

THE SCHOOLBOY DETECTIVE

A light hearted look at one of Charles Hamilton's excellent, though not very well known characters by Ron Hodgson

Not Jack Drake, late of St. Winifreds and Greyfriars, as might be expected, but a young Fifth Former of the name Len Lex, who made his first appearance in Modern Boy number 452, dated 3rd October, 1936.

The Modern Boy was somewhat of a hotch-potch of a boys' paper and may not be much in demand, but during its eleven years life it had some very good stories by first class authors, amongst whom, of course, was the incomparable Charles Hamilton.

In the excellent article by Eric Fayne on "The Development of the Modern Boy and the part that Charles Hamilton played in it" which appeared in the C.D. Annual for 1954, Eric had this to say about one of the series:-

"There was nothing very outstanding in the Len Lex series, the stories of the schoolboy detective, which began in 1935 in No. 452 and continued for 36 issues. They were typical Hamilton mystery yarns and, as such, were charming and very pleasant reading. But the plots would have been familiar to any Gem or Magnet fan."

Three years later in the 1957 Annual another excellent article, this time by Jack Wood, was "Browsing in Hamilton Byways" and during its course, Jack had this to say:-

"In the Modern Boy we heard of two other Hamilton schools, one of which is forgotten (Oakshott) and the other the School for Slackers, High Coombe."

These seem rather short, if not sweet, words to say about some very good school yarns which were published under the authorship of Charles Hamilton as serials in 24 issues of the Modern Boy and which were reprinted in an abridged form in SOLs 353 and 371 and in the 1941 Greyfriars Holiday Annual.

The stories were school and detective in content and like the High Coombe series, dealt with the seniors of the Fifth Form, unlike Hamiltons three more famous schools which were mainly about the juniors.

In the High Coombe series of 1934, which were also in the Modern Boy and SOLs, a great deal of description was given to the school and its surroundings and a good character study of the Fifth Form Master, Mr. Chard. But in the Oakshott stories very little descriptive detail was given and the stories were nearly all action. This was probably why some of the above remarks were made. All we seem to know about the school itself was that it was ivy covered, like most of the Hamilton schools. In the Modern Boy, Len Lex used this to climb back into the dormitory after being locked out, but this whole episode was chopped out of the SOL. Near Masters' Gate grew a clump of oaks. The Fifth Form Master's Study, which adjoined his bedroom had a large casement window, which was on the ground floor in a spot quite screened by trees and at the end of a rather dusky passage that branched off a big corridor. This dusky passage led to the two rooms and nowhere else. These were about the only details given.

Perhaps, because of the lack of background details, this is one of the

reasons why the stories do not seem to be so well known as Hamilton's other schools where one has a mental picture of the whole area. The stories, of course, were short and only lasted for a few months where the more famous schools ran for years.

The first ten stories which all appeared under the collective title of "The Schoolboy Detective" dealt with the trailing and capture of the Sussex Man - a mysterious burglar who, for nearly two years, had prowled and plundered undetected. When these were reprinted in SOL 353, for some reason or other they were given the rather horrible title of "The Schoolboy 'Tec."

In passing, it is interesting to note that Charles Hamilton placed Oakshott in his favourite county of Sussex, along with his other great school.

The series opened with Peter Poringe of the Fifth, more commonly known as Pie, leaving the dormitory for the purpose of a rag on his Form Master's Study, as retaliation for a "six" administered in prep. An interesting point this, as the Fifth at Oakshott were caned quite often by their Form Master and the prefects. Before Pie could leave the scene of the crime after distributing a quart of ink around, he was surprised by a figure entering the casement window and, before he could stir, a swift blow laid him on the floor, stunned and senseless.

Detective-Inspector William Nixon of Scotland Yard was a worried man over the failure of the police to put a stop to the activities of the Sussex Man. Even the latest attempt at the school had been foiled by pure chance and not even the porter's mastiff, which now ran loose at night, had raised any alarm.

Len Lex, his orphaned nephew, who was looked after by Bill, realising how worried he was, decided to put his Uncle Bill in the picture with his own observations. As Len explained:-

"About two years ago, the silver was lifted from Greenwood Manor, in Sussex. That was the first shot. Since that time, at intervals, there have been mysterious burglaries, all within a radius of about thirty miles, from Greenwood in the north to Lowcroft in the south, Baye in the east to Woodway in the west - all of them performed in the neatest possible manner by a joker who never left a trace. Not the remotest clue to his identity - they call him the Sussex Man for want of any other name. Now, for the first time, two jobs on the same night - one at Oakshott School, the other at Woodway Court, eight miles away."

Len carried on and explained that all the cribs were cracked in Sussex because the man was tied down to the quarter where he lived and that he had now as good as handed the police his card. Poor Bill still could not see, so Len gave all the dates of the robberies and stated that all these were between the beginning and end of an ordinary school term. A further sketch map by Len showed that Oakshott School was in the centre of the beat. A thirty mile beat from end to end - but when worked from the centre, never outside fifteen miles.

"And finding a school in the centre of the beat," said Len, "doesn't it look as if the Sussex Man worked round from Oakshott, Bill? Now he's put his foot in it, and told you so."

"Has he?" said Bill dubiously.

"Woodway Court was robbed that night, Bill. The man that Poringe saw getting in at the window was not after a crib. He was a nightbird coming home to roost. He knocked the boy out, not to clear his way to a crib, but to

prevent recognition. The boy might have had a flashlamp - very likely had! He couldn't run the risk. He tapped him hard and quick."

"But - ."

"And the proof is, what the mastiff did!" answered Len.

Bill Nixon blinked.

"The mastiff did absolutely nothing!" he answered.

"That's the proof," said Len. "The dog knew him and did not bark!"

Perhaps a slight pinch from Sherlock Holmes but, as a result of all this, Len Lex entered the Fifth Form at Oakshott and was placed in Study No. 8 in the company of Pie Porringe, Cedric Harvey and Banks.

Charles Hamilton may have been cashing in on the popularity of Horace James Coker with the creation of Pie Porringe, who was an exact copy. Harvey and Banks being his Potter and Greene. Pie's mind worked like that of the great Horace, he always knew what he was doing and he was always right. His spelling too, was on a par with Coker's. His attempt to put gum into the tank of his Form Master's motor bike resulted in the only other bike in the shed, that of the games master, being made immobile and that, of course, resulted in a form ragging for Pie. He tried to swamp Len Lex with a bag of soot and succeeded in bagging Rance of the Sixth. A six from Campion, the Head Prefect, was the reward for this. But Pie, like Coker never learned and one could carry on with his misfortunes which, in due course, all helped Len Lex in his task of unmasking the villain of the piece.

Coker was one of Charles Hamilton's great creations and, in my humble opinion, so was Pie Porringe.

The other Fifth Formers mentioned in the series were Cayley, Bird, Fane, Simpson, Worrall and Hobbs although they did not influence the action in any way.

Of the Sixth Form, Oliphant the School Captain was mentioned on occasions, as was Devereux and Campion, the head prefect. Rance, the dingy black sheep was introduced into a number of chapters and took a couple of thrashings from Len Lex, so it was obvious that Rance had a later part to play.

The junior room was known as the Lair but the juniors themselves were hardly mentioned apart from Albert Root who, unknowingly, helped Len on a number of occasions in his quest for the various villains he unearthed at Oakshott.

Len had not been long at the school before he soon had four suspects lined up. This was rather more than usual in the Hamilton saga, but I suppose the idea was to spin out the interest over the ten weeks whereas, in the Gem or Magnet the whole series could have been published in two issues.

The first suspect was James Bullivant whom Len had spotted in the dark in Mr. Silverson's study and who had displayed unmistakable terror at being found there. Bullivant was the games master and was described as being stocky, red faced and with rather bulging light blue eyes.

Len's attention was then turned onto his form master, Vernon Silverson, who was dark, slim and handsome and had a slightly sardonic smile which made the Fifth Form men refer to him often as a sarcastic beast. He was also a secret backer of horses and the owner of the study which Len knew was the mystery man's way of egress and ingress, when the Sussex Man was on the prowl.

The next suspect was Ralph Surtees, the Master of the Fourth who was sturdy, boyish in looks, the youngest beak at Oakshott, a keen footballer and

very popular. He had been recognised prowling in the silent and sleeping house after one o'clock in the morning.

The final suspect was a rather tall, shadowy figure who never showed his face.

To cut short a long story, Len soon discovered that Bullivant was after some money from Silverson's desk to help his young brother Roger who, being a bank clerk at the County and Provincial Bank, Bristol, had been dipping into the till to the extent of £400 and was therefore, on the run. Acting on information from Len, Bill Nixon soon stopped young Roger's jaunt.

The prowlings of Surtees turned out to be the result of Surtees turning amateur detective as he, unlike the police, had worked out that the centre of the Sussex Man's beat was Oakshott.

The fourth mystery prowler turned out to be the Sixth Former Rance who was caught by Surtees as he was once more breaking bounds to make the usual trip to one of the local hostleries to place his money on another of Charles Hamilton's also rans.

The net was now closing on the Sussex Man as only one suspect was left - Vernon Silverson. He had received an invitation to dine with Lord Trant at Trant Elms and Len Lex assumed that Silverson had spied out the land and the next burglary would, therefore, be at Trant Elms. And with only two chapters of the story left, the assumption turned out to be correct and Detective-Inspector Nixon's hand dropped on Silverson's shoulder while he was in the very act of lifting Lord Trant's bonds and other valuables from the safe.

One thing that caused a bit of thought was that although Silverson had a motor-bike he was unable to take this from the school at night and had to use Shanks' pony for his nightly visitations. And with some of the cribs fifteen miles from the school he had to cover thirty miles on foot, which meant quite a goodly number of hours walking, or running would probably be a better word, each time; especially as he was usually back at school round about one o'clock in the morning.

Authors licence, no doubt!

The next series consisting of four stories dealt with the disappearance of Harvey's uncle, Sir Lucian Jerningham at the Old Moat House. A typical Hamilton Christmas story, excellent in every way, with snow, a ghost complete with rattling chains and the villain turning out to be the Secretary, Mr. Chard, who was hoping to make his employer part with his signature to a transfer of bonds. Chard needed the cash to recoup the losses he had sustained at roulette. As usual, he was foiled in the attempt and was led away with the handcuffs on his wrists, by Inspector Shute, the local police inspector.

One cannot help feeling that had Lord Eastwood been called in, he would probably have been of very great assistance, as he was quite used to seeing his secretaries being led away by the police.

A break of thirteen weeks followed and we next met the Oakshott fellows in Modern Boy No. 479 returning to school and were introduced to the boy who was "Asking for the Sack." This was Eric Tunstall who had been sacked from Higham School in Yorkshire. Len Lex, at the request of his Uncle Bill, was asked to give very particular attention to find out whether Tunstall was a young rascal who got no more than he deserved or whether he had been the victim

of unscrupulous scheming, with more to follow. He had been expelled for breaking out, betting, pub haunting and black-guardism generally. Tunstall, of course, denied all this and put the whole thing on his cousin Herbert Varney - another Higham boy - although he could not offer the slightest jot of evidence. Once again the root of all the trouble was money. If young Tunstall was a disgrace to his name, his grandfather would disinherit him and the money would go to the other grandson, Herbert Varney. Both the boys were orphans. The amount involved, and remember this was in 1937, was twenty thousand pounds a year. Quite a nice tidy little income! And no-one seemed to have the slightest idea that anything fishy was afoot! As Len said reproachfully to his Uncle later in the story:- "I begin to doubt whether you'll ever be Chief Commissioner at Scotland Yard, even with my assistance." It seemed more likely that Bill would finish up as Chief Commissionaire.

Needless to say, Pie Porringe pointed the way and the real Eric Tunstall was discovered as a prisoner. The rascally Varney who was acting his part at the school had finally been caught by the Head Master, Dr. Osborne, smoking in the billiards room of the disreputable "Peal of Bells" and sentenced to expulsion. All Charles Hamilton's pubs seemed to have billiards rooms but I must admit, I've never come across one that has.

All turned out fine at the end - the real Tunstall was reinstated in his grandfather's good books and returned to his old school, duly cleared of any suspicion. Herbert Varney disappeared and his accomplice, his tutor by the name of Stacey who was supposed to be abroad with young Varney, finished up in the cells on a charge of kidnapping.

We found in this series that Oakshott had first roll, second roll and lock up roll, so that the school must have spent a considerable part of each evening going to and from the Hall to answer their names. No wonder that on the occasion Chowne, Master of the Shell was taking roll, he was described as curt and irritable and snapped off the names almost as if he were biting them off.

Probably in those days, tranquillisers were unheard of.

The final series of four stories dealt with the Mystery Master - Mr. Egerton Young - who came to the school for a few weeks to take the place of the games master, Mr. Bullivant.

Len Lex & Co. having slogged up Trant Hill on their push bikes, refusing to dismount until the old gentleman in front of them did the same, were relaxing with ginger beer and cakes at a little table under the spreading oak outside the Rotunda tea house when they heard revolver shots from the Sussex and Southern Bank and saw the old gentleman run out, mount his bike and ride away like the wind. No doubt the description of the old johnny rings a bell. He was complete with bushy silvery hair, white brows, grizzled moustache and beard, and looked sixty if he was a day. The same character seems to have appeared in Magnet yarns and was, quite often, pursued by the Bounder.

Pie Porringe voiced strange suspicions of the temporary games master and set Len Lex thinking hard. He later informed Bill Nixon that he ought to pay a call at an office in Regent Street known as Hodgson's Scholastic Agency which supplied temporary masters to schools when required. Although a number of Oakshott names appeared in other Hamilton yarns this is the first time I have come across my own. The office, however, does not appear to be in existence at the present time. If Bill were to obtain a list of posts held by

Mr. Young during the last few years and then compared this with a list of bank hold-ups where the man had not been caught, some light should be seen.

It seemed to be a good thing that Bill Nixon did have the help of his young nephew if he expected any further promotion.

The bank robber, as might have been expected, duly turned out to be Mr. Young and Bill Nixon led away another wrong-doer, complete, once again, with handcuffs on his wrists.

The end of another successful case and also the end of the exploits of the Schoolboy Detective as, unfortunately, no further stories ever appeared.

The illustrations throughout were by Savile Lumley. In the first four episodes in the Modern Boy and the second SOL he showed the Fifth Formers in Etons, though later in the Modern Boy and the Holiday Annual reprint they were in lounge suits.

As mentioned earlier, all these plots would have been familiar to any Gem and Magnet fan of long standing, but not to the new readers who kept joining up, when they would have been completely fresh. And, dare I say it, not everyone was a Gem and Magnet fan.

Of all the grand stories Charles Hamilton wrote for the Modern Boy, only two were school yarns - High Coombe and Oakshott and I defy anyone to read of Pie Porringe & Co. and not admit that they have just enjoyed an excellent and entertaining school story, in the best Charles Hamilton tradition.

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COMMENTS ON A VOLUME OF THE JESTER (Continued from page 25)...

called "Step by Step" and is an exceedingly good story. Yet another story of which all the instalments are available is "His Dad's Good Name," by Henry T. Johnson. This seemed to me to savour of F. Anstey's "Vice Versa," as during the course of the yarn a youngish man masquerades as a boy.

Other serials which one would have liked to read in their entirety are:- (1) "The King's Highway," a story of Dick Turpin by Henry St. John. The first part of this is complete, but as it is immediately followed by a sequel, "Stand and Deliver!" which is still unfinished at the end of the volume, one is left frustrated. (2) "The Fight for Canada," by Morton Pike, begins in No. 93 but is still running in No. 104. Towards the end of the volume commences a serial by Stanhope Sprigg called "The Master of Mystery." So in all this collection of 52 issues in sequence there are actually only three complete serials!

Of the long complete stories quite a few are by Arthur S. Hardy and several of these are laid in the Australian bush. Others are by Mark Darran and Tristram K. Monck. To my mind the best are those dealing with Dr. Messina. No name is appended to these yarns, except in one instance, when Alec G. Pearson is credited with their authorship. Several years later shorter stories of Dr. Messina were to appear in the "Boys' Realm."

As an afterword, though it has no connection with this particular volume, Sexton Blake fans may be interested to know that, in a loose copy of the Jester for 1906, I found an instalment of a serial called "Sexton Blake" by Maxwell Scott. This shows that the creator of Nelson Lee penned quite a fair number of words about the Baker Street detective, as in addition to the serial above quoted, he wrote the Scorpion tales in the "U.J." and a serial of Blake and Lee, "The Winged Terror."

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