To Roger Needham
with the author's best wishes.
21/1/1996

CHARLES HAMILTON, GREYFRIARS AND MYSELF

Presidential Address to the Private Libraries Association by Raymond Lister 9 April 1974

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CHARLES HAMILTON, GREYFRIARS AND MYSELF

Raymond Lister

THE story of the subject of this paper—so far as my own involvement with it is concerned—began in the autumn of 1930, one year after I had become a pupil at the Cambridge and County High School for Boys. From the autumn of 1929 until the summer of 1930, I had been happy there, under the guidance of a wise, understanding and dedicated form-master. But this man retired in 1930, and thereafter my life at the County School was anything but happy, coming, as it did, under the domination of an unimaginative, unfeeling and uncomprehending headmaster—a mind without a man.

But that is another story, except to remark that the fact of my youthful misery (not to put too exaggerated a name to it) had a great deal to do with what I am going to talk to you about this evening. For it originated a long interest in old boys' books. I first had to find an escape, if only in imagination, from my headmaster's educational ideal. I found what I wanted in the school stories of Charles Hamilton, which I first discovered, during a summer holiday at Great Yarmouth, on the bookshelves in our lodgings. They were printed in a series of books called the *Greyfriars Holiday Annual*, published by the Amalgamated Press, and related the adventures of boys at three imaginary public schools, Greyfriars, St. Jim's and Rookwood. The Greyfriars stories appeared under the name of Frank Richards, those of St. Jim's under that of Martin Clifford, and those of Rookwood under that of Owen Conquest.

I did not realise then, and indeed only discovered it many years later, that each of these names was a pseudonym for Charles Hamilton, an unique literary phenomenon, who, it has been calculated, wrote during his career millions of words for boys and girls. Hamilton's own name appeared here and there as the author of other stories, but these had little interest for me—it was mainly the adventures at Greyfriars (printed weekly, I later discovered, in *The Magnet*) and, to a lesser extent, those at St. Jim's (printed weekly in *The Gem*) that I found so fascinating.

These adventures did not resemble the happenings at any real school, private, public or secondary, but were very much larger than life—as indeed was right. But I dreamed that they were completely authentic; and they showed an environment so utterly different from that created by my own headmaster, that they offered me a delightful world of make-believe, into which I could, at least in imagination escape from what I saw as the cold, unfeeling, noxious reality of my own school.

At Greyfriars (which was situated in Kent) there was always adventure. A new master might prove to be a criminal, or perhaps a detective. The less stable of the school's characters would break out at night to play billiards at The Three Fishers, a local pub of ill-repute, and would escape detection (if at all) by only the slenderest of margins.

But the heroes were always clean, decent chaps, good at both games and class-work, ready to help a lame dog, or to put a new boy on the right path, but dreadfully down on more shifty characters or slackers. Such were the 'Famous Five' of the Greyfriars Remove—Harry Wharton, the captain and head boy of the form, and his friends, Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, the Nabob of Bhanipur. It was around these boys and their form that most of the adventures revolved.

On the whole, the masters were a decent lot, too. Most prominent was Henry Samuel Quelch, M.A., form-master of the Remove, a strict yet just man, but a holy terror to malefactors. There was Paul Pontifex Prout, the elephantine master of the Fifth, who bored his colleagues with stories of his youthful escapades hunting bears in the Rocky Mountains. The comic French Master (and all foreigners were comic) M. Henri Charpentier, or 'Mossoo'; Larry Lascelles, the youthful games and mathematics master; mild Mr Capper, master of the Fourth; and tart Mr Hacker, Master of the Shell, were among other members of the staff presided over by Dr Herbert Henry Locke, the Headmaster, a kindly old gentleman, who yet was able to wield the birch with considerable muscle.

Opposite: The Cover of the first issue of The Magnet, *published 15 February 1908 (reduced).*

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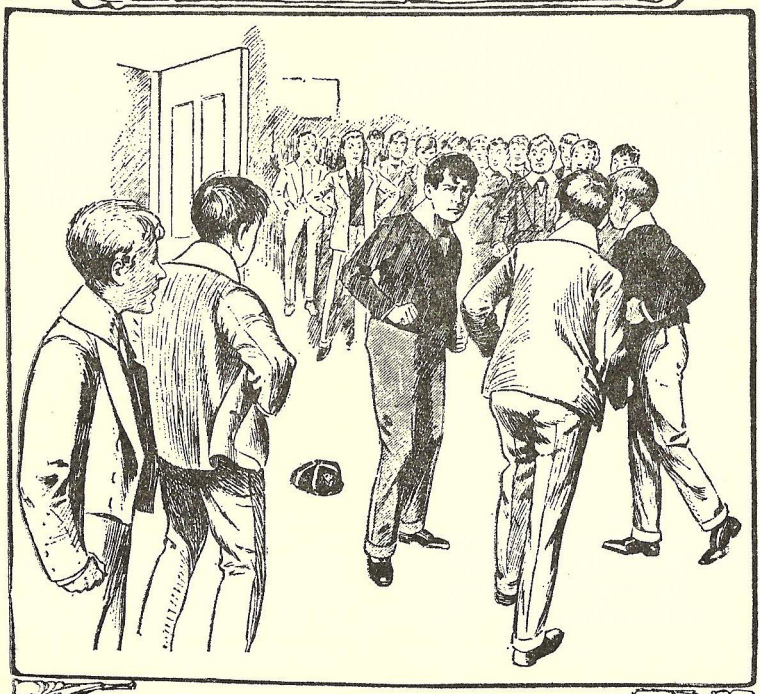
COMPLETE SCHOOL TALE

The Making of Harry Wharton

By FRANK RICHARDS



HE TORE HIMSELF FREE AND GLARED AROUND!

Among the servants were the crusty old porter, William Gosling, who often expressed the opinion that all boys were 'young rips who ought to be drownded at birth'; Fred Trotter, the page; and Mrs Jessie Mimble the kind old lady who ran the tuckshop.

The majority of the Greyfriars boys, such as the Famous Five, came from upper class and higher middle-class backgrounds, although there were exceptions. And the lower-class boys who appeared were almost invariably drawn as characters of the highest moral calibre; one such was a fisherman's son, another the son of a Lancashire factory-worker. But they were not typical.

Harry Wharton, despite the fact that he was an orphan, was more typical of the general sum of Greyfriars scholars. He had been brought up by his uncle, Colonel James Wharton, a wealthy upper-crust land-owner, who lived at the ancient family home, Wharton Lodge, at Wharton Magnus, in Surrey.

As a character, Harry Wharton was somewhat idealised, but not too much. His counterpart at St. Jim's in the *Gem* stories, Tom Merry, was too good to be true, and had something of *Eric, or Little by Little* in his make-up. Wharton was at heart a good chap, but inclined to truculence, shortness of temper, and *hubris*. But he was really far too healthy-minded for a boy of fifteen. Perhaps his repressions were responsible for his uncertain temper. Be that as it may, Harry Wharton made his first appearance in the first chapter of the first *Magnet* story in 1908, in which the boy's character was clearly drawn, although it was to be modified during the course of the paper's 1,683 issues:

'SEND Master Harry to me!'

Colonel Wharton filled his glass from the decanter, held it up to the light, and then slowly sipped the contents, a dark shade of thought upon his bronzed face the while.

The colonel had dined, and he was alone now in the old, dark, oak-panelled dining-room at Wharton Lodge. A bronzed, grim-visaged old soldier was the colonel, but under the rugged exterior a kindly heart beat.

The door of the dining-room opened, and the colonel set down his glass, only half emptied, and compressed his lips slightly as he looked at the boy who came into the room.

A handsome, well-built lad, finely-formed, strong and active. Handsome indeed was the face, with its well-marked features and large, dark eyes. But there was a cloud upon it, a cloud that seemed habitual there, and in the dark eyes was a glint of suspicion and defiance. The whole manner of the boy was

one of suppressed hostility, and the colonel realised it keenly enough without words being spoken.

'You sent for me, uncle.'

In the tones of Harry Wharton, too, was a half-hidden hostility and defiance, as if he knew that he had not been sent for in a friendly spirit, and was ready to meet anger with anger.

'Yes, Harry.' Colonel Wharton's voice was very mild.

'Sit down, my boy. I want to speak to you.'

Harry Wharton did not move. The colonel raised his eyebrows.

'Sit down, Harry.'

'I suppose you are not going to keep me long,' said the boy doggedly. 'I want to go out on my pony before dark—'

The colonel half rose from his seat, a flush of anger darkening his cheek.

'Sit down!' he thundered.

For a moment it looked as if the order would be disobeyed, but there was something in the colonel's face that impelled obedience. Harry Wharton slowly moved to a chair and sat down, but the sullen cloud was darkening on his brow.

'Now, Harry,' said the colonel, in a more kindly voice, 'I want to speak to you seriously. I hope you will take all I am going to say in a friendly spirit. I am your uncle; you are the only son of my only brother, and you should understand that I have your truest interests at heart.'

The boy's lips slightly curled, but he did not speak.

'I have come home from India,' resumed the colonel, slightly raising his tone, 'to find that you have run completely wild under the charge of my sister, and I should not be doing my duty to my dead brother if I did not take you in hand and make at least an attempt to put you on a better road. You have grown up wilful and headstrong, you have grown into the habit of dictating to Miss Wharton, and of overruling your tutor. Your education has been neglected—'

'Mr. Pynsent says I am quite as advanced as most boys of my age,' said Harry, with a sulky look.

'Possibly, because you are naturally a quick and intelligent lad; otherwise, you would be a perfect ignoramus by this time. You have done exactly as you liked, and you have not the least idea of discipline. During the month that I have been at home I have tried to improve you—'

'Perhaps I don't want improving.'

'You probably think so,' said the colonel patiently: 'But I think otherwise and, as your guardian, I have my duty to do. You are obstinate and wilful, and inclined to be insolent to your elders. All that must cease. You have run wild too long. That must come to an end. But I cannot bring myself to exercise the severity necessary for the purpose and my feeble attempts in that direction

have made the house almost a pandemonium. You are determined to have your way, and I am determined that you are not to have it.'

Harry Wharton smiled slightly. He knew perfectly well that the veteran from India had undertaken his reform, and without thinking much about the matter, he had set himself against it. He flattered himself that the colonel would find it a thankless task, but he had not been quite prepared for this confession of failure.

The smile on the boy's face irritated the colonel, and he had to make an effort to speak calmly and dispassionately as he went on:

'I have, therefore, come to a new decision, Harry, which is what I want to tell you about now. I am going to send you to school.'

Harry Wharton's face fell.

'To school?'

He repeated the words blankly. He had not thought of that.

'Yes, to school! I have written to Dr Locke, the headmaster of Greyfriars—the school where I was educated—and he is ready to receive you. You will go to Greyfriars tomorrow morning.'

In course of time Harry settled down, and became head boy and captain of the Remove Form, and in general a good chap.

Wharton's great friend, Frank Nugent, was little more than a cipher. Johnny Bull, a Yorkshire boy, was noted for his straight talk, which, more often than not was merely tactless—even boorish.

Bob Cherry, who was the most sunny-natured member of the group, was clumsy in many ways—unable for instance, to the consternation of Mr Quelch, to sit in class without shuffling his feet—but a good all-round sportsman, always willing to look for the best in every person and every situation. In his slangy, but good-natured way of speaking, he is reminiscent of Corkoran in Kipling's *Stalky & Co* (and, in passing, we may remark on the deep influence of that book on much of Hamilton's work).

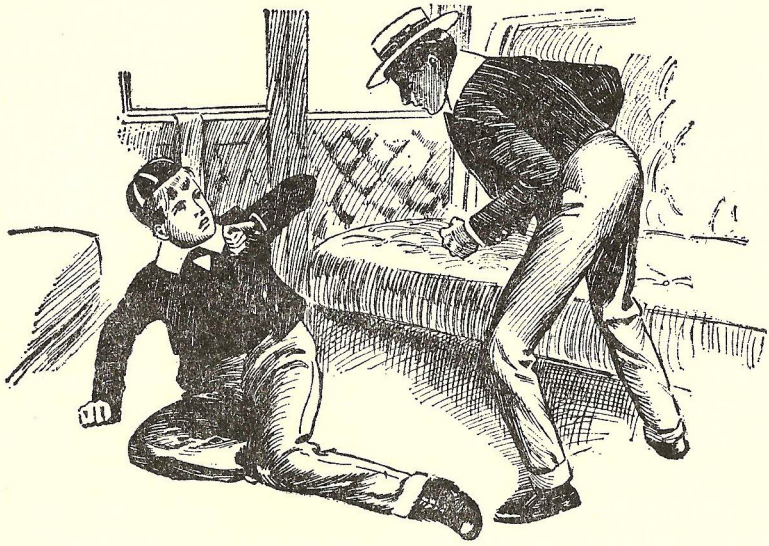
The most curious member of the Famous Five was the Indian boy, Hurree Singh, who had learned English from a certain celebrated moonshee in his native Bhanipur. It is strange that Hamilton should have inserted as a permanent character in his stories, one who spoke Babu English, and one would have thought it unlikely that a speaker of such English should have been a prince. Yet it all falls into place in the stories and was completely acceptable. Even the stately and portly Wells, Colonel Wharton's butler, did not bat an eyelid when Hurree Singh asked him to deliver a note to Harry Wharton, explaining an abrupt departure from a Christmas holiday at Wharton Lodge. 'It's early, Sir!'

remarked Wells when he found the Indian boy dressed, packed and ready to depart before breakfast.

'Quitefully so!' agreed the nabob.

'Perhapsfully you will have the kindness, my esteemed Wells, to deliver this note to the worthy Wharton when he comes downfully?'

Hamilton's concentration on adventures of boys of the upper classes has caused the charge of snobbery to be levelled at him—on one occasion by George Orwell. But the charge is unfair. Hamilton wrote at a period—mainly between 1909 and 1939—when public schools consisted almost exclusively of boys from those classes. And he went so far (as I have just indicated) to include working-class boys, and to show them in the best possible light, frequently contrasting them favourably with boys from more prosperous backgrounds.



An illustration from the first issue of The Magnet, *15 February 1908.*

Thus the son of a Lancashire factory-worker, Mark Linley, was the most brilliant and hard-working scholar in the Remove Form. A fisherman's son, Tom Redwing, was a throughly likeable boy, a close friend of the millionaire's son, Herbert Vernon-Smith. Redwing brought working-class commonsense and decency to bear on Vernon-

Smith, known to his schoolmates as the Bounder, and noted for his outbreaks of blackguardism.

Yet, lest this should sound as if the characters were drawn in too great a contrast—too black on one side, too white on the other—let me add that Vernon-Smith (or 'Smithy') was also tough, good at games, and even an intelligent scholar. He was portrayed (one might also say, despite being a millionaire's son) as basically decent, but with a moral flaw that, among other things, enabled him, without hesitation, to lie to masters and prefects to get himself out of difficulties. He loved backing horses, visiting pubs, playing billiards and smoking—or rather he did these things, not so much because he enjoyed doing them, but because in doing them he was flouting authority. He was, in short, typical of many public schoolboys of his day.

Even a really bad character, like the cad, Harold Skinner, was not usually depicted as wholly bad. He had a marvellous, if somewhat spiteful, sense of humour, and was capable of real wit. The only completely bad—nay, villainous—character among the boys in the stories, came from a nearby rival school, Highcliffe. He was Cecil Ponsonby, known as 'Pon', an aristocratic but caddish young snob, who was really not far removed from a hooligan.

The stories were not wholly confined to the adventures of juniors, for senior boys frequently appeared. Such were George Wingate, the head prefect and captain of the school—a tremendous swell, and Gerald Loder, a smoky, shifty and bullying prefect. But the most pleasing of all the seniors was Horace James Coker of the Fifth, who had a fatheaded conceit about his prowess at games and in class, and was always getting mixed up in wrongheaded quarrels and fights with the Remove, to the disgust of his form-master and friends.

Above all among Hamilton's characters was the comic fat boy, Billy Bunter. But Bunter became the centre, the whole *raison d'être* of the stories, and we will return to a consideration of him in a moment.

One source of strength in the Greyfriars stories is their old-fashioned atmosphere. They were set in times completely different from those in which I lived as a boy, and I should imagine they did not bear a very close resemblance to the earlier times they seemed to suggest. But old-fashioned they certainly were, and this was something that was strongly reinforced by their illustrations. In these Wharton's uncle, and others of similar standing, are shown dressed in pre-1914 city wear—frock

coat, spats and shining topper. Sir Hilton Popper, an aristocratic landowner who lived near the school, wore formal riding clothes, including a bowler hat and a cravat, and had a monocle screwed into his irate eye. Countrymen are shown wearing smocks and leggings, and farmers are dressed like a John Bull of the 1890's, complete with square-rig bowler hats. Footpads—there were many of these to enliven the adventures—looked like caricatures of burglars, sometimes even wearing a black domino mask. Masters wore formal clothes, and were often whiskered; sometimes, especially before 1932, they were so reluctant to cast aside their academic gowns and caps, that they wore them even on country walks! Later, such formality was less noticeable, and even the old-fashioned atmosphere tended to die away, but to my mind these dilutions represented a loss of character.

At the height of his achievement, Hamilton was writing as many as six stories a week and using some twenty different pseudonyms. Working at such pressure was bound to lead to shortcomings in technique, although it is probable that Hamilton would have found it impossible to work slowly. This is borne out to some extent by the books he wrote after the last War, which were created in a more leisurely atmosphere, but which are, but for at most a couple of exceptions, far below his best work in *The Magnet*. True, he was by this time an elderly man, which may have meant that his abilities were diminishing; but I do not think it was that, so much as the fact that the pressures of working to a tight time-table suited his muse.

But—as I have said—there were shortcomings. Tautology was, for example, widespread in Hamilton's writing. Listen to this example. The boys are on a trip with Lord Mauleverer (a member of their form) to a south-sea island, and their boat has been stolen.

'But look, old beans!' urged Lord Mauleverer. 'Between those footprints the surface of the sand is quite undisturbed—what?'

'Why shouldn't it be, fathead?' asked Johnny.

'Good old Mauly!' roared Bob, catching on to his lordship's idea. 'Of course, if the rope had slipped off it would have dragged down the sand when the boat drifted, pulling the cord after it. It would have scored a mark all down the sand to the water—'

'By Jove, of course it would!' exclaimed Harry Wharton. 'Is that your idea, Mauly?'

'Yaas'

'Oh!' said Johnny. And he left it at that.

Now that his lordship drew attention to the circumstance, there was, of course, no further doubt. The rope dragging after the drifting boat could not have failed to furrow the soft surface of the sand.

There was no sign whatever of such a furrowing. Obviously, therefore, the rope had not slipped off the peg and dragged.

It had been taken off by someone who had unmoored the boat!

But for the repetitions, all of that could have been written in two or three sentences. But Hamilton had to fill his space, and this was one of his methods.

The stories, too, were all written within a certain formula, which no doubt eased the burden of the author's work. Laughter was expressed simply as 'Ha, ha, ha!'—invariably on a separate line, which again used up space—although this was varied in the case of Billy Bunter to 'He, he, he!'

Exclamations and shouts were all standardised. When Bunter was imbibing tuck, he went 'Gobble, gobble, gobble!' Bicycle bells went 'Buzz, buzz, buzz!' A motor-car or motor-bicycle collision went 'Crash! Smash! Bump!' If anyone was hurt he shouted 'Yarooh!' or 'Yaroop!' or 'Whoop!' If he fell over, particularly if he were a comic character (and Hamilton was best at drawing these), he shouted or muttered 'Lemme gerrup!' If he was winded or felt bilious, he said 'Moooh!' or 'Groooh!'

Many characters had their own leitmotifs. Bob Cherry always said 'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' Bunter announced himself with 'I say, you fellows', and he invariably exclaimed 'Beast!' if he was in trouble with anybody (which happened in every story). The tactless Johnny Bull tended to grunt out his expletives. Lord Mauleverer drawled 'Yaas!' instead of 'Yes'. Vernon-Smith dropped the final 'g's' of his words in true huntin', fishin' and shootin' style.

Catch phrases abounded. Bunter's hand was a fat paw, his little round eyes glinted behind his big round spectacles, like Iser he rolled rapidly, and he did not laugh but cachinnated. Moreover he bestowed on people glares that almost cracked his spectacles. Mr Quelch had gimlet eyes that shot out looks like those of the fabled basilisk. His impositions fell on his pupils like leaves on Vallombrosa. If Harry Wharton showed contempt, his lip curled. The boys did not exclaim but ejaculated. One could continue quoting examples for an hour.

All of these remarks may sound like condemnation, and indeed, taken in isolation they would be. But in the final concoction catalysts got to

work and made the stories into acceptable, convincing fiction, stylised certainly, but vital also—as stylised and vital as performances of the *commedia dell'arte*. One catalyst was undoubtedly Hamilton's gift of creating an atmosphere, a world of his own, however unreal it may have been. It was a gift he shared with P. G. Wodehouse, himself a contributor to some *Greyfriars Holiday Annuals*. But even more important than this was Hamilton's gift of drawing character, particularly comic character, and, despite the cold analysis which one can and does apply to his style and workmanship, there remains this flash of genius.

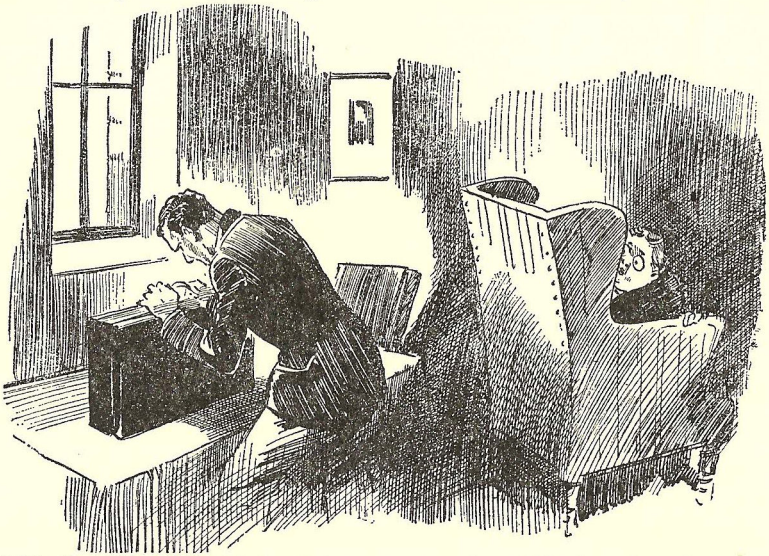
For it is no less than that to have created one of the immortals of English folklore—and that is what Billy Bunter is, as surely as are Ally Sloper, Robin Hood, Dr Crippen, Sherlock Holmes, Jeeves, King Arthur and Little Tich. Even Hamilton himself once said that he could not imagine that Bunter was not a real person.

Most of all does Bunter remind us of the Fat Boy in *The Pickwick Papers*, and Falstaff in *Henry IV*. I feel sure that Hamilton must have had those characters very much in mind when he invented the immortal William George Bunter, the Fat Owl of the Greyfriars Remove. From the Fat Boy must have come Bunter's greed, his capacity for sleep, his eavesdropping, and his conceited ogling of the girls; from Falstaff his boastful but imaginary valour, and his virtuosity in mendacity. According to Hamilton himself, Bunter was a compound of an enormously fat editor and of a short-sighted relation of Hamilton's who used to blink owlishly through his glasses. His famous postal order that never came was suggested by an acquaintance who was always expecting a cheque, and in the meantime wanted to borrow a pound or two on the strength of it. But there must have been more to Bunter than that; he is too complete a character to have been built on such flimsy foundations alone.

Bunter was stupid, cunning and sly, and possessed unlimited greed. Although he was so mendacious, he was indignant and pretended to be insulted if he was accused of being a liar. He stole tuck from other fellows' studies. He boasted of his rich and titled relations, of his ancestral home—Bunter Court—and its army of servants who waited on the Bunter tribe. The truth was that his father was a modest stockbroker who lived with his family in a suburban villa. But Bunter's snobbishness would never allow him to admit this. Yet he was not too snobbish to borrow money, if he could, from a working-class lad like Mark Linley. If Linley refused or simply did not have the money,

Bunter would be likely to remark how horrid it must be to be poor, or merely tell Linley that he was a 'factory rotter'.

This makes it sound as if Bunter were a disagreeable character. In some ways he was; yet he was triumphantly saved from repulsiveness by the comedy which he brought to the stories. Moreover, he was fre-



Billy Bunter hiding behind a chair sees a situation which gives the twist to the development of a story: 'The Schoolboy Cracksman' in The Magnet *of 16 May 1931.*

quently used as a key figure in a plot. He often listened at keyholes and open windows, or hid behind a sofa or screen to avoid being caught stealing tuck, and overheard conversations or saw situations which enabled him to give a twist to the development of a story. But, above all, he was a comic character without whom the Greyfriars stories would have been but a poor shade of what they actually were. Certainly there would not have been such episodes as the one I am about to quote:

'BUNTER!'

Billy Bunter jumped.

'It—it wasn't me, sir!' he gasped.

'What?'

'I—I don't know anything about it, sir!'

Dr Locke, the headmaster of Greyfriars, gazed at Billy Bunter. The Remove fellows looked round at him, grinning.

It was second lesson at Greyfriars, and the Head was taking the Remove. That was very unusual. Seldom indeed did the Lower Fourth Form of Greyfriars enjoy the distinguished honour of being 'taken' by their headmaster.

It was an honour they would willingly have dispensed with. The Head was rather a terrifying personage to Lower Fourth juniors.

But the Remove had started the new term without a Form-master. Their own 'beak', Mr Quelch, had not come back after the Christmas holidays, being laid up with a severe cold. So matters were rather at sixes and sevens until he came.

The Remove were on their best behaviour with the Head. Bob Cherry tried hard not to shuffle his feet. Skinner carefully refrained from projecting inkballs at other fellows' necks. Lord Mauleverer suppressed his inclination to yawn. Even the Bounder was quiet and respectful; and Billy Bunter had not brought anything eatable into the Form-room. Really, it was quite a model Form that morning, every fellow anxious not to catch the Head's eye.

But that eye fixed on Billy Bunter!

Bunter was alarmed.

There were many sins, of omission and commission, on Billy Bunter's fat conscience, and, as Dr Locke rapped out his name the Owl of the Remove could only wonder which of them had come to the Head's knowledge.

He blinked at Dr Locke in great alarm through his big spectacles, and promptly denied the accusation, without waiting to hear what it was.

'Bunter!' repeated the Head.

'I assure you, sir, that it wasn't me!' said Bunter, in a great hurry. 'I haven't been near the Fifth Form passage this term.'

'What?' ejaculated Dr Locke.

'If Coker says that his cake is gone, sir, I don't know anything about it. Besides, that was yesterday—'

'You are a very stupid boy, Bunter!' said the Head mildly. 'I have heard no complaint from Coker of the Fifth Form.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'But,' said the Head in a deep voice 'if you have abstracted a cake from Coker's study, Bunter—'

'Oh, no sir! Not at all! I-I don't think Coker had a cake! I never heard him mention it to Potter and Greene, nor—'

'Ha, ha, ha!' came from the Remove.

'Bless my soul!' said the Head. 'Bunter, I fear that you are a very untruthful boy, as well as a very stupid one—very untruthful indeed!'

'Me, sir?' exclaimed Bunter. 'Oh, no, sir! Perhaps you're thinking of Wharton, sir, or Nugent—'

'You blithering owl!' murmured Harry Wharton.

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Silence!' rapped the Head. 'Bunter, stand out before the Form!'

'Oh lor'!'

Billy Bunter rolled out dolourously. Evidently the trouble, whatever it was, was not connected with Coker's cake. Bunter wondered whether the cook or the House dame had been complaining. It would be just like those old cats, Bunter thought, to make a fuss about a pie being mysteriously missing from the regions below stairs.

'Now, Bunter—'

'I never touched it, sir!' said Bunter.

'You never touched it?' repeated the Head.

'No sir! I haven't seen it.'

'You have not seen it?'

'No, sir! There's a very strict rule about fellows going down into the kitchen, and I'm always very careful about the rules, sir! If there's a pie gone, it's news to me!'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head.

'The fact is, sir, that I don't care for beefsteak pie!' said Bunter. 'It's not a thing I like at all! And it wasn't a nice pie, either, sir! You can ask Skinner! I gave him some!'

Dr Locke was not so used to the fatuous Bunter as Mr Quelch was. He seemed to be quite taken by surprise by him. He gazed at him as if Bunter had taken his breath away.

'Bunter,' he gasped at last, 'I have certainly received a complaint from Mrs Kebble with reference to a missing pie, but I was not aware that you were the culprit.'

'O lor'!' gasped Bunter.

'I called to you,' said Dr Locke, 'with reference to that extremely conspicuous diamond pin in your tie, Bunter.'

'Oh!' stuttered Bunter.

His fat hand went up to his tie, in which gleamed and glittered and flashed a big diamond.

Everybody at Greyfriars had seen Bunter's diamond except the Head—and now the Head saw it!

Nobody, of course, believed that it was a real diamond; even Bunter, who had bought it for a shilling from a shabby man in a railway train, could hardly believe that it was genuine.

But it looked genuine goods, there was no doubt about that. And Bunter had swanked very extensively with his diamond pin.

According to Bunter, it was a diamond of the purest water, and its value was almost fabulous.

Greyfriars fellows did not sport diamonds; it was considered bad form. But Billy Bunter did not care much about that, so long as he could flash and sparkle and glitter.

It was still early in the term; but Bunter's diamond had become as well known at Greyfriars as the clock-tower or the ivied library wall or the football field. It had become one of the sights of Greyfriars. It was familiar to almost every eye. And—though it did not occur to Bunter's fat mind—it was certain that the Head would want to know about it as soon as he became aware of it.

'No boy in this school, Bunter, is allowed to wear such prominent and expensive jewellery,' said the Head. 'It is in bad taste, Bunter. But, apart from that, I require to know how you came into possession of such an article? It is far too valuable to belong to a junior schoolboy. Where did you obtain that diamond, Bunter?'

The Remove fellows looked on, with grinning faces.

The Head, apparently, was taking Bunter's diamond as genuine. Certainly it looked it.

But if it was genuine, it was worth a hundred pounds—in which case, a Lower Fourth fellow would have found it very difficult to explain how he had come by it.

Bunter had to own up now.

The fat Owl had told many tales about that diamond. It was an heirloom in the Bunter family which had been made up into a tiepin. It was a Christmas present from his Uncle George. It was a New Year's gift from his Uncle William. Bunter never could remember that a certain class of persons should have good memories! None of these yarns, however, would do for the Head. The Removites listened with keen interest to hear what the hapless Owl would say.

He blinked dismally at the Head. It was a relief to learn that he was not called on in reference to a cake or a pie. But he did not want to own up before all the Form that his famous diamond was paste!

'Answer me, Bunter!' rapped the Head.

'The—the fact is, sir—' stammered Bunter.

'Well?'

'My—my Uncle George—' stuttered the fat Owl . . . .

'Your uncle?' repeated the Head.

'Yes, sir! He—he—he gave me this—this pin for a Christmas present, Sir.'

Bunter was risking it. Anything, from Billy Bunter's peculiar point of view, was better than stating the facts before a whole grinning Form.

Dr Locke's brow grew very stern.

'A most extraordinary thing!' he exclaimed. 'Surely, Bunter, your uncle should know that an article of such value should never be placed in the keeping of a junior schoolboy. Give it to me at once—'

'Eh?'

'I will return it to your uncle—'

'Wha-a-a-t?'

'With a letter explaining my reasons. Take that pin from your tie at once, Bunter, and hand it me.'

'Oh crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He had not expected that. Really, he might have—but he hadn't. He stood rooted with dismay, blinking at the Head.

'Bunter—'

'Oh lor'! The—the fact is, sir—' gasped Bunter.

'I am waiting—'

'The—the fact is, sir, my—my uncle George never gave it to me, sir—that—that's what I really meant to say, sir!' stuttered Bunter.

And as Dr Locke stared at him blankly, from the Remove there came a howl:

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence' hooted Dr Locke.

He turned a grim frown on the Remove. For a moment the kind old Head looked as grim as Mr Quelch had ever looked. The Remove men contrived to control their merriment.

'There is nothing' said Dr Locke, 'in this boy's obtuse untruthfulness to cause laughter.'

On that point the Remove did not agree with their headmaster. Dr Locke could take Billy Bunter seriously if he liked. But to the Remove, the fat Owl was a scream—a real shriek.

Silence, however, was restored, and Dr Locke fixed his eyes again on the hapless Owl. Bunter, standing first on one leg, then on the other then on the first again was longing to escape. He fairly wriggled under the Head's stern eye. But there was no escape for Bunter. Dr Locke evidently meant to know all about that big diamond.

'Bunter! I command you to tell me the truth at once!' snapped the Head. 'You have made a statement, and immediately contradicted it. Can you, or can you not explain how you came into possession of that diamond?'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'The—the fact is, sir—' . . .

'Speak, Bunter, and at once!' rapped the Head impatiently.

'The—the fact is, sir, that—that diamond is an heirloom in our—our family, sir—'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Bob Cherry, in sheer wonder at the fat Owl's fatuous nerve.

'Silence! Did you say an heirloom, Bunter?' exclaimed the Head.

'Yes, sir; handed down from generation to generation,' said Bunter, recovering confidence a little. 'It came over with the Conqueror, sir—I mean with one of my ancestors who came over with the Conqueror—'

'Do not talk nonsense, Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir!'

'If that stone, Bunter, is a family possession, as you say, how comes it to be in your hands?'

'It—it isn't in my hands, sir.'

'What?'

'It isn't really, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'It's in my tie, sir.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence! Bless my soul!' gasped the Head. 'Is it possible for a boy to be so obtuse as this? I mean, Bunter, how comes that stone to be in your possession if it is an heirloom, as you say?'

'I—I thought I'd have it made into a tiepin sir, instead of leaving it with the—the other family jewels, sir—'

'Bunter! I shall cane you severely for telling untruths.'

'Oh lor'!'

'And I can only conclude, Bunter, that you obtained possession of that large and valuable diamond, in some questionable manner!' thundered the Head. 'Obviously it cannot belong to you. Have you purloined that stone, Bunter?'

'Oh crikey!' gasped Bunter.

'If you came by that stone dishonestly, Bunter, confess the truth at once. You will, of course, be expelled from Greyfriars—'

'Ow!'

'But possibly the police—'

'The pip—pip—police!' stuttered Bunter.

'The police may take a lenient view of the matter, when they observe your crass stupidity and impenetrable obtuseness. But you must make a complete confession this instant.'

The fat Owl gasped. Obviously, prevarication was not going to save him. So long as the Head believed that the diamond was real, he would not believe that it was Bunter's.

Bunter was driven to tell the truth.

It was a last and desperate resource.

'I—I—I say, sir, I—I—I never pinched this diamond, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'The—the fact is, sir, it—it ain't real, sir.'

This was good rumbustious stuff. I have mentioned the *commedia dell'arte*, and such an episode would have been well received at one of its performances, with Bunter as a blend of Giangurgolo, Pulcinella, and the Capitano, and the Headmaster owing something to Pantelone and the Dottore.

The stories had not always been so good. The one I have just quoted from was published in 1934, towards the end of the *Magnet's* best years. The fact is that they developed and became better over the years; it is

sometimes impossible to recognise many of those published in, say, 1910 or 1920, as being by the same author as those published in the 1930's.

Bunter in retreat, from The Magnet *16 May 1931.*

As the stories developed, and as Hamilton's characters became more rounded, so earlier crudities disappeared, and more subtle nuances were introduced. In a very early story, the following passage appeared, concerning the behaviour of an uncle of Sidney Snoop, one of the caddish characters in the series. Snoop's uncle had befriended him, but—horror upon horror—he put his food into his mouth with his knife, and picked his teeth with a fork! But even the upper-class Wharton told Snoop that such deviations did not matter.

'Oh, that's all rot!' said Snoop.

'Besides, if you think so, do you think the other fellows would think so too? Do you?'

Wharton was silent. He could not answer Snoop's question in the affirmative.

In later stories that kind of uncouthness disappeared.

* * * * *

But let us come to Bunter's creator himself. Hamilton was a very shy man. Very few of his admirers were privileged to meet him. Certainly I never did, although I corresponded with him. My friend, the late Denzil Batchelor, sports writer and wit, was among the few who penetrated into his modest little house, 'Roselawn', at Kingsgate-on-Sea, Kent.

He described to me the elfin little man with failing sight, sitting in his armchair, with a shawl pulled around his shoulders and wearing a skull cap, continually striking matches to light his pipe. They sat down to a tea of muffins, jam tarts, cakes and cream horns that would have delighted Bunter.

Much of that interview was captured for posterity on a gramophone record; more survives in the B.B.C. sound archives. It must have been a delightful afternoon, for it left Denzil Batchelor claiming, with pardonable exaggeration, that there were two English writers who had given the world immense happiness, yet of whom little in the way of personal details was known; one was Shakespeare, one Hamilton. One cannot of course, in critical detachment, link those names. Yet there is, after all, something similar between the scene at the Boar's Head Tavern in Eastcheap, and many of those played out, with Bunter as the central character, in the Remove Passage at Greyfriars.

We have learnt a little more about Hamilton since Denzil's visit. They are, alas, now both departed, and the barriers that Hamilton erected around himself are largely gone. For the old man was always reticent about his background, not caring much for the present-day vogue of confessing every intimate detail of one's spiritual and physical life. That he was a man of considerable learning was always apparent from the many classical and literary references in his stories. In his old age, he even wrote a Bunter story in Latin for the *Times Educational Supplement: Ulterio Bunteri.* But even he was defeated in translating 'Yarooh!' into Latin—it had to remain in English, if such it may be called.

In fact, Hamilton was educated privately and he also for a time attended Thorne House School, Ealing, a private establishment. His genius speaks well for such education, which was surely better than the often brutal educative methods of the 19th century. With William Blake, he might have cried:

Thank God, I never was sent to school
To be Flog'd into following the Style of a Fool.

He was born in 1876, the sixth of the eight children of John Hamilton, once a stationer, but later a master carpenter. Little is known of Charles Hamilton's early life, but he began to write at an early age, and, before long, he was writing not only school stories, but romance, adventure, mystery, crime, travel, and much more.

That some of this writing was not of a high standard is unsurprising; What does surprise is that so much of it was brilliant. And if some of the long serials, running into perhaps a dozen issues of *The Magnet*, smack of 'long-drawn disenchantment', the shorter stories smack equally of genius.

* * * * *

There were many illustrators of the Greyfriars stories. The most accomplished among them was Leonard Shields. I did not know him, but I was once privileged to visit the most prolific and indefatigable of the Greyfriars illustrators, Charles Henry Chapman.

It was in 1955; I was running a private press and was toying with the idea of publishing a book about Chapman and his work. I wrote to him, and he agreed to meet me and my partner, Arthur Astbury, at his home near Reading.

Chapman himself received us. A wizened little man, completely bald, looking more than anything else like a piece of polished Chinese ivory. His dress was most peculiar: a suit like a barrister's (black coat; heavily striped trousers); brown canvas yachtsman's shoes with rubber soles; union flannel shirt with a white collar; a black and white tie of assorted stripes; two grey cardigans, and a cloth cap.

He offered us a drink; it was, he said, his favourite: ginger beer mixed with stout. We gulped back our feelings, thanked him and accepted. Fortunately we were given only half a glass apiece.

The room in which he received us was a masterpiece of disarray and cold comfort. His own pictures hung on the walls. They were not what they should have been—specimens of his Greyfriars illustrations—for in those he was, in a limited sense, a good artist. But they were sentimental pictures of the worst 'chocolate box' kind. Roses, of what I can only describe as an electric pink vied with cottage scenes of superfloral splendour, and landscapes that were so bright that they hurt. One landscape—great green mountains, lakes and green fields—was in-

scribed across the mount in large letters: 'THE GREEN MOUNTAINS OF OLD WALES'. And his technique in these seemed not so much gouache, as he claimed, but an uncontrolled and unlimited use of vast quantities of glue. 'I didn't have time to do much of this sort of work when I worked for the Amalgamated Press,' he said. 'There wasn't time.'

For that we may be thankful.

Yet the best artists have their off-moments, and we are all sometimes tempted to push beyond our limits. It was as an illustrator, and particularly as a comic illustrator, that C. H. Chapman shone. But even here it must be put on record that the work he produced in his old age was very poor stuff indeed. And even his earlier work was mannered and caricatured.

In the course of conversation it transpired that Chapman had, in addition to drawing for *The Magnet*, illustrated *Ally Sloper*, *Comic Cuts*, and *Chums*. He said—and this is of considerable interest—that much of the work done in the Amalgamated Press was composite; that he often would, for example, rough out a set of drawings, an 'understudy' would do most of the work, and he would put the finishing touches to them.

It was the same with the work on the literary side. It is, of course, known that substitute writers sometimes produced Greyfriars stories, although not all that often. On one occasion, Chapman said, a sub-editor wrote a whole Billy Bunter story around a set of his drawings. He said that six weeks normally elapsed between the delivery of a work and its publication, adding that some of his work was done at his home near Reading, and some at the Amalgamated Press offices.

* * * * *

But enough! Let me conclude by asking what Greyfriars means to me now that I am a middle-aged man and myself an established author. I am unashamed to admit that I still read the stories—and my motivation is not wholly nostalgic.

When I was about sixteen, I stopped reading them, snobbishly thinking that I had outgrown them. I thought it much grander (and no doubt it was) to read Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats *et al.*, and to seek my comedy from P. G. Wodehouse or the plays of Noël Coward (himself, incidentally, an early reader of *The Magnet*).

Ten years or so later, curiosity prompted me to look at an old *Magnet*, and all the magic returned immediately! I collected the stories

enthusiastically, and have read the best of them over and over again.

But there is more to my enthusiasm than that. It is essential for all of us to have light relief in order to escape for a time from responsibilities and from concentrations on deeper subjects, and in order both to lighten our spirit and to keep our sense of humour intact. Some read 'Westerns', others read detective fiction or science fiction. It is said that the late Sir Henry Wood played jazz on his piano in his spare time. And it is known that Churchill laid bricks as a relief from the cares of office.

For me, and for many others, it is Greyfriars. Just as in my youth it provided a world of make-believe into which I could temporarily escape from a mistaken school regime, so now, after spending days among the arcana of literature and painting, or following the twists of more mundane affairs, I can open an old *Magnet*, and enter at once into a Never-never Land, where right always prevails, and comedy is innocent.

* * * *

Charles Hamilton, Greyfriars and Myself is the text of Raymond Lister's address as retiring President of the Private Libraries Association on the occasion of the Association's Annual General Meeting held at the Library Association, Ridgmount Street, London W.C.1, on Tuesday, 9 April 1974.

For those wishing to pursue the subject Raymond Lister has added the following notes:

The Magnet was first published on 15 February 1908 and the last issue appeared on 18 May 1940; a total of 1683 issues. All Greyfriars stories appeared under the pen-name of Frank Richards, but there were at least twenty-five substitute authors in addition to Charles Hamilton himself. The substitute authors wrote about 300 of the stories, mainly between 1914 and 1926. From No. 1221 (published in 1931) every story was by Hamilton.

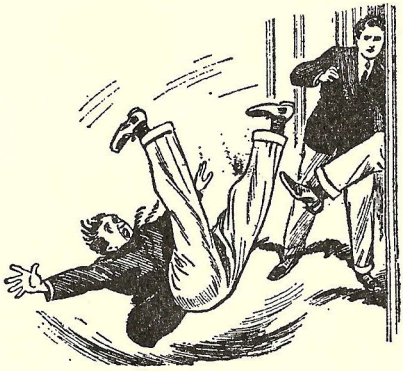
When *The Magnet* was first published it cost ½d, later this rose to 1d, 1¼d and, finally, 2d.

It first appeared in a red wrapper, which was changed on issues 397 to 769 to blue and white, from issues 770 to 1552 to orange, yellow and blue, and from 1553 to 1683 to salmon.

The best bibliographical guide is *The Magnet Companion* compiled by W. O. G. Lofts and published by Howard Baker Press Ltd in 1971. There are also Eric Fayne's and Roger Jenkins' *A History of The Gem*

and Magnet, Maidstone, n.d., Roger Jenkins' *The Charles Hamilton Museum*, Maidstone, n.d., and his *Catalogue of the Charles Hamilton Library*, Havant, n.d., J. S. Butcher's *Greyfriars School, a Prospectus*, London 1965, and articles on the subject are published in the privately-circulated magazine, *Collector's Digest*, which may be obtained from Eric Fayne, Excelsior House, 113 Crookham Road, Crookham, Nr Aldershot, Hampshire. Much background material may be found in *The Autobiography of Frank Richards*, London, 1952, and *The Letters of Frank Richards*, Crookham, 1974.

Howard Baker Books, which incorporates the Greyfriars Press, publish facsimile issues of the *Magnet*, *Gem* and *The Greyfriars Holiday Annual 1925*. A catalogue of Greyfriars Press titles can be obtained from Howard Baker, at the Greyfriars Press, 27a Arterberry Road, Wimbledon, London S.W.20.



An example of C. H. Chapman's work from The Magnet *of 3 January 1931.*