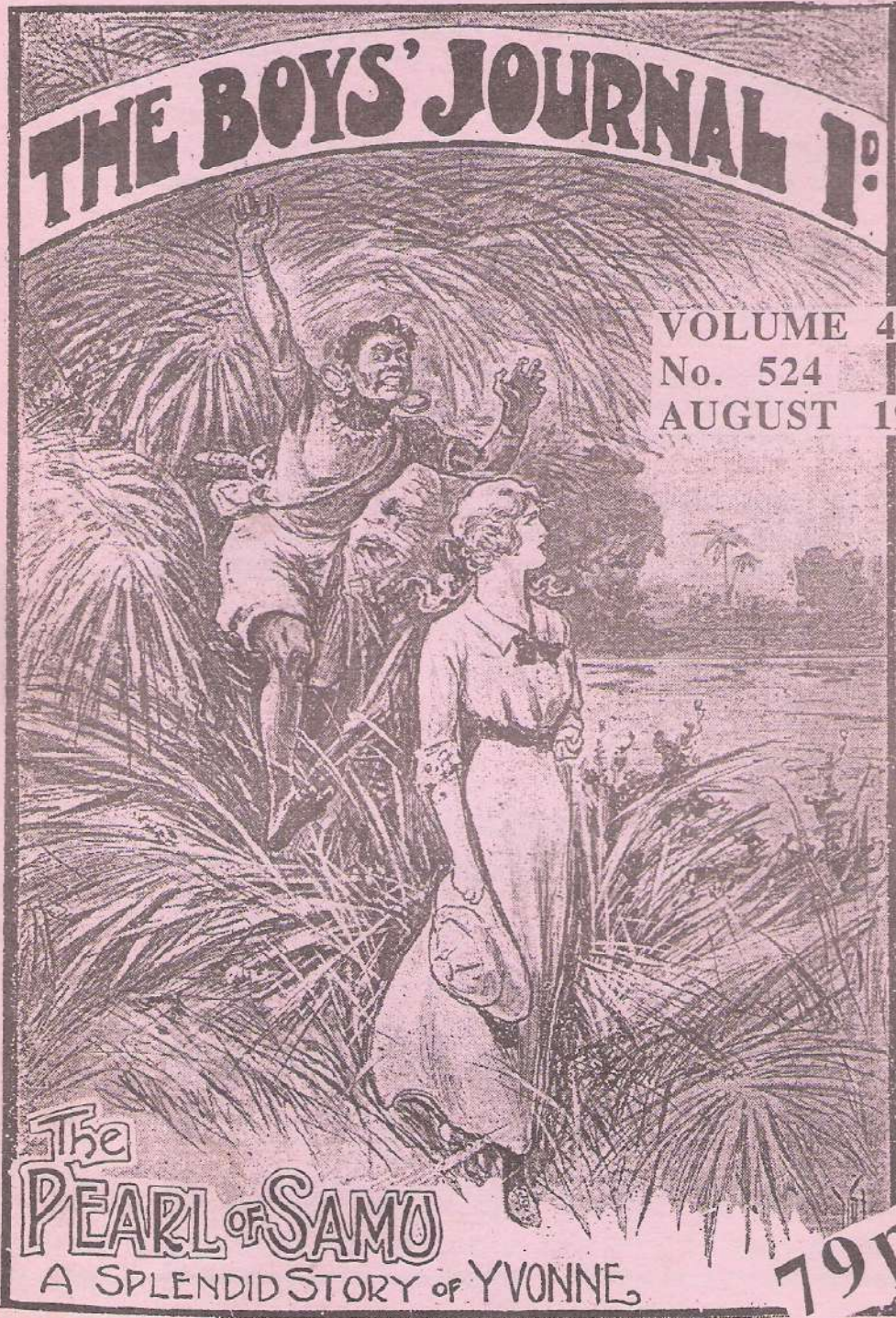


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SPLENDID MORAL CODE?

by Mark Taha

"He taught a splendid moral code, without the slightest suggestion of preaching or priggishness" Bill Lofts wrote recently about Charles Hamilton. Well - did he? I must, to start with, admit that my views on such matters as gambling, smoking, "pub-haunting", and the more recent "permissive society" are as poles asunder from those of Hamilton and, I suspect, most Hamiltonians. I am myself only 30, which may account for it. But what lessons did readers learn from Hamilton, and were they good or bad?

Smoking, drinking, and gambling were of course constantly condemned, in fact, overcondemned; no one seems to have drunk after the early years (although I'd have thought the Sixth formers, at least, would have indulged in more than cards at a pub!) but I found the incident in *Magnet* 234, when Bolsover mistook Vernon-Smith for Coker after a couple of glasses of champagne, ridiculously overdone.

Hamilton was, of course, speaking from experience when he wrote of people who thought they could pick winners and who fell into the grip of gambling fever; but didn't anybody at Greyfriars or St. Jim's ever back a winner? And I'm inclined to agree with the view of the 1908 Levison (reforming whom was the worst mistake Hamilton ever made, in my view); a master who smokes a pipe himself and canes boys for smoking is being hypocritical, unless he admits to being addicted.

Hamilton was certainly a cynic (the most splendid part of his moral code, perhaps). He didn't think much of journalists, tax men, city people, lawyers or politicians. Remember such gems (no pun intended) as "Billy Bunter had a vivid imagination, worthy of a novelist or a newspaper reporter" (some things never change: would he have grown up to be a reporter for the tabloids?); and the following hilarious episodes:

From *Magnet* 859. Vernon Smith: "'We all know Toddy will be a great lawyer some day, proving the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent, according to the fees he gets.' ...The Bounder's description was not Peter's idea of a legal career. Peter, of course, was young yet.'

And, from *Magnet* 1348. Bunter: "'Suppose you're paid to defend a chap. Would you tell the court you believed him guilty, if you did?'" Peter did not answer that. "Or if you were paid to prosecute him", went on Bunter, "would you say you believed him innocent?'"

The rascally solicitor with an unpleasant-sounding name (Sarle, Gedge, etc.) was a stock Hamilton character, of course. His opinion of City gents appeared to mellow with age. Mr. Vernon-Smith, the only one to make recurring appearances, was depicted as the vulgar, purse-proud, swindling "Cotton King" in 1910 but, in the 1939 Bertie Vernon series, it was stated that "the Smiths had gone out and done things for themselves while the Vernons had sat around thinking how superior they were". Hamilton's own political beliefs were, I would say, Socialist as a young man

(I doubt if he ever voted Labour, though) and Conservative as an old one. I suspect he'd have agreed with Eric Payne's Leslie Chadley (*CD Annual*, 1959) that "the only man ever to enter Parliament with honest intentions was a Mr. Guy Fawkes". Certainly, he was given to asides like (*Magnet* 1086) "If the Sixth Form debate had been a Parliamentary debate, it could not have been conducted with more disregard for reality", and (*Magnet* 1325) "Mr. Hicks was one of those men born with a natural disinclination to work... he might have been a Cabinet Minister, or an ornament of the Diplomatic Service".

He had, of course, no time whatsoever for hypocrites. I may instance the 1916 *Gem* in which Mr. Selby's enthusiasm for conscription was tempered (putting it mildly!) by a fake news item which seemed to make him eligible for it, and another *Gem* of that time in which Skimpole remarked to the same gentleman "No doubt you are very keen on the war, like many gentlemen over military age".

Another splendid part of his moral code was his obvious and utter loathing of cruelty to animals; I may instance a 1911 or 1912 *Gem* in which featured a friend of Mr. Selby's, a "cruel vivisectionist" who'd been driven mad by his experiments although he'd stayed within the law, from which we can infer Hamilton's opinion of that law (shared by me 100%); his depiction of villainous characters like Heath (*Magnets* 173-174) and Bright (1028-1034) as cruel to animals, and his obvious disapproval of Sir Hilton Popper's main occupation in life (apart from meddling in other people's business), "killing his hapless furry and feathered fellow creatures". As an anti-vivisectionist and opponent of blood sports myself, I'm glad to see that Hamilton's heart was in the right place.

As we all know, anyone accusing him of snobbery or racism wouldn't be even close, as the Americans say; to put it crudely, the only snobs and racists were the cads. Only the Bunters and Skinners of this world (apart from occasional lapses by Vernon-Smith, Cardew, and, on one occasion, Lowther) referred to "factory cads", "niggers", or "Sheenies". A minor flaw in Hamilton. He made the good chaps too good and the cads too bad, again putting it crudely.

I would argue that his attitude towards bullying was too soft; while he obviously condemned the Ponsonbys and Loders (his most realistic Sixth-former, in my view), he seemed to approve of Peter Todd's mistreatment of Bunter, and the Famous Five's heavy-handed treatment of so-called "slackers", not to mention their hounding of Fisher T. Fish. I always rather liked him (more than Johnny Bull, easily my unfavourite Removite), and what's wrong with slacking at games, anyway? Mine is, I admit, a prejudiced view. I'm proud to say I did! I've always believed that all physical education should be voluntary. As for the argument about a captain's duty, no one has to become a prefect or form captain, has he?

Furthermore, although I appreciate that he could hardly write from a "schoolboy rebel" viewpoint in a pre-war boys' magazine, I believe that Hamilton was too "soft" on masters. I do not care for "collective punishments" (unless the culprit owns up, the whole Form will be kept in) and don't believe that they should be permitted. And, in the "Wharton the Rebel" series, my sympathies were entirely with Wharton on both occasions. Not only do I disagree entirely with the *Magnet* Editor's view that Wharton "deserves everything he gets" (*Magnet* 886), and Hamilton's that Wharton deserved to be expelled (*Magnet* 887), but had Quelch magically appeared in front of me at the end of that series, I'd have knocked his nose through the back of his head. This may sound harsh, but he came across in the series as another Ratty, almost: a cold-blooded ramrod with a rule book for a heart. I refer to the episode in *Magnet* 887 which led to Wharton's expulsion. He was gated

because Quelch "couldn't trust him" (the previous half-holiday, he'd been accused, wrongly, of breaking bounds, and had succeeded in making fools of six prefects!) and was caned by Loder for saying (not to Loder) that he was going out anyway. Wharton broke out at night, and found the prefects on watch. I could only see that as a deliberate plot by Quelch, the act of a cad.



"Bend over that armchair, Todd!" ordered Mr. Quitch. "Oh dear!" gasped Peter. Whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack! Todd squirmed and wriggled as he received "six."

Furthermore, I believe that Smithy should have been pardoned in *Magnet* 1321; I know he'd been breaking bounds at night, but he had saved Lascelles from having his head busted. And there were precedents for letting off breakers of bounds. And, in his "Grimslade" stories, Hamilton made a hero out of a sadist. The genial flogger Sammy Sparshott, a "great believer in whopping", was to me a thoroughly unpleasant character, almost an athletic Ratty in his "flog anything that moves" philosophy. How would I deal with a rebellious pupil who didn't want to be at my school, if I were a Headmaster? I wouldn't admit him in the first place.

One might also say that Hamilton believed in environment as a cause of criminal behaviour; this is a pompous and partly humorous reference to the "schoolboy criminals" (Lancaster, Talbot, Flip, Skip) who reformed under the influence of Greyfriars of St. Jim's. I must admit to never finding that entirely convincing, despite Lancaster always being one of my favourite series. I wonder, what if a "boy burglar" had gone to Highcliffe?

So, did Hamilton teach a splendid moral code? On the whole, yes. His readers would learn to be against snobs, bigots, bullies, vivisectionists, hunters, and hypocrites, and to be cynical about journalists, city gents, taxmen, politicians and lawyers. That must surely be a good thing!
