

WHITE COVER DAYS

by

ERIC FAYNE

When the editor announced "Good-bye to the old Blue Cover", the Gem seemed to lose more than its familiar jacket. Old traditions were forsaken, some of the change being due to the war, and some of it to alteration in policy.

True, there had been marked signs of this change in policy for some time before the white cover came along. Tom Merry's eclipse had started by 1914, though he played a fairly substantial part in the early Talbot stories. During the last year of the Blue Cover, there is evidence that the Gem was trying to cash in on the popularity of some of the Magnet characters. Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn had been introduced as copies of Coker, Potter and Greene, and Trimble had arrived as the St. Jim's version of Billy Bunter. St. Jim's gained little if anything from these newcomers, especially as such favourite personalities as Fatty Wynn, Lumley-Lumley, Koumi Rao, and, of course, Tom Merry, were neglected as a result.

For Tom Merry was, and is, one of the most famous names in school literature. It is not easy to put one's finger on what was the compelling quality of his personality, but to speak of the Gem is to speak of Tom Merry. Clearly there was some magic that has shone down the years, despite the playing down which he suffered during the early white cover period. There was, admittedly, a certain perfection about him, an ideal element that others recognised. It may be that we, in a more cynical age, are less moved by this.

We accept our own defeats and disillusionments and do not care to accept that there can be an element of what

used to be called noble in people. We are, perhaps, too ready to decry and deride the conception of control over our lives, of an ordered and achieved life. Possibly, in some of the very early Tom Merry stories, the idea was overplayed a little. But to deny it altogether is an inhibited way of looking at things.

It may or may not be significant that, as the white cover days lengthened into years, the editor was continually mentioning that the Gem was dropping behind in the circulation race.

THE YEAR 1916

Whatever criticism can be offered of the later White Cover tales, they started well. "A Strange Secret" was the second of a pair featuring Valentine Outram, a boy whom Levison denounced as having been in a reformatory. It was a fine story, with gems of character-painting.

It was Mellish who was "The Snob of the School", ashamed of his cousin who was a private in the army. Tales of snobbery seldom made comfortable reading, but this one was one of the best of its type.

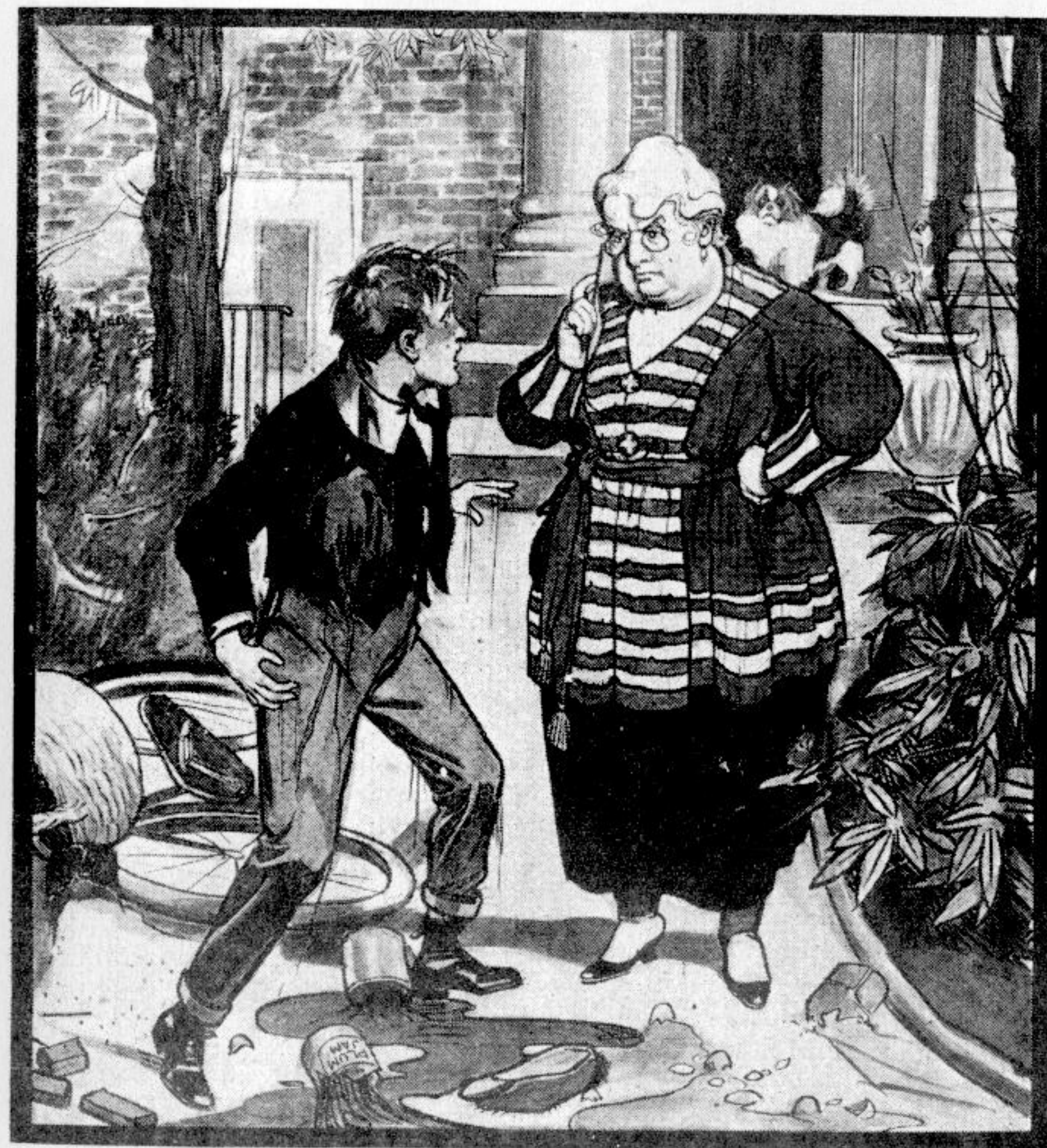
"Moneybags Minor" was Peter Racke, whose father made war profits, so Peter's name was changed to Aubrey. He was introduced, no doubt, in readiness for the reform of Levison, though he never shone as a masterpiece of character work.

"Too Clever By Half" starred St. Leger, who put himself into Trimble's power. This was the last Gem for many moons to be illustrated by R.J. Macdonald, who now entered the navy. For a few weeks the Gem was illustrated by P.J. Hayward, before Warwick Reynolds took over for a long period.

"Patriots of St. Jim's" was rather a remarkable story. Full of satire, it must have been well above the heads of the average Gem reader, but it made amusing reading for the adult. It was Gussy's idea that all wealth should be conscripted on behalf of the war effort.



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"RENTON OF THE ROVERS!"
A Tale of the Footer Field.

"LOWTHER ON THE WAR-PATH!"
A Story of Tom Merry & Co.

"SLAVE ISLAND!"
A Thrilling Adventure Story.



LOWTHER PREPARES FOR THE JAPE OF THE TERM!

(An Incident from the Grand Long Complete School Story in this Issue.)

Another newcomer, Sidney Clive, arrived in "Kildare's Enemy", Clive saved Kildare from the plotting of Sefton and Gibbs, and both seniors were expelled at the end of the yarn.

"Friends or Foes" was a good effort, in which Crooke tried to trap Talbot, who was saved from disgrace by the partly-reformed Levison. Levison was back again in "Levison on the Warpath", an amusing little tale centred on Tom Merry's Weekly.

In the last week of September arrived "Levison Minor", a youngster of entirely different character from his brother. He teamed with Wally D'Arcy and Reggie Manners in a trio to be known as "the three minors", and, from now on, Joe Frayne dropped out of the picture. And with the coming of Frank Levison, the reform of Ernest Levison was to be completed. The transformation of Levison took place in surprisingly few tales, each one really complete in itself. The reform stories were separated from one another by other stories, though they were placed together when reprinted.

"D'Arcy in Disgrace" was a first-class tale of the quality that was becoming all too rare. Gussy received a letter from a Mr. Banks, acknowledging the receipt of £1 in connection with a horse. Levison spied into the letter, and it was assumed that the man concerned was Banks, the bookie. Actually it was Mr. Banks, the carrier, who had three sons at the front.

In the late autumn, the real Frank Richards contributed a story in which Tom Merry & Co. pretended to accept an invitation to stay at Trimble Hall. The sequel, by some odd twist, provided the long story in the Christmas Double Number, and this story, "In The Seats of the Mighty", was written by Pentelow.

Hamilton then weighed in with one on his old theme - the boy - Piggott in this case - who got up a sweepstake, and arranged that he himself should be the winner.

Early in December, Crooke insulted the French master,

who was later struck down, an act for which Crooke was blamed. But the culprit was Herr Schneider who, not unnaturally at that time, did not like Frenchmen.

Levison Minor starred in two stories at the end of the year, first in a story in which we had the old topic of Colonel Lyndon losing faith in Talbot, owing to the foul plotting of Crooke. Levison Minor went through snow and ice and fog to Abbotsford to tell the Colonel the truth. To wind up the year Levison broke bounds to visit a disreputable place known as the Friv. Levison Minor occupied his brother's bed, and so, when an inspection took place, it was Levison Minor's bed that was empty. 1916 was the Levisons' year, perhaps just a little too much so. That minor was just a little too good to be natural.

THE YEAR 1917

Few people seemed to find Grundy attractive, but the opening story of 1917, in which he starred was a good one. Mr. Linton was sent an anonymous, insulting letter. Racke was the writer, but a hand-writing expert, Mr. Spother, stated emphatically that Grundy was the culprit.

The final story, and probably the best, of the Levison reform stories was "The Wisdom of Gussy". Gussy gave birth to the scheme that Frank Levison should appear to be following the racketty road to ruin as trodden by his brother. Though the vicissitudes of the Levisons were tending to become tedious, this was a charming tale, with some neat character work.

Giacomo Contarini, an Italian schoolboy who was nicknamed Jackeymo, turned up at this time. The tale was below standard, and Contarini was never featured again in the lead, though he remained as dead wood in the St. Jim's forest for a good many years.

In mid-March Ralph Reckness Cardew arrived, and this whimsical character stayed on to become one of the most popular characters at St. Jim's.

Cardew was met at the station by his "distant

relation", Gussy. Cardew wanted to drive to the school in a car, but it was pointed out to him that, as it was wartime, boys were not expected to use a car except to take wounded soldiers for a run. Accordingly, Cardew called at the local hospital and collected several soldiers, one of whom had lost both legs, another had lost one leg, and a third had lost an eye and an ear. On this sombre note, Cardew turned up at St. Jim's.

Several reasonably good single Cardew stories followed, and then came a series in which Lacy, a newcomer to Rylcombe Grammar School, recognised Cardew as a fellow who had been expelled from Wodehouse School in the north, for theft. Cardew had been shielding a Wodehouse Sixth-former, whom he admired.

High summer brought the series in which Reggie Manners was accused of theft. Harry Manners, knowing that his young brother was the favourite son of his parents, took the blame. Though based a little too closely on the old Magnet tales of the Nugent family, this was a finely-written series of great appeal, and it was probably the Gem's best series of the war years.

Levison's sister arrived, and Trimble fell in love with her. Mr. Horatio Curll turned up again, employed by the boys to pretend to be a recruiting officer and to make Mr. Selby think that he had been conscripted into the army. Read all these years later, it seems to be a tasteless and unfunny comedy.

The Gem's last Christmas Double Number of all time brought back Valentine Outram on to the scene, in trouble once again as a result of his abnormal strength. It was aptly named "The Shadow of the Past", for this Outram tale was a poor shadow of the earlier pair featuring this character.

During the year, Pentelow had revived Hamilton's idea of a St. Jim's parliament, and had created the miser, Erasmus Zacariah Pepper, whom Hamilton himself was to use on a number of later occasions.

During the year, Hamilton had contributed several good single tales. In one, Lowther fancied that his own uncle, of Holly Lodge, was making war profits after the style of Mr. "Moneybags" Racke; in another, Tom Merry, in exasperation, claimed that the School House junior football team, with Trimble in goal and Racke as a back, would still beat the New House juniors; and in yet another, a German plane was brought down near St. Jim's and the airman was captured by the old favourite, Jack Blake.

But, in spite of some very bright spots like the "His Brother's Keeper" series about the Manners family, it was a badly-balanced year for the Gem. There were far too many stories about Levison and his relatives. It is not surprising that three of them were side-tracked into the Boys' Friend Library under the collective title of "After Lights Out".

THE YEAR 1918

This was a poor year. There was a glut of substitute stories, while those from the genuine writer, when they put in a welcome appearance, were not particularly memorable.

Early in the year, a new fellow named Roylance fell foul of Harry Manners. Roylance was suspected of having bullied Manners Minor. Manners Major, who was incapable of dealing with Roylance, persuaded Tom Merry to fight the new boy. It was competent enough, if rather heavy-going. Roylance remained on the St. Jim's stage to add length to the rather meaningless Who's Whos.

A typical Hamilton pot-boiler, and rather a neat little effort, was a single story in which Trimble was paid by a local tobacconist to distribute pro-German literature. The St. Jim's chums, for a time, became "bolo hunters". Bolo, apparently, was a real-life German spy of the period.

This was the Spring which gave readers the long and notorious series in which the Fourth and Shell went in

for a large number of sporting events. The genuine Clifford contributed a few stories in the series, one of which told of a chess contest. But there was hardly one redeeming feature in a series which featured spasmodically over a period of no less than 15 weeks.

"The Plunger" of July was Gussy, who decided to back a horse, "Jolly Roger", in an effort to raise £100 for the cottage hospital.

The genuine author was also in good form with a single story in which Lacy, of the Grammar School, visited St. Jim's, and was persuaded that Grundy had stolen his tie-pin.

A clever little tale starred Clarence York Tompkins. He managed things so that a Mr. Brown offered a new £16 bicycle as a reward to some unknown hero who had saved Mr. Brown's life. There were many claimants for the reward.

A fairly entertaining series introduced another new boy, Paul Laurenz, "the schoolboy Hun". It was another version of the missing heir theme, with plenty of contrivance. It turned out that the despised German lad was the son of Cardew's uncle, Commander Durrance.

In October, Gordon Gay turned up at St. Jim's as Clive's "Sister Mabel", a type of story which the Gem always did so well.

November brought a fairly good series in which Tickey Tapp ran a gambling den in Laurel Villa. This was not, of course, the Laurel Villa, but a bungalow near Rylcombe. An odd choice, on the part of the author, of a name for the bungalow. It all ended up rather tamely with Tickey Tapp kidnapping Talbot.

A glorious little romp, really the highspot of an unsatisfactory year, told of the Misdeeds of Mulvaney Minor. Uncle O'Toole wanted to adopt Micky, who didn't want to be adopted.

There was no Christmas story or Christmas Number

this year.

THE YEAR 1919

Early in the year commenced the series in which Billy Bunter went to St. Jim's under the name of his cousin Wally.

The foundation of the series was laid at Greyfriars, so that three stories were written in the Magnet in preparation before the Gem joined in. Taken as a whole, the series occupied 18 weeks in the Magnet, and 15 in the Gem, though some of the tales in this period did not deal with the "doubles" plot.

In my view the Gem had the better part of the arrangement. On the whole, the Gem stories in the series were better than those in the Magnet, and the reason for this was that Billy Bunter went to St. Jim's. Nowhere in the whole range of Hamiltonia is the importance of Billy Bunter as a valuable Hamilton asset more obvious than here.

Billy Bunter was the ventriloquist. In a couple of joyous Gems, he turned St. Jim's into a haunted school. It was a formula of inevitable success for any but those who had an aversion to the extravagance of such stories.

There can hardly be any doubt that Hamilton planned the double series with Pentelow. Pentelow wrote the yarn which landed the St. Jim's team at Greyfriars a man short, so that Wally could play for St. Jim's and impress Tom Merry & Co.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the series ran too long. Had it been restricted to about nine tales in the Magnet and six in the Gem, Hamilton could have written them all - and what an advantage that would have been!

There followed a series in which Mr. Ratcliff's nephew, Bartholomew, went to St. Jim's, until he was expelled for theft. Almost always, Mr. Ratcliff's

character was heavily overdrawn, and such stories probably appealed more to younger readers.

The Gem is really more memorable for exceptionally good single stories than for series. A noteworthy single introduced a tramp named George Merry, who was an ex-convict, and who succeeded in convincing Gussy that he, George Merry, was Tom Merry's uncle. With the best will in the world, Gussy stirred up all sorts of trouble for Tom Merry. A delightful yarn.

For three months in the summer of 1919 Hamilton supplied every story for the Gem. Probably Hamilton and the editor decided that the Gem needed a boost. So Hamilton, possibly recalling the success of a caravanning series for Rookwood fans a year earlier, returned to the theme, and the Gem became his pet for quite a while. So it was the turn of Tom Merry & Co., with a horse named Circumstances, to roll along the highways and byways with a bright caravan. This was the longest series, up till that time, that Hamilton had ever written for the Gem. It is, in fact, second in length only to the Silverson series, which was not to appear till twenty more years of Gem history had swept by.

The 1919 caravanning series was superb throughout, and included several outstanding yarns in which Gussy fell out with his pals, and went to stay at the home of St. Leger of the Fifth.

After the close of the caravan stories, Hamilton was to write one more story that year for the Gem. Ironically enough, it dealt with the falling circulation of the Gem, and Gussy's efforts to improve it. In one delicious chapter, Martin Clifford, who had Frank and Hilda Richards staying with him on holiday, was visited by Gussy, and dropped happily into the first person. A very jolly and original tale.

THE YEAR 1920

"Glyn's Great Stunt", in February, was the only

genuine story for the best part of twelve months. Glyn invented a hair-restorer which worked. Only a pot-boiler, but it shone among the stack of substitute tales.

In September, Hamilton was back with his first travel series for many years, when Mr. Levison, his sons, and Tom Merry & Co., fled to Alaska before the madman, Dirk Power. Thrills and action were snappy and rapid, and the opening story was quite incredible. But the story improved as it went along, and the series, though not a great one by earlier and later standards, had its moments. For a welcome change, Tom Merry played a substantial part in the series, and Cardew was left out of it.

This travel series was followed by an excellent pair featuring Gussy who disgraced himself by running away from Pilcher, the grocer's boy. The One and Only was not afraid of Pilcher. He was alarmed that his new overcoat might get spoiled.

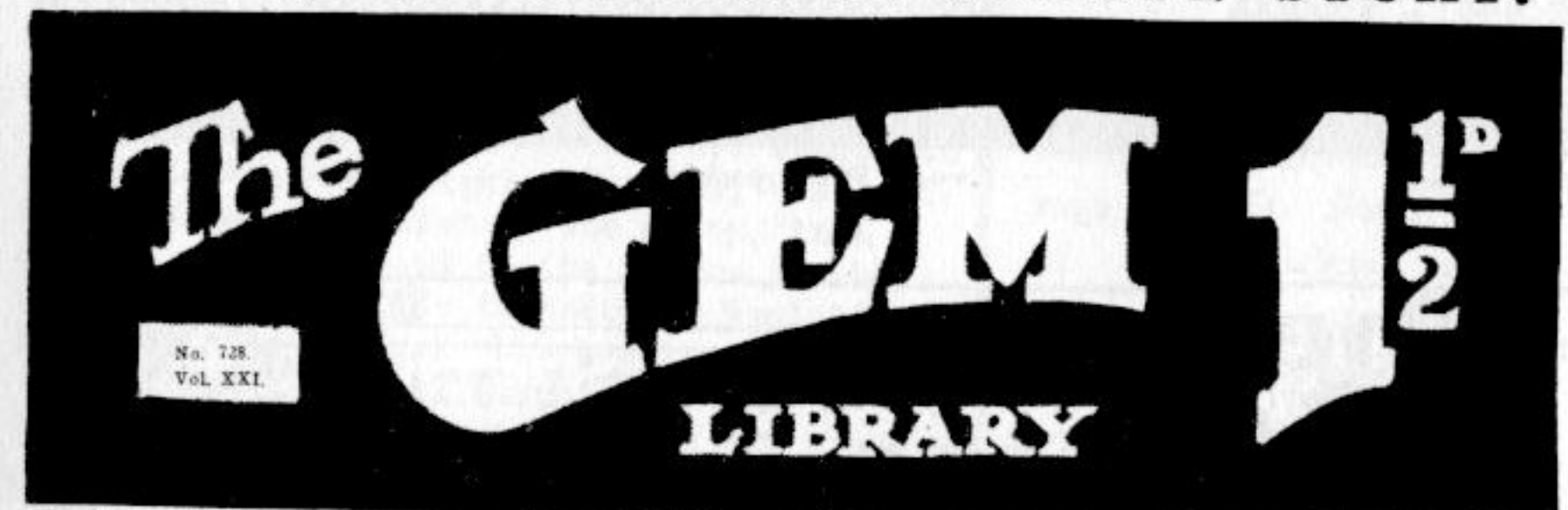
THE YEAR 1921

This was rather better than the previous year, in that the genuine Martin Clifford was responsible for about 50% of the total number of stories.

At the end of January, Wildrake was introduced for the first time, as "The Boy from the Wild West", and featured in three or four stories before the sub-writers came into the picture again. In May, an excellent couple of yarns appeared, with Wildrake and Cardew playing the lead. In "Chumming with Wildrake", Cardew takes Wildrake to a gambling den, and in "His Chums Against Him" the Boy from the Wild West takes Cardew on a long, ten-mile walk, and has to carry him home.

St. Jim's had its summer vacation early that year, for towards the end of June we found Tom Merry and Co. camping. It was a short series - and no story was very long, but what it lacked in length it more than compensated for in quality. The titles, "Tom Merry & Co's Camp",

FINE LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY.



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January 21st, 1922.



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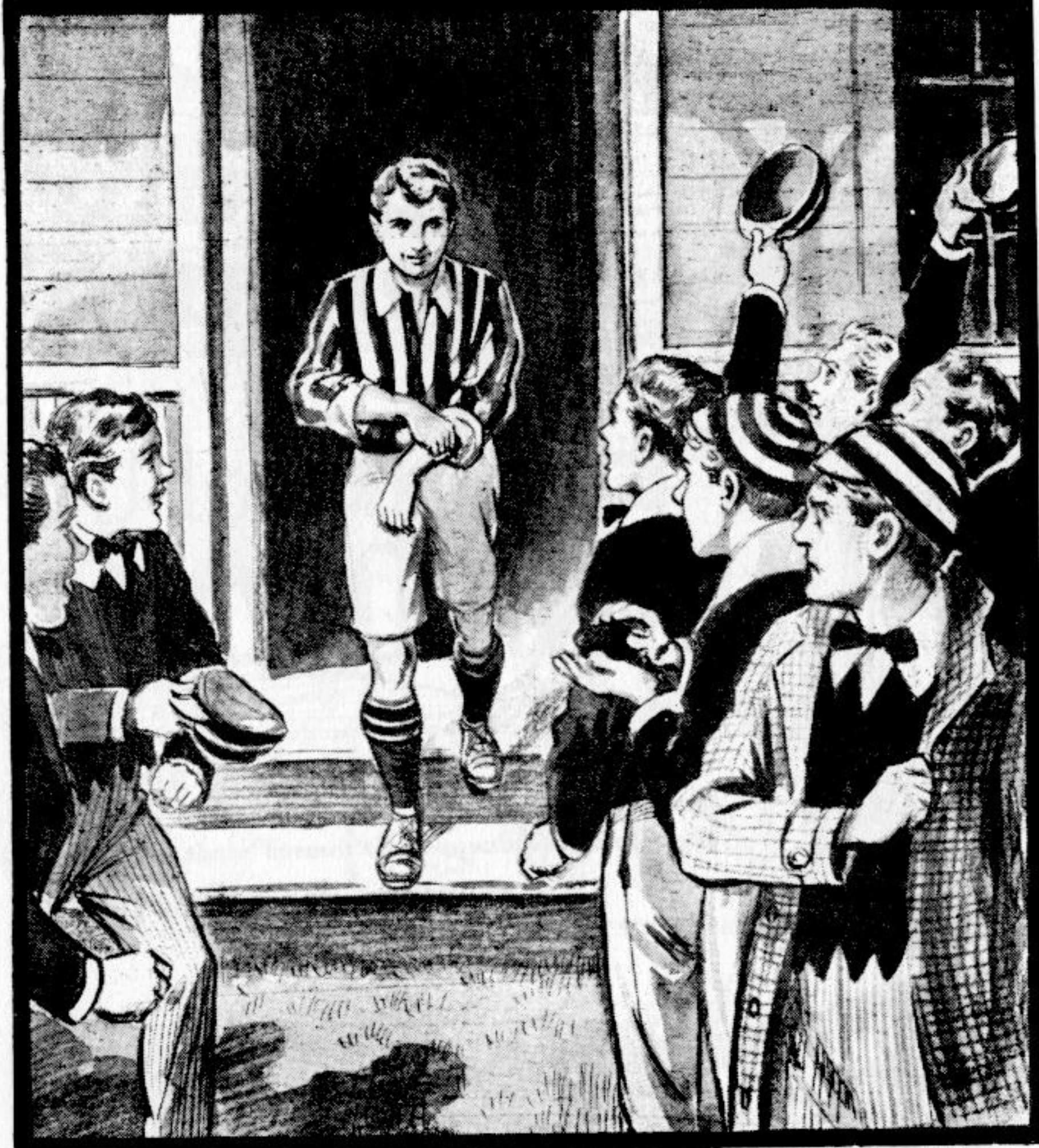
(A Mysterious Incident from the Grand Long Complete School Story Inside.)

SPECIAL CUPTIE ARTICLE INSIDE!

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No. 742
Vol. XXI

20 Pages. Every Wednesday. April 29th, 1922.



TOM MERRY TURNS OUT FOR THE FIRST XI.
(The Unexpected Result of Grundy's Little Scheme.)

"Seven Schoolboys and Solomon", "Cardew and the Campers", and "Camp, Caravan, and Cricket", - a real gem of a quartette.

In the middle of August came a memorable single story "The St. Jim's Swimmers", in which Cardew goaded Tom Merry into attempting to swim the Channel. This issue had a full length picture of Tom Merry on the back cover.

In September came a fairly entertaining series, where a lion escaped from Sankey's circus - "Tom Merry's Ten Pound Note", "In the Hour of Peril", "The Schoolboy Lion-Hunter". The lion-hunter was Wildrake.

October brought a jolly series on the old House rivalry theme - with an unusual twist - "Figgins on the Warpath", "Blake & Co's Campaign", and "Tom Merry & Co's Victory".

At the end of November came a series in which Figgins & Co. barred out Mr. Ratcliff, and the barring-out was broken by Tom Merry & Co. - a fairly novel theme.

The genuine Martin Clifford wrote his first Gem Christmas story since 1917 - "Lord Eastwood's Christmas Party", - a single story in which Wildrake discovered that the earl was being poisoned by his secretary, Bloore.

It would seem that Wildrake was the last new character to be introduced at St. Jim's in a permanent way. Whether he was really necessary is beside the point. He figured very prominently for a time, and featured in some fine outstanding series. Apart from his gift as a tracker, there seemed to be no particularly striking traits in his character.

THE YEAR 1922

This was the Gem's finest year since 1912, and must ever rank as one of the best of all time. The genuine

Martin Clifford wrote almost every story, and only an odd one, here and there, was the work of a substitute writer. It was many years since the Gem had published such a succession of consistently sound stories, and it is rather doubtful whether it did so again, until the re-print days brought back the old masterpieces.

January opened with a Levison-Cardew series, in which an unscrupulous adventurer, Dandy Carson, turned up from Mr. Levison's shady past, and kidnapped Cardew in mistake for Levison. Carson had installed himself in the Levison home, and was administering secret doses to Mr. Levison to undermine the latter gentleman's self-assurance. Doris Levison, sweet and demure, was frantic with worry till the last chapter. Like the Dirk Power series, this one was slightly on the melodramatic side, but it made very satisfying reading.

This was followed by a light four-story series - sometimes collectively referred to as the Wacky Dang series - bubbling with joyous fun over the rivalry with the Grammar School. Then came three tales with Racke in the lead, in which the character of the black sheep of the Shell was more shrewdly analysed, and in consequence it was possibly the best series in which he ever featured. Racke tried to win fame by pretending to rescue Trimble from drowning, and, when his trickery was exposed, only Gussy stood by the outcast.

March brought a very fine, serious series - "The Fifth Form Mystery", "Self-Condemed", and "Wildrake's Winning Way", - in which Darrell, in the aftermath of a calf-love affair, was suspected of a theft of £50, which Cutts had committed.

At the end of April, "The Hero of the Shell" was a gem of a single story in which Tom Merry played for the First Eleven.

May is memorable for that excellent series in which various boys were kidnapped by Rogue Rackstraw, and imprisoned beneath Wayland Mill. The stories were tense

and dramatic, and worked up to a tingling climax, and this series stands supreme among the many kidnapping themes which Mr. Hamilton handled over the years. It re-introduced Inspector Fix of Scotland Yard who had first appeared way back in Blue Cover days. The titles - "The Mystery of Tom Merry", "Held to Ransom", "Hand of the Unknown", "Wildrake's Desperate Venture", and "Out of the Depths".

June was a joyous month, for Tom Merry & Co., in three priceless stories, opened "The St. Jim's Tea-Shop" in an effort to raise the wind, and found their last state worse than their first. The series culminated in that classic, hilarious episode when Gussy visited a pawnshop and tried to "pop his tickah!"

Mid-July brought the superb series with Gussy in flight, after he had run away from school. The titles tell their own tale - "The St. Jim's Runaway", "Gussy at Greyfriars", "The Refugee at Highcliffe", "Gussy among the Girls", "The Runaway at Rookwood", and "The Return of the Runaway".

Without any delay, Mr. Hamilton launched another tip-top series, in which news got around St. Jim's that Levison had been expelled from Greyfriars before he went to St. Jim's. So far as older readers were concerned, its impact would probably have been greater had it been published some ten years earlier, and one wondered that any boy was admitted to a school like St. Jim's without reference having been made to his previous headmaster before he was accepted for entry. But, without delving too deeply into the pros and cons of the case, it was a cleverly written series, which made fine reading.

October brought a couple of pleasant stories in which Clarence York Tompkins' uncle tested his nephew by pretending to lose his wealth.

The issue dated October 28th saw the opening yarn of another fine series - "The Cardew Cup", and the

White Cover Days ended in a blaze of glory with the second story of the series, "Fighting for the Cup", early in November 1922.

What a year was 1922 for the Gem! What a contrast with much of the rest of the White Cover period with its drabness and its disappointments! What promise for the years of the Roaring Twenties yet to come - a promise only partially fulfilled, sad to relate. But that is another story!

Such then is the story of the seven years of the White Cover, from the viewpoint of one who has always loved the Gem the most of all the old papers. There are many unanswerable questions which present themselves during this period, and perhaps the most fascinating one of all is "Why did the Gem drop behind in the circulation race after the white cover came on the scene?"

It would be easy to ascribe the decline to the substitute writers, and it is more than likely that they were the cause to some extent. But not the whole cause, for the Magnet at this time suffered equally if not more so from the activities of those much-maligned writers. Could it be that the Gem, in adopting its new policy for St. Jim's, turned away some of its loyal enthusiasts, and did not replace them? I don't know, and, probably, neither do you, - but it's an interesting thought with which to turn over the last of the white covers.

