

'The Black Mate' – Joseph Conrad's Bunter

By John Lester

In January 1908, whilst a bulkier Bunter was being prepared elsewhere, Joseph Conrad revised a story he had apparently first written twenty years before, which also has a Bunter as its main character. Winston Bunter, who, in contrast to Billy, is tall and lean, is known as the Black Mate because of his jet-black hair. His youthful looks are important, for his skipper, Captain Johns, considers the sea to be 'no place for elderly men' and will have no 'oldsters' on his ship. The captain also has a rooted belief in the spirit world (of which Bunter is openly sceptical) and longs to communicate with the spirits of the dead. Some of the hauntings with which Greyfriars, St. Jim's and Rookwood fellows are involved would enthrall him.

Like Billy often is, though, Winston is forced to subterfuge. The blackness of his hair is caused by dye (though we don't discover this till the end) and when a fierce sea destroys the bottles with their precious contents, he is in a quandary. One look at his grey hair will cause the nosy Captain Johns to fire him out of the ship. When he falls down a ladder and knocks himself unconscious, matters seem to have become worse.

Here, though, he shows cunning, obviously inherent in Bunters. When the captain comes to see him, Bunter suggests that his fall was caused by a supernatural visitation, so horrible that he cannot recount it. 'It has made me feel twenty years older,' he reports. Captain Johns is convinced and feels that this is the spirit world punishing Bunter for his disbelief. When Bunter's dark hair turns grey almost overnight (the effects of the dye having worn off), the captain is agog.

When the ship arrives in port, Bunter discovers that his wife has inherited a fortune and that he need no longer go to sea with his unpleasant and credulous captain. Like Malcolm and Donalbain in *Macbeth*, he is not dainty of his leave-taking. At first Captain Johns thinks his mate must have been spirited away supernaturally until the owners disabuse him of this notion. Still, though, he cites the case of Winston Bunter as an example of what can happen to those who do not believe in the spirit world and wishes he had been able to witness the unspeakable sight Bunter has reported.

What is curious about this is that two Bunters should have appeared in print at about the same time. 'The Black Mate' was first published in *The London Magazine* two months after Billy's debut in the first *Magnet* as one of the supporting cast for the rebellious Harry Wharton. It appeared in book form in *Tales of Hearsay*, published after Conrad's death, but, whilst Winston Bunter's brief appearance on the literary scene is unknown to all but the most fervent Conradians, William George Bunter has become a national institution, dominating all other literary Bunters as he dominates the spotlight at Greyfriars.