opening extract from

Jennings Goes to School

written by

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Foreword

Jennings first made his appearance as a new boy in the London Children's Hour in the autumn of 1948. He and his friend Darbishire were then very new boys indeed. Mr Carter and the Headmaster, the very old Old Boy and the very Very Important Parent, were only names; Mr Wilkins' geometry lessons and Matron's cakes were joys still to come. We had not yet been thrilled by the adventure of the Poisonous Spider, or delighted by the Ingenious Affair of Jennings and the Tinkling Glass, or stirred to laughter by the antics of Leading Fireman Cuppling. All these characters have since delighted many thousands of Children's Hour listeners. Jennings has three times reached the distinction of an appearance in Children's Hour Request Week. On two of these occasions the plays came third with one in every two children voting for them. I hope that as many of them as have found their way into this story version of Jennings' adventures will prove as acceptable in print as they certainly have over the air.

DAVID DAVIS,
Producer, BBC Children's Hour.

Introduction

It would be a waste of time to describe Linbury Court Preparatory School in great detail, because, if you are going to follow Jennings through his school career, you will be certain to alter the shape of the building so that it becomes, in imagination, your own school. Jennings' classroom will be your classroom; his desk, your desk; his text books – well, those who want to know where Jennings was at school, have only to glance at his text books to find out. If you will open his *A Shorter Latin Primer*, carefully altered to read *A Shorter Way of Eating Prime Beef* you will find the inscription:

"If this book should dare to roam,
Box its ears and send it home,
to J C T Jennings,
Linbury Court School,
Dunhambury,
Sussex,
England,
Europe,
Eastern Hemisphere,
Earth,
near Moon,
Solar System,
Space,
near More Space."

This should satisfy the most inquisitive. But our search for geographical detail has led us too far ahead. Jennings has not yet arrived at Linbury; the Latin Primer is still unsullied, and JCT Jennnings is only a name on Mr Carter's list of new boys. So let's start at the beginning.

1

Jennings Learns the Ropes

It was the first afternoon of the Christmas term and Mr Carter was enjoying the peace and stillness, so soon to be shattered by the arrival of sixty-seven boys on the school train. A few had already arrived by car, and were importantly memorising the contents of the notice board in order to be first with the news when the main body arrived. To know who was who in such matters as prefects, dormitory captains and school librarians was important in itself, but to be able to broadcast this information to the masses before anyone else could get a word in edgeways, was more important still.

Mr Carter was greeted enthusiastically by the group at the notice board.

"Oh, sir, how are you, sir? Have you had a decent holiday, sir?" came from ten voices simultaneously.

"We had a supersonic time, sir," said an eleventh voice. "We went to Scotland, sir, and we had gluey porridge every day and we got stuck in a bog, sir, and my father said that was where they got the porridge from, but it was only a joke really, sir."

The twelfth voice added its quota.

"Sir, we went to France, sir, and we had a spivish ozard crossing, but I wasn't sea-sick, honestly, sir. It's a jolly wizard

job I'm not a chap I know at home's uncle, because he's always ill on boats, isn't it, sir?"

"Isn't it what?" said Mr Carter.

"Isn't it a good job I'm not him, sir."

"Who?" asked Mr Carter.

"The chap I know at home's uncle, sir."

"Yes, very probably," replied Mr Carter.

Twelve times Mr Carter shook hands; twelve times he was pleased to say that his health was excellent, and twelve times he informed the earnest inquirer that he had spent a pleasant holiday. He moved on, his right hand somewhat stickier than before.

In the dining-hall, where he stopped to pin up the plan of the boys' places at table, the Headmaster was showing a clergyman round the school. The latter, whose look of anxious inquiry clearly labelled him "New Parent," was accompanied by a small-scale model of himself, labelled with equal clarity, "New Boy."

The likeness between father and son was remarkable; both had fair, curly hair, Father's being thinner on top, but tidier; both had pale-blue eyes and spectacles and, when they spoke, both the large and the small edition expressed themselves in a welter of glistening consonants, and managed to convey the impression that they were speaking in capital letters.

"Now one attractive feature of this dining-hall, Mr Darbishire," the Headmaster was saying, "is that the air is kept at an even temperature by heated panels let into the walls."

"Really! Most interesting, most interesting!" said Mr Darbishire, in block capitals.

"And these windows are all fitted with vita glass, which means that they allow the ultra-violet rays to pass through."

The Reverend Percival Darbishire peered closely at the

vita glass windows, screwing up his eyes as though uncertain of the effect that the ultra-violet rays might be having upon his eyesight. It looked like ordinary glass to him, but one could never tell, and he was determined to be impressed by all he saw.

"Most remarkable, most remarkable!" he said.

"You will observe our system of overhead ventilation," the Headmaster went on, "which allows every boy a minimum of three thousand, five hundred cubic yards of air."

Mr Darbishire, still blinded by science, was unable to see anything overhead, except the electric light fittings, but he obediently looked upwards, wondering vaguely whether a tea-urn at the far end of the hall might have something to do with the ventilation.

"Most interesting! Very remarkable and – ah – interesting," he said, now convinced that the tea urn must have something to do with it.

The Headmaster was wondering whether he really did mean three thousand, five hundred cubic yards of air. Perhaps it was three hundred and fifty thousand cubic feet. He would have to work it out. There were twenty-seven cubic feet in a cubic yard, so that meant… He gave it up; after all, you couldn't expect a classical scholar to be a genius at mathematics as well.

"Good gracious, it's four o'clock!" he said, changing the subject. "Now you must come along to my study for a cup of tea."

Mr Carter returned to his room just as the patter of little feet announced that the main body had arrived by the school train. The little feet pattered up the stairs like a cavalry regiment thundering across the plain, and Mr Carter was once more the centre of vociferous greeting.

"Have you had a wizard holiday, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Temple."

"So did we, sir," said Temple. "We went to Guernsey by air; it was super-delectable. Actually it was a rotten swizzle, sir, because we flew through low cloud and we couldn't see a thing, but if it hadn't been for that, and if we'd flown about a hundred miles farther east, I could have wiped this school right off the map, sir, honestly."

"Really!" marvelled Mr Carter.

"If I'd had a machine gun that is," Temple explained.

"We seem to have had a narrow escape."

Mr Carter turned to the next boy.

"Well, Atkinson, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"I went to Lords, sir, to see Middlesex play Lancashire, and I took my autograph book to get all their signatures, sir."

"And did you?" inquired Mr Carter.

"I got one, sir," said Atkinson proudly.

"And whose was that?"

"I'm not sure, sir, 'cos the chap's writing's a bit wobbly, and he just did a couple of squiggles and a flourish, and I didn't like to ask him what his name was," Atkinson confessed. "But if you look at it one way up it looks like B K Inman, and upside down it might be E J O'Reilly."

"And which do you think it really is?"

"Well, it's most probably Smith, sir, 'cos there wasn't an Inman or an O'Reilly in either of the teams, but there was a Smith on both sides," he explained, "so that makes it a two to one chance on its being one of them rather than anybody else, sir. But it's a pity his signature's so illiterate."

"Illegible," corrected Mr Carter.

"Oh, he must have been that, sir, 'cos even if he's not eligible for Middlesex, he would be for Lancashire, wouldn't he, sir, or he wouldn't be playing?"

Mr Carter was at a loss for the right answer to this one, so

he proceeded to shake hands all round, and furtively wiped the damp stickiness from his palm on his handkerchief. "Line up," he said, "I want your identity cards, health certificates, money for the bank and trunk keys."

Order was restored and Mr Carter started to check each boy's belongings. There were always snags in this. Temple had handed his identity card, as well as his ticket, to the collector at Victoria, and a hole had been punched in it before the error was discovered. Atkinson's father had departed to the city with his son's trunk key in his pocket; Venables' mother had lost his health certificate, but she sent a message to say that "it was all right, wasn't it?" – obviously trusting in Mr Carter's shrewd glance to detect any germs that might be lurking about her offspring.

"Right," said Mr Carter, "next boy."

"Me, sir, please, sir," said a voice.

Mr Carter's first meeting with Jennings was the routine affair of a busy master, who saw in front of him a small boy not unlike the dozens of other small boys who were lined up outside his room. His suit, socks and tie conformed exactly to the regulation pattern. His dark brown hair, which still bore the faintest trace of a parting, was no different from that of his fellows, and his face was the average sort of face worn by boys of his generation. So Mr Carter learned little from this first meeting. Later on, he was to learn a lot.

"A new boy, eh?" said Mr Carter. "And what's your name?"

"Jennings, sir."

"Oh, yes, here you are on the list. J C T Jennings; ten years, two months. Right?"

"No, sir, not quite right, sir; ten years, two months and three days last Tuesday, sir."

"We won't worry about that," said Mr Carter. He had placed the new boy by now. Only that morning the Headmaster

had shown him a letter from a Mr Jennings, expressing doubts lest his son, who had never been away from home before, should not settle down at boarding school. Mr Carter gave him another look; he seemed the sort of boy who knew how to look after himself.

"We shall have to show you the ropes, shan't we?" said Mr Carter, sorting out the small pile of documents that Jennings placed before him.

"Identity card, yes; bank money, yes. Where's your health certificate?"

"I don't think I've got one of those, sir," said Jennings, not knowing what a health certificate looked like.

"You must have," returned Mr Carter with mock gravity. "How do we know you're not suffering from mumps, measles, chicken-pox, whooping cough, scarlet fever and bubonic plague?"

A look of alarm passed over Jennings' face. "I'm sure I'm not, sir," he said. "I haven't even got any spots, honestly, sir. Look, sir!"

"Isn't this it?" asked Mr Carter, extracting the certificate from Jennings' pocket and studying it. "Yes, I thought so. You're quite all right."

"Not even any bucolic plague?" asked Jennings, rather disappointed now that all was well.

"Not even a mump or a measle. That was just my little joke. Now we must get someone to show you round." His eyes searched the group clustered round the door.

"Come here, Venables," he said to an untidy looking boy of twelve.

"Yes, sir," said the untidy one.

"Come and be introduced. I want you to show Jennings the ropes. On my left," he proclaimed, in the manner of the best boxing referees, "on my left, Venables, easily distinguished by his trailing bootlaces."

"Oh, sir," protested Venables.

"On my right, Jennings, who's got to be looked after. Venables – Jennings: Jennings – Venables." As though to heighten this sporting comparison, a bell rang in the distance.

"There's the tea bell," said the self-styled referee. "Take Jennings to the dining-hall and treat him as you would your brother."

"Yes, sir," replied the trailer of bootlaces.

"On second thoughts, don't," added Mr Carter. "I've seen how you treat your brother. Look after him as you do yourself and he certainly won't starve."

"Oh, sir!" said Venables in aggrieved tones. One had to sound aggrieved at the heavy-handed pleasantries of the staff, but actually it was rather flattering to be picked out for such a distinction. He led Jennings away to wash his hands for tea.

Old Pyjams, the general factotum, was putting up clean towels in the wash-room. His name was Robinson and he was in his early twenties, but he had to be called Old Pyjams because his opposite number, Hawkins, the night watchman, was known as Old Nightie.

"You'll 'ave to do without soap," Old Pyjams told them, "I ain't got around to getting it out yet."

This was all to the good because, by trailing their fingers under the cold tap and pressing hard on the clean towels, the boys were able to make impressions which would have delighted the fingerprint department of Scotland Yard.

Another bell rang and Venables led Jennings to the dining-hall where Mr Carter was waiting to say grace. The buzz of conversation ceased.

"*Benedictus, benedicat*," said Mr Carter.

There was a scraping of chairs and the buzz broke out again.

"You'd better sit here, Jennings, next to this other new chap," said Venables. "Here, you, what's your name?"

"Charles Edwin Jeremy Darbishire," said the small edition of his father, in capital letters.

"You can keep the Charles Edwin Jeremy, you won't be needing it," said Venables. "And you'd better talk to Jennings as you're both new." And with the air of one who has already been overgenerous to small new fry, he turned to the sublime heights of conversation with his equals.

Jennings and Darbishire looked at each other without interest. Having been bidden to talk, neither could think of anything to say. Finally, Darbishire cleared his throat.

"Magnificent weather for September, isn't it?" he said in his best rectory drawing-room manner.

"Uh?" said Jennings, out of his depth in polite conversation. "Oh, yes. Super… I say," he went on, "how much cash have you got in the school bank? I've got a pound."

"I did have a pound," said Darbishire, "but I spent fourpence halfpenny on the way here this afternoon, so I've got – er – nineteen and – er – I've got a pound less fourpence halfpenny. I gave it to that master who said grace just now. What's his name?"

"I think he's Mr – er – I say Venables, what's that master's name?"

With an effort, Venables descended from the sublime to the ridiculous. "Were you talking to me?"

"Yes. That master. What did you say his name was?"

"That's Benedick," replied Venables. "We all call him that, anyway. Actually, his name's Mr Carter."

"Why call him something else?" demanded Jennings.

"Well, you heard him say grace just now. *Benedictus* and all that. And after meals he says, '*benedicto, benedicata*.' "

Jennings waited in case more explanation was forthcoming, but it wasn't.

"Go on," he said.

"I've just told you," said Venables with the patience reserved for imbeciles. "*Benedicata* – Benedick Carter."

"Oh," said Jennings. "Is that a joke?"

"You're a bit wet, aren't you?" replied Venables.

"It's Latin, Jennings," broke in the erudite Darbishire. "My father knows a lot of Latin. He's a clergyman, and he says – "

"Yes, but what does all that benedict – whatever it is, mean?" demanded Jennings.

"Don't ask me," said Venables. "I was thirteenth in Latin last term. I'll ask Bod; he's a brain." And calling to Temple on the opposite side of the table, he asked, "I say, Bod, there's a new chap here who wants to know what the grace means in English. You were first in Latin last term; you ought to know."

Temple, alias Bod, considered. When one is first in Latin, it doesn't do to confess ignorance. "Well," he said with an authoritative air, "when they say it before meals it means something like 'come and get it,' and after meals it means 'you've had it.' "

And having given the ignorant newcomers the benefit of his learning, he returned to his shepherd's pie.

"But if what Bod said is right – " Jennings began.

"You mustn't call him Bod," said Venables, shocked. "New chaps aren't allowed to call fairly senior chaps by their nicknames until their second term."

"Then his name isn't really Bod, any more than Mr Carter's name is Benedick," persisted Jennings, who liked to get things straight.

" 'Course not," said Venables. "His name's Temple, and his initials are CAT, so naturally we call him Dog."

"But you didn't call him Dog, you called him Bod," argued Jennings.

"Give a chap a chance to get a word in," said Venables. "I haven't finished yet. It's a bit of a sweat calling him Dog, so we call him Dogsbody for short."

"But it isn't short," protested Jennings. "Dogsbody's much longer than Dog."

"Okay, then," replied Venables logically, "it needs shortening. Bod short for Body, and Dogsbody short for Dog. Really!" And he shook his head, sadly. "You new oiks are dim at picking things up."

"It's a nickname, Jennings," said Darbishire. "My father says that the word 'nickname' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'eke-name' which means 'also named,' and it's true, 'cos if you say 'an eke-name,' very quickly, it sort of turns itself into 'a nickname,' doesn't it?"

They practised turning eke-name into nickname until Jennings received a peremptory demand from Atkinson to "pass the ozard and stop hiccupping."

Jennings looked up and down the table, but could see nothing that answered to this description.

"What did you say you wanted?" he asked, helplessly.

"The ozard," repeated Atkinson, marvelling that new boys could be so stupid.

"I don't know what – oh, d'you mean the jam?" asked Jennings.

"Of course I do," said Atkinson, cutting his bread and butter into minute cubes. "What else could I mean?"

"Yes, I can see there's nothing else," said Jennings, "but why is it ozard?"

Atkinson, as a new boy, had asked exactly the same question less than a year before, but his manner implied that he had been born with preparatory school jargon on his lips.

"School jam's rotten muck," he explained. "It tastes like hair cream. Of course, all school food's muck, but usually it's

pretty decent, so that makes it wizard muck, if you follow me."

Jennings followed him.

"Okay then," proceeded Atkinson. "You've heard of the Wizard of Oz, of course. Well, obviously, the opposite of wizard is ozard, isn't it?"

Jennings conceded the point.

"That shepherd's pie we've just had was supersonic muck so it's wizard, but this school jam's ghastly so it's ozard. Everything ghastly is ozard; being a new chap's pretty ozard for a bit, but you'll get used to it when you've been here as long as I have."

"And how long have you been here?" Jennings wanted to know.

"Me? Oh, I've been here donkeys' years. Ages and ages," said Atkinson, and his voice came from the mists of antiquity. "Well, two terms, anyway," he compromised.

After tea Venables escorted Jennings and Darbishire to a classroom, where some dozen boys were laboriously engaged in writing post-cards to let their parents know of their safe arrival.

"You wait here," said Venables. "If you haven't got a post-card, Old Wilkie'll give you one." With that he disappeared, leaving Jennings and Darbishire wondering which of the occupants of the room might be Old Wilkie.

Jennings approached the largest of the boys, who had finished writing his post-card and was dabbing the wet ink with his handkerchief in lieu of blotting paper.

"I say," said Jennings. "Are you Old Wilkie?"

The handkerchief paused in mid-blot.

"Am I Old Wilkie?" he said surprised. "Am I Old Wilkie?" And he went off into peals of laughter. "I say, you blokes," he gasped to the rest of the room when his laughter had

subsided slightly, "there's a character here who wants to know if I'm Old – ha-ha-ha-ha; he wants to know if I'm Old – hee-hee-hee-hee." And turning again to Jennings, he said, "No, I'm not," and resumed Operation Blotting with his handkerchief.

Neither Jennings nor Darbishire could see anything to laugh at, so they smiled politely and waited. A moment later the door handle rattled noisily, and the door hurtled open as though a small charge of dynamite had been placed behind it, and Old Wilkie burst in. Mr Wilkins was young and vigorous, the "Old" being merely a courtesy title. He was junior to Mr Carter and offered a complete contrast to him in every way; for Mr Carter remained quietly calm in the midst of the most frantic hurly-burly which occurs occasionally, even in the best regulated preparatory schools. But Mr Wilkins had none of his colleague's placidity. He hurtled and exploded his way through life like a radio-controlled projectile.

"I want everybody's post-cards, immediately," he boomed in a voice like a loud-hailer. "If you haven't finished, then you ought to have done. I can't wait all night. Lots to do."

"Please, sir, Darbishire and I haven't got any post-cards, sir," said Jennings.

"New boys, eh! Yes, of course you are; must be. Thought I hadn't seen your faces about the place before. Here you are," he went on; "two post-cards, two pens. Go and write them."

"Who do I have to write to, sir?" asked Darbishire.

"Not 'who,' 'whom,'" corrected Mr Wilkins. "To your mother and father, of course, who else?" He paused, considering whether he should have said "whom else."

Darbishire still looked puzzled.

"Well, go on," said Mr Wilkins. "Mother and father. No point in writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury; he won't

be interested. Tell them you've arrived safely."

"But they know that, sir," said Darbishire. "My father came down with me."

"Can't help that," said Mr Wilkins. "School rules say 'write post-card home.' All right then, write post-card home. Won't do any harm, will it?"

Jennings and Darbishire sat down at a desk. Darbishire sucked his pen while Jennings discovered, to his delight, that the inkwell was three-quarters full of ink-soaked blotting paper. With infinite care, he proceeded to fish for little bits with his nib and proudly displayed the results of his toil on the top of the desk, where the ink trickled down in little streams.

Darbishire decided to assure his parents that he was concerned about the state of their health. He headed his card, "*Linbury Court Preparatory School, Dunhambury, Sussex*," in huge, sprawling writing that covered more than half the post-card. "*My dearest Mother and Father*," he went on in letters half an inch high and nearly twice as broad, and discovered that there was only enough space left for one more line. "*I hope you are quite* – " He stopped, having completely filled up the available space. There was just room for a full stop, so he put that in and took his effort up for Mr Wilkins' approval.

Mr Wilkins adjusted his eyes to the outsize script and blinked.

"I hope you are quite – ?" he read out, bewildered. "I hope you are quite, what?"

"No, not quite what, sir," corrected Darbishire gently. "Quite well."

"So one might gather," expostulated Mr Wilkins. "But you haven't said that. You can't say 'I hope you are quite, full stop.' It's nonsense!"

"I hadn't got room for any more, sir," explained Darbishire.

"And it's all right, really, 'cos my father'll know by the full stop at the end that I'd finished and wasn't called away unexpectedly in the middle of anything, sir."

"But don't you see, you silly little boy, it doesn't make sense? How's your father going to know what it is "quite" that you hope he is? For all he knows, you might be going to say you hope he's quite – " Mr Wilkins was unable to think of a suitable comparison.

"But it's bound to mean quite '*well*,' sir," reasoned Darbishire. "After all, you guessed it, and if you can, sir, I'm sure my father could, and I wouldn't be likely to mean I hope you're quite '*ill*,' would I, sir?"

Mr Carter would probably have sighed. Mr Wilkins made a noise like an inner tube exploding under pressure. The back of his neck turned pink and he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. After a short period of convalescence, he opened his eyes and gave Darbishire another post-card.

Jennings had finished Operation Salvage in the inkpot and was gnawing the end of his pen. It would take a week or so to chew his way down to the nib, he decided, but already the pen showed signs of giving way as the end was beginning to spray out like a paintbrush. The noise of Mr Wilkins' mental anguish recalled him to the realms of scholarship, and he set about collecting material for his literary masterpiece.

A post-card home was something new in his experience. What should he say? His mother had told him to be sure to pay his pound into the school bank as soon as he arrived. He could say he had done that, for a start. He was richer than Darbishire because he had only got a pound less fourpence halfpenny. What else? Well, there was that frightfully funny joke Mr Carter had made about his having bubonic plague. What was it they called Mr Carter? Benny something? And it had something to do with the grace that Bod could translate, because he was a brain at Latin. Oh, yes, and that shepherd's

pie for tea had been lovely. Surely he had enough material now for his post-card. He wrote:

"*Dear Mother,*

"I gave mine in to Mr cater Darbsher has spend 4½ of his my healthser ticket was in my pocket he said I had got bubnick plag it was a jok he is called Benny Dick toe I think it is. We had ozard of wiz for tea Atkion says wiz is good and oz is garstly so do I. Love John.

"PS. Temple is a brain, he is short for dogs boody."

Pleased with his effort, he trotted up to Mr Wilkins and awaited his approval.

Mr Wilkins did his best to decipher the message. As a solver of crossword puzzles, he felt that if only he had a clue, he might be able to read what appeared to be an ingenious code. But Mr Wilkins hadn't a clue and this time, his period of convalescence was longer.

The dormitory bell was ringing an hour later when Mr Wilkins reluctantly accepted Jennings' post-card. It was his seventh attempt and Mr Wilkins knew what it meant because Jennings, with infinite patience, had explained it. But to Mr and Mrs Jennings, who had no interpreter to help them, the post-card's message remained forever a mystery.