Hamlin was an extremely efficient, almost, you might say, antiseptically modern community. But would all that efficiency and modernity keep out the searching winds of the past, or the future . . .?

HAMLIN

by Rosemary Harris

AT THREE O'CLOCK, THE CHILdren would come out to play. Refreshed by their afternoon nap, they were bright and rosy, full of high spirits. The women came trailing after them, dragging striped canvas chairs, which they would place in little groups along the lower half of the slope. From this vantage point, they could observe the children without imposing too obvious a supervision.

It was no accident that the project was laid out in such a way as to make possible this covert vigilance. In the brochure, delivered by special messenger to a selected few, Hamlin Town was described as "a community designed and managed with exclusive attention to the welfare and development of our young," and every detail of landscaping and architecture bore witness to the conscientious execution of this intent. The entire area, about a half-mile square, was split by a broad, tree-lined drive which wound gently upwards from the office and administration buildings to the white gate at the top of the hill. Detached as this gate was from any sort of fence or barrier, it served no practical purpose except to mark the upmost boundary of Hamlin. Beyond it lay a steep decline, littered with small boulders, which led into a densely wooded area. Occasionally, a child wandered through the gate, or past either side of it, and then, through a clever arrangement of wiring, a bell would set up a shrill clangor, and one of the women would run to fetch the wanderer back. It would be explained to him that there was nothing beyond Hamlin but the woods, in which he might easily lose his way.

The houses were clustered half way up the slope, on either side of the drive. Above these, the land was left free for a strategic plac-

ing of playgrounds, bicycle paths, and wide stretches of lawn. Here the children gamboled, clearly visible to the women seated below. Should one of them be hurt, swinging from a monkey bar or tumbling from his bicycle, it was a simple matter for the woman nearest the scene to run to his aid. All of the inhabitants were known to one another, so that there was no difficulty in identifying a child.

The houses themselves were delightful. Low and rambling, their shingles were stained a silver grey, which shade provided a charming background for the trellised roses which outlined each doorway. These roses bloomed all the year around, lending color to every season. To the uninformed, the assortment of hues might seem a matter of chance, or of calculated variety, but the inhabitants of Hamlin knew the significance of this apparently random selection. Designed as the community was, for superior children, these roses were part of a careful scheme of identification. Each color represented the quotient scored by a child in the tests given previous to admittance to Hamlin. That is, red roses indicated the dwelling of a child whose rating might be termed astronomical, yellow was for those less high, and pink for those who, scoring lowest, still soared far above the average of the world outside.

Since each family had at least two, and more often three children, (it was considered inadvisable to sponsor a family unit with only one child, considering the personality problems almost inevitably concurrent with such a status), each doorway bloomed with a profusion of color. Here and there, a trellis entirely yellow or pink appeared, but these were very few. The management of Hamlin had been engaged, for some time, in the development of a method for insuring trellises of a homogeneous appearance, preferably red, but even they acknowledged that this was a long-term endeavor. In the meantime, as Mr. Spinny, the management representative jested, they were as gaudy as a carnival.

The Gliddon doorway presented an interesting variant. Ablaze with crimson ramblers, of an intensity deeper than those of any other, it displayed, also, nestling along one side, a few white buds. The reason for this was apparent in Sissy, the elder of the two Gliddon children. Leona, the younger one, was of a potential so far beyond that of even the Hamlin children that the management had been persuaded to overlook the fact that Sissy was a retarded child. Such an exception had never been made before, but when it was determined that Sissy's condition was the result of an automobile accident, and when

the Board viewed, with amazement, the results of Leona's tests, it was decided that the risk was not too great. There had been some protest from one or two families who felt that one exception led to another, but on the assurance that there would be no further relaxing of standards, these protests were withdrawn.

There was no doubt that Leona was a remarkable child. Besides the evidence of the almost incredible quotient, she possessed a personal beauty that positively dazzled. Small, perfectly proportioned, she was more like an angel than an earthly child. In addition to these assets, she had an unusually lovely singing voice, to which both children and parents listened enthralled. Poor Sissy, on the other hand, was dark and awkward. Across her cheek ran a jagged purple scar, a memento of the accident, and one of her eyes had a tendency to turn inward when she was at all tired or excited.

Her voice was hoarse, and she could only jabber unintelligibly, or utter shrill, yelping sounds. If, as occasionally happened, the children's play upset her, Sissy would glance about her dartingly, stamp her feet, and emit these almost animal noises. At such times, Mrs. Gliddon would take her into the house and give her a lemonade, or otherwise distract her, until she had calmed down. It was part of the understanding that Sissy should never be permitted to interfere with the routines of the other children, and Mrs. Gliddon was most conscientious about adhering to this agreement.

Even Mr. Spinny was pleased with the success of the arrangement. He had, himself, entertained some doubt about the wisdom of admitting the Gliddons. Mindful of the oath he had sworn, when he undertook the responsibility of Hamlin Town, he hesitated to tamper with the qualifications. If the place were to maintain its unique reputation, it was important that there be no slightest letting down. Until now, he had discharged his duties with admirable assiduity and tact. When it turned out, as it had a few times, that the regular examinations indicated that a child who qualified, on admittance, had slipped back into the norm, Mr. Spinny arranged for a gradual withering of the roses about the family doorway. As a rule, the family, appreciative of the delicacy of this suggestion, departed quietly, without any fuss. Once in a great while, it became necessary to remove a trellis completely, but such unpleasant necessities were rare. The Board had cited Mr. Spinny twice for his commendable vigilance. Now, however, the white buds about the Gliddon entrance were a reminder

that he had, without the full permission of his conscience, abetted the Board in the infringement of its own rules. At first, he had some difficulty in reconciling himself to this defection, but later on, observing Leona's continued remarkableness, and Mrs. Glidden's clever management of Sissy, Mr. Spinny was able to tell himself whole-heartedly that it was worth a Sissy, to have a Leona.

The advantages of Hamlin were immense. It was not difficult to understand the occasional recalcitrance of those who were forced to leave. Everything was so carefully, so intelligently planned for the optimal development of the children that many of the parents found themselves hardly able to believe their luck. Each morning, the children were escorted to the special school, behind the administration buildings. Here, they received expert attention; instruction along the most progressive lines, with assiduous emphasis on the development of individual talents. They were returned home at noon, at which time they were served a hot lunch, and put to bed. At three o'clock, they emerged for an afternoon of free play. Until five, this play took place under the deceptively casual eyes of their mothers. At that hour, the women having to go indoors to prepare the evening meal, a squad of trained watchers was sent out by the management. These watchers loitered unobtrusively amongst the children, observing their actions, and taking copious notes which they submitted, in the form of a report, once a month. After supper, the children read or played quiet games until eight o'clock, when it was required that they go to bed. From eight to eight thirty, excerpts from the best classical music were piped by the community organ into each child's bedroom, lulling the children to sleep. By special arrangement, Sissy's room received only the simplest tunes, lest she become excited and disturb Leona's repose. As Mr. Spinny said paternally, "We can't have our Leona kept awake."

This use of the pronoun was indicative of the management's personal interest in every child in Hamlin. If a little girl's teeth came in crookedly, she was sent, at the owners' expense, to the best orthodontist in the country. The best children deserved the best treatment, Mr. Spinny pointed out. If, as a watcher occasionally reported, a child let fall information revealing a specific irregularity in his diet, the mother received a pleasant little note reminding her that vitamin A is important to night vision, and enclosing several carrot recipes.

Even on so homely a detail as between-meal eating, the management was alert. The children

were not encouraged to partake of odd-hour snacks, but every afternoon, at three thirty, a Good Feelings wagon was admitted to the project. This hour was considered suitable in that it came shortly after the children's nap, when they were likely to be hungry, and far enough before the supper hour so that it would not dull their appetites. The Good Feelings wagon was streamlined and gleaming white. The driver wore a starched, sterilized uniform, and was required to dip his fingers in alcohol at frequent intervals. As a result of this precaution, his hands were bright red, and covered with powdery looking scales. His ice-cream was tested daily, at the entrance to the project, for purity and vitamin content. Mr. Spinny himself supervised the analysis, and frequently demanded an increased percentage of butter fat, or a lessening of artificial flavoring in the chocolate.

This visit of the Good Feelings wagon was the high point of the children's day, and vindicated the management's contention that children had certain universal requirements that must be satisfied to produce a balanced personality. Like the children in less privileged locales, the Hamlin children shouted joyfully when they heard the Good Feelings bell, and ran alongside the wagon holding out their nickels and dancing with impatience. The mothers would watch fondly, smiling at their antics, and even condoning the puppy-like pushing and shoving. Sissy was kept seated on the grass, beside her mother's chair, because the jostling was likely to upset her, and Leona would buy Sissy's ice-cream stick. She would tuck the paper napkin under her sister's chin, and hand her the goody. "There, Sissy," she would say, "Enjoy yourself." Many a woman would feel tears rise to her eyes, at the gentleness of the tone.

One week, the Good Feelings man was sick, with a rash all over his body, induced by the frequent dippings in alcohol. The management distributed free ice-cream, but it was not the same, and the children's disappointment began to tell on the mothers. They would watch sadly as, at three thirty, their little ones came to the curb and cocked their heads hopefully, and a few of them remarked that the management might, just once, admit one of the strange wagons that roamed the highways. The only one who did not seem particularly disturbed was Sissy. She ate the free ice-cream with relish, dribbling some of it onto her chin, and Mrs. Gliddon wiped it off, sighing, "She doesn't even know —" Smacking her lips, Sissy would squirm closer to her mother's legs, and smile contentedly.

Then, one afternoon, the woman heard music coming up the

slope from the Good Feelings testing station. It was a strange tune, high and thin, and unlike any other they had heard. They looked at one another, puzzled, and walked over to the curb, peering around the bend. Within a few moments, a wagon came in sight, and the women laughed aloud in satisfaction. It was the Good Feelings wagon, but so changed and bedecked that the children would be doubly hilarious at its return. Mr. Spinny had outdone himself.

The wagon was drawn by a white horse, which pranced and tossed its head like a circus pony. All along the horse's mane were brilliantly colored crepe paper flowers, which rustled in the breeze, and along its golden saddle were dozens of tiny bells which jingled musically. Above the wagon was stretched a crimson canopy, from the fringes of which hung more bells, and the wagon itself was decorated with gleaming, gaudy heiroglyphics. As it came closer, the women exclaimed with astonishment at the change in the Good Feelings man. Before his illness, he had been rather thin, and, while always kindly, somewhat grave. Now, however, he had filled out in every direction, swelled his cheeks, his stomach, presenting an aspect of rosy jollity. He was playing a flute, and his ruddy cheeks were so puffed that his eyes appeared in tiny slits, which sparkled mischievously. Instead of the starched white uniform, he was attired in a red vest, yellow knickerbockers, and a pointed purple cap, from whose peak dangled still more bells. The flute glinted in the sunlight, sending off rays which made the women blink.

Turning to rest their eyes, they saw a few of the children straggle over to the curb, gazing curiously down the slope. In the forefront was Leona, her mouth half open, her eyes rapt. As the wagon drew closer, she turned and shouted something, and the other children came running, three and four at a time. The Good Feelings wagon, jingling and flashing in the sun, came to a stop where the children had gathered, and the man flung his flute into the air, pirouetted, and caught it neatly. With joyful shrieks, the children began to clamber up the sides of the wagon, but the Good Feelings man raised his arms, and they fell back. When they were all quiet, he began to sing, in a strange tongue. The mothers looked at one another in some surprise, since Mr. Spinny had expressed himself often on the inadvisability of confronting the children with anything beyond their understanding. Oddly enough, however, the children seemed to know what the man was singing about. They nodded their heads with comprehension, and chattered excitedly. After a few minutes, the

man stopped, and bowed deeply to Leona, who, without hesitation, took up the tune in a voice so high and sweet that it cut through the air like a ribbon. Then, flicking the reins so that the pony reared and tossed its gaily flowered mane, the Good Feelings man raised the flute to his lips and played again that first, eerie tune. The wagon began to move slowly, and the children flocked after it, in a great throng. Watching, the women remarked that they had never seemed so many. They came from behind every tree and shrub to join the swelling stream, and made a breath-taking sight. Their voices rang like precious metal, and their hair, their clothing, took on an added brilliance. When the wagon had attained the top of the hill, the Good Feelings man held out his hand to Leona, who leapt up lightly beside him, and handed her the flute, which she brandished above the children like a wand, before she began to play. Poised on tiptoe, caught in the sun, she was purest glittering gold. Then, the gate swung open, the wagon dipped below the hill, and, with a great shout, the children streamed after it.

For a moment, the women were alarmed. A few of them began to run up the slope, but the others, more quickly rational, pulled them back. It was obvious, they argued, that this was all a treat arranged by Mr. Spinny. The wagon had come up from the testing station, and, conclusively, the bell at the gate had set up no warning clangor. It would be a shame for them to spoil the celebration with stupid anxiety. Mr. Spinny himself, no doubt, awaited, at the bottom of the hill. After a few minutes discussion, they dispatched one woman, securing a promise that she would reconnoiter silently, without making her presence known to the children.

While they waited, the mothers chatted happily, congratulating themselves anew on living in a place which compensated the children so lavishly for any disappointment, and reproaching themselves for their earlier implied criticism of Mr. Spinny. When they noticed that the children's voices could no longer be heard, that the project was, in fact, unusually still, they looked toward the top of the hill, shading their eyes with their hands. The woman who had gone ahead was standing with her back to them. As they gazed, she turned, and beckoned excitedly. Guessing that the children must be displayed in some panorama too charming to resist, they trailed up the slope, laughing softly, and motioning one another to be still.

When they were about two thirds of the way up, they caught sight of Mr. Spinny, running across the lawns flapping his arms frantically, and shouting in a

squeaky, frightened voice. At the same moment, the woman at the top slammed the white gate, and there was a burst of jangling sound, and silence. Suddenly, the women understood. They began to run, pushing one another aside and panting hoarsely. Some of them were knocked down, and scrambled to their feet again, their hair full of dust, and their dresses torn. They reached the top in little clusters. As each cluster attained the summit, it stood motionless, looking down the other side, and those behind redoubled their speed, not knowing what horror awaited them. Mrs. Gliddon was last, having fallen twice. She had a bruise on her forehead, and in one hand she still clutched, senselessly, a few blades of grass.

The women stood, transfixed. The hill dipped down into the woods, and there was no sign of the children or of the Good Feelings wagon. No echo of a voice or glint of hair came back to them. Mr. Spinny came gasping up, still squeaking unintelligibly, and they turned on him like angry lions, demanding to know why he had admitted a Good Feelings man who would lead the children off into the woods. Mr. Spinny caught his breath and said that he had done no such thing, that the Good Feelings man was at that very moment home in his bed, driven out of his head by an itching, scabrous rash, and that someone had been tampering with the wiring. Then, the women screamed, all at once, and ran, stumbling, down the steep hill and into the woods, leaving Mr. Spinny to turn and walk off alone, stiff shouldered and jerky.

It was almost dark when the women came back. They marched dumbly out of the woods and up the far side of the hill, their eyes fixed straight ahead. At the top, they halted, and looked down on Hamlin. In the half-light, the roses were all grey. Someone had turned on the organ, and the wiring had gone wrong, so that, instead of playing in the bedrooms, the music, which was from the Messiah, reverberated through the streets and echoed from one house to the other. A little way down the slope, to one side, lay a child's shoe, a white pump with an ankle strap. The woman who was first picked it up and carried it dangling from her wrist, like a bracelet. The others followed her down the drive walking two by two, like convicts. When they had all gone into their houses and closed the doors, someone must have phoned in about the organ, because the music stopped and everything was still.

After dark, a door opened, and Mrs. Gliddon crept out. She walked stealthily around the side of the house, humped over, snapping her fingers and hissing softly, like someone calling a cat. Sissy

crawled out from under a pile of leaves, and stood up. The scar along her cheek was vivid in the moonlight. Her bad eye was turned all the way in, and her throat was knotted with the effort to speak.

"S-sh," said Mrs. Gliddon, laying her finger along her lips.

She held out her hand for Sissy to take.

Sissy strained. Her mouth opened.

"Pretty," said Sissy, hoarsely. "Pretty."

She took Mrs. Gliddon's hand and went with her peaceably, back into the house.