

DECLINE AND FALL OF THE MAGNET

1938 - 1940

by

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The last few years of the Magnet's life have to a large extent been neglected by many collectors. It is true that the delightful style of writing that epitomised the Golden Age had long since departed, but even so the style of the salmon-covered days was always competent and could at times be exceptionally pleasing. A more cogent reason for this neglect is probably the plots of the period. They tended to be new versions of old themes, and later versions usually suffered by the comparison so naturally evoked.

Many writers have followed the same sort of development as Shakespeare, and Charles Hamilton was no exception. The red Magnets could be compared with "The Comedy of Errors", "The Taming of the Shrew", and "Love's Labours Lost", all of which exhibited a fresh and youthful approach to life. Even the sombre stories had romantic overtones, like "Romeo and Juliet". With the 'twenties came the more confident approach, the more well-knit plot, and the discarding of irrelevancies. To continue the comparison, the Bunter Court series would form a "Midsummer Night's Dream", the Loder captaincy series a "Julius Caesar", and the Rebel series a "Hamlet". Finally, just as Shakespeare ended on a note of mellow tranquillity with "The Tempest", so Charles Hamilton in the last years of the Magnet brought his ship home safe to calm harbour.

It should not be supposed, of course, that any claim is being made that Charles Hamilton is another Shakespeare.

The sort of comparison made above could be applied to any prolific writer of merit. Nevertheless, just as critics admire "The Tempest" but refuse to allow it pride of place over the great comedies and tragedies of the Middle Period, so do many collectors admire the salmon-covered period of the Magnet but refuse to concede it superiority over the stories written around 1930. At all events, let us now examine the "Tempest" era of the Magnet, and see what virtues and blemishes it possesses.

1938 - Triumph and Tragedy

Some of the first day of term scenes on the railway station were often worked most ingeniously into the plot of the Magnet story, and No. 1560 entitled "Bunter's Big Blunder" was no exception to this rule. Bunter's blunder was his belief that it was Mr. Quelch who had snowballed Dr. Locke. It need hardly be added that this egregious belief was mistaken.

It is idle to profess to like Greyfriars if you do not like Billy Bunter: you might just as well claim that "Hamlet" would be improved if the Prince of Denmark were omitted from the cast. Most Magnet readers, however, have always admired the Carter series in Nos. 1561-1572, in which Bunter played so prominent a part. Arthur Carter was a distant relative who had offended his uncle Joseph, and Bunter was likely to become the new heir if Mr. Quelch gave him a satisfactory report. The plot of the series did not develop at all in the manner that plots of Greyfriars stories had done in the Golden Age: each number was simply an account of how Carter tried to disgrace Bunter. Nevertheless, although the plot was repetitive, the style of writing was superb. A polished, scintillating humour pervaded most of the series, and much of this humour was entirely novel and most of the situations were extremely well-contrived. For these reasons the Carter series stands out as one of the best of the latter-day Magnet stories. In a way it was like

the echo of the glories of yester-year. Incidentally, although Carter was expelled, Bunter never seemed to inherit the favour or the fortune of uncle Joseph. According to a Bunter book it seems that after the war, at least, uncle Joseph's means were very moderate indeed.

The magic of the Greyfriars stories lay mainly in the tales with a school setting, though some of the English holiday series ran them very close. Foreign holidays in strange parts could not rely on nostalgia to hold the reader's interest: such stories had to stand or fall on their own merits. There were only four great foreign holiday series in the Magnet: the Sahara series of 1924, the India series of 1926, the South Seas series of 1927, and the China series of 1930. Each of these series was superior to all earlier ones, and the success of each lay in the convincing manner in which Charles Hamilton portrayed a scene he had never witnessed himself. These successful series were not Greyfriars stories at all in the strict sense of the term: they were really astonishingly good adventure stories into which the Greyfriars juniors seemed to have strayed by accident. The Texas series in Magnets 1573-1582 was, unfortunately, not a good series by any sort of yardstick. If the Carter series was a triumph, the Texas series was a tragedy.

The Texas series was really two successive stories. The first one dealt with Barney Stone, the crooked manager of Mr. Vernon-Smith's ranch, and the second one introduced the Rio Kid, but to those who remembered the original series in the Popular he was but a pale ghost of his former self. The scene was set in Packsaddle, itself taken from yet another set of stories. Perhaps it was the curious admixture of so many different characters that caused the Texas series to jar somewhat, but there is no doubt that the spectacle of Vernon-Smith handling a gun like a seasoned campaigner was a little too incredible to ring true. When Jimmy Silver and Co. had gone out west in the previous decade they had not been made to behave as anything but

schoolboys. Vernon-Smith in the Texas series was too good or too bad - to be believable. Despite this it would not be fair to the Texas series to leave it without paying tribute to the power of some of its descriptive passages, which were of a type now becoming rare in the Magnet.

The summer term was extremely short in 1938, since deep inroads were made into it at both ends by excessively long holiday series. Though it was short, it was quite entertaining, and began with two amusing single stories, which were both new versions of an old theme. No. 1583 entitled "Bunter the Hypnotist" related how Coker was deceived into thinking Bunter possessed that occult power, while No. 1583, "Walker on the Warpath", featured Tom Brown by way of a change.

The remainder of the term was occupied by four stories rather loosely linked but curiously satisfying in that there was a great deal of referring back to past incidents. Nos. 1585 and 1586 dealt with a rag on Loder by Ponsonby and Co., the blame for which fell on the Famous Five. The title of No. 1587, "Punishing Ponsonby", spoke for itself, while No. 1588 was an odd collection of unrelated incidents, one of which was a sequel to the earlier tales. On the whole, these stories were well above average.

1938 was unique in that there were two foreign holiday series in one year. Magnets 1589-1598 dealt with a trip to the South Seas to enable Lord Mauleverer to find his missing cousin Brian. Brian had been the villain of the piece in No. 776, many years ago, and this perhaps explains why the juniors did not recognise him when they saw him in the South Seas. There was plenty of action and inventive imagination in this story, which was one of the best holiday series of later times. Most collectors probably prefer the 1922 Congo series for reading about Bunter as head of a cannibal tribe, and the 1927 South Seas series was a much superior tale. Nevertheless there is plenty of good reading in this 1938 series, and, as with the Texas series, the chance was not missed to introduce a character from the Modern Boy - in this case, King of the Islands.

The new term did not commence until October, and so it was not surprising that the Tracy series in Nos. 1599-1608 occupied all that was left of the autumn term. The Tracy series was equally as good as the Carter series earlier in the year, and was also far less repetitive: the plot developed with some pleasing twists and turns that brought to mind some of the plots of the Golden Age. Gilbert Tracy was, like Angelo Lee in the Gem, a boy who wanted to leave school. Mr. Quelch was equally determined that he should not leave school, and there were many novel situations arising before the plot was finally resolved in a typically Hamiltonian manner.

It would be interesting to know exactly why Charles Hamilton resuscitated the character of Soames for the Christmas series in Nos. 1609-1612. Soames had been a striking success in the late 'twenties, but he had not been heard of since, and there could be few Magnet readers in 1938 who remembered his earlier appearances. Soames was now but a faint shadow of his former self, and the series about the message in Greek which was scratched on a silver cigarette case was not one of the major Christmas series in the Magnet.

1939 - Twilight

The new term commenced with an agreeable pair of stories in Nos. 1613 and 1614 about a blackmailer named Squidge who used his talents when he found juniors out of bounds. A postscript appeared in No. 1617, which was really intended to follow immediately, but for some reason the publication of this story was delayed.

"How about a series featuring an Old Boy with a grievance?" is what the editor might well have said when the Crocker series was mooted. Such a slender theme could not, of course, have sustained a whole series, but there was more than met the eye at first glance in this series, which ran in Nos. 1615, 1616, and 1618-1625. Jack Drake was brought back to solve the mystery in the

guise of a new Removite called James Duck, and Mr. Quelch's continual loss of faith in him which was always followed by a renewal of confidence tended at times to grow a little wearisome in its repetitiveness. The identity of the Greyfriars prowler was obvious, and so the series was perhaps unduly prolonged, but nevertheless it was always bright and entertaining, and no one could have had any substantial objection to it.

In the late 'twenties and early 'thirties there was a certain indefinable charm about Vernon-Smith that made him quite an attractive character, no matter how badly he behaved. As time passed, however, he became hard and rather callous. In 1938 he certainly showed up very badly, especially in the Blackrock Island series in Nos. 1626-1629, in which he invited Bunter and the Famous Five to spend the Easter holidays on an island off the North Devon coast. Once they were stranded there they found that a small cottage was the only habitable dwelling on the island.

"Fool's Luck" in No. 1630 was by way of comic relief, and related how Coker was caned, and how he tried to put paid to Prout in return. This was followed by the Bertie Vernon series in Magnets 1631-1642 which featured Vernon-Smith at his very worst again, this time when confronted with his identical cousin.

The idea of building a series around the double of one of the famous established characters was an old one. The Wally Bunter and Stacey series in the Magnet were both constructed on these lines, though the old Clavering series in the Gem was the nearest comparison, in that Tom Merry was to have been defrauded of his fortune there, just as the Bounder was here, though the means to be employed were somewhat different. Vernon-Smith was so detestable throughout the Bertie Vernon series that the reader's sympathy was strangely divided. Nevertheless it must be admitted that the plot was finely wrought - indeed, it was by far and away the best story of the year.

Odd things were happening to the Magnet at this time. With No. 1639 the chapter numbers were omitted, leaving just titles. This was only a small thing, but it represented a break with the tradition of 31 years. The reason for this became clear in No. 1643, when a large style of print was adopted. The stories then gradually grew shorter, a fact which was thus not so readily apparent. Although these were only minor matters, they were disturbing to the knowledgeable reader. A chill wind was beginning to blow from the East.

It is sad to have to say that the Water Lily series in Nos. 1643-1650 is over-rated. It must be freely admitted that it represents the high-water mark in holiday series in the final period of the Magnet. There was something very nostalgic and evocative in this last pre-war holiday which constituted the final glimpse of a vanished world, but the series does not really qualify for all the praise it has been given. The journey up-river from Kingston could have been the Gem series of 1923 all over again, and other parts could have been the 1929 Thames holiday series in the Magnet all over again - but, alas, they were not. Good as the Water Lily series was it could not aspire to the glories that were gone. Shifty Spooner was too persistent a pursuer and Ponsonby was far too ubiquitous: as a result the inconsequential charm of the older stories was discarded in favour of a more tightly woven plot that could at times seem more than a little repetitious. The Water Lily series was very competently written, like all the post-war Bunter books, but it lacked the divine spark which had glowed so brightly a decade previously. Good but not outstanding is perhaps the fairest judgment that could be passed.

The stories of the autumn term were a sparkling selection of tales, nearly all of them being written in Charles Hamilton's best humorous vein. It was Vernon-Smith who was "Condemned without Evidence" in No. 1651, as a result of certain incidents arising on the first day of term. The following week Billy Bunter, with the help of Wibley in

disguise, almost managed to convince Mr. Quelch that "Grunter of Greyhurst" was Bunter's double, at whose door all misdeeds could be laid. Billy Bunter was "The Bounder's Dupe" in No. 1653, a story of ventriloquism, while Bunter was also "The Black Prince of Greyfriars" in No. 1654, in which he assumed a temporary disguise in order to escape a Head's flogging. The last of the run of single stories was "The Tuck Hoarder" in No. 1655. Reference had been made to gas-masks and A.R.P. before, but this issue dated 4.11.39. was the first one to mention the war. It was Fisher T. Fish who was hoarding food - but it did not last long once Bunter had chanced upon it.

Coker was destined to feature prominently once more in the Magnet - in Nos. 1656-1658, in which he was wrongly suspected and expelled. How he took a job as Uncle Clegg's errand boy and haunted the school until the truth came to light was told in a most amusing manner. The last single story in the Magnet was No. 1659 entitled "Billy Bunter's Bargain", which was Lord Mauleverer's bicycle repainted by a thief and sold to Bunter on credit.

No voice is ever raised to contradict the universal assertion that the Lamb series in Nos. 1660-1675 was too long. This condemnation is indeed well-founded, for apart from the Wally Bunter series no Magnet story had lasted so long. Yet the part of the series which appeared in 1939 was very lively, varied, and interesting. The kidnapping of Mr. Quelch, and the Wharton Lodge Christmas with its concomitant Moat House mystery all represented some of the best of Charles Hamilton's latter day writings. The year ended on a most promising note with Bunter sharing Mr. Quelch's incarceration.

1940 - Night Must Fall

With the New Year it became apparent that the Lamb series was far too long. Vernon-Smith's feud with the new master was interesting enough, but Ferrers Locke's continued series of failures became just a little too patent a

device for spinning out the story. On balance, therefore, the Lamb series was not a success, but it had some very entertaining moments.

The last holiday series was spent at Eastcliff Lodge in Nos. 1676-1682. Sir William Bird, Loder's uncle, was on Secret Service work, and Wibley was engaged to impersonate him and so give the impression that Sir William was still in England when in fact he was on the continent. Soames made yet another appearance, this time in the guise of a patriot, though he did not disdain to feather his own nest. The war-time background of food-shortage, air-raids, and petty restrictions - to say nothing of an advance peep of the Battle of Britain - makes rather odd reading at this date, but the series was well-written and up to average.

With the justly celebrated "Shadow of the Sack" in No. 1683 the Magnet ended its remarkable career. This story was the first of a series in which Wharton was suspected of another's misdeeds, and it promised very highly indeed, with Mr. Quelch determined to uphold Wharton despite all the evidence against him: "There was an occasion, once, when I lost my trust in you, partly owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding, partly to your stubborn temper. This misunderstanding was cleared up, and I resolved never to be misled in the same way again." This might well have been one of the great Magnet series: we shall never know for certain now, but at any rate we can feel thankful that the Magnet ended with a bang and not a whimper.

The Ending of the Magnet

The titles of four subsequent stories were to have been as follows:-

- 1684 "The Battle of the Beaks"
- 1685 "Bandy Bunter"
- 1686 "What Happened to Hacker"
- 1687 "The Hidden Hand"

and there were at least two more stories in hand, which were not connected with the series.

Why the Magnet ceased publication in such an abrupt manner is one of those mysteries the explanation of which can, at this stage, only be guessed at. The paper shortage which was so suddenly precipitated by Hitler's invasion of Norway was undoubtedly a very cogent factor, but there seems to have been no other Amalgamated Press publication which stopped in so curious a manner, in the middle of a series, without warning, still advertising next week's issue, and of course without advising readers to buy some similar paper like the Triumph. It seems certain that the paper shortage was not solely responsible for the permanent eclipse of what had once been so brilliant a star in the constellation.

Under different circumstances it seems possible that the Magnet might have carried on during the war (perhaps appearing fortnightly, like some other boys' papers), and have continued for some time thereafter. This possibility raises many interesting questions. For instance, for how long would Charles Hamilton have been able to write regularly? Even the most active septuagenarian might tire of weekly writings of such a length. Again, how many people would have turned to the Old Boys' Books Clubs if the Amalgamated Press had continued to publish the Magnet or the Schoolboys' Own Library? One eminent dealer has stated that 75% of his customers want only Magnets. This urge to collect back numbers would never have gained any momentum at all unless current stories had become non-existent. It is somewhat paradoxical to reflect that the lamentable demise of the Magnet really inaugurated today's country-wide fellowship of collectors.

Conclusion

I have often been asked to state the order of merit in which I would place the various periods of the Magnet. I am accordingly listing them beneath, adhering to the dates selected for the series of reviews written for the C.D. Annual Since I began in 1953. By the side of each period I

have listed briefly the quality for which it is most noted:-

- 1930-1934 for the incomparably fine writing.
- 1922-1929 for the remarkable development in characterisation.
- 1938-1940 for extremely well-knit plots.
- 1935-1937 for general competence.
- 1908-1915 for inconsequential charm and freshness.
- 1915-1922 for development of writing series.

The Magnet is undoubtedly the most famous of all boys' papers. Others may have had a wider circulation or a longer life, but none succeeded so triumphantly in etching such an indelible impression on the minds of its readers. It says much for its consistent appeal that the Greyfriars story always occupied the major part of the paper: no serials or other counter-attractions (the sure signs of a flagging circulation) were ever allowed to impinge upon what was always the main, if not the whole, attraction of the paper.

Because the Magnet was so consistent, its sudden end was all the more of a blow to readers and author alike. In 1943 Charles Hamilton stated, in a letter to me, that "perhaps, after so long a run, it was time for Harry Wharton & Co. to make their final bow and retire from the scene." This was no doubt the philosophical view to take and in those dark days of war the old reader might well have recalled the plaint of Tennyson:-

"All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past"