Memories OF THE MAGNET Office

by G R Samways

MY first job, found for me by the charity school at which I had spent nearly six years of Spartan training and iron discipline, was with the L.S. Starrett Company, an American firm, makers of fine mechanical tools, in Upper Thames Street, London.

No prisoner, counting the weary days to his freedom, ever longed for liberation more desperately than I. Night after night I lay awake in my dormitory, yearning for the happy day when the school gates would cláng behind me for ever.

But alas! the reality brought painful disillusionment. I joined the L.S. Starrett Company ostensibly as a shorthand typist -- shorthand and typewriting were voluntary subjects at school, and I had made myself proficient in these twin arts -- but instead of going into the office, I was relegated to the basement of the warehouse, where my job was to rip the band-iron off packing cases. For this monotonous form of unskilled labour I received ten shillings per week. Such a sum, in 1911, went very much farther than it does today; at the same time, I found it quite a problem to feed and clothe myself on this wretched pittance. I took a tiny bedroom over some dining rooms in York Road, Westminster, and had my meals with the cabbies who frequented the place. I can well remember writing out the menus, in a large boyish hand -- one large one for display in the window, and a smaller one for each table. My reward for this service was one free meal per day, which helped considerably to eke out my slender resources.

On Sundays the dining rooms were closed, and I was turned adrift from early morning until late at night, when the staff returned from their day out. The mornings were usually spent in St. Paul's Churchyard, reading my favourite MAGNET; and in the afternoon I attended the service at Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road -- more, I fear, for warmth and comfort rather than for spiritual sustenance. The Rev. F.B. Meyer a noted Congregational preacher of the time, took the services, which were usually followed by free refreshments, in the form of tea and buns. After the service, I would tramp the streets until it was time to return to my lodgings.

FORTUNATELY, I was not doomed to spend the rest of my youth ripping band-iron from packing cases. In due course I was promoted to the office, where life was more tolerable. But I was never really happy at Starretts, despite the fact that three Old Boys of my school worked there. I stayed long enough to qualify for the reward of a golden sovereign, which the school governors made to every Old Boy who completed a year's service with the same firm. I then sought

another situation, and succeeded in obtaining a junior clerkship at the headquarters of the Borstal Institute, just off the Strand. Here I was fortunate enough to have as a colleague my old school friend Harold W. Twyman, later to join me in journalism and to become Editor of the "Union Jack."

The Borstal job, although more interesting than its predecessor did not last very long, and my next switch was to the Treasury Solicitor's office in the Law Courts, where I did a vast amount of typing work for very little pay. This job was also short-lived, for I decided to make a clean break and quit London for my native county of Hampshire.

In 1913, I started work in the office of a stock and share broker in Southsea, at a wage of fifteen shillings per week. Renting a bed-sitting room for five shillings weekly, I was just able to keep myself on the remaining ten shillings.

Although the atmosphere of the Southsea office was more congenial than that of any of the London offices in which I had worked, I had very little interest in the world of stocks and shares, bulls and bears; and any desire to become a speculator on the stock market, should I ever grow rich, was dispelled at a very early stage. I can remember typing the letters to clients on settling day, the usual formula being :- "Dear Mr. -----, I enclose statement of your account, showing a balance due from you of £ ----------. Kindly let me have your cheque for this amount in due course."

Only on rare occasions was this formula varied to:- " I enclose statement of your account, showing a balance due to you of £ ------, a cheque for which is enclosed."

Many clients were involved in heavy losses, whilst my employer himself, despite his professional knowledge of the stock market and its fluctuations, was eventually ruined by rash speculation.

THROUGHOUT all my vicissitudes, I had remained deeply devoted to those favourite periodicals of my schooldays, the MAGNET and GEM. If I had the misfortune to miss any issues, through lack of funds on the day of publication, I could always secure back numbers at a reduced price, from a stall in Arundel Street, Portsmouth.

I had read the MAGNET from its very first issue, despite the fact that at my old school the companion papers were strictly forbidden. They were classed with "Deadwood Dicks" and "Buffalo Bills" as pernicious and subversive of discipline, and there was short shrift for any schoolboy who dared to defy the ban. Nevertheless, the ban was defied, and the beloved papers were smuggled into the school by all sorts of ingenious ruses.

Writing in the STORY PAPER COLLECTOR, Mr. W.O.G. Lofts has described how I used to read the MAGNET and GEM to a select and admiring circle in the school playground, one boy being stationed to give warning of the approach of a master or monitor. Many attempts were made to suppress these regular (or should I say irregular?) readings; but all in vain. But I recall one occasion when a big round-up was made of the banned periodicals, and these were put into a brazier and publicly burned on

the school parade ground, in the same way that heretical works were once burned by the common hangman!

I almost wept with rage and mortification at this holocaust, which seemed to me to be an act of sacrilege on the part of the school authorities.

As the flames arose from the funeral pyre, we were solemnly warned by old "Roman," the Headmaster (to whom the red cover of the MAGNET was as a red rag to a bull) of the dire pains and penalties which would befall us were we ever found with such "pernicious trash" as the MAGNET or GEM in our possession!

But a new and more tolerant age was soon to dawn, and it is pleasant to record that within a few years the ban was lifted, and the companion papers circulated freely among the boys of King Edward VI School, than whom there can surely have been no greater enthusiasts for the writings of Frank Richards and Martin Clifford.

PART II

My first contribution to the MAGNET was a rhymed one, singing the praises of my favourite paper. This juvenile effusion tickled the fancy of the sub-editor, Maurice Down, who published it with the comment: "One of my Southsea readers has sent me the following verses. He does not ask me to publish them, as some readers do, whether they are good or bad; but I am pleased to publish them, for I consider them very good indeed."

These words of kindly encouragement were instrumental in launching me upon my journalistic career.

Having thus got my foot in, as it were, I proceeded to consolidate this early success. Working by candlelight in my bed-sitting room at Southsea, I produced a series of twelve poems, each dealing with a prominent character in the MAGNET, and these were published under the title of "Greyfriars Lyrics." They were followed by a similar series for the GEM - "St. Jim's Jingles."

Despite the fact that these poems showed more precocity than real promise, they proved very popular, and I soon found myself fairly established as the MAGNET and GEM rhymester.

From a very early age I had dabbled in verse. It might be said of me, as of a far more famous versifier, that "I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came." The school magazines — one official, and the other produced by the boys themselves — had published my effusions; but the first poem for which I received cash payment appeared in "Under the Dome," the magazine of Bethlem Royal Hospital. Written when I was only twelve years old, it was, I remember, a parody of "The Burial of Sir John Moore"- the first of many parodies of the classics which were to flow from my tireless pen.

ONE day, when working in the stock and share broker's office at Southsea, a telegram arrived for me from London — a message which set my heart pounding wildly, for it was from the Editor of the MAGNET,

requesting my immediate attendance at the Fleetway House.

It was a Friday morning, I remember, and my boss readily granted me leave of absence. I think he had a premonition that he would shortly be losing my services, but he faced the crisis with cheerful resignation; for, truth to tell, I was a better versifier than a stockbroker's clerk! Moreover, I am afraid I had been writing a great deal of verse during business hours — a practice which did not make for office efficiency.

I don't know what sort of a person I had expected the Editor of the MAGNET to be — a venerable greybeard or a callow youth. Herbert Alan Hinton was neither. He was a man of striking physical aspect, and at that time twenty-six years of age. He was an old public school man, played Rugger for Blackheath, and was obviously an athletic, outdoor type rather than a slave of the lamp.

Hinton's greeting was friendly enough, but there was an Olympian aloofness about him — an air of superiority which some might have regarded as snoobishness — though I am sure he was no snob. I was later to know Hinton well, in day-to-day contact in Room 59, after I took Maurice Down's place as sub-editor; but although he always treated me extremely well, and had a higher opinion of my work than it probably deserved, there was something reserved in his bearing which forbade that close intimacy I came to know with Noel Wood-Smith, Hedley O'Mant, and other members of the MAGNET staff.

Frank Richards, in his autobiography, has compared Herbert Hinton with George Figgins. Frankly, I can see no point of resemblance between the Editor of the MAGNET and the leader of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's Were I asked to name the character whom Hinton most nearly resembled, I should say Mr. Larry Lascelles, the games master at Greyfriars.

Although a competent Editor, and the writer of some of the early MAGNET stories, Hinton was not an enthusiastic, dyed-in-the-wool Greyfriars "fan". He was more interested in the artistic than the literary side of story production, and he was probably happier editing "THE CHILDREN'S ZOO PICTORIAL" than when he was at the helm of the MAGNET.

Herbert Alan Hinton was a man for whom I had the greatest admiration and respect, and I was deeply shocked to learn of his tragic death in 1945.

MAURICE DOWN, the future Editor of the MAGNET, was in closer affinity than anyone with Hinton. Both were public school men, with a great deal in common; and both worked as a harmonious team in the preparation of the papers. Down was a quieter and less dominant personality than Hinton, and he was undoubtedly well liked by the MAGNET staff. Whilst lacking the robust athleticism of Hinton, he was intellectually superior, and he has already written a number of "substitute" GEM stories of such merit that they have frequently been attributed to Charles Hamilton.

In modern times I have sometimes seen ill-informed criticisms of Down's editorship of the companion papers; but there is no doubt in my own mind that he was the right man for the job. Certainly I owe a great deal to him, and although I was often to prove a thorn in his

flesh later, in making demands for higher payment for my work, I am sure he has long since forgiven me, and I wish him well in the sunset of his day.

SEATED in the cosy armchair reserved for visitors to Room 59, I experienced none of the nervousness I usually felt on being interviewed. Both Hinton and Down put me entirely at my ease, and explained why I had been sent for.

A major crisis had arisen in the MAGNET office. Charles Hamilton, who at that time was living in the south of France, had failed for some reason to turn in his manuscripts with his customary regularity. The drawer of Down's desk labelled "MAGNET COPY" was empty; and a story was urgently needed with which to go to press. Would I be prepared to tackle the task — to remain in London and write a MAGNET story over the weekend?

I had not expected anything like this, and for a moment was non-plussed. Many of my jingles, and some plays in verse, had already been published in the MAGNET; but a long Greyfriars story was a very different proposition. However, I could not afford to reject this golden opportunity, and after some discussion I agreed to undertake the task. A typewriter was loaned to me, my expenses paid, and I took for the weekend a room where I might work undisturbed. By Monday moring the bulk of the story was written. I was painfully aware of its imperfections, but hoped it was sufficiently in the Hamilton tradition to pass muster. My hopes were justified in the event, for both Hinton and Down, after a careful perusal of the manuscript, gave a favourable verdit, and I was commissioned to go ahead with another MAGNET story as soon as the first was completed.

Needless to say, I went back to Southsea filled with elation; happy to have found at last a job after my own heart — that of a writer of MAGNET stories under the generic name of Frank Richards.

PART III

I CANNOT at this distance of time recall the actual stages of my progress from an outside contributor to a member of the editorial staff of the MAGNET; but it was an easy and natural transition.

My job at Southsea had been given up, and I had returned to London to live and work; and it was not long before I was offered a "dream job" — for so it seemed to me then, and still does in retrospect — at the Fleetway House.

An adequate salary, reasonable hours of work, a happy and inspiring atmosphere, and above all, a job for which I was naturally fitted, combined to make my new life very congenial. Truly, the lines had fallen unto me in pleasant places.

In Room 58, next door to the editorial sanctum, I began my new duties. My colleagues were Noel Wood-Smith, who corrected the proofs of the MAGNET and GEM as they arrived in "galleys" from the printers: Stantion Hope, who worked on CHUCKLES, the new weekly comic; and Arthur Aldcroft, whose activities were confined to THE PENNY POPULAR. With all

three I got on well, but particularly with Wood-Smith, a young man of remarkable energy and ability, who was not only a first-rate journalist but a gifted inventor. Noel wrote sporting and detective yarns under the pseudonym of Norman Taylor. On Saturday mornings (Saturday was a non-working day at the Fleetway House) we had Room 58 to ourselves, Noel being engaged on a football story, and myself on a MAGNET yarn. In the afternoon, we went to a League match, Stamford Bridge being our favourite haunt.

After his marriage, which took place about that time, Noel and his wife very kindly invited me to their home at Richmond, where I lived for some time in happy content.

Another member of the staff, who worked in Room 60, was Clive R. Fenn, son of the famous writer of boys' stories, George Manville Fenn. Clive was a very quiet, unobtrusive sort of man, keeping very much to himself and taking little part in staff activities.

There was also an office boy -- lackey, tea wallah, and general runabout -- whose name I have forgotten. Of the MAGNET office boys I remember only Thompson and Snow, and they came on the scene later.

My days in the MAGNET office did not follow a regular pattern, but I will describe a typical day.

The majority of the staff started work at ten o'clock, the Editor making a more leisurely appearance about eleven -- although he frequently worked late, especially on press days.

The morning postbag was my first concern, for it had been arranged that I should take over the Answers to Correspondents feature, expanding it into a whole page of replies to readers. The postbag was generally pretty heavy. Letters poured in from all part of the world -- from readers eager to acquire back numbers of the MAGNET and GEM; wishing to form pen friendships; or seeking information concerning Greyfriars and St. Jim's. Where exactly were the schools situated? Why did Harry Wharton & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. never grow up? Would Frank Richards please send a cricket team to Yorkshire or Lancashire to play the local boys? These and countless other questions, were promptly answered, either by letter (Clive Fenn's job) or by a brief paragraph in the Answers to Correspondents page.

The interest shown by MAGNET and GEM readers in the schools and characters was remarkable. So realistic were some of the stories of Charles Hamilton that quite a number of readers believed that the schools and scholars actually existed, and were not merely fictional. I remember one story in particular, describing the poverty and early struggles of Dick Penfold, the cobbler's son, bringing in quite a sheaf of compassionate letters, and offers of financial assistance. Letters were actually addressed to Penfold at Greyfriars School, Friardale, Kent. These, by arrangement with the postal authorities, were forwarded to the MAGNET office, and were replied to by the Editor. If it was deemed necessary to dispel the writers' illusions, this was done in a kindly and sympathetic manner.

The postbag kept me busy for the best part of the morning, for in those days there were several deliveries of mail before lunch-time.

The Editor usually lunched either at the Press Club or at Sweeting's; the rest of us went in a body to Yexlee's in New Bridge Street, or to the A.B.C. on Snow Hill.

In the afternoon I would assist Wood-Smith with the proof-reading, or busy myself with a plan of Greyfriars School and its environs; also compiling a list of the characters, giving their correct Christian names and brief notes about them. This record was intended to serve as a guide for writers of substitute stories.

Five o'clock was the normal hour of finishing work, but there were no clock watchers in the MAGNET office, and often we continued our labours until a late hour. Supper and dominoes at Yexlee's were a frequent occurrence.

THE first Great War now burst upon the world; but Kaiser Bill failed to accomplish what Adolf Hitler eventually succeeded in doing -- killing the MAGNET and GEM.

Inevitably, there were early gaps in the staff. Maurice Down was the first to go, and Wood-Smith and Stanton Hope soon followed. Subsequently, all of us were to be absorbed into the war machine; but meanwhile, we carried on as best we could, though a good deal of reorganisation was necessary.

Down's place as sub-editor was taken by me, whilst John Nix Pentelow, an elderly and well-known journalist, formerly Editor of CRICKET, was summoned from his Sussex retirement to join the MAGNET staff.

Pentelow's first job -- and a very formidable job it proved -- was to peruse, analyse and judge the entries for the Greyfriars Story Competition. The object of this contest was to discover new talent, for the manuscript drawer of MAGNET and GEM stories was often perilously low.

HERE I would like to say a word concerning substitute writers. I have seen it stated that inferior stories were often put into the papers without regard either for Charles Hamilton, the creator of the schools, or of the readers.

To this palpable absurdity let me reply: (a) that no substitute story was ever published whilst a Charles Hamilton story was available; and (b) Editor Hinton was very jealous for the papers' reputation and circulation. If the sales figures slumped, he was called "on the carpet" by that somewhat irascible director Sir George Sutton, whose wrath no Editor was anxious to provoke. Consequently, Hinton engaged only those writers whose stories had a beneficial effect upon circulation. To have published any sort of rubbish in the companion papers would most certainly have jeopardised his job.

Substitute writers have in my opinion been most unjustly maligned. Some were original writers of great merit, who did not care about doing imitative work; but having been called upon in an emergency, they gave of their best. I can remember more than one occasion when their ready

response to an S.O.S. has preserved the continuity of the MAGNET and GEM.

PART IV

FATE was kind to the MAGNET staff in the First World War, for all came safely through, and there were no ominous gaps in the office when we reunited. There was, however, one new face.

Hedley Percival Angelo O'Mant — I give him his full array of names — was an old school friend of mine. Irish on his father's side, Italian on his mother's, Hedley was a youth of singular charm, with a most winning personality.

"Tall, eager, a face to remember,
A smile that could change as the day;
A spirit that knew not December,
And brightened the sunshine of May."

Although Hedley was four years my junior, we were drawn closely together at school, by a bond which was to become even closer in the years to come. Strangely enough, we both felt, by some occult intuition, that this was not the birth of a new friendship, but the renewal of an age-old one.

Hedley was only fifteen at the outbreak of war. After serving for a time in the London Scottish Cadets, he joined the Royal Flying Corps becoming an intrepid pilot in those days which produced "kites of wood, and men of steel."

My friend was not a Greyfriars enthusiast, though I did my best to fire him with my own ardent, almost fanatical enthusiasm for the schools and characters. Nevertheless, he was keen to get a job in the MAGNET office if it could be arranged; and Alan Hinton, the Editor, was prevailed upon to give him a trial. Hedley quickly justified his appointment, becoming a most competent sub-editor, and later blossoming out into a writer of considerable merit. As Hedley Scott, he wrote many aviation stories of a semi-autobiographical nature.

Our friendship was not confined to the MAGNET office, for we lived together at Farncombe in Surrey, in the home of Ernest Munton, a reporter on the "Surrey Times." Mrs. Munton, a motherly soul, cooked our meals, and I have never to this day tasted anything so delectable as her jam roly-poly puddings. Hedley was not particularly fond of puddings, so I used to scoff the lion's share. Our hostess, however, got it into her head that Hedley was the gourmet, and she used to call him "The Pudding Boy", much to our amusement!

EDITOR Hinton developed quite a partiality for Old Boys of my school (though he was horrified on one occasion to learn that we played Soccer instead of his beloved Rugger!) and another acquisition to the staff was Harold W. Twyman, to whom I have already referred in these memoirs.

Twyman was a born journalist, but his flair was for detective fiction rather than school stories, and he soon switched from the MAGNET

to the UNION JACK, eventually becoming Editor of the latter periodical.

THE early 1920's were a"boom" period for the MAGNET and GEM. Circulations soared, and new publications were added to the companion papers. The MAGNET office was a veritable hive of industry. Stories of school life were at this time at the peak of their popularity.

I have sometimes seen it suggested, by those with nostalgic memories of the past, that the MAGNET and GEM should be revived. Would such an experiment meet with success? I very much doubt it. To the boy of today, school stories make little or no appeal. He is far away in the stratosphere, waging an imaginary space war with the Martians. Try reading to him one of the old MAGNETS -- even the most exciting you can find — and by the end of the first chapter he will be sunk in the somnolence of boredom. No; I fear there will never be a return to the halcyon days of which I am now writing.

I have always been a glutton for work, but in those days even my insatiable appetite was satisfied. For besides the long MAGNET and GEM stories, of which I am now writing quite a number, I was responsible for the production of the GREYFRIARS HERALD and the St. JIM'S GAZETTE, which appeared weekly in supplement form.

As for light verse, I was pouring out quite a spate of this, not only for the companion papers and the GREYFRIARS HOLIDAY ANNUAL, but for such variant publications as ANSWERS, PASSING SHOW, JOHN O'LONDON'S WEEKLY, FLYING, and AERONAUTICS. I also contrived to get a poem or two published in PUNCH — no easy matter in the days of Sir Owen Seaman's editorship.

Every well know classic of English poetry has at some time been parodied by me — Shelley's "Skylark", Keats's "Nightingale," Wordsworth's "Cuckoo" — besides "The Village Blacksmith," "Excelsior," "Casabianca," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," to mention but a few.

It has recently been suggested that these parodies were the work of Charles Hamilton, but I should like to make it clear that Mr. Hamilton made no verse contributions to the companion papers until a much later date, after I had ceased to write for them.

With this terrific output of prose and verse, in addition to my normal office duties, it is not surprising that my health began to suffer. Burning the candle at both ends is not a good recipe for health and longevity, and I was warned of dire consequences if I continued to live and work at such a pace. Either I must give up writing, and confine myself to editorial work; or I must relinquish my job at the Fleetway House and become a free lance.

Much as I loved the MAGNET office, with its happy associations, I decided it would be wiser to retire to some peaceful spot and continue my writing. The haven of my choice was West End Cottage, Ventnor, in the Isle of Wight.

BEFORE finally shaking the dust of Farringdon Street from my feet, however, there occurred a happy event which will always remain a

cherished memory. My colleagues in the MAGNET office generouly arranged a farewell dinner in my honour, at the famous Mitre Tavern; and there we foregathered, one memorable evening, in that haunt made immortal by the worthy Doctor Johnson, to partake of "the feast of reason and the flow of soul."

Hedley O'Mant was there, of course; and Nool Wood-Smith, and Harold Twyman, and several members of the Amalgamated Press not connected with the companion papers.

"Where is now the merry party
I remember long ago?"

Save for Twyman and myself, there are no survivors of that convivial gathering at the Mitre Tavern. Nool Wood-Smith passed from the human scene many years since; and Hedley O'Mant, reputed to have been killed in a flying accident, actually died in his bed in 1955.

Fleetly and more fleetly pass the years, and those happy days in the MAGNET office now seem like a far off dream.

Life is still sweet, despite the materialism and menace of this Atomic Age; but I can truly say that no period of my earthly pilgrimage has brought me such genuine happiness as those days in the MAGNET office; reading the proofs of a Hamilton story; plunging into the bulging postbag of readers' letters; planning future issues of the MAGNET and GEM; and enjoying those golden friendships which my faith assures me have been but temporarily eclipsed, and not extinguished.

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