

Christmas Day 1930 was a very important day for me because among my Christmas presents was a copy of the Holiday Annual 1931 and through that wonderful book I was introduced to Frank Richards' wonderful world of "Greyfriars" and "St. Jim's". I treasured the book greatly, as I still do, and very soon afterwards I started to take the Magnet and the Gem.

Like many of you I find that the friends I made at "Greyfriars" seem more real to me now than many of the friends that I had at school and I owe this to the genius of Frank Richards.

I went to a public school myself before going to Oxford and, although I soon realised that real public school life was rather different from the life depicted at "Greyfriars" and "St. Jim's", I have always been fascinated by the stories and, above all, by the characters so brilliantly portrayed by the master of boys' literature.

As a school-master myself, so often I see something of the characters of the "Greyfriars" boys in the boys of my school. I was a House-Master in a boarding school when the hard-backed Bunter books were introduced in 1948 and it was my great pleasure to introduce Greyfriars to a new generation of boys by reading a chapter a night in the dormitory to the boys in my house. A few weeks ago one of the small boys to whom I had read these stories and who is now a well-known M.P., told me over dinner at the House of Commons, how much he had enjoyed listening to the Greyfriars' stories and that only recently he had bought a Bunter book for his library! As I had been his Classics Master I was very pleased the next day to send him a copy of "Ultio Bunteri!".

When I became a Headmaster in 1950 in Surrey it occurred to me to write to Frank Richards (I always think of him as Frank Richards and in all his correspondence with me he always signed his name in that way) to thank him for all the pleasure he had given me and to tell him that I had put copies of the Bunter books in the school library and that they were being enjoyed by the boys.

I said how much I hoped it would be possible to have the Magnet reprinted or a boys' paper containing his stories. In his reply he wrote "there seems to be a general consensus of opinion that it must be books or nothing and the publishers have the last word! but it does amaze me sometimes when I receive the report of the sales of the Bunter books. One volume alone has run to 40,000 copies and is still re-printing. Of course, this makes me very happy but I don't think that I shall ever cease to be surprised".

He went on to say: "So you remember the story of Bunter as an African King? That is another continual and very pleasant surprise to me, the way

old readers recall old stories. I almost rubbed my eyes when I looked at my Times on 8th November (1950) and found Harry Wharton in the fourth leader. The writer actually quoted an incident from a Magnet story published in 1909! What a memory! I shall certainly act on your suggestion of reviving Billy Bunter's ventriloquism in the books. But in these days of slow and difficult production we work a long time ahead. There are four Bunter books with the publishers now, of which three will appear in 1951, and the fourth at Easter 1952! So our plump ventriloquist will have to wait a little.

"At the moment I am busy revising my Autobiography, which was written during the War, and must be brought up to date for publication next year.

"I don't quite know how to express my appreciation of the very kind things you say about my writings. You must take the speech as read! I don't need to tell you that any writer for young people regards appreciation from a schoolmaster as a feather in his cap.

"I should very much like you to accept the enclosed copy of my latest book, to add to the Bunter books. It is about a new character called "Jack of All Trades", and is the first volume of a new series. And you may be interested to see the cutting from the Evening Standard referring to it, a picture of the oldest and the youngest inhabitants of this quarter."

In December 1950, in answer to my letter thanking him for the book "Jack of All Trades" which he had sent he replied:

"Many thanks for your letter of the 1st. Your description of Form III's reaction to the book is extremely interesting to me. And I was very interested indeed to read that you were preaching in Canterbury Cathedral on Sunday. It occurred to me that you might like to see something I have written quite other than school stories though, I hope I may venture to say, with the same end in view, of keeping the young mind on the right path. I enclose a copy of a local Church Magazine, containing some extracts from my little book called "Faith and Hope". The book is not yet published, but I hope to see it out next year.

"Certainly, I shall be very glad to see you if you will call when you come this way in the Spring. It will be a real pleasure."

I wrote to him on the 1st October, 1952, to say how I had appreciated his autobiography and I was able to put him in touch with the Secretary of the Lutterworth Press regarding his book "Faith and Hope" and I enclosed a copy of our school magazine. In his reply of the 9th October, 1952, he wrote:

"Many thanks for your very pleasant letter, and for the copy of the school magazine which accompanied it. This, I need not say, interested me very much, and I thank you most sincerely for your kind remarks on page 15. I was very interested to find the name of "Coker" among your seniors -- no resemblance whatever, I am sure, to Coker of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars! -- and still less between Skinner and the Captain of Searle House and the bad boy of the Remove who bears the same name!

"I am glad that you liked the autobiography. To tell the truth, I was in some doubt about publishing it at all, but so many readers have since written such kind letters about it that I venture to be reassured.

"Faith and Hope" is not yet published. The publishers do not seem to regard it as a 'seller', and perhaps they are right. They must, of course, consider this aspect, in these days when so much capital is involved in the

production of even a small book. However, I hope that some more optimistic publisher may materialise sooner or later -- being a good deal of an optimist myself!"

In my letter of October 13th, I was able to assure him that both Coker and Skinner were quite unlike their more famous counterparts at Greyfriars but occasionally I cast my gimlet eye upon them, just to make quite sure!

Later in October, I asked him if it would be possible for him to write a special story for the next issue of our school magazine and I remarked that I should be proud to be included among his editors! To which he replied:

"Now about the school magazine. I should be very pleased to write the short story you suggest; but agreements with publishers bar Greyfriars, St. Jim's and Rookwood. I would write a "Carcroft" story if you like. If you think the boys would like a spot of "Carcroft", just let me know about what time you would require the typescript."

I sent him a copy of J. B. Phillips' translation of the Gospels which had just been issued, in which my name was mentioned in the foreword and he wrote back saying that the new translation had given him great pleasure. His letter continued:

"I must apologise for not having sent you the short Carcroft story earlier: it is Billy Bunter's fault; that "fat villain" having been in possession of the typewriter. But I have much pleasure in enclosing it herewith", and he enclosed the short story "No Tuck for Turkey" which we printed in the special Coronation edition of the School Magazine in 1953.

I wrote to him in March sending him a copy of the School Magazine and he replied:

"Many thanks for your letter and the "Gateway". Yes, I like very much the way in which it is printed; it is a pleasure to read in such beautifully clear type. I am glad to hear that the boys liked the little Carcroft story and glad that the "perfect Billy Bunter" is like W.G.B. only in appearance! Billy Bunter is, so I am told at least, amusing in fiction; but a real live Bunter would, I fear, soon cause his school-fellows to repeat Queen Victoria's famous remark.

"Faith and Hope" has not yet found a publisher. One of this fraternity gently counselled the author to follow the cobbler's example, and stick to his last! Perhaps he is right.

"The Bunter books appear twice a year as usual, but this year it is to be June and October. Perhaps you may be interested to hear that Bunter is to have an Annual all to himself, which will keep company with Tom Merry's Own next Christmas. It is to be called "Billy Bunter's Own". I have just finished writing "Billy Bunter's Christmas Box" for it, and Sister Bessie is now in possession of the typewriter as she will also appear in the annual.

"It has indeed been a long and hard winter, and I am glad to see the last of it. But the lovely sunshine we are getting now was worth waiting for. Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by the sun in Kent, as Shakespeare so nearly said."

I then sent him the text of one of Cicero's books which he said that he would like to have and I continued my correspondence with him the following year and sent him another copy of our school magazine and asked him if he would write another story for us which he agreed to do. In August 1954 he sent the story "Turkey's Misfortune" and in his letter he wrote:

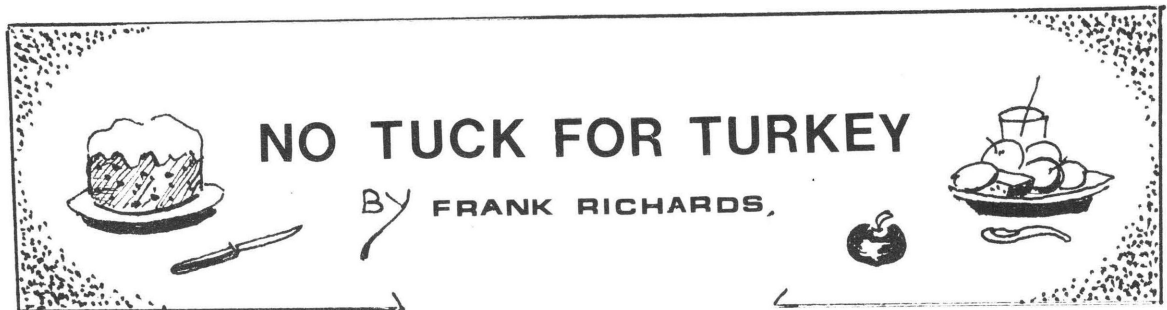
"Many thanks for your letter of June 29th, and the school magazine, which does indeed interest me very much. I delayed replying till I had written a "Carcroft" story, which I enclose -- not too late, I hope! As it happens, I have a series of Carcroft stories now running in a periodical at Sydney, N.S.W., and they tell me that Turkey is becoming quite popular at the Antipodes.

"About paying me a visit, much as I should like to see you, do you mind leaving this open for the present. To tell the truth, I am not just now quite so fit as I was at this time last year. Not a case of "pallida More pulsat" of course but Plancus, alas! is no longer consul, and the years do accumulate."

Although he does not mention it in any of his letters I like to feel that it was as a result of my correspondence with him that, in his book Lord Billy Bunter (on page 160) published in 1956 he states that Bunter Villa was in Reigate, Surrey, and I believe that this is the only time that the situation of Bunter Villa is mentioned.

It was a great pleasure to me in August last year to be a guest at the London Old Boys' Book Club held at the Charles Hamilton Museum in Maidstone and to give a talk about this correspondence and to show the originals of the letters and the stories to the President, Mr. John Wernham, and the members of the club and also to see the old type-writer on which these very letters were typed over thirty years ago. Below is the first story he wrote for me reprinted from the Gateway School Magazine of St. Mary's Preparatory School, Reigate.

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"Seen Turkey?"

Turkey Tuck jumped.

Bob Drake asked that question, in the Fourth-form passage, just outside the door of the corner study. Just within that door, Turkey heard it. Only the old oak door was between them.

Turkey, of course, had no business in the corner study. It wasn't his study: it belonged to Drake and Compton and Lee. But it was not uncommon for the fat Turkey to be found where he had no business.

It was the first day of term, and Carcroft fellows were coming back. On the first day of term, there was often an unusual supply of sticky things in the study

cupboards. Turkey, sad to relate, was not particular whose sticky things he devoured, so long as he devoured them.

But he had had no luck in the corner study. He had found the cupboard, like that of the well-known Mrs. Hubbard, bare. And he was about to emerge, to seek fresh woods and pastures new, as it were, when Bob Drake's voice outside the door halted him quite suddenly.

Turkey did not want Bob Drake to discover him there. He did not need telling that Bob had the heaviest foot in the Carcroft Fourth. He knew that by experience. And if Bob was coming in ...!

"Anybody seen that fat ass Turkey?" called out Bob, again.

"Up in the studies somewhere, I think", came Harry Compton's voice.

"Never mind Turkey", called Dick Lee, "Let's get out."

Turkey Tuck, inside the door, listened breathlessly. If the Carcroft Co. went out, he was all right. But the next moment he heard Bob's voice again:

"Wait a tick ...I'll leave this tuck-parcel in the study."

"Oh, scissors!" breathed Turkey.

Bob was coming in! The door-handle was turning!

Turkey Tuck's fat brain did not always move swiftly. Indeed it often seemed not to move at all. But peril sharpened his wits. Swiftly, he backed behind the door as it opened. The fattest figure at Carcroft School was out of sight, as Bob Drake tramped in.

Turkey hardly breathed. Fervently he hoped that Bob wouldn't shut the door. That would have revealed him at once.

But Drake did not shut the door. He slammed a parcel on the study table, and then tramped out again, quite unaware of a fat and palpitating Turkey in the room. He shut the door as he left, with a bang. Then Turkey heard footsteps receding down the passage to the stairs.

He grinned.

It had been a narrow escape. But he had escaped. And he was left alone with the parcel Bob had slammed on the table. Why Bob had been inquiring after him, Turkey did not know: unless it was to make sure that the fat junior was not in the offing when he landed the tuck-parcel in the study. He had landed it fairly into Turkey's plump paws!

A fat hand was stretched out to the parcel. But Turkey paused. It was altogether too dangerous to linger in Bob Drake's study while he dealt with Bob's tuck-parcel. He picked it up, put it under a fat arm, and turned to the door.

But at the door he paused again. He did not want fellows in the passage to see him emerge with Bob's parcel under his arm. Turkey revolved on his axis and crossed to the window. It was quite easy to drop the parcel from the window, stroll out of the study empty-handed, and then

cut round the House and collect the parcel.

He leaned from the window and looked round. There was no one at hand. Taking the tuck-parcel by the string, he dropped it: and it "plopped" on the earth below.

Then he cut across to the door again, and strolled out of the study.

It was a grinning Turkey who hurried along to the stairs. It would take hardly more than a minute to reach the spot where the parcel had dropped. And then, in some hidden corner, there was going to be a feast.

At the foot of the staircase, he almost ran into three juniors: and Bob Drake shouted to him:

"Here, Turkey...!"

Turkey Tuck certainly heard: but he heeded not. He cut past Harry Compton and Co. at a run, and disappeared out of the House, leaving them staring.

A minute more, and he would have been collecting a parcel. But Turkey's luck, hitherto good, failed at that point. Gates of the Sixth, with a bag in his hand, called to him.

"Here Tuck! Take this bag to my study, will you?"

Turkey breathed hard. Gladly he would have told Gates of the Sixth where he could get off. But he did not venture to do so. With deep feelings, he took the bag, and hurried away to the Sixth Form studies with it. Five precious minutes were lost, before Turkey was able to cut round the House, to retrieve the parcel he had dropped out of the window of the corner study. And then...!

"Oh, crumbs! gasped Turkey.

He gazed at the spot where the tuck-parcel had dropped. That spot was bare! Not a sign of a tuck-parcel was to be seen. There had been nobody in the offing when the parcel dropped. But during those five lost minutes, somebody evidently had passed that way. Somebody - Turkey could not begin to guess who - had picked up that parcel and walked off with it.

Not that it would have comforted Turkey to know that Snooks of the Second Form had been amazed and delighted to find a tuck-parcel, apparently unowned, lying about the quad: and was even at that moment

standing an unexpected and glorious spread to his fag friends in the locker-room!

Turkey gazed at the spot where that parcel should have been, but was not! He had arrived with a grin of happy anticipation on his fat face. But there was no grin - not the ghost of a grin - on that plump countenance as he rolled slowly and sadly away.

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"Here, Turkey!"

It was Bob Drake's cheery roar.

He had "snooped" Bob's tuck-parcel in the corner study, and not so much as a plum or a crumb had been his reward. But the penalty for snooping tuck in the studies was a booting: and it looked as if Bob had missed his parcel, and guessed: for he left his friends, and came towards Turkey at a run.

Turkey ran for it. A booting, after somebody else had annexed the tuck-parcel, was altogether too much of a good thing. Turkey flew.

"Stop, you fat ass!" shouted Bob.

Turkey was not likely to stop. He put on speed. But his little fat legs had no chance in a race with Bob's sinewy ones. A hand dropped on a fat shoulder and spun him round.

"Ow! Leggo!" gasped Turkey, "It wasn't me..."

"You fat duffer, what are you cutting off for?" exclaimed Bob, "I've been looking for you ever since we got in. I've brought something back for you from home."

"Eh?"

"Wouldn't you like a tuck-parcel?" asked Bob.

"What? Oh! Yes..."

"Well, I've brought you one ..."

"Oh scissors!"

"I couldn't find you, so I've left it in the study..."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Cut up to the corner study, and you'll find it on the table", said Bob. "You can sit in my armchair there, if you like and scoff it. That's all."

"Oh, jiminy!"

Bob Drake walked away to rejoin his friends. Turkey gazed after him as he went. Then he groaned.

He had snooped that tuck-parcel... for somebody else's benefit! And it was his own! ...Bob had brought it back for him after the hols! Had he not snooped it, he might now be sitting at his ease in the corner study revelling in its contents! And now...!

Turkey did not cut up to the corner study as Bob had bidden him. It was not of much use cutting up to the corner study now! He stood gazing after Bob, with an expression on his fat face, compared with which that of the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance might have been called a cheery smile. He did not speak. He couldn't! Only a deep groan could express his feelings.

Turkey just groaned!

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WANTED: Library's, Boys' Papers, Girls' Papers, Comics, Football Papers, and magazines for prompt payment or exchange.

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