

Good-Bye, Mr. Chips

J.Hilton

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I first encountered this slight book in a so called 'Easy Reader' edition as a school-boy. I do not remember that much of this simplified version of a simple tale, save a vaguely suffused feeling of warmth and contentment. It is about the quintessential English school-teacher in an English boarding school, sentimentally executed, without being excessively so. As a reader we are becoming privy to an old man reviewing his long life in service. Born in 1848, taking up his position in 1870, retiring in 1913 and then during the last years of the war called back to active duty. Now it is 1933 and he is indeed old, leading a quiet life by the fire-place, seen after by his housekeeper and landlady, and all the major events, personal as well as international pass review. He has seen many boys faces, and boasts that he has forgotten none of them. He is a teacher of Classics, but the Classics have not made any deeper imprint in his rather mediocre mind, he sees them merely as constituting a traditional school subject, providing an excuse to interact with his boy pupils. He is not a very daring and imaginative man, conservative by temperament and outlook, his one romantic episode in his life being his unexpected marriage to a sprightly young woman of spirit and radical leanings, the romance with whom is cruelly cut short after a mere year as a result of a late miscarriage involving the death of both mother and child, an event not that unusual at the time. She had made him bloom, bringing forth to their best advantages, his humble gifts, after which he was a changed and very much improved man, providing the basis out of which his legendary status would eventually develop. A new director with new-fangled ideas about improvement and modernization puts pressure on him to step down prematurely. He ineffectually defends himself and would no doubt have come to grief, had his predicament not been caught by former students of influence and power, coming to his support.

Eventually the old man is after a visit by a new pupil. seized with an inertia and exhaustion he had never before encountered. He loses consciousness, is discovered, brought up to his bed, where he enjoys a brief reprieve, before being recalled to heaven (or whatever). And the young pupil can boast that he was the one who last saw him on his traditional tea, and his last words 'Good-Bye, Mr.Chips' carried a poignancy, he was not aware of at the time.

The English public school, so reviled and so sentimentally adored, occasionally at the same time, provides the necessary background, without which nothing would make sense. As a child I read a series of novels by a Swedish author on a fictional public school, by name of Singleton I recall, in which the adventures of a Swedish boy are presented, learning the traditional virtues of a classic English education, which are not academic, but more in the line of acquiring a stiff upper lip and doing well in sports. ¹

¹ The author's name was something like 'De Geer' and indeed, googling reveals a relevant entry in Swedish Wikipedia for Louis de Geer (1888-54). From 1929, settling in a pension in the Swedish province of

Hilton, more known for his 'Shangri-La', was obviously a purveyor of 'feel-good-fiction', a technical challenge, not to be too summarily dismissed, even if the result to the sophisticated reader, is to be so rejected, even if the present book may nevertheless linger fondly in memory.

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Dalsland, he stayed for twenty-five years until his death, writing among other things, seven titles concerned with 'Singleton'. He was of aristocratic stock, with a paternal uncle who had served as a Swedish Prime minister. He initially pursued a military career, and spent some time in England, which obviously must have provided some inspiration, just as his own experiences of the Swedish variety, which however, played a very marginal role in the Swedish educational system, and were intended for pupils of means without academic inclination or talent.