

How Billy Bunter Stole The Show

By EDWARD C. SNOW

A Former Sub-editor of the "Magnet" and "Gem," now living in Australia.



George Figgins, oldest of the schoolboy heroes created by Charles Hamilton, and Billy Bunter, the monumental glutton.

CHARACTERS in fiction are similar to children: those who create them cannot control their individual popularity—or lack of it.

Take the case of William George Bunter, well-known to older-generation students of schoolboy fiction and recently given a new lease of life on television in Britain.

Bunter was one of the many brain-children of that prodigious writer, Charles Hamilton, who introduced him into the Greyfriar's series of the Magnet Library in 1909, with qualities that gave him a high nuisance value in plot construction.

Quite recently Hamilton said: "Bunter was not a nice fellow and it was never intended he should attain the fame he has acquired."

While Bunter's counterparts in the St. Jim's and Rookwood series of schoolboy stories have faded into obscurity, he has won something of the status of an immortal.

As one who played a modest sub-editorial part in his apotheosis, I had a box seat from which it was possible to observe how Bunter developed from a minor character into a British institution.

Charles Hamilton, who wrote under many pretentious pen-names, began his career as a teller of schoolboy tales with a short story in Pluck Library of St. Jim's on November, 1906. He was then 34.

His oldest characters are George Figgins and Jack Blake, Tom Merry, the central figure of

the Gem Library, transferred from another school to St. Jim's with Manners and Lowther in No. 11 of the Gem in 1907. Harry Wharton and Co. began their adventures in the Magnet in 1908, but these early stories lacked most of the characters who were later to make the stories so famous and successful.

Then Bunter arrived, bringing with him a complete set of original commandments, chief of which was: "Any form of beastliness committed in obtaining extra tucker is perfectly fair play." Confronted with it he always advanced the "I wasn't there, it wasn't me, I didn't do it" kind of alibi.

HIS routine achievement in arriving home first at the end of a school term, to burgle his younger brother's money-box with a tin opener, was in keeping with his character. So also was his periodic habit of eating his way through his schoolmates' cupboards.

The early formula of the "Magnet" and "Gem" yarns lay in close teamwork between the editorial staff—with the correspondence of readers as a guide—and the author.

Hamilton, in turn, followed the policy and ideas of such schools as Dulwich, Rugby and Charterhouse to teach boys to be good losers in the world of sport, business and society and to put up with petty troubles and inconveniences without sneaking and complaining.

Artists were specially chosen who were able to capture the atmosphere of the playing fields and the river sports, sculling shells, etc.

Then a major policy change was introduced. After 10 years, the author—who varied residences between Monte Carlo, the north of France and a farm in the south of England—introduced Talbot into the St. Jim's yarns.

Talbot was a boy member of a gang of criminals, intent on organised burglary. The editors recorded a sharp increase in the circulation.

The formula for this series, known as "The Toff Yarns," was to write it backwards and use the opening chapters as trailers. The chapters were also crossed so that the healthy life of the school and the criminal conspiracy were concomitant with each other.

From 1915 onwards, Tom Merry and Harry Wharton stepped from the central limelight to the central background. This was because readers were wanting stronger meat—the more lurid adventures of cads, bounders and blacksheep with retribution laid on thickly.

During these changes, however, Billy Bunter lost no ground, either in weight or popularity.

The next 10 years saw as choice a collection of bad lads introduced into the yarns as ever left an author's pen. Skinner,

Snoop, Stott, Vernon-Smith, Angel, Carne and Loder graced (or disgraced) the Greyfriar's series, while the St. Jim's series were augmented by Cutts, Knox, Levi-son, Cardew and Racke.

Rookwood school had one sarcastic character named Valentine Mornington, whose studied insolence to his masters was very popular with the readers of "The Boys' Friend."

Naturally, when the aggregate of bad boys became too great for the balance of good ones, reformation set in. Reformation of a sort, that is, for the bouncer never became a Tom Merry or a Harry Wharton.

They became a "new type"—plucky, but still aloof; open-handed in deed, but ungenerous of mind; sneering at what others respected, but showing up magnificently in a crisis.

Some, such as Bunter, Loder, Skinner and Racke, never reformed, but the most popular formula became the yarn of an arrogant bouncer, who threw it all off and behaved like a brick when trouble came.

BY 1919, the English school story business had boomed to fairy tale proportions; two publications had grown to 10, and two annuals, dealing with 20 fictitious schools, had emerged. With a weekly circulation of a million and a quarter, Amalgamated Press, London, had become one of the world's largest publishing houses and its chief, Lord Northcliffe, one of England's most powerful men.

In their 40 years of life, the "Magnet" and "Gem" had many chief editors, sub-editors and contributors, to help Charles Hamilton turn in his world's record output. That his 60 million words were produced in correct English was truly remarkable in a century of high speed and inevitable errors.

The formula for Hamilton's deputy writers, who managed about 10 per cent. of all that was published, was to ensure that any sort of schoolboy delinquency was adequately punished. Stories of that type filled the gap which exceeded Hamilton's capacity.

His great success lay in the more subtle foundations of nomenclature and two stories in one. He wrote for pupil and master in the one narrative.

Interspersed with rollicking adventures were Shakespearian quotations and expressions from "Alice through the Looking

Knowledge

As falls the rain
Into your cupped hands,
So gather
The precious waters of experience,
To be husbanded
Or to trickle through your fingers
And be lost forever.

—J.W.

Glass," with aphorisms from Greek and Roman poets and philosophers to entertain senior readers.

Charles Hamilton's main reason for success is no trade secret; it lay in the fundamental gift of nomenclature. In order to make his characters live and last his lifetime, careful consideration had to be given to alliteration, relevancy, class and vocation.

The author's ability in that respect has been admired or grudgingly admitted the world over. He invented a literary formula and held to it rigidly.

As George Orwell pointed out in his diverting essay on "Boys' Weeklies," many standardised words and phrases became popular.

For example, Bob Cherry's standard exclamation: "Hallo, hallo, hallo, wherefore this thunsness?" made him a big favourite with all readers.

Bunter's favourite line was: "I'm expecting a postal order; I know you won't refuse an old pal a loan."

A good deal of Bunter's life was strict formula also.

His bootlaces, which persisted in coming undone outside certain study keyholes, resulted in his knowing too much of the other side's plans and capitalising on them where prospects were fairest. He repeatedly wrecked the best laid schemes of cads and good fellows alike.

His execrable behaviour ("ripping japes," "wheezes" and "stunts") brought him to the central limelight over the last two decades of the stories, and also won him the greatest number of floggings, as well as numerous "bumpings" on the cobblestones of the quadrangle.

A large series of standardised expressions: "ow!" "wow!" "yah!" "yaroooh!" "garoooch!" recorded his emotions.

The full details of the Bunter formula were worked out only over a long period—as, indeed, was the formula for every character in the stories—but the Bunter recipe obviously had a "little extra something," for he has outlived all his contemporaries.

STONE
HERAZD
14-b-52