

My Brilliant Career at Hutchins School

Miss Gilham, fresh from Phillip Smith Teacher's College, was nervous in front of her first class. She was doubly nervous, for in that class was the son of the science teacher she had just met before morning assembly, Mr. Biggs, a forbidding looking man. She thought she'd better mind her Ps and Qs, especially in dealing with her colleague's offspring. It would not do to get off on the wrong foot.

Which one was he? Looking around the class, she didn't see any miniature Arthur Askeys with a prominent jaw. She started by calling the roll.

'John Archer?'

'Here, Miss.'

'Say "Present, *Miss Gilham*." Please address me correctly.'

'Yes, Miss Gilham.'

'John Biggs...'

'Present, Miss Gilham.'

She looked carefully at this boy with the hesitant voice. He was noticeably smaller than the others, as if he was in the wrong class. She decided she'd better treat this one with kid gloves. She smiled at him gently.

Roll finished, she got them all to stand and recite the tables. She was told they liked that and it settled them down. They went through to the ten times. At '...nine tenza ninety, ten tenza HUNDRED!' they all sat down again, looking at her expectantly.

This was easier than she thought. She caught young Biggs's eye and smiled again at him; he smiled shyly back.

'Now, I'll call out a times and I want to see who's the fastest to give me the right answer. Hands up if you know the correct answer. Right? Five fives.'

Up went a hand. 'Er, thirty five?' from a hatchet-faced kid with black hair and ratty eyes.

'Wrong. Can you tell him, John?' she asked smiling encouragingly.

'Twenty-five, Miss Gilham.'

After a few rounds of this, she discovered that although they seemed to be able to recite their tables in a chorus, many of the boys couldn't rap out the correct answers to random timeses. Except for John and a butter-haired boy with rosy cheeks called Graham.

With a sigh, she told them to get out their readers. She got them they were to read aloud individually around the class until recess time. She was pleased to find that despite his timidity John was a good reader, although he gabbled his words and it was sometimes hard to hear him. Lack of confidence, she thought; he needed encouragement. Perhaps his father was too hard on him – old Biggs Senior certainly looked as if he could be! She kept smiling at him accordingly.

All in all, she was pleased with her first morning in class.

'Good. Now put your books away, and when I say "*stand!*" I want you to stand beside your desks, and when I say "*march!*" march out in file to the playground.'

She watched as the boys obeyed her orders. As the last filed out, she saw through the door that a couple of boys, including that hatched-faced kid, Rod Somebody, move up to John and shove him hard in the back. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but more and more boys starting milling around John. She thought she'd better ignore it. At least it wasn't happening in her class.

Next, she heard a rhythmic chanting getting louder and louder: 'Teacher's Favourite ... Teacher's Favourite ... TEACHER'S FAVOURITE!'

She took a quick look out the window and saw John cowering against the fence, his hand clasped over his head as if trying to ward off the cruel words, at least half the class pointing at him, jeering, chanting ...

'What *have* I done?' she mumbled, horrified. She didn't take her usual route through the playground to the staffroom for her cup of tea, which would have taken her past the jeering mob, but walked round the back, through the Old Gym so she could pretend she didn't know what was happening.

And hoping desperately that John wouldn't tell his father how she'd thoughtlessly made him a target for the other boys' ridicule.

Oscar enrolled John at Hutchins on his fifth birthday. As this fell on the 25th October, he entered near the end of the school year and as he could read already, he passed into the next class well over a year younger than his classmates. He continued to be the baby of the class until Sixth Form.

John liked school at first, proud that he could read out loud in class faster than anyone else. But that changed in Year 3, when he was marked out as Teacher's Favourite. John's other teachers were well aware of Oscar's status but only one, the new Miss Gilham, had openly treated John differently. It was the start of a school-long experience of harassment and bullying. Not that John was the only one bullied, far from it, but it was that well-meant partiality by an inexperienced teacher that had marked him out as a target.

Hutchins, Australia's second oldest continuing public school, as private schools were then mystifyingly called, cultivated a tradition of elitism to which all boys were expected to conform: 'Thy name adown the ages past, Thy sons salute and cheer ...', as the School Song put it with more hope than probability. Conformity was enforced by many devices: compulsory sport, strict uniform rules, ridicule by teachers. Most boys learned that lesson well. They too demanded conformity on the playground: any boy who displayed differentness was just asking for it.

Such as not wearing the cadet uniform correctly.

When John moved into secondary school, he had to choose between the School Cadet Corps or the School Scout Troup. He gave the Scouts a go, but the Scout Meetings with their overlay of aren't-we-special-in-our-religiosity-cum-patriotism seemed to him like a junior freemasonry in making good boys better. Actually, he later found out – second hand – that what some Troop leaders did to some boys would not have made them better in any sense that Baden-Powell would have approved. The cadets it had to be.

He was thrilled with his cadet uniform when he brought it home. It provided him with his first pair of long trousers – he was the only boy in the class still in short pants – and they had deep pockets *both* sides. Next morning, he proudly walked through the main gate at school – to be met with a jeering crowd of correctly uniformed cadets. John's gaiters were upside down, his slouch hat was back to front, and his belt was upside down. Googy Butler, the Cadet Lieutenant, averred through gritted teeth that here was a deliberate attempt to disgrace the King's Uniform – nobody could have been that stupid! But nobody had showed John how to wear the damned thing, so how was he supposed to know how these fine details of which side was up?

But the fact remained that John was the only boy who didn't know them.

The headmaster during John's secondary schooling was 'that unspeakable beast', Paul Radford. Among the many unspeakably progressive things he did was to give Sixth Form boys the privilege of wearing an extra strip of magenta ribbon across their caps, to forbid boys to walk in front of the School with their hands in their trouser pockets, and to empower school prefects to cane at their discretion boys who infringed school rules. And if they hadn't infringed any rules, some prefects made up a rule on the spot to justify a jolly good caning.

John was standing outside the cloisters one lunch hour, in view of Macquarie Street. He had one hand in a trouser pocket. The shrill tenor of Graeme Renney rang out: 'BIGGS! TAKE YOUR HAND OUT OF YOUR POCKET!'

Renney stood, back ramrod straight, arm outstretched, the picture of outraged rectitude, with finger pointing at the offender. Renney was then Cadet Lieutenant, used to exercising his parade ground voice. He had been a prefect for over a year and was in Sixth Form, the same class as John.

John resented being so addressed by a classmate, but if he disobeyed, it would have been a major incident. Attempting to maintain some sort of dignity, he withdrew his hand from his trouser pocket, placing his fingers in his blazer pocket, thumb displayed languidly. He treated Graeme to a friendly smile. 'SEE ME IN THE PREFECT'S STUDY AFTER SCHOOL.'

John attended as ordered, to receive a ringing torrent of abuse, about how he was undermining School Spirit, how as a Sixth Former he should be Setting Examples, and like public school clichés. John, face set, stared out the window throughout the tirade, determined to appear unbowed. That caused Renney to increase the pressure. Was John Biggs not only a Sixth Former privileged to disport that extra

magenta ribbon on his school cap, but a *Probationary Prefect* to boot? Had he no pride in Our School, no *self-respect* even?

At least he didn't receive a caning from a peer, as did poor Fishhook for not showing sufficient School Spirit. Fishhook refused to turn up to barrack for Hutchins at Saturday morning football matches by bellowing the war-cry: 'One tin of cocoa, one tin of jam. Two tins of cocoa, two tins of jam. Omarua, timarua, high pukkarā. Hee hi *Hutchins!*' Fishhook's argument was that Saturdays were his to spend how he liked, not how the prefects told him to. His argument was not accepted.

John's probationary prefect status lasted for nearly two years. The usual time for probationers to be promoted, if they were to be promoted at all to the rank and privileges of a full prefect with the special black and white cap, was a few months.

In October, only a couple of months before leaving school for good, he was told to go to the Headmaster's Study, where he was at last invited to that august rank. The reason for the delay, Paul Radford explained, was precisely because of the Renney incident. The issue was not that John's hand had been in his trouser pocket, or that Renney had spontaneously decided that it was illegal to place a hand in a blazer pocket, but that John had displayed a *negative attitude* to being harassed and bullied by a peer who'd been licensed to harass and bully his peers.

John thought about refusing the promotion then and there, resigning his probationary status as well. He talked it over with Oscar, then his form master, who thought that as he was leaving school soon, it was best to leave gracefully and with good feeling. John agreed, with some relief at not forcing himself into a confrontation with authority – although like his great-grandfather Alfred he was prone to do this in later years – but he also thought that the embarrassment to his father, had he not conformed, would have been great.

Some weeks after being elevated to the exalted rank of a Prefect of Hutchins School, John saw Radford's youngest son walking in front of the school, and – YES! – one of his hands was in his coat pocket! Being Abraham's great-great-grandson, John babbled a quick prayer to the Almighty for His Loving Kindness, before letting rip:

'RADFORD! TAKE YOUR HAND OUT OF YOUR POCKET! You of all people should be showing respect for the school!'

Child abusers were themselves the once abused, a mechanism from which public schools derived their traditions and their following.

Renney was a perfect example of the genus Public School Boy. He remained so all his life. He had an indifferent academic career but was an excellent sportsman, with First Colours in cricket, football, swimming and athletics. But most important, he had Leadership oozing out of every pore of his body. He never left school. When he finished being a student, he returned to Hutchins as a teacher. He then did the circuit of Independent Schools, as public schools were renamed, ending as headmaster of a prestigious Sydney school, where he prematurely died in service. Others too returned to Hutchins soon after their teacher training, never leaving Hutchins until they retired.

It must have been a very special institution to have inspired such life-long devotion.

Team sports were compulsory at Hutchins, as Fishhook had found to his painful cost. Sissies who were too *weak* to play football had to feign admiration for the real boys who did.

John hated both cricket and football. His dislike of cricket was established in early primary school. Roy Collings, the School Bursar, doubled as arithmetic teacher and, despite a gammy leg, sportsmaster for the Junior School. On Friday afternoons he sent the class to the Sports Ground to play cricket. They weren't told what the rules were, how to hold a bat, how to bowl, how to catch, how to field: any real boy just *knew* these things, just like they would know how to wear an army uniform. John was chided regularly by Gerlach the senior sportsmaster for 'shirking his duty' by wagging football. His reason for shirking that duty was basic: he was a rotten kick, a rotten mark, he hated being pushed over into the mud and he hated being jeered at for his ineptitude at what was supposed to come naturally to real boys.

John was a reasonably good sprinter, but did poorly at cross-country running. At cross-country time, all the boys were sent on one training run then entered into the three-mile House Cross-Country race. All but the seasoned athletes were sore and stiff for days afterwards, convinced that cross-country running was not for the likes of them. Yet later in adult life, John took up jogging to lose weight and kept

it up for the next forty years, doing lots of 10 km competitive runs – the last when he was 72, but alas coming a long last – and the odd half-marathon.

John's school sporting career was salvaged by rowing. He started his rowing career as a cox, sitting in the back of the four – no eights in those days – steering and calling out the timing. Russell Keon-Cohen, senior English master, was in charge of rowing. Tall, round-shouldered, tobacco-stained moustache, his clothing dirty and unpressed, in classroom or in boatshed, Keon-Cohen was loud and crude. Changing into filthy navy striped serge shorts in the boatshed, he volunteered: 'Haw! These shorts are like State Parliament House.'

'How come, Sir?'

'No ballroom.'

In 1950, John upgraded to rowing: the Thirds crew. They led from the start, but were overtaken by Friends School about halfway. As the School Magazine for June 1950 reports: 'One member of the crew showed determination by rowing half of the race on his slide rails as his seat had fallen off.' (p. 43). John ended that race with a very tender backside.

He graduated to the Firsts in 1951. It was a light crew but he was only just over seven stone, rather less than 50 kg. Keon-Cohen would not allow anything below eight stone in the race records, so from then on he was 'Biggs, the bloody eight stone wonder.' He rowed bow, which at least had the advantage of keeping the sharp end high out of the water. In the Head-of-the-River, Hutchins led up to the halfway mark – at which point John crabbed: he didn't feather his oar properly and it was whipped out of his hands in the rushing water. They came last.

The account of the inglorious 1951 Head-of-the-River in the School Magazine for June 1951 commences with a quote from the great rowing coach, Steve Fairbairn: 'Enjoying a losing race is the greatest possible victory.'

Strangely, Keon-Cohen and the other crew members didn't agree.

Keon-Cohen collected university degrees: seven in all, but only four were listed in the School Magazine. Oscar, as Editor, refused to publish them all, as the remaining three were acquired *ad eundem gradem*, or double-counting as it is now called.

In an English literature class in which John was present, Keon-Cohen averred that the School Magazine should not be edited by a 'filthy physicist', as he delicately referred to those on the science side, but by himself, the senior English teacher. It was no doubt an even sorer point that said filthy physicist hadn't published all of Keon-Cohen's double-counted degrees in the staff list.

The whole class looked at John enquiringly: How was he going to react to this attack on his father? John had been asking himself that very same question for the previous ten minutes. But an enraged squeal from his pubescent voice – a Bluebottle's '*You rotten swine, you*' – would have lacked the firm dignity the occasion warranted. He remained silent.

But Keon-Cohen had ruffled more feathers than those of the Biggs family. In 1953, the Board of Management of Hutchins demanded that Keon-Cohen be sacked.

Alan Harvey, a senior boy, rode to school on a 1932 New Hudson motorcycle, a 250 cc. side valve. Harvey held lunchtime seminars on this wondrous machine, surrounded by a throng of admiring boys trying to kick-start it. Whenever John tried, it backfired, sending him feet into the air; Harvey used to over-advance the spark deliberately. But the damage had been done. This noisy, smoking ruin seduced John into an obsession with motorcycles that lasted for the next forty years.

Oscar understood this obsession – hadn't he been similarly obsessed with cars? He also understood that John was deeply unhappy at school and needed a boost to finish his school days. He gave John an indefinite loan of £79/10/- to achieve his dream. On his 17th birthday in 1951, a prefect at last and two months before he left school, John bought his own motorbike. Not a snarling, two-balled, open-exhaust, hot, throbbing, metal phallus thundering away between his scrawny legs, but a pretty, little green BSA Bantam with sensible leg guards. At least that met Ella's grudging but necessary approval.

In his final weeks of school, John rode to school proudly on his BSA Bantam. He parked it in front of the cloisters, where he thought it looked great. Radford, however, thought that parking a motorcycle in front of the school produced as unfavourable an impression as a busy hand in a trouser pocket.

John was ordered to park his pride and joy in the street.

