
LET'S BE CONTROVERSIALNo. 147. THE STRANGE CASE OF BUNTER'S BABY.

Herbert Hinton was editor of the Companion Papers at the outbreak of war in 1914. Mid-way through the war he left the Fleetway House to serve his country, and returned to the editorial chair early in 1919. Legend has it that, late in 1920, he was sacked by the Amalgamated Press for plagiarism, and the offending story was quite obviously "Bunter's Baby," published in the summer of that year.

Hinton based "Bunter's Baby" on a Hamilton Red Magnet story of 1909 entitled "Harry Wharton's Ward." That can hardly have mattered. Plots were repeated willy-nilly all down the years, and nobody turned a hair, no matter who was responsible. But, unfortunately, and inexplicably, Hinton lifted sections of dialogue wholesale from the original story, though he credited the remarks to different characters. He also "lifted" an amusing little sequence concerning a "kid" which Mr. Quelch and Dr. Holmes assumed to be a young goat.

Let us look for a moment at the two stories. The original, "Harry Wharton's Ward," was a rather silly little tale, though it had a lot of the ingenuous charm which was typical of so many early red Magnet stories. Harry Wharton, browsing over "Woman's Journal" comes on an advertisement inserted by a woman living near Friardale. She offers for sale, at the price of £10, a baby boy named Toddles. Harry, being touched (possibly in more senses than one), persuades the Co. that they should visit the woman and buy the child. He obtains Mr. Quelch's permission to buy a "kid," and Mr. Quelch, who likes his boys to keep pets, is pleased.

The boys buy Toddles, and take him back to Greyfriars. Eventually the woman comes to claim her child. Her husband, who was working in Australia, had been hurt, so had been unable to continue to send her money. She wanted £10 to enable her to go to Australia. Finally, the kind-hearted Head arranges matters, and, presumably, the woman was able to go to Australia - with Toddles.

Hinton's effort, "Bunter's Baby," was unquestionably far more credible. A woman, in a lane near Greyfriars, asks Bunter to look after a pram containing a small boy named Robin. She has lost her

purse, and wants to rush back down the lane to look for it. She tells Bunter she will soon come back to claim her pram and child, and promises Bunter 6d if she finds the purse. She does not return, and eventually Bunter takes the pram and contents to Greyfriars.

Later, it transpires that the woman had been taken ill while looking for her purse, had fainted, and been conveyed to hospital. Still later, she informs the police, and comes with a policeman, to claim her property.

There was nothing unusual in Hinton's writing a new version of an old plot. What was astounding was that a writer, of some experience, should pilfer actual dialogue, word for word, from another author's work.

No doubt the matter was hushed up, and Hinton was coldly asked to disappear from the scene. His offence, of course, was greater because, as editor, he held a position of authority.

The more one thinks about it, the more inexplicable Hinton's conduct becomes. It probably seemed an impossibility to him that anybody, even the original writer, would remember an obscure little story from so many years back.

Though he wrote effusive editorials to which he devoted too much space, Hinton wrote very few substitute stories. From this, he would seem not to have been a natural writer of fiction, though his few little tales compare well with the general standard of sub stories. It might have been, though there is no evidence to show that such was the case, that he used old stories as a basis for all his new ones. There were hundreds in the A.P. files. If he had got away with it on earlier occasions, he might have gone too far and risked using an old Hamilton tale as the sire of "Bunter's Baby."

And who gave him away to the powers-that-be?

It may have been someone in the employ of the Amalgamated Press. An anonymous letter would have done the dirty trick. It might have been some substitute writer whose brain-child had been rejected by Hinton.

It is possible that Hinton reckoned without the long memories of old readers of the Magnet. Some readers may have written in to the directors to draw attention to what had happened.

The obvious one to complain would be the man whose dialogue he had stolen, but did he? Even if Hamilton bothered to read "Bunter's Baby," I think it improbable that he would have remembered the snatches from his own work when so many hundreds of thousands of words had flowed from his typewriter between 1909 and 1920. I think we can rule out Hamilton, from that angle.

Hinton carried away from his A.P. office a list of names and addresses of readers of the Companion Papers. Not so many months later he was writing to tell them about his new paper "School and Sport," signing the letters with his familiar "Your Editor" block. And not long after that, the Companion Papers, a trifle cheaply, carried an announcement that the new paper had nothing to do with them.

The fact that Hinton asked Charles Hamilton to write stories (the Harry Nameless - Wilmot series) for School & Sport would seem to indicate that it was not Hamilton who brought about the fall of "Your Editor." But, things being what they were, you never could tell. It was odd that Hamilton should write for a rival to the Companion Papers in this way. The A.P. would surely have taken a stern view of the matter, and it would seem that he was risking his livelihood.

I have sometimes wondered whether someone, with or without malicious intent, may have drawn Charles Hamilton's attention to the plagiarism in "Bunter's Baby," and whether Hamilton, justifiably angry, may have sent a hot complaint to the directors without ever dreaming for a moment that the culprit was his friend, Hinton, who had so seldom ever written a story. Did Hamilton, later on, deeply distressed by what happened to Hinton, try to help his friend by writing for his new paper, thereby jeopardising his own career? It is all conjecture, but the theory would seem to fit the facts.

The author commented, later on, that Hinton never paid for the Wilmot stories. Some time afterwards, the A.P. published the tales, but one wonders whether the A.P. knew the whole history of the Wilmot tales.

Was the A.P. harsh in dealing with Hinton as it did? We feel sorry for a man who has come a cropper, especially one who had served the firm for so many years, and who had done his bit in the war. We know that there was a good deal of jiggery-pokery in the editorial

offices during the war, and, looking back at Hinton from the space of 50 years, it may seem that he did not stray so very much further.

To have condoned Hinton's action might have made a precedent which would have been undesirable. It is hard to decide that justice was not done.
