

## THE OLD ACADEMY

BY W. R. DUNLOP

It is a far cry to Hamilton, Scotland, with its historic associations of the House of Douglas, Cadzow, Bothwell Brig, Drumclog, and "Old Mortality" and the proverbial beauty of Clydesdale orchards.

I speak of my old school there in the late 'Seventies; and incidentally these lines may touch a kindred chord in others who take a retrospect of life—the long span of years since the days of a strong but wholesome discipline. Moreover the eyes of a Hamiltonian here and there may chance to read this reminiscent notice.

Strange it is to think of those boys of long ago, so vivid and yet so far off! Some, either in their own person or in that of their sons, may have fallen on the fields of battle; others have fallen more gently on sleep; many, like myself, are still on the highway and it may be that a few, grown beyond my ken or recognition, rub shoulders with me on the streets of this cosmopolitan city in the West.

In these decades I have made periodical visits to the old school—once on a June "breaking-up day" when I marched with the procession to the Town Hall and saw myself reproduced in the eager faces in the forms below; and I recall the wistful looks which, on a later occasion, I cast through the great iron gates which sentinelled the rear of the building, only to find that the happy playground had become a wilderness and a solitary place and the venerable Academy of former days a decaying or collapsed mass, for the "coal-dark underground" had done its work and forced a change of venue. *Mutatis Mutandis*. Yet, if I may paraphrase Byron:

"Evening falls, youth fades; but memory doth not die,  
Nor yet forget the old school once so dear."

My earliest recollections of it centre round a small boy with shining morning face in a junior class in awful proximity to the Rector's room. A music teacher taught within easy ear-shot; and when the small boy was "kept in" he often heard the dreary drip, drip of some girlie practising the scales with varying success, frequent stops and in lugubrious measure; which filled up his cup of dismal woe, quickly changed, however, to nectar when, on release, he scampered home by the stately Palace grounds. Then came the memorable day when he advanced to the dignity of trousers—half proud, half ashamed of his new dress—and left the mistress for the master and so from form to form and, according to headpiece, from glory to glory, away across the Pons Asinorum, down among the Latin declensions and up the envied Heights of Fame.

As we "old boys" journey through life the name of our Rector acquires a posthumous halo. Influence is a profound educator; and, looking back over the years and in the perspective of distance, I am sure we think of him as the Dr. Arnold of our schooldays and gratefully acknowledge that whatever refinement we possess, or philosophy in the rough and stony places, is largely a result of his impress on our young and plastic minds. Can a wise teacher have any finer comfort in his evening days than the knowledge that, by his influence, he has turned many eyes to follow the gleam? Method and curriculum have changed since then; but I question if there is much in the change that can improve on the soundness of Scottish education in the higher class schools in the 'Seventies and 'Eighties.

The class handbell, kept in a press in the writing-room, was an object of rivalry among those who courted publicity. It was no small tinkling bell but a formidable shining thing with a generous handle; and he was no ordinary boy who had courage to wield it. In full view of expectant crowds he stood, a solitary figure by the entrance porch, his

eye ready to catch the Rector's signal; and, if a novice, the deafening clang in his ears and the gaze of schoolmates made him swell in nervous importance, presently dissipated in the levelling of class-life. Yet the honour of having been the bell-boy remained a secret joy with him for many a day.

But who will tell of the glories of our games which made of the spacious playground an Olympic stadium? "Prisoners base" was the blue ribband of our sports, while hokey-pokey, leap-frog and others, the names of which are now in the limbo, had their meed of patronage and sometimes of peril. Marbles and merchandise were interchangeable terms and he was rich indeed who at the close of day could shew a good sprinkling of marled "cheenies" among the mere "reddies," with the added reputation of a good throw and plunk. Those snowball fights with the Bowieites, strange mysterious scholars from "Somewhere" who were as the Philistines—what wonderful strategy was possible along that narrow road which led from the mountain fastnesses of our playground, across the high wooden bridge and up the hill in tortuous turns! And in the battle was not Dick Ferry our commander-in-chief and our undaunted hero? I can still see his muscular body crouching in daring ambush beneath a hedge until the great moment came. And were not the Bowieites eventually routed from Dan even to Beersheba?

In natural sequence now comes into view the stout but soldierly Sergeant-Major who lined us up for noon-drill. His stentorian voice still rings in my ear: "Heel of the left foot in the hollow of the right," and his sharp military threat to make a public example of any delinquent. The longed for "Dismiss" was the signal for an onward rush to a near-by shop for lunch (though we knew it not by that fine name) and then some halcyon moments as we jostled into the tiny room, felt the warmth of the kitchen fire and the kindly interest of the motherly soul in shawl and mutch as she dispensed scones and syrup, gingery 'Dundy' cakes and sticks of candy and sympathized with our hopes and fears. Some of nomadic mood, and perhaps with an extra penny to spend, employed the precious half-hour in wandering into the town and, with bold front, patronizing a genteel bakery honoured by the carriages of the gentry; but I like to cherish the memory of that unpretentious little shop with the small mullioned window and of the dear old soul who moved familiarly among us amid the glee and the clamorous custom.

Some years ago I went with affectionate interest into the little "close" and knocked at the well-remembered door; but there was no answer. A kind neighbour, learning my mission, told me the tale, of a kind that is often told: "A year or two ago," she said, "your old friend \_\_\_\_\_." And here the curtain falls: it is the time of Epilogue.

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