

# THE STORY PAPER COLLECTOR

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## A READER'S COMMENTS

NUMBER 79 of *The Story Paper Collector* was up to its usual high standard. Its welcome arrival brought "the glow of sunshine" of former years into the dreary wetness of a most un-summerlike present.

I particularly liked the photograph of the late Charles Hamilton, puffing contentedly at his pipe, seated in his comfortable, capacious armchair before his typewriter. The picture is permeated with peace and quietness of a high order.

In these days of traffic and industrial noises, blaring television and radio sets, and being pursued into every nook and cranny in our efforts to get away from it all by the worst menace of them all—the transistor set—the photo gives almost a last glimpse of a world of sanity which is fast disappearing!

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WHAT A REALLY professional

writer is Tom Hopperton! I have thoroughly enjoyed his articles on Victorian juvenilia. His letter mentioning a Bunter story published by W. C. Merrett sent me searching in a corner of my bookcase where I found a large envelope containing ten books which I bought and read some time after the end of the 1939-45 war.

Two of them were published by John Matthew (Publishers) Limited and were *Mascot School-boy Series* Numbers 1 and 2, written by Frank Richards, in parentheses "Author of Billy Bunter." The school was Topham School, the Captain of the Remove was Bob Hood, and Bunny Binks was the "fat boy." The colored front covers were illustrated by "Ratcliff." The price of each number was 4½d. and, as I remember, they were sold at Woolworth stores. Of the other eight books, all of which were

published by William C. Merrett (Publishers), Ltd. and illustrated by R. J. Macdonald, two were by "Hilda Richards." The school was Headland House, and the heroines were Margaret Ridd, Ethel Bent, and "fat girl" Dolly Brace; all belonged to the Lower Fifth.

The rest of the books were the *Sparshott Series*, six numbers in all, by Frank Richards, and again "Author of Billy Bunter." The Sparshott School heroes were Harry Vernon & Co. of the Fourth, the "fat boy" being Plum Tumpton.

In the story referred to by Mr. Hopperton, *Pluck Will Tell*, Billy Bunter makes his entry into this wholly Sparshott story with his usual "I say, you fellows!" and is recognised by the others, as Harry Vernon & Co. had "played matches at Greyfriars." Mr. Quelch, Harry Wharton & Co., Bob Cherry, and Vernon-Smith receive mention quite a number of times in the story.

These ten books were written, I suppose, some time between the closing down of *The Magnet* and the publishing of the first Skilton "Bunter Book"—a difficult, unsettled, and perhaps (who knows?) an interesting period of Charles Hamilton's life.

—MAURICE KUTNER

August 7th, 1962.

## Pictures That Lived!

THE ILLUSTRATIONS to Charles Hamilton's stories in *The Magnet* and *The Gem* were always a treat to behold. They presented the characters and action in the stories faithfully and well. I can recall just one slip that many readers might well have passed unnoticed: in the story *When Friends Fall Out* in *The Gem* of October 27th, 1934, Jerrold Lumley-Lumley, a rank "Outsider," is described by the author as "a youth with a somewhat weedy, and yet wiry, form." On page 9, Tom Merry and Lunley-Lumley, each in football shorts, are shown in a fight. Lumley-Lumley is the better built, and looks the heavier of the two!

A long-dead comic paper that had really effective illustrations to its yarns was *Chips*. I can still see that old rascal Jasper Todd of the famous serial *The Red Inn*, and Melton White of another thriller, *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*.

The comic characters in *Chips* were outstanding, too: Weary Willie and Tired Tim, and Homeless Hector, "The Tale of a Lost Dog," amongst others.

Yes, those old-time illustrators surely knew their job!

—O. W. WADHAM

Lower Hutt, New Zealand.

## DIGGING ROUND THE ROOTS

By TOM HOPPERTON

UNLUCKY BOB was the first attempt to build the fat boy into the leading character. The next serial, *The King of the School*, really rang the bell, being an excellent and exciting story which could have held its own in any company till well after 1900, and noteworthy too as developing in full the type of plot which may be described as the half-brother of the missing heir, where some unscrupulous character attempts to supplant the heir-presumptive to a fortune. Charles Hamilton came out strong on this, too, and few of his suitable leading characters but had at some time or other to combat strenuous villainy aimed at getting them cut out of a will.

He was responsible for one modification. The early Sir Jaspers made no bones about their objective: it was to secure a clean-cut, decisive, and irrevocable reversion by murdering the hero. It began thus in *The King of the School* and continued through *The Gypsy Schoolboy* and dozens more into the palmy

days of *The Amalgamated Press*. J. N. Pentelow never got the formula out of his system. *The Fourth Form at Franklingham* is best remembered for Johnny Goggs, but it was essentially in this vein, and *Jack Jackson's Enemy* stuck to the old "final solution," as did Henry St. John's *The Cad of the Fifth*.

It was as bad as *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Exploits of Elaine*. The heroes were continually being fished out of flooded quarries, raging torrents, burning buildings, and the path of thundering expresses. The reader with any sense of efficiency is often provoked into asking why the blockheaded villain couldn't just take a gun and shoot the brat instead of spending months manoeuvring him into all sorts of fancy predicaments from which he was sure to escape. Charles Hamilton's industrious but milder scoundrels never incurred this reproach. Such strong meat was adjudged unsuitable for the delicate stomachs of *Gem* and *Magnet* readers, and if Wharton, Merry, Vernon-

Smith, or Coker had been expelled in disgrace it would have sufficed their persecutors.

No other facet of Mr. Hamilton's work reflects his Victorianism so strongly as does his devotion to the missing heir. It is difficult to pick up a copy of a boys' paper before 1900 in which one of the species is not going through his routine, and The Amalgamated Press had a numerous band of addicts—St. John, Pentelow, Wray, Phillips, and Johnson spring immediately to mind—but long after the others either died off or abandoned the theme he continued diligently as the last practitioner. I have dealt with the subject at some length in *The Collectors' Digest* and there is no need to cover the ground again here. Some very fine stories, including several of the Hamiltonian favourites, have been written round the subject even if it is the most hackneyed plot in English, but it is now so essentially outmoded that this strange persistence can only be a matter for wonder.

CHARLES HAMILTON's literary ancestry leaks out also in his attitude to corporal punishment. The early writers frequently assured their readers that they were lucky not to be living in the bad old flogging

days. Their good new caning days were still rough on the youth with the sensitive rear, and the actual improvement is speculative. The pedagogue in *Mr. Midshipman Easy* explained that the birch merely left a dull ache, whereas the weals of the cane resulted in a more poignant and lasting agony. I am prepared to take his word for it. My own sufferings were exclusively from the cane, and I do not propose at this late stage to get myself flogged just to test the truth of his assertion. In any case and whatever the comparative efficacy of the instrument, it would surprise our pampered modern juniors to know that the cane was kept so busy in both these fictional and real schools that economical masters had the tips bound with wax ends by the local cobblers to prevent splitting and undue wear.

Time has forced Frank Richards' hand in the Bunter Books. In his weekly days he continued the tradition of extracting fun from whoppings, and our approval was solicited for the howls of agony when Peele, Racke, Skinner, *et al* collected retributive thrashings. As late as the 'thirties he had no less than three schools dedicated to the proposition that the way to a boy's soul is through the seat of his trousers (The School for

Slackers, Grimslade, and Pack-saddle) and the total can be swelled to four if one cares to include Will Hay's antics at Bendover.

To be fair, his fiction perhaps outstripped some aspects of real life on the road to reform. Coker's indignant pleas that the Fifth were not caned generally prevailed against Mr. Prout's wrath, but Cyril Connolly tells us that when George Orwell was an eighteen-year old Etonian he offended against some petty point of school punctilio and was well beaten for it, not by a master but by contemporaries duly armed with full and legal powers to cane him. There is a good deal of bite in that sentence in *A French Mistress* where a master bends a rebellious boy over and remarks, "Fortunately, this isn't a secondary-modern school: there's no danger of your parents prosecuting me."

IF BRETT STILL HAD any doubts about the appeal of the school story, they should have been resolved by *Jack Harkaway's Schooldays*, which must have been far and away the best-selling boys' book of the nineteenth century and eventually led to his premises being dubbed "Harkaway House."

Any aeronautical engineer can prove mathematically that

having regard to the shape, size, and weight of the bumble bee's body its wing span is totally inadequate, and the bumble bee is consequently unable to fly. Similarly, it is easy to demonstrate by any critical standards whatsoever that *Jack Harkaway's Schooldays* could not have been a resounding success. The bumble bee, not knowing any mathematics, flies merrily on its way, and the Boys of England (and America) showed their appalling ignorance of critical standards by gobbling up Harkaway and clamouring for more.

Jack is introduced as a ruthless and fearsome practical joker. This form of sarcasm in action served the dual purpose of demonstrating the hero's high spirits and giving reams of easy fun. It was then most popular, and we did not realize that its apparent recession was so illusory until millions on both sides of the Atlantic began to glue their noses to the TV for *Candid Camera*. We must now admit that the gentlemen who slip razzberry cushions under their friends and inflict explosive cigarettes on them are not quaintly aberrant pin-heads: they are the undaunted few with courage enough to give free expression to a trait deeply implanted in most of us. Jack's free expression is freest with



Mr. Crawcour, his Headmaster. He blows up his pipe with gunpowder, stretches a cord across a dark corridor so that the man falls into a bag of soot, inks his hat, substitutes a sooty lamp-rag for his handkerchief, and reaches a revolting all-time low with his disgusting trick of putting black-beetles in the poor chap's soup.

This sort of recital must surely have led to more trouble than all the penny dreadfuls combined. There were practical difficulties attaching to a fourteen-year old robbing a stage coach or setting up in business as a pirate in 1871, but one shudders to contemplate what happened to giddy youths seduced into inking, soot-ing, or blowing up their fathers in an emulative exhibition of sheer joy of living.

There are a couple of curious dislocations in the book. The denouement of missing-heir Jack finding his father would normally come in the last chapters. Hemyng shoves it in the middle, giving a certain anticlimactic flatness to the rest of the tale. He opens a startling line in female sadism, with Mrs. Crawcour as the she-tiger having Jack flogged into unconsciousness by an usher and our hero turning "spoons" on her. No matter how promising this might have been in one of Hemyng's *Anonyma* yellow-backs, the reader has

grasped long before the author did that it is hopeless in a boys' story, and begins to wonder how the author will get out of his predicament. That's easy! He simply drops the whole idea, and Mrs. Crawcour with it.

Otherwise the tale is what editors were later fond of describing as "rollicking," with japes, fights, ventriloquising, impersonations, running away, floggings, fires, rescues, and more than a fair share of brutality. Hemyng was an exceptionally bloody-minded writer, even for that day. It is impossible to keep track of all the slaughtered in his first serial for Brett, *The Hidden City*, which provides such charming interludes as a man having his throat cut and the killer jumping up and down on his chest to send a fountain of blood spurting from the wound at each impact, a frame of mind which might be in place in the wilds of South America but is certainly out of it in school stories.

**H**INDSIGHT BEING MORE illuminating than foresight, we now find it difficult to understand how, when the school-days of Tom Wildrake, Jack Harkaway, Dick Lighthouse, Ned Nimble, Ralph Rollington, and the rest were so popular, it never occurred to any of the authors to stabilise a valuable asset by

keeping the hero in school instead of bustling him through it in one volume before despatching him to China, Australia, Tartary, or any other spot which promised a little variety from similar stories in competing papers. But this was very much in the future.

Quite fifty years later J. N. Pentelow confessed rather glumly that he just had not thought of keeping any of his boys in the Fourth instead of letting them work their way up the school and so out of it. Rather belatedly, he wished he had, on the grounds that he could have avoided the bother of devising new backgrounds and characters. Coming from a former editor of *The Gem* and *The Magnet*, this is quite remarkable. His mind jumped not to the accrued compound interest of support afforded a long-running character but to saving himself trouble, and he obviously considered that his name as author outweighed that of any character, a thing that his experience with the Hamiltonian papers should have taught him was not true.

Even as one-shot stories, however, they continued to come thick and fast until by the 'eighties the serialists, like Kansas City, had gone about as far as they could go. The last of the bizarre elements were gathered

in with Brett's *Schoolboy Sombambulist*, Emmett's *Mat Mesmer*, and Rayner's imitation, *Dick Darling, the Boy Mesmerist*, who could put the 'fluence on wild bulls and similar small deer. There is very little indeed in the pre-1914 *Gem* that cannot be matched from this period. (The scholarship boy is one item which could not happen in the small private school, and I have yet to learn the actual genesis of the Fourth-Form Frank Reades typified in that inventive genius Bernard Glyn.)

THE WHOLE PERIOD is summed up in the effort of a writer who was determined to produce a best-selling school story. He carefully tabulated every element in every previous success and conscientiously shovelled the lot into—*Tom Floremall's Schooldays*. It reads as if it were by Bracebridge Hemyng, although I can no more guarantee this than I can account for its origin. What I can warrant is that anyone who wants to get the full flavour of the school tale of the 1880 period with the minimum of trouble cannot do better than read this one.

Tom Floremall, as the name indicates, was one of those pugilistic prodigies. He was also a missing heir and so, for good measure, was his pal Jack Nemo.

His other accomplishments included out-ventriloquising Bunter, out-japing Putty Grace, and running Wibley a close second in impersonations. Lashem Hall had been a nunnery and abounded in secret passages. Monsieur Bricabrac and Herr Phule could not be anything else but comic French and German masters.

The Headmaster, Mr. Lashem, had been a master's mate (mercantile or naval), hence his unusual idea in fustigation. He tied erring pupils to a triangle and whaled them with a cat-o'-ninetails until the blood ran. Blame him not! If you, dear reader (the period must be getting me!), if you had boys who knocked you down and stole your cork leg for a jape, you would have done the same.

There is a fat boy, Jeremiah Mutton; a Beau Farthingale with a Cardewish line of persiflage; bully Sam Boarhead; a flash swindler; Captain Raffles, marking the path for Captain Punter; in fact, a comprehensive muster. The prodigal author races through his narrative, lightly throwing away every couple of pages ideas such as Tom being framed as stealing a watch which the more economical Mr. Hamilton would without padding have expanded into a full issue of one of his papers and quite likely into a series.

But Floremall's creator had no thought for the future: *necessity* was the mother of elaboration and prolixity as well as its better-known offspring.

IT WAS NOT ONLY the germs of the plots which abounded. Those of the characters are as common. The fictional device of showing affectation or preciousness by substituting w's for r's in the speech is of some antiquity, and Hemyng, Emmett, and Harcourt Burrage all used the "Weally, you wotten wascals!" type of dialogue. Most interesting of all is *Mark Rushton*; or, *The Three Merry Mids* by Charles Stevens (*Boys of England*, 1867), which contains not only the accent but the complete prototype of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy:

"What do you think of the Honourable Curzon Vavasour?" asked Mark of his friend . . .

"I think, Mark, that he well deserves his title," was the reply. "He is indeed 'honourable,' and for all his affectation and molly-moppishness, a true gentleman."

A typical example of the dialogue is:

"Your uncle!" chorussed the rest. "And is he a nobleman?"

"Most assuredly! He figures in the *Wed Book*—the *Peerage*, you know—as the *Earl of Wockington*."

"Of *Wockington*?"



"No, no; I said Wockington. Conveet your pwonunciation. Aw! widiculous, Wushton. Why, in the name of Lindley Muway, don't you twy to woll your 'wahs' twippingly on the tongue?"

"Oh, Rockington," rejoined Mark briskly. "R-r-rockington."

There is a careful build-up of Vavasour's artless and simple nobility of character, culminating in his speech when a foundling known only as Seadrift turns out to be the missing-heir cousin who will sup-

plant him in the succession to Lord Rockington and deprive him of both title and fortune:

"My deah cousin, I am as delighted to acknowledge you as one of the family as if I had been cweated Lord High Admiwal," cried Vavasour, seizing his cousin's hand and wringing it with every mark of cordiality and affection. "I was pwoud of you before, now you have the best wishes of my heart."

And, if you want a final curiosity, Seadrift's real name turned out to be—D'Arcy!

*The Concluding Part Will Appear In Number 82*

## LIGHT ON A DARK SUBJECT

SIR FRANCIS BACON said "Reading maketh a full man." To which remark Artemus Ward might pungently have added, "Of what?" When one thinks of the enormous amount of literature in circulation it makes one wonder how much is remembered. Here and there works, or a work, stand out which linger in the memory when most others are dead and forgotten. Sentences, odd passages, remarks, *obiter dicta*, and the like give food for thought and, sometimes, meditation.

These opening lines refer to a subject which has for some

time been discussed in *The Story Paper Collector* and prompts the writer to pen this article for the information, it is hoped, of the readers of that excellent little journal.

The subject in question is a fragment which begins *When in the Dark*,\* which was contributed to the St. Jim's lower school magazine in an early *Gem* story and reprinted in the 1930's. It was offered by Monty Lowther in the hope that "what was too silly to be spoken could be sung." It certainly puzzled Tom Merry

\*See *The Story Paper Collector* Numbers 75, 76, 80.

and everyone else and still provokes speculation.

I think I can offer a solution, but if I am wrong I hope someone will correct me. It is, I think, a paraphrase of part of a poem called *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, by a clergyman named Edward Young. He was rector of Welwyn, Hertfordshire, and was a prolific writer on many subjects. His writings are almost all forgotten and *Night Thoughts* seems to be his only work that is known today. Though vague and perplexing to read, it appears to be a transcendental theory on human life and endeavour.

HAVING PLENTY OF TIME on his hands, *Night Thoughts* was no doubt written down as it occurred to him. It appears to have given rise to a body of literature which flourished until the middle of the last century. One thinks of *The Castle of Udolpho*, by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk*, by Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, Sir Walter Scott's translations of Gottfried Burger's *Wild Huntsman* and *Lenore*, and *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, by Mrs. Henry Wood.

In all of these works the supernatural, the horrifying, and the

mysterious occur and recur like the interwoven themes of a fugue. It has also been copied in some modern "ghost stories," but except for the works of M. R. James has not taken very well.

The remarks of the Editor on Edgar Allan Poe remind me of one of Poe's short stories, *The Premature Burial*. The narrator, troubled by catalepsy and dreading being buried alive, awakens from a horrible nightmare in which this takes place. His reaction on recovery from the shock is to burn the books in his library that deal with this "bugaboo stuff," as he calls it, *Night Thoughts* being one of them. From being a bookworm he turns to and leads a full and happier life.

This article will, I hope, be a *Lucus a non Lucendo* to those readers who have been wondering for so long, and in the words of the title help to throw "light on a dark subject."

—HENRY ADAMS PUCKRIN

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YOUNG, EDWARD (1684-1765), an English poet and clergyman who acquired considerable fame as the author of *Night Thoughts*. He also wrote a couple of tragedies, *The Revenge* and *Busiris*.

—*Pears' Cyclopaedia* (23rd Edition).



# WAS FRANK RICHARDS A SNOB?

By W. O. G. LOFTS

ONE OF THE GREATEST disappointments to all the admirers of the late Frank Richards was his Autobiography. First published in 1952, it was re-published as a Memorial Edition in 1962 with the original text. Thanks, however, to the Editor of *The Collectors' Digest*, the latter edition is far superior to the original one in presentation. Apart from a very accurate account of Frank Richards' writings by Eric Fayne, the inclusion of additional plates make it worthy of a very well-deserved place in any bookcase.

Because of the regretted death of Frank Richards on Christmas Eve of 1961 no revision of or addition to the original text was possible, and the mystery seems to remain concerning many of the things which are of the greatest interest to us all.

Many editors and writers whom I have met from time to time in Fleet Street, the home of many of our boyhood papers, have expressed the view that because Frank Richards was always so mute about his own schooldays and especially about

his own family—which was of respectable middle-class background—he must have been a snob!

If Frank Richards was a snob, then so were his readers, though their changed social attitudes may obscure the fact. It is always difficult to define the word "snob." Anciently it was a corruption of *sine nobile-snob*, and it described the hangers-on of the aristocracy and those who looked up to their admitted social superiors, without any hint that it also applied to those who looked down on others whom they considered to be their social inferiors.

It seems fairly obvious from Frank Richards' writings that the social and moral standards he admired were those natural to him. But these writers and editors seem to suggest that they may not have been natural to his own family or immediate forebears. This raises a very tricky point—one cannot ever trace all one's forebears and it may well be that he could have been a throwback. The true test is whether a man is true to

himself and becomes what he truly is. If a duck's egg becomes part of a hen's clutch, then surely the hatched-out duckling, to be true to itself, must become a duck and not a farmyard fowl?

No man who wrote as much as Frank Richards wrote could have maintained an act; if his characters were "gentlemen" it was because Frank Richards himself was. There were several "substitute" stories in *The Gem* especially which referred to Gussy as "not being a gentleman." This was not true to character and in this respect the writers revealed the fact that they were not capable "substitutes"—for the characterisation was not the one invented by "Martin Clifford," or, rather, "Frank Richards" himself.

Since his characters were so popular and true to life it is hard to believe that most of his readers would have preferred them to be cads or hooligans. There have been strong critics of these school stories who have deplored the "old-fashioned" code and morality which dominated them; and it is true that, writing in the tone of his own period, he did show working-class characters as they were then by different manners of speech, such as dropped h's and the like. But in those early days

policemen in all stories by all sorts of authors dropped their h's—and so they did in real life. This was not portrayed with the object of insulting them, but merely because it was so.

Back numbers of the high-brow English magazine *Punch* sometimes shock the class-conscious for this same reason, factually true though it was; and there seems to be a new generation of critics who suggest that the jokesters were poking fun at the working-class. However, it was accepted that the victims—who were not usually readers of *Punch*—were not directly insulted. Such critics would be forced to admit, if they are at all impressed by factual evidence, that Frank Richards did not patronise his Courtfield County Council schoolboys, but on the contrary he presented them as heroes and admirable in every way. Such schoolboys were, after all, the bulk of his readers!

MEASURED AGAINST the social pattern of his time, Frank Richards was no more snobbish than other writers—in fact, if the word is in any way applicable, he was less so. As to his stories of scholarship boys and the snobbishness they encountered at Greyfriars, there was substance in his theory and

it is not improbable that he was a scholarship boy himself. Moreover it must be remembered that many of the themes for his stories were editorially suggested, and one cannot say for certain whether he chose the themes, even though they were very well handled.

In the 1915 period these sort of stories built up the circulation, and if the reader will study the *Magnet* stories prior to this period he will find that in the main the themes were very light and airy. The heavy drama came during a period when The Amalgamated Press were selling such well-known stories as *The Boy Without a Name* and its sequel *Rivals and Chums in The Boys' Friend Library*; escaped convict, cobbler's son arriving at Greyfriars, and the like in *The Magnet*.

It was the early period of the working-class lad acquiring a secondary education, a period of transition, and although now it is commonplace for a state-educated boy to go to Oxford or Cambridge, it was in those days quite exceptional. Because such a hard line was drawn between the two classes—and made obvious by, above all else, accent—clearly there were problems. For an example, read *The Hill* by H. A. Vachell, which has been so capably reviewed in *The Collectors' Digest* by W. J. A. Hubbard.

HAVING REGARD to all this, why should Frank Richards have been obliged to carry his early environment as a placard? If he had the ability to move into a high-income bracket, as we call it today, why should he not have done so? Why should he have been obliged to carry a chip on his shoulder, announcing to everyone: "Of course, I come from a working-class home"? Why embarrass people by apologising? Why not be accepted for what he was? It is just as snobbish, and as embarrassing to others, to emphasise early poverty as early riches.

If we do not praise a man for saying "Of course, I came from a high class home and went to Eton and Oxford" as an opening conversational gambit, why praise him for saying "Of course, my father was a carpenter"? So what? A man is what he is: he certainly may not be better for having had an expensive education from which he was unable to profit. He may be no worse, but may even be better, for having educated himself.

Unfortunately, it seems largely that it is the other people who are snobs—and it may well be this was the reason for Frank Richards' alleged "secretiveness."

Personally, I do not think Frank Richards' origin is all that



important, though no doubt it is interesting to read about the background of such a great writer. If it were important, or if it had been proved that he really was an old Etonian, many old readers would instantly have disliked him for this (purely snobbish) reason! If it had been proved that he was solely a County Council School boy other readers would say he was a snob to write about public school boys about whom he knew nothing! So, on this assessment, he was a snob either way.

Anyway, anyone who could not enjoy a Frank Richards yarn without first wanting to know whether he was an old Etonian or a County County School boy must surely have been a snob whose judgments were based purely on class feeling.

**H**OWEVER, THERE is a realistic, non-snobbish attitude towards these stories and it lies in the explanation that most people, not excluding children, enjoy reading about others who do what they themselves would like to do. They like to read about heroics in war, adventure, and a more expensive standard of living. In the early 1930's cinema-goers wanted to leave their own drab, unexciting lives behind for an hour or two and "live it up" with rich people on

the screen. For a brief while they were vicariously enjoying riches, fine apartments, cars, expensive clothes, things they had always yearned for.

Today, in 1962, the tendency is to move into a lower level; to leave a comfortable home and for an hour or so in the theatre to live vicariously in a filthy slum with people who are foul-mouthed, coarse, rude, and obscene. Fashions change; but a writer such as Frank Richards should be judged in the terms of his own period, not in those of another.

Frank Richards' condemnation of smoking is, of course, in fashion again! How popular he would be with doctors nowadays because of his strong condemnation of schoolboy smokers! It might even be that lying and cheating will once more be regarded as contemptible and that winning a game by means of an artful foul will once more be frowned upon! If this should happen, then Frank Richards' works may become a standard work for the young of today.

The fact that lying and cheating were condemned by the "upper classes" has made the class-conscious swing round in admiration of such conduct; but it cannot be said that Mr. Richards' part in making the

code known to boys to whom it was unfamiliar did any harm. Or that his readers would have benefited from being told "the facts of life"—that cheats prosper, or that smoking is good for children, or that there is plenty of room at the top for rogues, traitors, seducers, and the unscrupulous at large. Does the reader honestly feel that Frank Richards was a malign influence in his life? Or that he would have been better if he had been protected from the upper-class view of life?

PEOPLE TODAY still try to keep up with the Joneses (no pun intended for the Earl of Snowdon!), and the upper classes were the Joneses of Frank Richards' day. Houses, clothes, manners, social occasions—the pattern was always set by the Joneses of "Society." No-one was made to follow the pattern; those who did, did so freely. It was the standard in social life, and also in fiction. Frank Richards was certainly no exception.

When the Duke of Wellington was once called an Irishman, not an Englishman, because he was born in Ireland, he replied most aptly, "A dog born in a stable does not

become a horse." Frank Richards was precisely what his written work proclaimed him to be. Neither horse nor dog, however, is in any way conditioned by the place or status of its birth. Mr. Richards was whatever he was born; his natural task was to find his true environment. One cannot possibly put a chicken in an oven and by some clever adjustment of the heat control take it out as roast turkey. If born a chicken, that is what it will remain regardless of environment!

So, too, with men. What a man is may give us a hint of his true ancestry—but is supposed ancestry proof of what he really is? We are in the position of never knowing exactly any man's true ancestry. No-one can ever guarantee that his mother's legal husband at the time of conception was his father! And he may have inherited the characteristics of some great-great-great-grandmother or great-great-great-grandfather of the 16th century—and almost nothing from his immediate parents!

So, all in all, it seems that the real test of Frank Richards' survival value is in his stories—what he was socially, or what his ancestry was, does not really matter.



**The House at  
Ealing,  
Middlesex, where  
Charles  
Hamilton was  
Born—As it  
Looks Today**

*Photo by  
Trevor Adley*

# MAGNETS AND GEMS

By JACK OVERHILL

“A MAN WHO WROTE about public school boys for errand boys”—that is what somebody said, rather contemptuously, I am afraid, about Frank Richards. Well, suppose he did—and there are other opinions about that. I was an errand boy—thirty-five hours a week out of school hours for three bob a week was one of the jobs I had—and lugging a heavy basket of goods about the town was hard work; and frightening work on winter nights when it meant going down dark roads and drives where dogs barked and owls hooted to scare the life out of you. With so much in your hands and on your mind you wanted someone to brighten things up a bit. Frank Richards did that for me—and for a lot more.

Frank Richards' real name was Charles Hamilton and I first became acquainted with him under one of his other pen-names—that of Martin Clifford. It was 1914, I was eleven, and the First World War had just started. There was a grim reminder of it

wherever you went. The men of Kitchener's new army were drilling in blue uniforms, and khaki-clad soldiers, regulars and territorials, with guns, limbers, and waggons, were all over the place. It was an exciting time, but the day came when I wanted passive enjoyment—something interesting to read.

Before going further I'd better say there wasn't much reading done in our house. My father was a shoemaker and a Radical. He was satisfied with the politics he found in *Reynolds' Weekly News*. (We lived on our own together in a tumbledown old house in a poor neighbourhood that would now be called a slum.) Our library consisted of one book. It was published in 1803 and it bore the impressive title *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attribute of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. It was written by Dr. William Paley, the Archdeacon of Carlisle. My father often said that his old man, whom the book belonged to, was a great reader and I

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would learn a lot if I read it. I tried, but I showed no thirst for knowledge by soon giving it up.

THAT WAS THE BACKGROUND TO my entry into a little news-agent's shop on a wet autumn afternoon in 1914. I placed the only penny I had on the counter and said to the girl behind it:

"A penny book, please."

"What sort?" she said.

I shook my head. I didn't know. She looked at me long and hard—she had large, dreamy eyes, so perhaps she was a reader, too. And then picking up the penny she handed me a boys' weekly called *The Gem*. I looked at the cover picture—a football match with a young man in a dress suit raising his silk hat and heading the ball into the net. The story was called *Tom Merry's War Fund* and I walked home reading about the boys of St. St. Jim's school.

I read the book all the evening in my father's workshop. In the beginning it was rather confusing: there was so much I didn't understand. There were the School House and the New House, classes that were called forms—they only had standards at my school—and one form had the odd name of "the Shell." There were little groups of junior boys called Co.'s under

their leaders Tom Merry, Jack Blake, and Figgins. These junior groups were in friendly rivalry with one another but united in their opposition to the seniors, one of whom was Kildare, the school captain—he was the one on the cover, heading the ball into the net. The juniors wore Eton suits and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sported a monocle. He talked peculiar English ("Yaas wathah, deah boy") and struck me as funny. I had lived among college students in Cambridge all my life but I had never come across one like him.

I went to bed that night dazed by the new world I had toppled into. For it was a new world to me, a world full of colour in which I could find adventure of a kind I had never known. Home, school, the shops I worked for, the town I lived in—they were humdrum places compared with St. Jim's, Rylcombe, and Wayland—and before long Greyfriars, Friardale, and Courtfield: for on the track of good school stories I was soon taking *The Magnet* as well as *The Gem* every week.

*Bunter the Blade* was the first *Magnet* I read. The cover picture showed the Owl of the Remove, fat and resplendent in Etons and topper, sitting on a stile smoking a cigarette, a seraphic look on his face. He had come



into money; his father, a "bull" or a "bear" on the Stock Exchange, had sent him twenty pounds—which had taken the shine out of those who didn't believe he was expecting a postal order!

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE taking *The Magnet* and *The Gem* every week didn't satisfy me. Harry Wharton & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. had been on the go five or six years and I was eager to know of all their adventures from the beginning. So the hunt for back numbers began. No treasure hunt was more exciting and often more disappointing. I went all over the town to little shops in back streets, turning over piles of boys' books that were sold at half price or swapped one for two by old men and women who traded in them as sidelines.

I had some rare finds: one of them was a five-year-old *Magnet* called *The Fifth at Greyfriars*. Five years old! Nearly half my lifetime! Think of it!

The disappointments were hard to bear.

"Magnets and Gems?" a lad would say to me. "Y-e-e-s, we've got plenty. My brother takes 'em every week, has done for years."

I'd go to the house, perhaps a couple of miles away, to be greeted with a stare from the

boy's mother and the curt order to "Clear off, I can't be bothered with you." Sometimes it was "There, I burnt 'em in the copper last week."

Burnt 'em in the copper! It was wanton destruction—and heartbreaking.

It got hard to find the money to buy the weeklies I wanted. For in addition to *The Magnet* and *The Gem* and their back numbers I now bought *The Penny Popular*, which told of the early adventures at Greyfriars and St. Jim's. Then I began to buy *The Boys' Friend* in which Jimmy Silver & Co. appeared every week. Again, the stories were written by Charles Hamilton, this time under the pen-name of Owen Conquest.

I solved the problem by letting out on hire an old girl's bike I had. There were a lot of squabbles between me and my customers—they would keep the bike longer than they should have done—but it was worth it to have the money to buy my favourite weeklies and to keep up the hunt for back numbers that had become an absorbing pastime.

There were other absorbing pastimes: drawing maps of Greyfriars and St. Jim's; cutting portraits out of *The Magnet* and *The Gem* and pasting them in a book; listing the studies with the

names, ages, and heights of those in them—some of which I got from *Answers to Correspondents*.

Frequent contact with the "Famous Five" and the "Terrible Three" had its effect on me. I modelled myself on them. They "played the game"; it was up to me to do the same, not be a cad like Skinner, Snoop, and Stott, and Mellish, Racke, and Crooke—and Levison, before he reformed.

I FOUND A SHOP where I could buy *The Gem* on Tuesday night instead of Wednesday morning. One night I stopped outside and in the gathering twilight and then by the light of the shop window I nearly read a story through. It was about Tom Merry's great fight with Grundy. What a fight that was! And how I gloried in Grundy's downfall!

I read *The Magnet* and *The Gem* in all places at all times: by the dim light of the oil lamp in the workshop, by the flickering light of a candle in bed, under the lid of a desk at school, in shadowy corners of the shops I worked for, at mealtimes, in the water-closet, in the street—stumbling over kerbs and bumping into lamp-posts.

My eyes always glued to a book earned me a nickname: the Poet. But what did it matter

what was said and who said it so long as I could keep on reading? And I kept on so earnestly that the piles of *Magnets* and *Gems* on the low cupboard beside the fireplace in the workshop got higher and higher. At last, they touched the ceiling and my father said I would soon have to do something about them or they would fill up the room. An exaggeration—and only a mild protest, for he never destroyed a book of mine and only once showed his temper over them.

That was when I lost two shillings while shopping for him. My mind wasn't on what I was doing; it was them damn books; he'd stop me reading 'em! But he didn't—and he soon got over his grievance—a just one, two shillings being a lot of money to him: he got only five bob for making a pair of boots.

Then there was a national appeal for reading matter for the troops in France and filled with patriotic fervour I handed in four hundred *Magnets* and *Gems* at a post office. I missed one *Magnet* called *Sportsmen All*, dated July, 1915. It was in an old jacket I used to wear when I went to the coal-yard with a handcart every week, and I've still got it.

By way of back numbers and *The Penny Popular* I read most of

the adventures at Greyfriars and St. Jim's. By the time I had, one thing was evident: Billy Bunter was growing. Only a secondary character in the beginning, a podgy guts always boning grub and pitching yarns about a postal order that never came, he came more and more to dominate the scene, not so much butting in as crowding in and crowding others out. He developed characteristics of a dubious nature and remarkably enough continued to be liked for it—a portent of the time when he was to burst the covers of *The Magnet* and spread his fat self all over the world. Indeed, as Hurree Janset Ram Singh, the Indian pupil, would have put it, "the spreadfulness of the esteemed Bunter was terrific!"

SOMETHING ELSE that was evident was the growing charm of the Cliff House girls, Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn—and Cousin Ethel, whom Figgins was so keen on. Clara once called Bob Cherry to her after he had scored the winning goal in a football match and (I quote from memory after nearly half a century) "Bob Cherry suddenly felt her soft lips on his and he realised the delicious, overwhelming truth—she had kissed him."

I realised it, too. It wasn't

Bob Cherry's lips she had kissed: it was mine!

Towards the end of the 1914-18 war, austerity made itself felt at Greyfriars and St. Jim's. The tea-table no longer groaned under the weight of jam tarts, cream puffs, meringues, and other eatables that made your mouth water. The boys were lucky to have a bloater for tea; study feeds and dormitory spreads were things of the past. That grieved me. I had never eaten a cream puff or a meringue in my life but I wanted Harry Wharnton and Tom Merry & Co. to eat them. I didn't enjoy it half as much when they had bloomers.

Maybe it was natural for so much reading to seek an outlet. It did—in writing. Just before I left school at fourteen the headmaster praised my compositions—the only work of mine he ever did praise. I knew he was really praising Frank Richards but it was a start and, encouraged, I wrote a short story. And I continued to write short stories after I left school, writing for an hour every morning before sitting down to work with my father to learn his trade of shoemaking.

YEARS PASSED and I rarely saw a *Magnet* or a *Gem*. When I did, the characters had been modernised. Eton suits had given way to flannel trousers and

blazers, and Wun Lung had lost his oriental dress and pigtail.

THEN I DREAMT of a story called *Nobody's Study* that I had read in *The Gem* twenty years earlier. I was so struck by the vividness of the dream that I wrote to the Editor of *The Gem* about it. He said it was a tribute to the force of the story and sent me a copy of *Nobody's Study*, which had been reprinted. I read the story again and handed it to my eleven-year-old son. Straight away he became an ardent *Gem* fan. It soon came to my notice that he was reading the same stories as I had read as a boy, and inquiry revealed that a change-over to the 1908 stories had been made in 1931.

My son also developed the craze for back numbers. I helped him, buying a sackful of *Magnets* and *Gems* for thirty shillings. I had them bound, and looking through them I wish a writer could now thrill me as Frank Richards did nearly fifty years ago. He had the rare gift of creating characters, scenes, and atmosphere that stir the imagination of the young in a healthy way.

I am sure he had a lot to do with my being a lifetime teetotaler and non-smoker. And there was an undercurrent of chivalry and compassion in his work. It's a fact that I called every girl "Miss" at evening classes when I was 14, 15, 16, and 17, though they were the same age as myself. That stemmed from *The Magnet's* "Miss Marjorie" and "Miss Clara," I am sure. The good Frank Richards has done and is still doing has never really been recognised.

I shall always regret I never met him in person. But he said in letters I had from him—letters written in the same style as his stories—that he didn't want any visitors; he was too old for them.

I heard of his death on the radio. It was like a punch under the heart. But though the living link has been severed, memories remain.

Looking at a *Magnet*, somebody once said to Mr. Richards: "Don't you ever think of doing something *better* than this?"

Frank Richards replied: "You see, there isn't anything better."

Well—is there anything better than giving pleasure to millions?



## DRAKE OR RAKE?

*The following is quoted from a letter written by W. J. A. Hubbard:*

WITH REGARD TO Mr. Lofts' article on the Greyfriars stories in *The Boys' Herald* [S.P.C. Number 79], you will remember that it was I who inspired Roger Jenkins' article on Jack Drake in S.P.C. Number 63 with the various queries I raised in connection with a story in one of the *Holiday Annuals*, *Nugent Minor's Lesson*, which featured Dick Rodney and Rake, not Drake.

You will remember that Roger was of the opinion that this H. A. story was probably the work of a "sub" writer, while I thought that the yarn was really one of the *Boys' Herald* Greyfriars stories with Rake being substituted for Drake for some curious reason. It would appear from the information given by Mr. Lofts that the H. A. story (1923) is most probably the last yarn of the Drake/Nugent feud series, Number 86, *Nugent Minor's Luck*, reprinted in Number 1663 of *The Gem* as *The Fag's Fear*.

Why Rake was substituted for Drake in the H. A. printing, thus giving rise to the belief that

Rodney was still at Greyfriars after Drake's departure, is a puzzle. I can only conclude that the reason for it was, that Drake was featured, in his detective capacity, in a story in *The Holiday Annual* of the same period, in which he solved the mystery of the disappearance of a number of personal articles belonging to the juniors, taken by Bunter while a Cricket Week was being held at Greyfriars.

—W. J. A. HUBBARD  
Nyeri, Kenya, B.E.A.

*The above paragraphs from Mr. Hubbard's letter were copied and sent to Mr. Lofts who, after doing some research, wrote:*

THE STORY IN THE 1923 *Holiday Annual*, *Nugent Minor's Lesson*, was not a reprint of a *Boys' Herald* story, but original. The strange thing is, that undoubtedly this story was intended to be the last one in the Drake/Nugent feud series, and it should have appeared in Number 87 of *The Boys' Herald*. In this number there was a substitute story, which no doubt was written in haste to fill the gap, because the proper story had not arrived, evidently, by press deadline.

Probably the story turned up later, but could not be used then because it would have been out of sequence. So it was used as an "original" in *The Holiday*



*Annual*, with the wise editorial decision to alter Drake to Rake, because of recent events. If one reads the 1923 *Holiday Annual* story, one will find reference to where Rake/Drake earlier had lent Nugent Minor £2 to get him out of a scrape. This action was mentioned and related in *The Boys' Herald* Number 86, so *Nugent Minor's Lesson* was obviously a follow-on story. One can imagine the "copy" from Charles Hamilton not arriving, and a sub-editor writing a substitute yarn in a hurry. I would class *Wun Lung's Pie* about the worst story ever! But now we see that there may have been some excuse for it.

In the 1924 *Holiday Annual*, in the story *A Great Man at Greyfriars* in which "Martin Clifford" comes to the school, is found mention of Drake and Rodney. No doubt this story was a very long time in hand; it is judged by the "experts" to have been written by Charles Hamilton.

— W. O. G. LOFTS



### BILLY BUNTER'S FATHER

¶ W. O. G. Lofts and Tom Hopterton are collaborating on a biography of Charles Hamilton, *Billy Bunter's Father*, which they hope will be published during 1963.

### ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

*Valiant*—Number 1, October 6th, 1962. 32 pages of adventure and fun plus other features all in pictures. 6d. per copy. Fleetway Publications, London.

*Film Fun*—Final issue was dated September 8th, 1962. Number 1 was for January 17th, 1920. A long run, perhaps the longest of any Amalgamated/Fleetway juvenile weekly papers apart from *Comic Cuts* and *Chips*.

### I WISH TO OBTAIN . . .

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—Number 51 of *The Story Paper Collector* to complete volume, and all earlier numbers.—Jack Overhill, 99 Shelford Rd, Trumpington, Cambridge, England.

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