



GOOD-BYE BILLY BUNTER!

The War Claims Another Victim: End of An Epoch In Schoolboy Literature

THE "Famous Five" of Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter and all the other "chaps and fellahs" have at last given up the ghost! The war has claimed them. Perhaps they have enlisted, perhaps the paper shortage has caused their demise, but whatever it is, "The Magnet," which used to rank with "Chums" as the most famous of all schoolboy periodicals, has just ceased publication. And with its passing, after 32 years of weekly existence, an institution and almost an epoch, have come to an end. Few men to-day, who were born during the last 30 years or more, can deny that in their youth they followed with delight the weekly adventures of those famous schoolboys, Harry Wharton and Co., Bob Cherry and Co., and Billy Bunter of the Remove at Greyfriars. Perhaps they also followed counterparts who existed in other periodicals with such names as "The Gem" and "The Schoolboys' Own"; and perhaps their sisters remember following their female counterparts, Bessie Bunter and Co., at their school, the name of which escapes us. But follow them most people did. And most people are not ashamed to remember it.

War Made Little Difference

Not without difficulty and a prolonged search of secondhand shops were copies of "The Magnet" at length unearthed, so that we might discover how Billy Bunter and Co. were faring during the war. Until recent events brought an end to their existence, they were faring as we expected they would be—quite unconcernedly except for a brief mention of such things as A.R.P. Apparently the fact that their country was at war hardly disturbed the tenor of their lives. Having survived one World War, they apparently thought they could survive another without much difficulty. And now they are dead.

Thirty-Two Years Old

"The Magnet" came into existence thirty-two years ago—and until recently it had been going strong ever since. The historian of Greyfriars was still the same Frank Richards, and he was writing at the beginning of this year just as he

wrote when he first began in 1908. Not one touch of characterisation had he altered; an occasional new character had appeared and disappeared; but the language and clothing of the famous pupils remained the same—Eton jackets and collars, with "toppers" on Sundays and Saints' Days. Perhaps Frank Richards has been replaced by his grandson, perhaps there never was a Frank Richards, perhaps the chronicles of Greyfriars were concocted by a syndicate of writers; but, whoever was responsible for the writing of these stories week by week, they never lost their zeal or their enthusiasm. And the same could be said of the anonymous artists who did the illustrations. Stock plots appeared and re-appeared years later when it would be safe to

to the little finger of his right hand, and extended the fingers of the left hand also.

The other fellows chuckled.

Bob's action was not dignified. It was not really worthy of a Remove man of Greyfriars. Inky little fags in the Second Form made such disrespectful gestures sometimes—scrubby little rascals like Sammy Bunter and Nugent minor. But they did not do such things in the Remove. They were above it—miles above it.

But Bob made an exception in favour of Mr. Parker. The caretaker of Sea View had to be attracted within range of snowballs somehow."

More, perhaps, than most of us realise, "The Magnet" and its prototypes have been responsible for the common conception of the British Public School. It wasn't until one grew past the stage of reading "Gems" and "Magnets" that one started to laugh at the old school tie.



BILLY BUNTER SCORES OVER HARRY WHARTON AND CO.: A characteristic illustration by the "Magnet's" anonymous artist

assume that the readers who first saw them had passed on to reading Bernard Shaw or the Racing Weekly.

Powerful Influence

But except that it didn't keep abreast of the times and refused, like the dodo and the moa, to adapt itself to a changing environment, it was a great performance. In its own sphere its standard was high. Its influence was always for good sportsmanship, it was always fairly literate, and its standards were always wholesome. The bad boys were always "cads" and "rotters" who surreptitiously smoked cigarettes at the back of the school, the villains from outside the school were invariably "pimpily-faced blighters" who were just as invariably trounced in the end, and the healthy, clean-living "chaps" of Greyfriars always triumphed. If they did wrong there was always a good motive behind their wrong-doing—they must always be worthy of the form and the school. As, for the example, in the following extract:

Mr. Parker had come to a halt and stood staring at the group of juniors.

Bob Cherry placed the thumb of his right hand to his nose and extended the fingers. Then he placed the thumb of his left hand

Time Stood Still

The most extraordinary thing about Greyfriars School and its pupils was that time apparently stood still so far as they were concerned. None of the characters ever grew up. Educationists might make an interesting study of young readers' reactions when they realised this fact. Who, among the magazine's thousands of readers, cannot remember the day when there suddenly crept into his mind the question: "Why don't Harry Wharton and Co. ever pass into the Sixth?" For they steadfastly remained forever in the "Remove." There were occasions which indicated the passing of time—birthdays and consequent opening of tuck-boxes and "mid-night feasts"—but no one ever grew a day older!

Most Famous Fat Boy

They were still in the same form, the Remove; Harry Wharton still had the Famous Five in almost every escapade, and he still scored the winning goal just as the whistle blew; Bob Cherry was still the best boxer in the school; Billy Bunter, the most famous fat boy in the British Empire, still consumed tarts by

the thousand. Loder of the Sixth was still perpetually searching for Bunter to cane him for some misdemeanour; Vernon-Smith was still the bouncer of Greyfriars; and Huree Jamset Ram Singh had still not returned to his native India. And not a master had changed at the school. Mr. Quelch was still in charge of the Remove—a form that still apparently never did any work but made the classroom a place for japes and pranks of every kind. The language of these characters, too, remained the same. A few modernisms had crept in—we found one case of "O.K."—but for the rest they still shouted "Cave!" at the first sight of danger; Bob Cherry still "ejaculated"; "Hallo, hallo, hallo!"; others cried "Crikey!" and "Go and eat coke!"; and Bunter still had a language all his own—a language which gave the impression that the author might be trying to stretch out his story by keeping his finger on the same key of his typewriter. Here's a sample of "Bunterese":

Bunter blinked round—too late!
Loder came with a rush!
"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.
He made a bound for the Remove passage—too late! A grasp was on his collar.
"Now—" gasped Loder.
"Yaroooooooh!"
Bend over and touch your toes, Bunter."
"Yoo-hoop! Leggo! I say, you fellows, rescue! Oh, crumbs! Yaroooh!"
Whack! The ashplant landed on the tightest trousers in the British Empire.
"Yaroooooooooh!"

Huree Jamset Ram Singh

The author(s) of these stories made much use of defects of speech for comedy purposes, and a character with a cold in the head was supposed to create laughs every time he opened his mouth. And Huree Jamset Ram Singh could never master the English language, but had to resort to an extraordinary distortion to make himself understood:

"I say, you fellows, have you been whopped?" asked Billy Bunter.
"The whopfulness was terrific," murmured Huree Jamset Ram Singh.

Right up to the last, chapters would lead off like this:

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"
"Bag him!"
"Bump him!"
"Scrag him!"

Yes, they're still the same at Greyfriars—or, at least they were. But now they have gone. "The Magnet" and other periodicals like it were institutions that survived the onslaught of one war but fell before that of another. Perhaps an old era has passed for ever, perhaps Billy Bunter, Harry Wharton and the rest will live again when this war is over. But it is not likely; for in the present struggle for survival, adaptation to changing circumstances is a prime necessity, and it was the unchangeability of the Greyfriars stories that was their most striking feature—and perhaps their greatest charm. And what chance have they against periodicals for schoolboys that deal in scientific things, and stories about characters such as "Reckless Reg. of the R.A.F."? Billy Bunter and Harry Wharton belonged to an age that has gone, but thousands will mourn their passing.