery-maid, Marguerite (?a poor frightened creature ?) as with her parents and the Tamerlane adventure plunges her into a memorably unfamiliar family ménage.

What we owe to the book then

is not its story, for that barely exists, but the great concatenation of Evelyn's social encounters such that almost every page yields scenes and conversations of an oddity or comic potential that are brought alive with an engaging freshness. Much stems from the Savages themselves ? four children, who leap off the page, each with their distinctive foibles, an obligatory nursery-maid and a baby with a nurse of its own. They are regular Christmas visitors and thus have the confidence of knowing both the topography of the great house with its hidden passages and back-stairs and the daily routines of its varied inhabitants: the housekeeper, the butler (a reliable friend in assisting the young to get out of over-ambitious plans that go wrong), a quantity of visiting uncles and aunts, to say nothing of Lady Tamerlane and her invalid husband who is only briefly encountered being wheeled about the garden under a pile of rugs.

Paddington Station is the site

where Eveline first encounters the Savage family. Seemingly occupying much of the platform: four children, a baby, a nurse and a nursery-maid and a large heap of luggage. They are grandchildren of Lady Tamerlane and since they make the visit every Christmas they are very much in confident possession of the routines of the trip and Eveline's attachment to them becomes a matter of constant negotiation as she ? an only child ? seeks to assert her own personality against their varied quirks.

By right of numbers

and regularity of attendance it is the Savages who dominate events. Nursery authority may be neglected or scorned as a series of self-invented escapades and entertainments are either planned or allowed to emerge from the fertile Savage imaginations.

But there are two other families too:

the Glens, with a fierce nursery-maid, and two rather sweet but nervous children dubbed the Howliboos. But it is the Savages who dominate all the pranks and games and nursery teas from whose often riotous character Evelyn, the only child, stands a little to one side. Only in a final climax does she take them all in with a bold act of self-assertion which earns her the prospect of a court-martial to be held the next day down behind the rubbish-heap. It is a doom from which she is saved (authorial intervention again) by the news that her parents are now back home and that she is to join them instantly ? escaping the Savage hoard while they are out on their ponies.

We know not

if justice ever caught up with Evelyn but it would seem that the visit to Tamerlane House was a moment out of time. (Published in 1955 as Clive's only children's book, its charm was enhanced by headpiece-drawings to its twelve chapters by that neglected artist Philip Gough.) As a memoir adapted for child readers though it deserves notice also as

the obverse to that slightly later story, **The Children of the House**, fashioned by Philippa Pearce from the manuscript by Brian Fairfax-Lucy. One hopes though that those resilient Savages escaped the sad fate of the children of Charlote.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0-7123-5728-9, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

Christmas with the Savages by Mary Clive, is available to read on Kindle, £2.99.

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