

LET'S BE CONTROVERSIAL

No. 137. THE MAGNET LOVE STORY OF 1920

When I first read the Magnet's love story of 1920 - the Schoolboy Film Stars Series, - it never occurred to me for one moment that Charles Hamilton had written it. I regarded it as a lousy series in a year of lousy stories.

Years later, I found that Roger Jenkins thought it a genuine series, albeit not a good one.

Soon after the war ended, John Shaw had compiled a list of substitute stories of the Magnet and Gem. This list did not include the 1920 Film Star series, which showed that Mr. Shaw believed this series to be written by Charles Hamilton. In a very early edition of Collectors' Digest Annual this list by Mr. Shaw was published. Herbert Leckenby, introducing the list, wrote: "It will be cordially agreed that John Shaw knows more about the stories than anyone." For some years, in fact, Mr. Shaw's list was accepted as something of a Hamilton bible.

Also in that very early C.D. Annual appeared an article by John Geal entitled "Magnet Masterpieces." Of the Film Star series Mr. Geal wrote: "Elsie Mainwaring, the film star, is making a school film. The Greyfriars juniors, some seniors and the Cliff House girls are included, as a genuine background. This takes place at Hawthorne Park on the coast. A love affair between Elsie and Wingate causes trouble, and many exciting twists to a good tale." In passing, Mr. Geal's "Magnet Masterpieces" included some substitute series, including Wally Bunter - Form Master.

In his famous History of the Magnet, Roger Jenkins had this to say about the series: "The only series Charles Hamilton wrote for the Magnet in 1920 was about the schoolboy film stars in Nos. 660 - 664. A party of Greyfriars fellows, under the care of Mr. Quelch, went to stay at Hawthorne Park where Mr. Cyrus Hunker was making films. This was an odd melodramatic sort of series, with Wingate in the lead. How he fell in love with the actress, Elsie Mainwaring, is recounted in a manner which harks back to red Magnet days. This was indeed the last of the love stories in the Magnet."

Some years later still, Mr. W. O. G. Lofts gave us his list of

substitute stories. Magnets 660 - 664 were not included in this list, thereby indicating that these stories had been written by Charles Hamilton.

Recently, in May of this year, I wrote in this column an article on the Schoolboys' Own Library, criticising the editing of that monthly. I commented: "The story of film stars and Wingate's love affair filled 5 Magnets. It boiled down into one S.O.L. It was nothing to write home about in the Magnet. In the S.O.L. it was a poor thing."

Contributing to the Controversial Echoes on this theme, Mr. Philip Tierney wrote: "As for 'Schoolboy's Honour,' the condensed version of the Wingate love affair story, I think it was absolute piffle from the first paragraph to the last. I am still not convinced, despite what the experts say, that it was Charles Hamilton himself who wrote it."

Mr. Tierney's remarks rang a bell for me. I have now read the series again, not without difficulty. I can say now that I fully agree with Mr. Tierney. I don't believe for one moment that Charles Hamilton wrote this story. I feel the same about it now as I did long ago.

In trying to weigh matters up fairly, we must admit that Charles Hamilton was far from at his best in 1920. It was a bad year for both the Gem and the Magnet. Hamilton wrote only a few stories for each paper. In the Gem he did not appear at all until September, when he contributed the Dirk Power series. This was not a first-class series, but the reader is never in any doubt that he is reading genuine Hamilton material.

Quite the reverse is the case in the film-star series, and I am puzzled as to how it ever came to be accepted as Hamiltonian. It appeared in a year which was a sea of substitute stories, and it is similar in construction and dialogue to plenty of substitute tales of the period.

This series, like so many substitute stories, started off on the wrong foot by providing the plot with a framework which was completely unbelievable. In the middle of term, the Head, without, apparently, making any enquiries at all, gave permission for 50 boys of Greyfriars to go to live at a "cinema school" on the coast for many weeks, in order to make films. The whole thing is quite incredible.

How different was the approach to the Hollywood Series of happier days! A small party went to the States for an educational tour, under the charge of a parent of one of the boys. The boys assumed, quite rightly, that the Head would never have agreed to their appearing in a film, but Mr. Fish, for his own purposes, contrived that the boys should believe that the Head had actually given permission.

Even more unlikely in the 1920 series was the fact that Miss Primrose also gave permission for a contingent of her girls to go to live, in term time, at this "cinema school." The girls were under the charge of Miss Locke. Note how the author introduces the girls: "--the juniors waved their caps to Marjorie Hazeldene and Miss Clara and Barbara and Mabel Lynn, and Philippa Derwent and the rest." Can you credit that Charles Hamilton ever included such an oddly constructed sentence in one of his stories?

Furthermore, there was no purpose in dragging the Cliff House girls into this mix-up. They play no part in the story at all.

The swift passing of time in this series was no Hamilton characteristic. Nor was the cramming of details, essential to the plot, into a few lines as is done on several occasions. Nor, in fact, were the loose ends which occur.

Another incredible item was that an American producer, in 1920, should have been making a film on the English coast with Wingate as a cowboy.

I now give a synopsis of the plot of the series. It is impossible to be brief in this synopsis, from the fact that action is so thick and fast. The dialogue, at times, was "corny," but I make no attempt to "send up" some of the stilted writing. The tale was written 50 years ago, and it is easy to gey the dialogue of most romances written as long ago as that. Here, then, is the synopsis:

Mr. Cyrus Hunker is a film-producer with a cinema school on the coast at Hawthorne Park. Mr. Hunker wants a party of about 50 boys to go to Hawthorne Park, where "there is ample accommodation of every kind. A master will be sent with the party, so that the usual studies will not be entirely neglected. Volunteers may give their names to their form-masters." (So announced the Head.)

The party comprising most of the Remove, Temple & Co. of the Fourth, Coker and Co. of the Fifth, Hobson & Co. of the Shell, and some of the Sixth including Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder, sets off in charge of Mr. Quelch on a double-decker bus.

"A head popped up the ladder at the back of the bus.

'Boys!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Oh, it's Quelchy! Yes, sir!'

'Not so much noise, please!'

'Don't you care for music, sir?'

'Certainly I do, Cherry; but I do not care for a tuneless, discordant noise!'

snapped the Remove master."

Out in the country, the bus overtook a large motor char-a-banc. The char-a-banc is crowded with Cliff House girls, and 'the juniors waved their caps to Marjorie Hazeldene and Miss Clara and Barbara and Mabel Lynn, and Philippa Derwent and the rest.' The girls, too, are on their way to Hawthorne Park, in charge of Miss Locke.

Later on, Wingate meets Miss Elsie Mainwaring, the film star. "'You know me?' she said, with a smile.

Wingate's colour deepened.

'Only from the pictures,' he said. 'I've seen you on the films, Miss Mainwaring. I-I always go to the pictures when you are on the screen.'

Mr. Hunker hands round cigarettes to the boys and girls. Mr. Quelch protests.

'Oh, I smoke, sir!' said Billy Bunter manfully. 'I - I'm rather fond of smoking, sir!'

'If you smoke, Bunter, it will be my painful duty to administer severe correction with a cane.'

During the next few days, the juniors decide that Wingate has fallen in love with Elsie. More than a week goes by, and a football scene is filmed.

Another week goes by, and then Wharton comes on Wingate and Elsie together.

'Your face has often been clouded,' said Wingate. 'I - I've thought for some time something was troubling you. Isn't it true?'

'It is true,' Elsie replied with a sigh. 'There is something that does trouble me, but -- but --'

'Can't I help you?'

'I fear not!'

The next day Mr. Hunker casts his film. Wingate is a cowboy rustler, and Loder is the hero. Elsie is to be in a runaway trap, and Loder is to rescue her.

The next day (how days fly at Hawthorne Park!) the film is to be shot. Loder loses his nerve, so Wingate rescues the terrified Elsie.

'I shall never forget this!' she said, and she pressed his hand, and left him, with a tremulous smile."

Two or three days pass, and then Elsie is missing. There is consternation at the Cinema School. Bunter announces that Wingate has been trying to borrow money.

Wharton comes on Wingate who is on the way to the station with a bag in his hand.

'I meant to slip away quietly,' said Wingate. 'You needn't mention that you've seen me.'

'But - but --' exclaimed Wharton in dismay.

'He understood the matter clearly enough. It was Elsie Mainwaring who was drawing Wingate away from Hawthorne Park, as she had drawn him there in the first place.'

Back at the Cinema School, Mr. Hunker is in a rare tantrum.

'What has happened?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, coming up breathlessly.

'I've been robbed!' roared Mr. Hunker. 'A hundred pounds has been taken from my desk.'

'It is quite impossible that a Greyfriars boy --' began Mr. Quelch haughtily."

The first story ends "with black suspicion in the minds of the schoolboy cinema stars."

The next day, with permission from Mr. Quelch, the Famous Five set out to search for Wingate. Mr. Hunker gives them a week, after which he will send for the police.

Meanwhile, Wingate has (by some means unexplained) traced Elsie to Fritchester. "He must find her - he would find her."

In a dusky street in Fritchester, Wingate rescues a policeman who is being attacked by three toughs. Wingate's crashing fists get to work.

A fight promoter, Jeff Blake, is impressed.

The scene changes. In a dingy garret a villain named Vernon Carson has found Elsie. He presses his unwelcome suit.

"It is not every man of my standing who would give his name to a convict's daughter."

Mr. Carson has discovered Elsie's father in hiding.

"Then all is lost" moaned Elsie.

Then she hears the ringing voice of George Wingate of Greyfriars. He rescues Elsie, and Carson flees.

Elsie explains to Wingate that her father had to make a sudden journey, and she has no money left. It has taken Wingate a week to find Elsie. He decides to take her to his own lodgings, as his sister.

In the darkness, on the way to his lodgings, he hears a well-known voice - that of Bob Cherry of the Remove. Wingate sees a group of boys, and he darts into an alley to hide.

Their voices come to him through the darkness.

"He's got to come back and clear his name."

The voices die away. Wingate is puzzled by the words he heard. He seeks out Jeff Blake, and it is arranged that, for a tenner, Wingate shall fight the Chicken.

The Famous Five, in their turn, rescue Elsie from Carson. They see her going in to see the fight, and they go in, too.

Elsie, horrified at seeing her George being knocked about, rushes into the ring. George collapses into her arms.

The next day Wharton is by Wingate's side when he opens his bruised eyes. Wingate learns of the theft of the money, and Elsie says 'You must go back at once.'

The next day there is a cheer at Hawthorne Park when Wingate returns to clear his name.

Bunter now has plenty of money. He is anxious to leave Hawthorne Park. He wants change for a ten-pound note.

The filming is resumed, and Elsie's fear of Carson makes her acting natural. Carson steals a letter, written in Morse, from Elsie. The Famous Five have planted the letter for Carson to pinch. It contains an insulting message to Carson - in Morse.

Carson takes from Bunter the money which Bunter had "found." In the meantime, Wingate gives Carson a thrashing. A detective - Mr. Beaky - is called in. Beaky finds the money - up Wingate's chimney. Mr. Quelch is upset

"Unhappy boy!"

'You believe me guilty, then?'

'What can I believe?' groaned Mr. Quelch. 'Unhappy, unhappy boy! What drove you to this act of madness?'

Wingate winced.

Mr. Quelch leaves the room wearily, and Wingate asks himself some rhetorical questions.

Bunter, at last, tells how Carson took the money from him, and at the end of that story Carson shakes his fist in impotent fury, and strides off into the darkness.

In the next tale, Carson phones Elsie from Seacliff. Elsie's father is at Seacliff. Elsie gives a moan.

Wingate meets Mr. Mainwaring - "a worthy father of Elsie." Carson threatens, 'I shall take a bitter revenge.'

After a good bit more melodrama, Wingate and Carson fight once more, but this time Carson has a revolver. The revolver goes off four times.

'I am not hurt,' says Wingate - but Carson is lying in a crimson pool.

Carson confesses that he stole the money for the theft of which Mr. Mainwaring had been sent to prison.

"I forgive you!" whispers Elsie, and the cold hand of the film actor was held in Elsie's as his life ebbed away.

In the final chapter, Wingate took his farewell of Elsie.

In the past I have made it clear that I am not unduly impressed by evidence gained from the literary analysis of isolated items in stories. But, from first to last, this film series never "feels" like a Hamilton story, and there are any amount of places where one gets what Gerry Allison would describe as "the crunch."

Take "It is quite impossible that a Greyfriars boy --" began Mr. Quelch haughtily. I am quite sure that Hamilton, in all his long life, never made Quelch speak "haughtily."

And "What can I believe?" groaned Mr. Quelch. "Unhappy, unhappy boy!" If that's Hamilton, then I'm a Dutchman.

I am not an expert on the substitute writers, but I incline to the view that this series came from Mr. Samways. The sentimental relationship between Wingate and Elsie is reminiscent of the many Samways tales about the Toff and Marie Rivers.

The series teems with rhetorical questions. Hamilton rarely used them. Samways stories had plenty.

There is a good deal of the characters' thoughts being expressed in words. This style of writing is found in Samways - rarely in Hamilton. ("He must find her - he would find her" reminds one irresistibly of the closing chapters of that post-war hybrid "Just Like Bunter.")

The use of Miss Locke, in charge of the girls, is another pointer. Miss Locke was a Hamilton creation, but, so far as I recall, she had been discarded in red cover days. Hamilton constructed the Cliff House cast for the School Friend. There was no mention of Miss Locke. Yet she appears briefly in this film series, as does Philippa Derwent (the latter a Pentelow creation).

Mr. Samways would have enjoyed the red cover Magnet as a boy. It would probably have been his golden age of the Magnet. It might account for Miss Locke turning up here.

There is one fly in the ointment. If Mr. Tierney and I are right, and this series has erroneously been classed as Hamiltonian, then how comes it that Mr. Lofts did not find it in the official records of the substitute stories. I wonder whether perhaps Mr. Lofts did find it

credited to a substitute writer, and, knowing that Collectors' Digest Annual had credited it to Hamilton, decided that the records must be wrong in this case, and omitted it from his own lists.

No doubt Mr. Lofts will let us have a few brief observations in due course as to the official records. In any case, it will not affect my personal view. Mr. Tierney is not convinced that Hamilton wrote this series. I am convinced that he did not.

ECHOES OF THAT LOVE STORY

GEOFFREY WILDE: I am sure you are right in rejecting the 1920 Film Star series as Hamilton's work. There are one or two single Magnet stories usually credited to him which I find it equally impossible to accept. And in such matters I would quite unrepentantly back my own judgment or yours against so-called documentary evidence.

There are difficulties, of course. You admit to being unimpressed by "evidence gained from the literary analysis of isolated items," and here you exercise a sensible caution. The conditions under which the old papers were produced were such that the editorial interpolation of a sentence or paragraph here and there must have been quite common. There must in the same way be a good many scattered lines in our collected Shakespeares which are the gratuitous insertions of the lead actors of the time, and which the editors of the First Folio allowed to stand.

But one thing is certain: the feel of a story, play, or whatever, taken as a whole is quite unmistakable, and the real thing is instantly recognised when one meets it.

The fact is, the layman mistrusts stylistic evidence because it seems to be based on such intangible factors, alongside which "facts" appear reassuringly solid and certain. But I'm prepared to be quite

dogmatic here and assert that a really sensitive and well-informed student's feeling for style will simply never let him down.

SYD SMYTH: I thought "Let's Be Controversial" this month marvellous - of great interest to me and sending me back to the series to see for myself. Rest assured your great effort is appreciated.

W. O. G. LOFTS: In view of the controversy that has always surrounded the Wingate Love Series, I made a special double check on official records when compiling my lists. It always came up with the same answer that Charles Hamilton wrote the series. I once asked Mr. Samways whether he wrote the series and he said that he certainly did not, and to my statement that it was a poor series he said that Charles Hamilton was only human and could not be expected to write brilliant tales all the time, and in his opinion Hamilton had written them. On the other hand, though I accept official records as strictly binding, it is known that strange things were going on in the Magnet office about this time. The whole solution may be that someone with a pull at Fleetway House had written the series and Chas. Hamilton may have had the task of re-writing it up.

Personally, I think it the poorest series ever to appear in the Magnet, and one could be swayed against it being by Hamilton because it is hopelessly outdated and almost comical in theme by today's standards.

GERALD ALLISON: I am now through reading Magnets 660 - 664 for the first (and last) time.

Philip Tierney wrote to me a few months ago and asked my opinion of this series - which he had just read in SOL No. 9 - not lent to him from the club library I'm glad to say.

Now I have read the story, and agree with you that it is not by Hamilton. It is amazing though, how cleverly these sub-writers imitate the appearance in type of a genuine story. The cinders had been ground very small to avoid the agonizing 'crunch between the teeth.' One thing I find in these inferior writers - the pedantic avoidance of the word 'said.' I have made a list of the varied synonyms for the simple word 'said,' and they are a convincing proof - to me - that this story is not genuine.

ERIC FAYNE says: It is news to me that controversy has always

surrounded the Wingate Love Affair series. Last month I quoted the experts who accept it as a genuine series, but I was unaware that I was following in the footsteps of others who have argued against its being Hamiltonian. I shall be glad to have particulars of where and when their articles appeared, in order that I can read them.

Mr. Samways seemed to think that it was written by Hamilton during a period of mental aberration. Luckily Hamilton recovered quickly in time for the Dirk Power series.

Euclid would have the right word for the hypothesis that someone else wrote the series and Hamilton was given the job of polishing it up. But Mr. Lofts is off-side in calling this the Magnet's "poorest series." There were worse.

LAURIE SUTTON (on an earlier theme): It would appear obvious to me that the 1920 series was written to order - and I don't think any creative writer is completely himself under such circumstances. But as you mention the Gem Dirk Power series, surely this was just as much off the normal Hamilton track, and the melodramatic style could just as easily be put down to a sub-writer; likewise the strange pair of Hamilton

stories in the Gem of 1925, "Shadowed From School" and "Hunted Down."

Another point is that from years of detailed research and statistical extracts on the substitute writers I know the phraseology and style of the regular sub-writers, and it certainly bears not the faintest resemblance to any of them. The series was definitely not written by G. R. Samways, F. G. Cook or J. N. Pentelow, although the theme could admittedly suggest either of the first two.

Mr. Sutton in a later letter wrote:

I feel now that I would like to come back to the cinema series and read it again when I have more time, as I'm having second thoughts on it. At the moment I think I'll change my judgment to a temporary one of "not proven."
