

1935 - 1937

AUTUMN YEARS OF THE MAGNET

by

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"Soon ripe - soon rotten" is an old country maxim that does not apply to the Magnet, which took nearly two decades to reach its maturity. But, although the Magnet never actually decayed, its autumnal years were marked with the aura of mists and mellow fruitfulness which Keats so magically evoked. The golden summer years had passed, but they had at least left behind them the mellow fruitfulness of their technique. The divine spark burnt a little less fiercely than before, the days were drawing in, and mists were beginning to cloud the memories of old splendours. There was as yet no real cause for anxiety, but to those who were tearing off the pages of the calendar on the wall a perceptible diminution of the life span could scarcely have failed to escape notice. Time was soon to lay its icy hand upon the Magnet.

1935 - Echoes of Past Greatness

There is much to admire in the Caffyn series which ran from Nos. 1404-1412. It was agreeable to have a long series featuring Coker, even though his rascally cousin in the Remove, Edgar Caffyn (who was nicknamed "The Snipe"), was perhaps a little too unpleasant to be true. Nevertheless, despite the many novel incidents it is possible to detect in this series the reason why the Magnet had passed its zenith. A comparison with the Secret Society series of the previous term reveals that in place of a series with entertaining twists and turns in each number

we now had a series in which each number was virtually a repetition of the last: each week Caffyn tried to get Coker disgraced, and each week he failed. In 1928 when da Costa had tried to get Wharton expelled, the theme was cleverly handled to avoid any sense of repetition, whereas the Caffyn series completely failed to develop in the same convincing manner. One would have to be looking for faults to cavil at any single number in the Caffyn series, but, taking the series as a whole, it is apparent that it did not quite succeed in ringing the bell.

Marjorie Hazeldene was, perhaps, the sort of person who would have been very pleasant to know but was rather dull to read about. There was, however, nothing dull about the series featuring Hazeldene's uncle in Nos. 1413-1417. John James Hazeldene was on the run, suspected of embezzlement but afraid to face the police despite the fact that he was innocent. The differing personalities of the various members of the Hazeldene series were well displayed in this readable series.

1935, like 1934, could boast only one single story. This was "Quelch's Easter Egg" in No. 1418, an entertaining little tale about a rude message which the Remove master received in the guise of a seasonable present. Equally entertaining was the Jimmy the Fox series in Nos. 1419-1421, a holiday adventure featuring Jack Drake and Ferrers Locke, which was notable for being located mainly at Cherry Place, though the movement of the plot finished up in London where a Sherlock Holmes theme was utilised against the background of the Jubilee celebrations.

The Stacey series in Magnets 1422-1433 has long been a favourite with collectors, and there can be little doubt that it was one of the greatest series of them all, despite the fact that it was published when the paper had really passed its peak. Ralph Stacey, a distant relative of Wharton's and looking like his twin brother, was befriended by Colonel Wharton and sent to Greyfriars. Wharton, with

very good reason, instantly took a deep dislike to his relative, and this dislike deepened to a bitter hatred when he found that all Stacey's misdeeds were being visited on his head as a result of their mutual likeness in appearance.

Of course, there were faults on both sides - it would not have been a good Hamiltonian drama had it been otherwise. From the very beginning, when Wharton took offence at Stacey's presumptuousness, to the end, when Mr. Quelch discovered the truth almost by accident, there were always times when Wharton was in the wrong and there were indeed some occasions when Stacey repented - for a while. Some years ago Charles Hamilton wrote to me as follows: "No doubt, as you have read it over in more mature years, you have discerned the pill in the jam: the idea being to impress upon the youthful mind the lesson that even an attractive fellow with considerable physical and mental gifts must come to grief if he cannot keep straight. Harry Wharton in the same series has many faults of temper which often place him at a disadvantage, but he is decent at heart and that pulls him through all his troubles in the end."

Superficially the Stacey series was not so exciting as the two earlier series in which Wharton featured as a rebel. In these two Wharton alienated all his friends and became an outcast in the form, whereas in the Stacey series he kept the friendship of the other members of the Famous Five and some other Removites. The fact that this series was more restrained meant that it was more realistic, though possibly not quite so entertaining. Nevertheless it had many highlights, perhaps the best of which was when the Bounder dramatically saved Wharton from being expelled in No. 1431.

Mr. Quelch showed up rather badly in this series. Whilst he never intended to be unjust, he placed full reliance in Stacey, his new Head Boy, and was not disposed to entertain any suspicions against him. It is interesting to note that he began to lose faith in Stacey



The Magnet^{2D}

Billy Bunter's
Own Paper

1939

APRIL

1

MR HACKER
Form Master

With best wishes
from Vernon Smith

**A PRESENT for
the ACID DROP!**

in the penultimate number, and the process was a gradual one - a very realistic touch, which could not have been effected if the denouement had not been gradual.

Another realistic touch was the manner in which both protagonists in the drama had their hours of triumph and tragedy all the way through. This was especially noticeable in relation to Stacey's prowess at cricket. Although he was by far and away the best junior cricketer at the school, he let the side down on two occasions: once when news of a gambling loss overwhelmed him in the middle of a match, and once when Loder blackmailed him into playing badly.

The test of a really great series is whether it can stand being read over and over again. The Stacey series passes this test with flying colours: there are dramatic situations to be relished in every number, which are so well written that no amount of familiarity can destroy their fascination. This was a truly magnificent series.

The pleasing aspect of the Portercliffe Hall series in Nos. 1434-1439 was the large number of juniors who were featured in this holiday series. Not only were there the Famous Five and Bunter, but Vernon-Smith, Kipps, Wibley, and Alonzo Todd were also guests of Fisher T. Fish and his father, who had rented the mansion with a view to discovering a hidden hoard of sovereigns. The hoard was eventually discovered, but Mr. Fish did not succeed in netting the proceeds.

This was a jolly little series. Despite the mystery which pervaded every number, there was plenty of gaiety centring mainly around Bunter, of course, who came across some of the sovereigns and began passing gold coin in Margate. This series also constituted Alonzo Todd's swan-song. He has never been heard of again from that day to this, but he was at his very best at this time, and his farewell performance was superb. Incidentally, those who know well their geography of the Isle of Thanet will probably be able to spot the actual mansion on which

Portercliffe Hall was based.

The Warren series in Nos. 1440-1451 broke fresh ground in that it featured a new boy in the Fifth Form, as a result of which there was a more adult air about the stories. This made a welcome change, and there is no denying that the series went off to a promising start with Harry Wharton, who knew the real James Warren, realising in the first number that the new boy was an impostor.

The technique used in the Lancaster series was tried out again in the Warren series: the new boy was suspected in turn by various boys in the school - in this case, Coker, Price, and Loder. Like so many repeated themes, the second version was inferior to the first. Not only was the brilliant sparkle of the earlier series missing, but the plot failed to develop satisfactorily, and there was a good deal of repetition. Nevertheless it would be unfair to suggest that the Warren series was a failure. It had some very amusing moments, and contained some convincing little character sketches, but, taken as a whole and measured by Charles Hamilton's own standards, it did not quite succeed in making the grade.

The year was rounded off with the Polpelly series in Nos. 1452-1455, which did not perhaps succeed in rivalling some of the more famous Christmas series of earlier years, but it was nonetheless a very readable story of a companionable Christmas spent in a ruined mansion in Devonshire. There were in particular some fine descriptive passages, and the search for buried treasure was told against a fitting background of ghosts and mysteries.

1936 - A Year of Encores

"Bunter's Bid for a Fortune" in No. 1456 was a gamble on the football pools. He won a prize, but it turned out to be only one shilling! This was followed by the first part of the tale of Mr. Hacker's nephew in Nos. 1457-1460, which constituted the best series of the year. The picture of the irritable Shell master trying to believe in the

innocence of his nephew, Eric Wilmot, who had been expelled from Topham on a charge of theft, and the reaction of the Removites to the new boy who was afraid to make friends in a new school he had no wish to attend all added up to a noteworthy series of the latter day period.

Foreign holiday series worked up to a peak with the China series, after which nothing was quite so effective. The Brazil series in Nos. 1461-1468 was never less than entertaining, but it could not succeed in competing with the splendours of the past. Jim Valentine, the host, was also a pale ghost of his former self - which perhaps goes to prove that characters who have a special part to play in one series can often outlive their usefulness.

The Brazil series was for some reason published earlier than intended, before the Wilmot series was completed. At all events, the mystery of Hacker's nephew was finally cleared up in Nos. 1469-1470, after which the decks were cleared for the van Duck series in Nos. 1471-1478. Putnam van Duck, the son of a Chicago millionaire, had already been introduced to the readers (together with his gunman guardian, Poker Pike) at the end of the Brazil series. There was plenty of amusement in the van Duck series, and the highspot, in which Mr. Quelch routed an armed kidnapper with a walking stick, was a veritable treasure. Nevertheless there was more than a suspicion of unadulterated farce about some scenes, and the series as a whole could not compare with the kidnapping of Fisher T. Fish series of 1930.

"Billy Bunter's Burglar" and "The Popper Court Tea Party" in Nos. 1479 and 1480 were an amusing pair of stories which were followed by the Muccolini Circus series in Nos. 1481-1490. There is no doubt that the story of how Bunter ran away from school near the end of term to join a circus is a very readable one, and the span of the summer holidays spent in Sussex and Kent comprised all the necessary ingredients for a very successful holiday. But - and there is unfortunately a "but" - the series cannot hold a candle to the delightful Whiffles Circus series of 1928, and the clue

to the mystery lies in the way in which the character of Bunter was handled. For all his presumption, Bunter of the Whiffles Circus series was a likeable, engaging character - Billy Bunter in his very best period. By the time of Muccolini's Circus Bunter had deteriorated into a detestable young rascal, and the reader could feel no sympathy for him whatsoever. Yet the plot itself was strong and fascinating enough, and the series cannot be considered a failure by any means. Nevertheless it is sad to record the decline in the presentation of Bunter's character.

During the 1934 summer holiday series the Magnet had presented cover to cover tales of Greyfriars, but the practice of carrying a serial at the end was resumed when the autumn term commenced in that year. With No. 1484, however, cover to cover tales returned. The omission of the serial was an undoubted tribute to Charles Hamilton's popularity with the readers, but there do seem to be grounds for considering that the additional five chapters made the Greyfriars stories just a little too long. Be this as it may, the readers must have felt quite satisfied, for the serials never returned to the Magnet again.

"Johnny Bull on the Run" in No. 1491 concluded the summer holidays. It made a distinct change to have a story featuring the Yorkshire member of the Famous Five, but it was a welcome change nonetheless. "Schemers of Study No. 7" the next week was a most amusing description of how Bunter contrived to turn awry Peter Todd's plans of vengeance against Loder. Loder also featured in a series in Nos. 1493-1496 which related how his cousin escaped from prison and came to Greyfriars as a master under the name of Lagden (a favourite name for masters with a dubious background). Two more single stories followed: "His Scapegrace Brother" in No. 1497, featuring Dicky Nugent and his new found friend Price of the Fifth, and "Harry Wharton's Amazing Relation" in No. 1498, an unhappy story of how Wibley disguised himself as a Jew in order to embarrass the Captain of the Remove: it may be that the readers were embarrassed also.

If the Warren series had been an echo of the Lancaster series, the Compton series in Nos. 1499-1509 was in its turn an echo of the Warren series. There was a new senior in the Fifth with a guilty secret, who was suspected in turn by various members of the school. Valentine Compton was a smuggler whose uncle ran a yacht called "The Firefly", and once the juniors boarded that vessel in No. 1506 for the Christmas holidays the series brightened up considerably: as with a number of other holiday series, the transference of the scene to foreign parts considerably heightened the drama, for what might seem exaggerated in England was credible enough abroad. No reader could have found fault with the dramatic climax to the series.

1937 - The Magnet Looks Back

The first series of the new term was the famous Tuckshop Rebellion series of Nos. 1510-1515. On the face of it, it was a good idea to star the ill-tempered Mr. Hacker as headmaster for a while, and the development of the resistance to his tyranny was both logical and interesting. But the series cannot rank as one of the great Magnet barrings-out. One has only to compare it with the Brander rebellion to realise that it was on an infinitely lower plane, and the vein of sheer farce which was often apparent in the van Duck series re-appeared in the Tuckshop Rebellion series, culminating in the scene in which Mr. Hacker was caught by the rebels and forced to do the washing-up for them. There had been plenty of fun and high spirits in the Brander series, but these had not been allowed to spoil the scenes of high drama. The Tuckshop Rebellion series was nothing but fun and excitement: high drama was completely missing.

* "Coker the Kidnapper" in No. 1516 related how Wingate was kidnapped because he would not play Coker in a match. "The Man with the Glaring Eyes" the following week was very much off the beaten track. Mr. Quelch had a distant relative named Philip Darke who was a hypnotist and was

wanted by the police. This unusual story was probably based upon an actual case at the time.

A series connected with Highcliffe was usually well above average, and the story of Quelch's gold chain in Nos. 1518-1521 was exceptionally well contrived and very amusing. Bunter played a trick with a gold chain belonging to his form-master which then passed into the possession of Ponsonby who lost no opportunity to make mischief between the two schools. This was one of the brightest periods of the autumnal years of the Magnet.

Years ago - in 1931, to be precise - Mr. Vernon-Smith had taken a party of Removites to Kenya. In the series in Nos. 1522-1525 it transpired that he had then obtained a concession so valuable that it now resulted in attempts on his life by an Italian. What made this series so amusing was the description of Bunter's stay at the Vernon-Smiths' country mansion at Seahill, and the novel manner in which his fellow guests from Highcliffe attempted to rid themselves of him. The holiday was rounded off with the delightful Coronation story in No. 1516, in which Bunter pretended to know Lord Trant - and then found to his amazement that he was his honoured guest at the Coronation Party.

A single story in No. 1527 entitled "Coker the Conqueror" was followed by the Cliff House feud series in Nos. 1528-1530. Once again Ponsonby played an ignoble part, but it could not compare with his two previous performances. A pair of stories featuring Bunter and an unexpected windfall of £50 came next, and then attention was focused on Cliff House again in Nos. 1533-1535 in which Bob Cherry mistakenly suspected Marjorie Hazelen of stealing Mauly's tenner.

A certain amount of suspension of belief is a necessary prerequisite of enjoying a story about Wibley, and the theme of Nos. 1536-1540 undoubtedly required a good deal of believing. Wibley was expelled for guying Monsieur Charpentier, and he returned to Greyfriars disguised as

new boy, Archibald Popper, in the hopes of obtaining Mossoo's forgiveness. The theme was treated in a most hilarious fashion, and may definitely be considered a marked success.

The China series sprang to life when the juniors first reached the Far East at Singapore. It is not surprising therefore that the series featuring Wun Lung in Nos. 1541-1544 should have failed to blossom out in the same way, having regard to the fact that the action took place entirely in Europe. There was a good deal of excitement and well contrived drama, but the series could not match the famous one of earlier days.

The tale of Skip in Nos. 1545-1554 was a variant on a very old theme - that of the befriended waif who subsequently discovered his long-lost relative. Skip was a pickpocket who was taken under Coker's wing and - with the aid of the indomitable Aunt Judy - entered for the Remove. This was a readable series, but one which was in no way outstanding, and one which lacked the dramatic twists and turns of the Flip series of 1932. What is noteworthy about the Skip series is that No. 1552 was the last of the coloured-cover Magnets. According to the editor, readers had been continuously writing in to request a return to the original type of cover in order that the Magnet could be distinctively picked out on the bookstalls. This is a statement which can be taken with a pinch of salt, since it is very doubtful whether many readers in 1937 had ever seen a red-covered Magnet, and there is no reason to suppose that the few who had seen one should have wanted a return to the old cover after such a lapse of time. Mr. Chapman has stated, however, that the change was not effected by reason of falling circulation or in an attempt to economise, and one can surmise only that an editorial decision was taken in the hopes of achieving some of the old originality of appearance, and the readers were then told that it was in answer to their requests. The original covers had been red, and the editor

promised a return to the orange-coloured cover, but No. 1553 was definitely a salmon pink, and so the colour remained until the end of the paper in 1940.

The remainder of the year's stories revolved around Bunter. "Bunter's Orders" in No. 1555 related how he blackmailed his way into the team in order to earn a tip from his uncle, whilst Nos. 1556-1559 were devoted to the famous Reynham Castle series, in which Bunter played the part of Lord Reynham in order to draw the attention of kidnappers. Charles Hamilton's Christmas series were never less than entertaining, and this particular one was one of the best of the latter day years - perhaps because most of us enjoy the spectacle of seeing a pig in clover.

Conclusion

The autumn years were marred chiefly by a sense of repetition. Themes that were so fresh and successful in the golden age of the Magnet were refurbished and presented once again in many entertaining guises, but even the most tasty hash on a Monday can never quite equal the succulent flavour of Sunday's roast. Quite apart from the repetition of general themes, each series itself became more static: instead of there being developments in plot and characterisation, each weekly episode tended to be a thinly disguised repetition of the previous one - a feature which first became apparent in the Caffyn series. Finally that intangible asset of the early 'thirties - the delightful, bubbling, humorous style of writing which cast such a sheen of glory over the stories - was gradually disappearing.

It must be remembered that this criticism rests solely upon a comparison with Charles Hamilton's own extremely high standards, and it is not intended to imply that nothing in the Magnet after 1934 was worth the reading. The Stacey series bears comparison with anything that had previously appeared, whilst the Portercliffe Hall series was as diverting as many other holidays of yore, and the

Wilmot series was as striking a character study as some of the best of old. It would have been impossible for the standards of the golden age to have been maintained indefinitely and we may feel glad that, with the stories of 1935-1937, the Magnet revealed that it did at least possess the valuable ability to grow old gracefully.

