

The School for Slackers

by ROGER M. JENKINS

For some reason that I was never able to fathom, the Modern Boy was the only "twopenny blood" permitted on the school premises when I was a boy. As I was a day-boy, I could read the Magnet and Gem at home with impunity, but the boarders could not avail themselves of this lucky option. I vividly recall the Second Master confiscating Magnets with glee and declaring his intention of reading the latest adventure of Billy Bunter before handing the copies over to his wife to light the fire with. (He was also a housemaster, and the boys in his house were universally pitied: he brought up his daughters to spy on them and report to him regularly on any misdeeds they had discovered.)

It was of course ironic that the Modern Boy should contain stories by the author of the forbidden Magnet. The Modern Boy was also one of the few papers where Charles Hamilton wrote under his real name. Soon after a King of the Islands series had ended, the first High Coombe story began in No. 371 dated 16th March, 1935. James McCann, a character drawn in the style of Larry Lascelles, arrived as the new headmaster of the school which was situated on the North Devon coast. The first episode was entitled "The School for Slackers" and a vivid picture was drawn of a school which was not so much vicious as lazy, where elegance and poise mattered more than anything else.

It was the Fifth form around which the stories revolved. Aubrey Compton was the best-dressed man in the form, Bob Darrell was the only one keen on sport, and Teddy Seymour was the third member of the trio, always inclining to agree with the last speaker. The tone for the whole series was set by the first episode when Compton cheeked McCann and was rewarded with six of the best in the quad, much to the horror of Dr. Chetwode, the venerable Beak who was just retiring. From then on, it was a battle of wits between Compton and McCann.

Bob Darrell was presumably the hero, torn between common sense, which made him approve of the new headmaster, and his loyalty to his friends, which made him support them in their rebellious actions. So when Aubrey Compton decided in No. 377 to break bounds to visit the theatre (in evening dress!) his two friends accompanied him. McCann caught them coming out and made them walk so many miles with him that they were absolutely dead beat on their return to High Coombe, which was typical of his unorthodox ways.

The basic contradiction underlying these stories is the fact that they were written for schoolboys but the sympathy lay with the new headmaster. Charles Hamilton tried to get round this difficulty by allowing the boys to win a round in the battle now and again, and this was usually at the end of a weekly episode, giving him the opportunity to ignore it the following week if it suited his purpose. Unfortunately some of these victories by the boys were so outrageous that the stories began to wear an unbelievable aspect: in No. 371 McCann was pushed in the river after dark; in

372 he was ejected from the Fifth-form room and missiles were thrown at him; and in 374 the fourth-formers were running into him, apparently by accident, and sending him flying. If the series had not been written by Charles Hamilton, the reader of these early episodes might have been excused for thinking that he was at the Red Circle school in the Hotspur. Certainly it would be difficult to imagine the headmaster of Greyfriars or St. Jim's being treated in this way.

One of the interesting masters was Mr. Peter Chard, the Fifth-form master with a portly figure and booming voice. Disappointed at not being made headmaster when Dr. Chetwode retired, he had a ready-made grievance, aggravated even more by the fact that Aubrey Compton, the chief opponent of McCann, was in Mr. Chard's form. Chard was known as Popularity Peter because he neglected his duties, partly out of laziness and partly out of a wish to curry favour with his form: it is interesting to note that the boys despised him for it, just as they despised Capes, the master of the Fourth, who used schoolboy slang and spoke to them as if to equals. At any rate, Chard was not merely a carbon copy of Prout, but unnecessary touches were added, such as a reference to egg marks on his face after breakfast. I am prepared to credit the fact that he fell asleep in class regularly (I knew a colleague who used to do this every day after lunch - and woe betide any pupil who woke him up!) but to suppose that he would make a fool of the headmaster by merely giving flicks when ordered to cane his form in public is a little too much to accept.

As the series progressed, however, the unreality of the general situation was toned down, and the interest centred upon the plots that misfired: in 378, it was Colonel Compton, a governor of the school and father of the celebrated Aubrey, who got screwed up in the head's study and went away demanding floggings for the culprits; in 379 the carbide placed below McCann's study got moved to the area beneath the form-room of the Fifth; and in 380 the wrong victim got bagged in the dark. With that number, dated 18th May, 1935, High Coombe broke up for the holidays (a curious time for holidays, one would have thought), and the first series came to an end.

In No. 383 the editor stated, "The School for Slackers will reappear next Friday! Such a clamour has been put up by readers in all parts of the world for further stories of this super-lively school that I have persuaded Charles Hamilton to carry on with a new series featuring all the original characters." Considering that these weekly papers went to press several weeks in advance of publication, it is clearly impossible that within a period of three weeks readers' opinions could have been received and Charles Hamilton could have a story ready for publication in the next issue. There can be no doubt, however, that the first series had ended with an idea that honours were even, and no complete victory had been gained by either side.

The first episode of the new series was "The Dandy Painter". Compton painted red marks all over the walls and furnishings of the Head's study and then daubed Bob Darrell's clothes with paint in the hope that a flogging would cause him to give up his support for McCann. The Head was not taken in by this circumstantial evidence, but the affair was left in the air in a manner that was typical of the High Coombe stories. The next few weeks dealt with the incompetence of the senior cricket team, and the appointment of Ferguson of the Fourth as cricket captain.

After this Compton came to the fore again in a series of episodes in which McCann managed to make him look ridiculous until he hired a ruffian to attack the Head after dark, but Bob Darrell was the victim by mistake, and this made Compton give up his vendetta for some time.

After a gap in 391, there was a further instalment about Ferguson's career as captain of cricket, which seemed to have been published out of sequence. The second series ended with two stories about Aubrey Compton: in the first the Head rescued him from a rift in Oakham Moor, and in the second Aubrey resolved that he would not remain under an obligation to an usher, and he decided to inspire everyone else in the cricket team to win, and this is just what did happen in the very last Modern Boy story of High Coombe entitled "Jimmy McCann's Miracle" in No. 394 dated 24th August, 1935.

As Eric Fayne has pointed out, there could be no real ending to the series because, if High Coombe ceased to be the School for Slackers, there could be no more stories about it, and it is interesting to note that Aubrey Compton in No. 394 suggested that after they had won the match they would reserve the right to go back to their old ways, once the debt of gratitude had been paid. In other words, Charles Hamilton was keeping all his options open.

The Modern Boy published no more tales of High Coombe, but perhaps Charles Hamilton was wise to keep his options open. In the 1950's he sought help in obtaining the two Schoolboys' Own reprints of High Coombe (290 & 299), and in No. 77 of the Collectors' Digest he announced that the next annual would feature, among other items, "Charles Hamilton with the School for Slackers. The latter, as you doubtless know, was a feature of the Modern Boy in the dear dead days beyond recall. It was quite a pleasure to the author to meet Jimmy McCann again: I trust he will have the same effect on the readers." It is interesting to note that some of Charles Hamilton's more recent creations were not so firmly etched on his mind as the older ones, and he had to re-read the old stories to get himself acquainted with the set-up of High Coombe.

It was the first "Billy Bunter's Own", issued in 1953, which marked the renaissance of High Coombe. The story was entitled "The Slackers of High Coombe" and related how an attempt was made to tar and feather McCann, like an earlier attempt in the Modern Boy. This time it was not Monsieur Mouton but Chard himself who became the unintended victim, and it was poetic justice of a very pleasing kind because Chard had noticed the tar but pretended not to have done so. The characters were clearly defined and the story was well-integrated to the personalities involved.

"Tom Merry's Own" for 1954 included a story entitled "Who Cares for McCane?" and this curious misprint of McCann's name persisted throughout the story. Even in the days of the Modern Boy there were similar inconsistencies, the outside porter being named as both Judd and Jupp. High Coombe also had an inside porter called Liggins, who became outside porter in 1954, no doubt because of the incomplete reprinting in the Schoolboys' Own on which Charles Hamilton was relying for his information. The School for Slackers story for 1954 went with a good pace and described how Compton, Darrell and Seymour got trapped by the tide in a cave

which had just been put out of bounds: incidentally, the 1953 story had referred to the limiting of school bounds as well. The 1954 tale was, however, too short to allow for more than an anecdotal type of story, and there was no opportunity for much inter-play of personalities.

Mandeville's 1955 "Billy Bunter's Own" was a very slender volume with no High Coombe story, and "Tom Merry's Own" had gone for good. Herbert Leckenby later announced that there would be no 1956 annual because Mandeville's had gone out of business, a fact which he had foreseen when he visited their premises the previous year. In 1957 Oxonhoath took over "Billy Bunter's Own" but they remained very slender productions and every year the reviewer in Collectors' Digest complained about what was lacking in the annual. Neither Mandeville's nor Oxonhoath ever dated their annuals which means that the only way to identify them is by reading the reviews in the monthly Digests.

1960 saw the last High Coombe story, a very thin offering of a mere three chapters, shorter than a Modern Boy instalment. A booby-trap for McCann was again caught by Chard, and on this very disappointing note the School for Slackers took its final bow. Only the first of the post-war stories could challenge the Modern Boy tales on its merits, the other two seeming to be little more than ghosts from the past. At any rate, High Coombe ended as it had begun, without any firm victory having been gained by either the new Head or the Slackers themselves.

When I visited Charles Hamilton in 1952 he took me somewhat aback at one stage by telling me that he thought the School for Slackers his most polished creation, presumably because he had just been re-reading the stories. Certainly I should be more inclined to rank it with Grimslade as a school where exaggerated and rather unbelievable events occurred, and "polished" would be about the last epithet that would have come to my mind. Nevertheless, the Modern Boy stories did reveal a different narrative technique: instead of commencing each instalment with a short conversation and then explaining what gave rise to this conversation, Charles Hamilton would often start with several paragraphs of descriptive and narrative material. Another innovation was ending a chapter on a note of climax and then to spend the following chapter explaining how it had come about. (None of this was observable in the post-war stories.) There was also very little in the way of literary allusion, and one cannot help suspecting that, despite the judgement of my own headmaster, Charles Hamilton regarded the Magnet and Gem readers as being a cut above those who took the Modern Boy. Perhaps the fairest way to judge the High Coombe stories is to regard them as proof of the versatility of a very prolific author. He tried to give each school its own ethos, and if we prefer to wander in the classic shades of Greyfriars and St. Jim's that does not deny the competence and originality of the stories of The School for Slackers. Once read, they are never quite forgotten.

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A very Happy Christmas to the Editor and all C. D. readers.

NEIL LAMBERT