

1930 - 1934

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE MAGNET

by

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The Magnet enjoyed a long and variegated career, and each phase through which it passed had something to commend it. There can be no doubt, however, that the period from 1930 - 1934 was both unsurpassed and unsurpassable, and set a standard that the Gem, for all its remarkably fine stories of the early days and its high-lights of the 'twenties, never really equalled. This period, which may be called the Golden Age of the Magnet, came about as the result of a period of sustained writing of Greyfriars stories that fortunately co-incided with the author's attainment of his highest powers.

Charles Hamilton stated in 1943: "Yes, I agree with you that the Magnet was at its best from 1930 or 1931 on. I think it was twice as good after that date as it had ever been earlier. This is rather odd, too, for about that time I had to give up my travels, owing to an accident to my eyesight, which barred me off from many things. Up to that time I had been accustomed to pottering about in many countries, ever since I began to write in the far off year 1890." Perhaps, after all, it was no co-incidence that his writings improved so markedly after an accident to his eyesight that must have eliminated most distractions from his work. At any rate, no matter what the cause, the result was plain: the Magnet had definitely improved.

The improvement in the Magnet was, of course, a gradual process, not a sudden phenomenon. From 1925 - 1927 the stories had been well told, but were rather bare in outline, having no frills at all. In 1928 the style

broadened and the humour mellowed, whilst in 1929 the smile had changed to an almost audible chuckle: the author was inviting the reader not just to read on and see what happened but to share some private jokes with him on the way. In short, it was apparent in 1929 that the zenith had been reached, and the series in that year about Methuselah the motor tricycle is the most charming summer holiday series ever to have appeared in the Magnet. Nonetheless, the year 1929 proved to be only a curtain raiser to the magnificent events about to be staged in the next decade.

1930 - The Food of the Gods

Appropriately enough, the Courtfield Cracksman series in Magnets 1138 - 1151 actually started in the beginning of December 1929, as if to emphasise the fact that there was no clear cut distinction in Magnet styles from one year to another. The mystery of the cracksman's identity was really no mystery at all, though there were two odd newcomers instead of the usual one, and the series began in a very roundabout manner with a story that might almost be regarded as complete in itself. What really matters of course is not the story but the way it is told, and there is not a single dull page in the whole series, which is sheer delight from beginning to end.

The 1929 Christmas at Wharton Lodge was the happiest Yuletide of all, with Bunter the usual unwanted guest, but all the incidents were unique and bearing the stamp of genuine novelty - Bunter trying to borrow from the butler, Bunter yawning aloud when Colonel Wharton was telling Dr. Locke a thrilling ghost story, Bunter discussing Christmas presents with the Famous Five - each and every incident is absolutely fascinating.

Back to Greyfriars for the Spring Term in 1930, and Mr. Quelch was missing "(I hear that poor old Queichy's dead - run over by a motor car in the hols", said Bunter. "Awful, aint it? I say, have you fellows got any toffee?")

Not only was there a new form master named Steele but a permanent innovation was the introduction of blazers in place of the old Eton jackets. As the term wore on, Vernon-Smith came into prominence in a feud with the new master, whom he suspected of being the Courtfield Cracksman. Finally, just before the Cracksman was arrested, Bunter stumbled upon some awkward knowledge, and was sent home. He returned to Greyfriars without permission, and on the railway platform at Courtfield he met Mr. Quelch who was also returning. The two chapters in No. 1150 describing the meeting of master and pupil are perhaps unequalled for the brilliant exposition of Mr. Quelch's character and for the tragically funny way in which he misinterpreted Bunter's gladness to see him return. The last number of the series saw Bunter ensconced at Greyfriars as a stow-away, unaware that he now had permission to return. This final story is typical of the new era which this series introduced, the era of fascinating little side-plots and irrelevancies which are like the decorations on a cake, at once delightful and unnecessary.

The Courtfield Cracksman series was followed by two sub stories, after which came a pair in Nos. 1154-55 featuring Coker's gallant attempt to get a place in the first eleven by getting Potter and Greene stranded at Canterbury en route for Rookwood. As he stated, he did it with the best of motives, but there was quite a rift in the lute until Aunt Judy's next hamper arrived. The next issue, No. 1156, bore the popular title "Who Hacked Hacker?" and revolved around a beautiful cake of Hobson's which had been confiscated.

Nos. 1157-58 related the mystery of a certain silver box which contained Sir Hilton Popper's missing moonstone. The second Magnet, incidentally, represented the whole of the Easter holiday, and No. 1159 saw the juniors back at Greyfriars without the usual scenes at the railway station. No. 1159 was entitled "Bunter, the Prize Hunter", and described how he attempted to win the form Latin

prize in order to earn the fiver his uncle had promised. Bunter's entry consisted of a copy of what he thought was a composition of Linley's, but it turned out to be a famous Ode by Horace. As Mr. Quelch said, "You must have imagined that your form master's ignorance was even more abysmal than your own!" Another amusing single story appeared in No. 1160. Bunter had left Greyfriars somewhat hastily (owing to a misunderstanding which had resulted in Mr. Quelch receiving the contents of an ink bottle in his face) and was offered a job at a circus. Bunter was highly elated with his prospects until he discovered he was booked to appear with the Living Skeleton and the Bearded Lady in a turn called "The Wild Weird Freaks".

Fisher T. Fish was not, perhaps, one of the more attractive members of the Greyfriars Remove, but the series in Nos. 1161-65 was certainly very readable and probably constituted the most amusing sequence of stories ever written around the American junior. His father had succeeded in cornering Pork in the United States and this sudden increase in fortune resulted in Fishy becoming the target for a gang of kidnapers. Although practically every one of Fish's unpleasant characteristics was well displayed in this series, it was so well written that the story was not spoilt by the close attention which had to be paid to the American junior.

Pop o' the Circus, Sir Hilton's nephew who wished to leave Greyfriars and return to the circus, occupied Magnets 1166-1168 in an agreeable though not outstanding manner. Faint praise will not be sufficient, however, for the magnificent barring-out series in Nos 1169-1174 which undoubtedly formed the best one of its type which Charles Hamilton ever wrote. The detailed theme was not new - it had been used before both at Greyfriars and Rookwood - and the first story was marred by the excision of two or three chapters to make room for extra advertisements (the title picture of Magnet 1169 relates to an omitted incident) but these are, after all, only minor matters. The whole series was written with such splendid convic-

tion that it represented a tour de force. Particularly compelling were the exchanges between Mr. Brander, the new headmaster, and Mr. Quelch whom he eventually dismissed, only to find the Remove master invoked the statutes of the school which allowed a dismissed master of long standing to remain at the school until the governors had heard his appeal. It need not be added that all came right in the end, and Dr. Locke returned.

The China series in Nos. 1175-85 was not only the greatest of all the foreign travel series but also has many points of interest in it for collectors. The story revolved around the efforts of a certain Chinese tong first to kidnap and later to murder Wun Lung, who, for the first time in the history of the Magnet, changed from a quaint oddity into a living character of flesh and blood. Like the series itself, the nearer we progressed towards the East the more realistic was the presentation. Some of the early incidents in England (like the planes which machine-gunned Wharton Lodge) were too bizarre to be really exciting, but from the moment the juniors set foot in Singapore the series was infused with a new life, and every number was superb. It is interesting to note, too, that some of the author's comments on the state of China still retain their significance despite the upheavals which have taken place in the quarter century since the series was written. There can be no doubt that the story of the escape from the clutches of the mandarin Tang Wang must have remained vividly in the minds of the readers of the time.

The transition from China to Greyfriars was cleverly effected in a single number in No. 1186 which related an incident which occurred on the voyage home: this story acted as a useful buffer between the high drama of the China series and the high comedy of Nos. 1187-88. These two stories were an absolutely delightful pair, starring Mr. Prout as the victim of circumstances: he became suspected of entering into drunken brawls, and in one superb sequence Mr. Capper went to speak to him "as a friend", urging him to tell the truth instead of making lame excuses. Mr. Prout was of course vindicated in the

end, but it was impossible not to feel sorry for him in his predicament - which was certainly a change from the usual tolerant amusement with which he was generally regarded.

Passing hastily over the substitute story in No. 1189, we come to No. 1190 which seems almost like something from the pages of a Blue Gem: it dealt with a feud between the Remove and the Fifth, and explained how Harry Wharton nearly lost the captaincy of the form because of the initial lack of success that attended his efforts to put Blundell & Co. in their place. The year ended in grand style with the Cavandale Abbey series in Nos. 1191-94: this commenced in an unusually inconsequential and interesting manner, and went on to comprise one of the best Magnet Christmases. The identity of the criminal was not perhaps a very great mystery, but it took Ferrers Locke quite a long time to work out all the details, and (more important) the series was extremely well written.

1931 - Ambrosia Still

The main feature of the Spring Term was the series in Nos 1195-1203 about Tatters the Tinker who surprisingly appeared at Greyfriars as Cecil Cholmondeley ("Chumley for Short" as one of the numbers was entitled). Cholmondeley was the victim of a plot by his cousin Rackstraw - a good roguish name, as Gem readers will remember. First Carne and then Ponsonby were used by Rackstraw in attempts to get the tinker expelled, but all the plotting came to naught. Cholmondeley eventually left at the end of a readable though not outstanding series.

A miscellaneous selection followed. "The Champion Chump" in No. 1204 was of course Coker: no-one else could have contrived to lock the Head in the punishment room by mistake. "A Schoolboy's Sacrifice" the following week featured Redwing and Vernon-Smith, but the story seemed rather compressed and the theme would have repaid a longer treatment in a series. "Billy Bunter's Bunk" in

No. 1206 was based on the classic fable of the boy who cried "Wolf". He made an attempt to obtain a holiday on the pretext that a parent was ill, and when illness really came he was not believed. The term was rounded off with a pair of stories in Nos. 1207-08, featuring an American swindler who was being pursued by one of his victims. The tale ended with a strange and dramatic climax in a mill near Wharton Lodge.

The highlight of 1931 was undoubtedly the Lancaster series in Nos 1209 - 1219. Although the theme had been used many years previously for the Talbot series in the Gem, there is no doubt that the Magnet version of this theme was superb. Dick Lancaster was a young man of Sixth Form age, strikingly handsome, an excellent cricketer, well mannered and winning golden opinions on all sides. He was unfortunately also a cracksman of remarkable ability, known as the Wizard. Sir Hilton Popper (who was in the toils of a money-lender) was forced to sponsor the boy for Greyfriars, and the stage was thus brilliantly set for the struggle that was to ensue between the boy's old life and the influence of his new associates. He was suspected in turn by Coker, Loder, and Wharton, and each one was dealt with in a different manner. This series was more credible than the Talbot series in that the schoolboy cracksman was aged eighteen instead of sixteen, and the author sensibly allowed Lancaster to disappear at the end of the series instead of keeping him on at the school (though Talbot would probably also have disappeared from St. Jim's had the readers been less vociferous: it was a pity that he did not leave in the same manner as Lancaster). The essential attraction of the Lancaster series was the fact the story centred round the senior school for a change: although the Removites were introduced quite naturally into every number, the general atmosphere of the series was on an appreciably higher level than usual. This was unquestionably one of the finest series to appear within the pages of the Magnet.

The Lancaster series was followed by "Speedway Coker" in No. 1220, a story which is famous for another reason -

it was the last substitute story to appear in the Magnet. Then came a number of tales of good average quality: "Billy Bunter's Bargain" in No. 1221 consisted in his borrowing money from Price in return for keeping quiet about an incriminating photograph; Nos. 1222 and 1223 related how Vernon-Smith was expelled - and reinstated; and another pair of stories in Nos. 1224 and 1225 dealt with Ponsonby's discovery of the secret passage that led from the hollow Friar's Oak to the Remove box-room, and the entertaining events which followed from this discovery. This miscellaneous selection was concluded with two single numbers - "Billy Bunter's Hat Trick" in No. 1226 (the trick being to hide a banknote of Mr. Quelch's in his Sunday topper) and "A Boy with a Bad Name" which dealt with the way in which Vernon-Smith succeeded in putting Wharton in a false position and so caused a rift in the lute.

The summer holiday series in 1931 was both long and late, running from No. 1228 to 1236 i.e. from August 29th to October 24th. Although the Kenya series was very readable and the last few numbers relating how the juniors were sold into slavery were exciting, it was not one of the really great foreign travel series, and there can be no doubt that the readers echoed Bob Cherry's sentiments when he declared: "Foreign parts are all very well for a trip, you men! I'm not sorry we went to Africa. But for a place to live in, you can't beat jolly old England!"

Back to Greyfriars again in No. 1237 found Mr. Prout rather dissatisfied with old England, since he was being persecuted by an Old Boy who came back to the school to cane the Fifth Form master. It was not an outstanding story, but it was notable for a specially amusing scene in which Capper went to Prout to sympathise with him. After the customary Guy Fawkes Day story in No. 1238, there came a pair of stories dealing with a new boy named Carlow to whom Nugent took an unreasoning dislike - a very readable series which nevertheless did not quite efface memories of a similar series in the Gem six years previously. "Coker's Football Fever" in No. 1241 speaks for itself, but not so "The Bounder's Blunder" the following

week which described how he mistakenly suspected the French master of stealing his five pound note. Another serious story was No. 1243 entitled "A Brother's Sacrifice" in which Frank Nugent took on himself the burden of his minor's troubles.

The Christmas series at Mauleverer Towers in Nos. 1244-46 was another delightful set of stories to commemorate the season of goodwill. Bunter excelled himself in his attempts to join the party without an invitation, and the mystery of the Towers provided a touch of seasonable excitement which all in all must have left every reader feeling more than satisfied.

1932 - Harry Wharton's Year

The remarkable point about the Flip series in Nos. 1247-1254 was the manner in which this new Second Form boy looked up to Bunter, whom he regarded as the epitome of courage, generosity, and wisdom. Bunter met Flip near Mauleverer Towers and the waif rendered him a service. Bunter in his turn persuaded Mauleverer to pay Flip's fees at Greyfriars, and the plot took another twist when Flip recognised a temporary Remove master, Mr. Lagden, as a crook from his old haunts. This series was not perhaps in the top rank, but it was a crisp and entertaining, and - unlike some later series in the Magnet - it never outstayed its welcome.

Harry Wharton played a big part in the year 1932 and was indeed featured more prominently than at any other time, either before or since. The first sequence of stories described his feud with Vernon-Smith, but it was rather an intermittent tale and really constituted several series in one.

The first series in Nos. 1255 - 59 was quite outstanding, and dealt with the manner in which Harry mistakenly thought his uncle had come to look on him as a burden. It transpired that the fortune of which not even da Costa and Captain Marker had been able to deprive him in 1928 had later been lost in a Bombay bank smash. In addition,

Colonel Wharton was feeling the pinch of taxation: the car had been sold, the chauffeur dismissed, Wharton Lodge was shut up over Christmas, and the Colonel walked from Courtfield to Greyfriars to save money. As the Colonel remarked, "Taxation has been carried to such lengths that it is practically killing the goose that lays the golden eggs." (One can only guess what he would have said twenty years later!) Against this background, it is not surprising that Wharton should later believe evidence that seemed to suggest his uncle thought him a burden.

This series shewed clearly one of Charles Hamilton's greatest gifts - the power to portray a convincing argument between two people, neither of whom was wholly in the right. Wharton determined to win a Founder's scholarship and maintain himself without help from his uncle. Bob Cherry auctioned his bike for him; Vernon-Smith generously bid more than it was worth, and then was incensed when Wharton threw the money in his face. This was the beginning of the feud, and the Bounder soon became captain of the form. Through Bunter's intervention Wharton's misunderstanding with his uncle was cleared up, and Bunter was for once a welcome guest at Wharton Lodge at Easter. But the feud with Vernon-Smith was not to be settled so easily.

Nos. 1260 and 1261 dealt with the Easter holidays. The Bounder was staying in a bungalow on the river Wyme, and his feud smouldered into flame again, but it was Redwing who became the victim of his plot and the pair of them were late for the new term at Greyfriars as a result. Accordingly the term began with two single stories unconnected with the series: "The Fool of the School" in No. 1262 was of course Coker, whilst "The Vanished Sovereigns" the following week belonged to Gosling, who had decided to sell them at 27/6d each to a jeweller instead of being patriotic and surrendering them for 20/- each at the Post Office.

Vernon-Smith returned in No. 1264 and was sentenced to be expelled, having been caught at the Three Fishers by

Sir Hilton Popper, but he was instrumental in exposing an impersonator, and so escaped the just reward of his misdeeds. The feud with Wharton was continued in Nos. 1265-66, a fine pair of stories, though the second one ended rather abruptly. At all events, the hatchet was buried - but Vernon-Smith remained captain.

Bunter's ventriloquism was probably never used to produce such hilarious results as it did in "Coker's Cricket Craze" in No. 1267, in which Coker almost succeeded in wangling himself a place in the first eleven. A story in completely different vein the following week featured Bob Cherry's disreputable cousin, Paul Tyrrell, whose predicament had already been hinted at some weeks earlier (in No. 1259). He was now wanted for forgery, and probably no-one was more surprised than Bob when Vernon-Smith intervened to help his cousin escape abroad. The end of Vernon-Smith's captaincy came with No. 1269, in which he led the team out of detention to play cricket - only to have the game curtailed by the unfortunate arrival of Mr. Quelch. As the master of the Remove remarked, "No-one can command who has not learned to obey." The Bounder's election was quashed, and Harry Wharton at last came into his own again.

"Coker's Camera Clicks" in No. 1270 was followed by two series - the tale of the Green Satchel in Nos. 1271-75 and the Egypt series in Nos. 1277-1284. There is a marked resemblance between these two series despite the difference in subject matter. Both commenced with a striking number which was full of excitement and development of plot, and then both series tailed off into stories which tended to be somewhat repetitive versions of the original theme - an unscrupulous villain in pursuit of property which did not belong to him. In the first series Dandy Sanders was after the loot from a bank robbery which had been hidden up the chimney of study No. 1, whilst in the second series Konstantinos Kalizelos was pursuing Mauleverer in order to obtain the golden scarab of A-Menah which contained the key to a fortune. The Egypt series was, however, distinguished by fine portraits of two different

types of Egyptians - Hilmi Maroudi, the millionaire, and Hassan the dragoman. The scenes describing the power of Hilmi Maroudi were almost sufficient to recall the best of the China series, but the Egypt series could not sustain this high level for long. The two series were separated by a single number entitled "Who Walloped Wiggins?", a story about Loder and Wingate.

Undoubtedly the finest series of all to appear in the Magnet during the years covered by this review was the tale of Harry Wharton the rebel in Nos 1285-1296. Whether it was superior to the earlier version which ran in the years 1924-25 is a matter open to question, but it was certainly much better written and constitutes a spell-binding narrative, not one chapter of which is superfluous and not one word of which is tedious.

The series opened with the usual first day of term incidents (scenes at the railway station and descriptions of first day chaos at the school) all cunningly interwoven into the story of Harry Wharton's downfall. Loder's unscrupulousness, combined with misunderstandings and Wharton's uncertain temper all contributed in turn to add fuel to the flames. It is interesting to note that Wharton was often unjustly suspected and that his own faults of character operated to prevent such misunderstandings from being cleared up. It is also noteworthy that Mr. Quelch was often depicted as allowing his suspicions to get the better of his judgment. Both master and pupil were shewn at their worse in this series.

Eric Fayne has pointed out that in the earlier series Harry Wharton was actually guilty of unsavoury conduct, whereas in the later series he was really not so black as he was painted, and in this respect this series is more true to character. But although he was not a blackguard he was certainly a rebel, and nearly every number contains an amusing description of how he managed to score off Mr. Quelch or Loder. Yet there was a definite development of plot in each number of the series, and there was no question

of there being a repetition of theme merely to spin out the series: each number saw Wharton sinking deeper and deeper into the mire, with Mr. Quelch perceiving more clearly than Dr. Locke the full extent of Wharton's rebelliousness, but with the Head firmly maintaining that Wharton should be given every chance to clear himself on each particular occasion, and that mere suspicion, however strong, was no adequate substitute for actual proof.

How to end a series of this nature is a difficult problem. In the earlier series the Head gave Wharton a second chance, and what might have been an anti-climax in fact turned out to be a realistic portrait of a reformed rebel who had to try to win his form-master's respect anew. The later series ended with Wharton and Mr. Quelch trapped in a cave whilst the tide was coming in, and in a moment of great peril Wharton apprised the Remove master of the true facts and Mr. Quelch unhesitatingly accepted them. The description of master and pupil trapped by the tide lacks nothing that the master hand could provide in the way of convincing verisimilitude. Yet one is left with just a mite of dissatisfaction that such a magnificent series could not have had a truly magnificent ending.

There are only a few really perfect series in the Magnet - perfect that is from beginning to end, the sort that it is difficult to lay down unfinished. Many, like the South Seas and China series suffered from an indifferent start, but amongst the perfect series one finds the following: the first Wharton the rebel series, the Bunter Court series, Loder's captaincy series, the Courtfield Cracksman series, the Brander series, the Lancaster series, and the Stacey series. In this rarefied atmosphere of the very height of Charles Hamilton's achievements the second Wharton the rebel series is assured of an undisputed place in the hall of fame. If Charles Hamilton had written nothing else this series alone would have proved that he fully understood and could perfectly portray the complex workings of human nature as few authors have done before or since.

To shew that the events of the past term had been completely forgotten Mr. Quelch had kindly consented to spend the Christmas holidays at Wharton Lodge, and so was on hand at the very beginning of the Valentine series, which ran from Nos. 1297-1307.

Jim Valentine was one of those characters who make an instant appeal to the reader. His first appearance was sudden and dramatic, right in the very first chapter of No. 1297. He was on a motor-bike, speeding along the icy roads trying to escape from a gang of criminals, and it later transpired that he was in fact Dick the Penman, a renowned forger who had eventually decided to cut free from his past.

Mr. Quelch was wandering, lost, frozen, and utterly weary when he came upon Jim Valentine who guided him to shelter. In a very moving sequence of passages the boy told the Remove master something of his past history and the master decided to enter him at Greyfriars at his own expense.

1933 - Calmer Waters

The remainder of the Valentine series related how the gang attempted by devious means to drive the boy from the school so that he would have no option but to rejoin them. It is not the complicated plot which so enlivens this series but the inimitable touches of characterisation: Mr. Quelch bestowing his frosty kindness upon the boy he had taken under his protection, and Harry Wharton & Co. trying to believe in Valentine when circumstances looked so black against him. There were also pleasing parts for Hoskins the mad musician, and for Bunter who was hawking up and down the Remove a tray of twenty articles at half a crown each.

Valentine's exit was every bit as dramatic as his entrance. The gang was arrested, and Mr. Grimes was just about to lay his hands on Dick the Penman when Valentine managed to elude him and fly to Brazil with his uncle.

The series ended with the usual valediction - "The Famous Five made up their minds, that, some day or other, they would have a holiday in far off Brazil and see Jim Valentine again." For once the valediction was proved true in the light of subsequent events.

After a fine series the normal type of story seemed to fall a little flat. "Wibley's Wonderful Wheeze" in No. 1308 was to obtain a place in the eleven by disguising himself whilst "Popper's Unpopular Prize" the next week consisted of £5 for the winner and a caning for the loser! Owing to a mistake in his trickery Bunter discovered that he had won the booby prize which was increased to a flogging for his special benefit. Much better was "The Schoolboy Impersonator" in No. 1310 which dealt with Nugent and his ungrateful brother, whilst "All Bunter's Fault" the following week was one of the funniest single stories to appear in the Magnet: Bunter was determined to annex Wharton's armchair, and was disgusted to learn that Wharton was making out it was his just because his Aunt Amy had sent it to him. What happened as a result of Bunter's curious mental processes constituted a tale which was sheer delight from beginning to end.

The Easter Cruise series in Nos 1312-16 must have been the last Magnet holiday series which had no connecting link between the various numbers in the series. Nevertheless it was an entertaining story, though Rookwood readers might have remembered a similar tale about fellows who imagined they were being invited as guests and later found out that they were expected to pay for their holiday cruise.

No. 1317 contained a tale about a somnambulist (not a very promising subject), whilst No. 1318 featured Napoleon Dupont in the unusual role of "Taming a Tyrant" (the tyrant in this case being Walker). Two pairs of stories followed: Vernon-Smith succeeded in being sent to Coventry in Nos. 1319-20 as a result of doing Nugent's brother a good turn, and the Bounder also featured largely in the series in Nos. 1321-22 in which Mr. Lascelles mysteriously disappeared from the school after readers had been reminded of his not quite respectable past.

Magnet stories in which the scene moved to Highcliffe always maintained a strong interest, mainly because of the vivid presentation of the unusual and striking characters therein. No. 1323 entitled "The Worst Boy in the School" was no exception, and the passages describing the reaction of Dr. Voysey and Mr. Mobbs to a knavish trick of Ponsonby's make memorable reading. Equally memorable (though in another manner) was "Aunt Judy at Greyfriars" the following week. This seems to have been her first visit since the never-to-be-forgotten occasion when she succeeded in getting Coker his remove from the Shell to the Fifth. On this occasion she was instrumental in saving her nephew from being expelled by mistake.

Charles Hamilton once stated that in his opinion the two funniest Magnet tales were "The Fellow Who Wouldn't Be Caned" and the story of Bunter's £100 Boater Hat. The former number belongs to an earlier era, but the story of the fabulous boater hat may be found in Magnets 1325-26. In those days banknotes of high denominations were current, and Mr. Vernon-Smith had the misfortune to see such a one blown away and picked up by a tramp, who subsequently hid it under the lining of Bunter's straw hat. The hilarious results of this action made a most amusing pair of stories, but collectors might perhaps find in the volumes of the Magnet a tale even funnier, like, for instance, No. 1327 entitled "The Shylock of Greyfriars" which told how a booby trap landed on Fisher T. Fish, resulting in the presentation of a bill amounting to £4.3.0d. for damage to clothes. Another amusing story was "Bunter the Ventriloquist" the following week, a story which is notable for being situated almost entirely at Rookwood. The term ended in fine style with a pair of stories about Vernon-Smith in Nos. 1329-30 which constituted a sequel to some of the events in the Lascelles series earlier in the term. The Bounder was expelled, and his father descended upon Greyfriars with the intention of discovering the truth for himself, an intention which was fully carried out. Once again the Bounder's proverbial luck stood him in good stead.

The Hiking series in Nos. 1331-40 was undoubtedly the finest English summer holiday series of the 'thirties, and was indeed surpassed only by the tour in 1929. What was so attractive about the Hiking series was its air of freshness and novelty. The connecting link - Ponsonby's pursuit of the Holiday Annual which contained a mysterious secret - never became too insistent or absorbing, and each week the juniors visited a different part of the country and encountered different adventures, ranging from a tithe war in Sussex to a haunted castle in Oxfordshire. This was indeed a model series, and well exemplified the classic formula for art - repetition with a difference. In length and development it represented the high water mark of the English summer holiday series in the Magnet.

A number of single stories followed. "The Ace of Jokers" in No. 1341 was Wibley, who was masquerading as a new master, whilst No. 1342 was given over to the usual Guy Fawkes story. Finally, "Down With The Tyrant" in No. 1342 related the exciting events which occurred when the Remove fell foul of Walker. After this there were no runs of single stories for a very long time indeed.

The reader who purchased the series in Nos. 1344-48 must have wondered whether he had obtained the right paper, since - for the one and only time in its history - the Magnet resorted to fantasy. Yet the result was not so unusual as might have been expected, because Charles Hamilton still subordinated the plot to the characters, and did not repeat this mistake of H.G. Wells whose characters were little more than puppets and who often allowed a promising idea to peter out, as in "The Food of the Gods". In the Magnet series the fantasy consisted of a phial of sticky crimson liquid which was the result of Professor Sparkinson's researches, and which magically endowed superhuman strength. The interesting part of the series was not the exhibition of strength but the manner in which the strong men used their new found muscular power, Alonzo Todd becoming fussy and interfering from the best of motives, and Bunter becoming downright tyrannical from the worse of motives.

So despite the fantastic element the whole series remained absolutely true to character.

Christmas thus found Bunter even more unwelcome than usual as a holiday guest. His problems were made more difficult by the fact that the Bunter residence was being closed down for the festive season. Aunt Martha took in Bessie on the strict understanding that neither of Bessie's brothers accompanied her, which meant that Uncle George was left with Sammy and Billy. Matters became quite desperate when Billy 'phoned Wharton Lodge and passed some unfortunate comments about the Colonel, only to find that he was speaking to the Colonel himself and not to Harry Wharton. Billy then confided to Sammy (just as Uncle George was coming into the room) that he would have to put up with the stingy old codger after all, a remark to which the stingy old codger took the greatest exception.

In the end Bunter was left with nowhere to go at all, and he hit upon the unique plan of stowing away in an attic at Wharton Lodge. This series in Nos. 1349-51 was the last of the really great Christmas holiday series, bubbling over with good humour and high spirits together with an agreeable touch of seasonable mystery.

1934 - A Year of High Drama

The end of the Christmas holidays and the beginning of the new term constituted the background for a pair of stories in Nos. 1352-53 concerning a diamond pin which Billy Bunter acquired for a shilling and which he sold to Fisher T. Fish for fifty shillings. Fishy was upset to learn that he was unable to realise his expected profit after all. There followed in Nos. 1354-58 the Kranz series, which commenced in a somewhat melodramatic manner with Bob Cherry being kidnapped by aeroplane, but which soon settled down to being an engrossing mystery of a more normal type, with Mauleverer playing a leading part in solving the problem. No. 1359 entitled "Who Walloped Wingate?" enjoyed the distinction of being the only single story of the year, and was a neat little piece about Price and his feud with Wingate.

Vernon-Smith encountered constant trouble during his long and hectic career, but never did he face such a calamitous prospect as in the Smedley series in Nos. 1360-73. In order to understand the background to this series it is necessary to know that he had been in constant trouble for many months and had even been expelled in the Kranz series, though the sentence was later rescinded by the Head. Mr. Quelch, who had been in very poor health since the holidays, was becoming progressively more annoyed with the scape-grace of his form, whilst Mr. Vernon-Smith, the millionaire financier, had completely lost patience with his son and threatened to disinherit him in favour of a cousin if the Bounder should be expelled from the school. When it is added that the cousin arrived at Greyfriars as the temporary master of the Remove under the pseudonym of Eustace Smedley, it will be appreciated that all the ingredients for a dramatic series were ready to hand.

Charles Hamilton did not fail to make full use of all the possibilities of the situation. It was a long and varied series, and included the whole of the Easter holidays which were spent partly in France and partly at Wharton Lodge, where - much to Bunter's disgust - Mr. Quelch was an honoured guest. Every facet of the Bounder's character was allowed full play in this fascinating series which despite its length was not a chapter too much. In fact the only blemish was a clumsy interpolation at the end of chapter 11 in No. 1369, the sole purpose of which appears to have been to concoct an unlikely incident to be depicted on the front cover. This was, however, only a minor matter, and there can be no doubt that the series constituted the most authoritative exposition of Vernon-Smith's character to appear during the final decade of the Magnet.

Mr. Prout drenched with ink - Bunter unjustly expelled - the Remove in rebellion. Such was the situation that confronted Mr. Quelch when he eventually returned to Greyfriars in No. 1374, and it was a situation which was destined to deteriorate still further before things returned to normal in No. 1382, for the Remove turned Popper's Island into a fortress and good barring-out series ensued.

Once again Rookwood readers might have had memories of a similar theme in the Boys' Friend, but the Magnet version was treated in much greater detail, and it is interesting to note that Mr. Quelch had a sneaking sympathy for the rebels, a sympathy which caused a certain coldness to arise between the Head and the Remove master. It is pleasing to be able to record in the end the Remove were triumphant, and Mr. Quelch had the personal satisfaction of putting Prout in his place.

The Bunter Court series of 1925 was but a fading dream in 1934, though no doubt many readers still remembered the fabulous mansion which had been accompanied by a strange lack of the necessary ready money with which to keep running the ancestral home of the Bunters. The series in Magnets 1383-89 (which incidentally ran from cover to cover in each issue) was in a sense complementary to the previous series. Bunter became possessed of a valet named Jarvish who made over to Bunter an immense fortune. How the Famous Five accompanied Bunter the Billionaire on an air trip to France and Italy and how a certain American named Tiger Bronx seemed to make Bunter's inheritance his own particular business all combined to constitute a jolly summer holiday series, even though it lacked the mystique of its more famous predecessor of 1925. Nevertheless it had its moments, perhaps the best of which was the description of D'Arcy in the antique shop in Venice - a delightful cameo which epitomised Gussy in the space of a few paragraphs.

It would be idle to pretend that the Secret Society series in Magents 1390-1400 had no faults. In No. 1394, for instance, the House page was referred to as Tupper: this was only a minor error, but the scene in No. 1391 when Mr. Quelch laid hands on Loder and a struggle ensued was perhaps a little too exaggerated to ring true. These matters are, however, only slight criticisms of a series which is immensely readable. Dr. Locke and Wingate were involved in an accident, and Mr. Prout became headmaster, making Loder his Head Prefect. The series presented a fascinating character study of Mr. Prout: the reader ceased to regard him with amused tolerance and began to dislike him actively,

so well did Charles Hamilton depict this pompous, self-important man who now found, for the first time, that his authority knew no bounds. It was not long before Mr. Quelch departed, his place being taken by the fussy, nervous Mr. Moose (who apparently stayed on as art master when Mr. Quelch returned). The Remove were left with no champion to protect them from Loder's bullying, and accordingly the Secret Society came into being, effectively checking the unscrupulous Head Prefect. An interesting sidelight was the way in which the free gifts being presented to readers at the time (thumbprint recorder, code, and invisible writing pencil) were worked into the series and used by the Secret Society. The series came to a grand climax in No. 1400 when Dr. Locke returned unexpectedly just as Mr. Prout was about to administer some unjust floggings, and the Fifth Form master saw his authority collapse like a pack of cards.

Christmas in 1934 (Magnets 1401-03) was spent at Hilton Hall on the Devonshire moors. By dint of blackmail Bunter secured an invitation for himself and also induced Hilton to invite the Famous Five. It was hardly a jolly Christmas, since an escaped convict was lurking in the neighbourhood, but there was plenty of thrills and excitement by way of compensation - in all, a series which was not outstanding but well up to standard.

Conclusion

What happened to the Magnet after 1934 is one of those mysteries which will probably never be solved. Good stories were to come, and plenty of them, but it is undeniable that the sustained level of 1930-34 was never regained in later years. It is difficult to point to any precise reason for the deterioration except to say that the stories of the final period were often pervaded by a sense of mechanism or contrivance: there was a feeling of repetition, a lack of spontaneity, a suspicion that we had been there before, so to speak. Somehow or other the tinsel had fallen off the Christmas tree and the branches looked bare.

It is only by examining the tales before 1930 and after 1934 that we can arrive at a just estimate of value of the stories of the Golden Age. Only then can we see how near to perfection the Magnet came for so long, with what sheer delight Charles Hamilton wrote the stories, and how fresh, charming, and ingenious the incidents still appear when read all this time afterwards.

The practically undivided attention which was paid to Greyfriars between 1930 and 1934 yielded other dividends, not the least of which was consistency. Each series was complete in itself but incidents from previous series were recalled from time to time in order to provide a most pleasing air of continuity. The exploits of Vernon-Smith, for instance, from the summer of 1933 to the summer of 1934 form a logical and ordered sequence of events even though they span several different series. Continuity of this kind would have been impossible ten years previously when the substitute writers were playing havoc with all logic and consistency.

It is sometimes claimed by various collectors that, whilst they enjoy stories by Charles Hamilton, they rank substitute stories among their firm favourites. It is difficult to see how a story deliberately written in another author's style and in almost every sense an imitation can actually be considered superior to the real thing, and there can be no doubt that, if the story had been published elsewhere with the characters and background differently named and the illustrations by an artist unconnected with the companion papers, such a story would not be given a moment's thought today. Had Pentelow's very gallant gentleman belonged to one of his own schools, who would think the tale worthy of mention now? The very fact that the imitations are remembered today is actually an indirect tribute to Charles Hamilton, since it is the reflected splendour of his schools and his characters which have given the substitute stories what little attraction they do possess. A story written by Charles Hamilton in the early 'twenties and a substitute story are as unlike as chalk and cheese: it would be as well to remember that the same difference is

apparent between his stories of the early 'twenties and those of the next decade.

It is the stories of the early 'thirties which give Greyfriars its superiority over St. Jim's, not because Charles Hamilton wrote more stories (and better ones) for the Magnet than he did for the Gem, but because Greyfriars reached its maturity later, when his powers of writing were at their height and when a continuous sequence of stories had succeeded in creating a set of characters who not only lived but evolved and developed from week to week. Stories about St. Jim's were usually kept in water-tight compartments, whereas the Greyfriars tales represented a living saga. Wherever we commence reading in a Magnet volume of the 'thirties we feel we ought to have begun earlier, and whenever the series comes to an end we know that the events therein will not be entirely without significance for the future. Such is the vital force of the Magnet stories at their best.

The most perfect part of the Golden Age was the beginning, comprising the years 1930 and 1931. These two years were absolutely unsurpassed in any other boys' paper, and indicate the immense superiority which Charles Hamilton possessed over all other authors on the staff of the Amalgamated Press. In earlier years he had created at least two schools which were fast becoming a legend, and had endowed them with tradition, character, and mystique. Now, at the beginning of the 'thirties, he raised his most famous creation, Greyfriars, to even greater stature by the fullest exercise of his incomparable literary gifts. It was as though he were seeing the world anew, smiling at its follies and encouraging it to even greater achievements.

We are told that Charles Hamilton has often been asked whether he would not have preferred to have written something better than school stories, an enquiry which has always elicited the emphatic reply that there was nothing better to be written. Those of us who examine the Magnet volumes of the early 'thirties can only feel

thankful that he did not attempt to devote his talents to some other purpose. Perfection makes only a rare and fleeting appearance in any form of art. The Magnet had, perhaps, more than its fair share in its fabulous Golden Age.



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