

A CHRISTMAS GREETING FROM FRANK RICHARDS

Una Hamilton Wright has kindly provided us with this text of her Uncle's broadcast on the BBC World Services at the end of the 1940s. Its warmth and depth of feeling still speak to us today, almost 50 years on.

Once more, Christmas. There is, I suppose, no other word in the language that means so much to all of us. What it means to my unimportant self I'm going to tell you.

I've seen many a Christmas --- snowy, in my own country, sunny, in warm southern lands: merry Christmasses in the good old days, War Christmasses of anxiety for absent friends. But it was always Christmas: with a brightening of faces and a lightening of hearts. A small boy asked me once whether, really and truly, I'd had seventy Christmasses. He could remember only four or five, and seventy seemed to him an unimaginable number. Well, to tell the truth --- a thing I often do! --- I've had more than seventy. I don't quite remember the first two or three - but all that I remember seem to have been worth having. With Christmas we generally associate the adjective "merry": and I think we may truly say of our Christmasses, "the more the merrier".

What a jolly time Christmas was in the eighteen-eighties! Most of you won't remember, perhaps! Looking back, every Christmas in those days seems to have been all brightness and merriment: with ruddy faces and friendly voices, -- snow on the roof, frost on the trees, ice on the river, holly on the walls, the log fire crackling and glowing, the bells ringing sweet music from afar. No doubt there may have been spots of bother even in those happy old days. But one doesn't recall them: and doesn't want to!



Charles Hamilton

Illustration by Colin Wyatt

Christmas nowadays doesn't seem, perhaps, quite what it was sixty or seventy years ago. But that, no doubt, is only one of the fancies of age! I remember my great-grandmother, who was born in 1790, saying, when I was a small boy, that Christmas wasn't what it had been in her young days!

To me, Christmas in the eighteen-eighties was just gorgeous. I don't think I should care much now for enormous puddings or unlimited mince-pies; but they are a fragrant memory. The Dickens Christmas was still a reality then. Its spirit survives. There are still music and light and laughter, and young hearts to rejoice. If one's own face has grown lined, and one's own eyes dim, the past can be recaptured in the sight of ruddy cheeks and bright eyes, and the sound of happy young voices. And how the years fall away, when the Christmas carol floats in from the December dusk, telling us once more of the First Noel and the Herald Angels.

For fifty years or so, this season of the year was largely associated in my mind with Christmas Numbers. Our plump friend, Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School, had no fewer than thirty-three Christmasses, while still in the Lower Fourth Form --- which I think must be rather a record.

Every one of them was a genuine old merry Christmas, with turkey and pudding complete, and often a ghost thrown in. Those were the days of Christmas Double Numbers, before paper-shortages were invented. I always had a cheery, elated feeling when the time came round for a new Christmas Number. I just loved writing them.

Greyfriars School would break up, once more, for the holidays. Billy Bunter would include himself in some cheery party. He would adopt his usual encircling policy towards the turkey, the pudding, and the other good things; and would feel afterwards that the eleventh helping had been, perhaps, a mistake! There would be skating, and dancing, and holly and mistletoe, snow and snowballs, the ruddy glow of the firelight, the chime of Christmas bells --- in a word, one's own happy boyhood over again in the form of fiction.

Old readers often write to me that they specially liked the Christmas Numbers, which pleases me mightily, for I always liked them myself. I think I missed them more than anything else, when the war put Greyfriars School and its happy inhabitants under a temporary eclipse.

This present Christmastide is a particularly happy one for me, for it heralds the return of Billy Bunter and the rest of the Greyfriars crowd. Many old readers in Australia and other places overseas have written to me, since the war ended, asking when Billy Bunter will be seen again. Now I am happy to be able to tell them that he is coming: not in weekly numbers as of old, but in volumes of book length, written by the old boy who now has the pleasure of telling you about it, with pictures by Mr. Macdonald, who used to draw for Gem and Magnet. Volume One will be followed by more --- and more --- and more --- in fact, by as many as the public will stand. We live in times of shortage, but from next year onwards there will be no shortage, at all events, of Billy Bunter. Which looks, to me, quite a happy prospect. I hope a few of my hearers will agree.

So my present Christmas is one of happy anticipation. Old fellows in the seventies live a good deal in the past: but I've always had a way of looking forward, rather than backward: and just can't help it. I'm even making plans for Billy Bunter to enjoy another run of thirty-three years! Why not? I've definitely made up my mind to last just so long as my readers want me to write, and if I don't live up to this, it won't be my fault!

May I conclude upon a more serious note? Even the author of Billy Bunter has his serious moments.

At Christmas, we greet old friends, and forgive old foes: and forget our little differences and disputes. The toughest of us feels the genial influence of the season. Even Mr. Scrooge softens: even Mr. Gradgrind forgets his hard facts for a space. Peace and good will find their way into all hearts. For a time at least, it becomes clear to us, that this world is not, as it may sometimes seem, a jungle of warring interests, but the home of a large family, who should strive, with God's help, to make one another happy.

To me, Christmas, in early days, meant largely holidays and festivities. In later days it meant largely Christmas Numbers. But it always meant something much more than these little things.

It meant a renewing and strengthening of the faith that is our guide in youth, and our consolation and hope in age. The older I grow, the nearer to the end of earthly things, the deeper and firmer is my belief and trust in Him, in Whose Name we keep our yearly festival. These are days of doubt --- even of unbelief: dark shadows on troubled minds. Christmas, with its reminder of the coming of the Child of Bethlehem, helps to drive those spectral shadows away, and to confirm faith and hope. Helps us to understand, and to believe, that we are all the children of an all-loving Father. For as long as we celebrate Christmas, we shall remember the Divine Message that came to lighten the world's darkness, and we shall go on our way with renewed faith, and hope, and charity. That is how *I* see Christmas --- and that is what it chiefly means to *me*.

Good-bye!
