

No. 16 - Boys' Friend 3d. Libraries Nos. 288 & 328

Charles Hamilton wrote only two stories centring around Highcliffe, but each was a veritable jewel and both have now become collectors' items. They were published in the Boys' Friend monthly library in 1915, a year in which the Magnet and Gem were in a state of relative decline, but there can be no doubt about the excellence of these two stories, which were never surpassed by anything else the author wrote in the earlier days.

No. 288 entitled 'The Boy Without a Name' appeared on New Year's Day, 1915, though it had been written before the outbreak of war. There was nothing remarkable about the plot - a new boy named Clare arrived at Highcliffe on a scholarship. His antecedents were unknown, and he had been brought up by a sea captain. Ponsonby (surely the most villainous schoolboy Charles Hamilton ever depicted) led a campaign against him, in which he was abetted by the snobbish Mr. Mobbs, who toadied to all boys who had wealthy or aristocratic connections. This is sufficient to form the basis of a very readable story, one might suppose, but why should it have been rated by Charles Hamilton as one of his very best? The secret lies in the presentation of the character of Rupert de Courcy, the Caterpillar.

The Caterpillar was one of the most fascinating characters Charles Hamilton ever created, and was quite wasted at a minor school like Highcliffe. Now and again readers would catch another glimpse of him, but he was never allowed to play such a large part again. Cardew of St. Jim's was his nearest counterpart, but Cardew was not always presented in a sympathetic light. The Caterpillar was the friend of the reader from first to last, perhaps because his enemy was Ponsonby the villain, not Tom Merry the hero.

The nobodies of Highcliffe (sons of solicitors and doctors who had to work for a living) were too much under Ponsonby's influence to chum with Clare, and it was left to de Courcy to invite him to share his study in this typical manner: 'At all events, I shall find you an interestin' study. I shall watch your manners and customs and habits, and so on - it will be as amusin' as keepin' rabbits, and much less trouble. After a term or so, I shall have a real insight into the ways and doin's of the brainy workin' classes'. (De Courcy could be equally disconcerting to others: 'You see, Franky wasn't trained like us, dear boy. Franky was brought up accordin' to the stern morality of the workin' classes. He'll never get over it. He might know you for a thousand years, Pon, old scout, and he'd never take to gambling, or smokin' or drinkin' or tellin' lies. It's a matter of trainin'). Acquaintance ripened into friendship, and in the end the Caterpillar had the satisfaction of knowing that Clare was the son of Major Courtenay, the rich uncle of whom Ponsonby had hitherto entertained high expectations.

It is interesting to note how the contemporary Magnets dealt with this situation. No.344 which appeared in September 1914 mentioned the arrival at Highcliffe of a new boy named Clare, but the circumstances were quite different: he was not a scholarship boy and his arrival aroused no antagonism. This could not have been our Clare. No. 374 dated April 1915 refers to Courtenay's earlier difficulties, however, and is the first obvious reference in the Magnet to 'The Boy Without a Name'.

No. 328 of the Boys' Friend Library entitled 'Rivals and Chums' was that rare bird - a sequel which lived up to its predecessor. Courtenay had now become form captain, and Ponsonby was full of hatred for the newcomer who had supplanted him. To add to the fun, Mr. Banks had installed a roulette game in a house in Courtfield, to which the Caterpillar was irresistably attracted. In this story Charles Hamilton devoted more space than he ever again permitted himself to an explanation of roulette, the various systems of the punters, and the way in which de Courcy realised, stage by stage, that it was impossible to beat the bank. Ponsonby reached the nadir of his infamous career when he informed the police about Mr. Banks' gaming house the night he knew de Courcy would be going, and then sent Courtenay after him, hoping that they would both be arrested together. Needless to say, all his plotting came to naught, and the story ended with Courtenay determined never to trust his cousin again.

This pair of stories illustrates, perhaps better than any other, the essential quality of timelessness in Charles Hamilton's writings. He was not concerned with topicality, the latest invention, the newest fad, all these become stale, weary, and unprofitable overnight. Topicality dates, the latest invention is soon an everyday matter not worthy of comment, and the newest fad becomes old-fashioned in a moment. These two Highcliffe stories on the other hand, are timeless because they deal with human nature in its varying facets; since human nature never changes, they remain as intriguing today as they were forty years ago. Thus it is that 'The Boy Without a Name' and 'Rivals and Chums' bear witness to the fact that Charles Hamilton wrote not for the moment, but for all time.