

THE HA'PENNY HERALD

by Tom Hopperton

"Frank Richards is almost ashamed to say that he knows nothing on the subject of early struggles, never having had any ... Then, when his income dropped in a day from £2500 a year to nothing ... he could be quite eloquent on the subject of 'late' struggles." Thus Frank Richards in "The Fifth Saturday Book", and I find the words highly applicable to my own experiences in reading his stories. I could grow eloquent - profane even! - about some of my collecting efforts when the weekly "income" ceased in 1940, but when others are relating harrowing stories of parental prohibitions, the only contribution I can make to the conversation is a sympathetic noise. My father, realising that it is easier to divert a stream than to dam it - as well as being safer - banned nothing, and when he thought it time that I graduated from comics gave me a small paper, saying: "Look, here's a new paper supposed to be written by schoolboys. If you like it, you can have it every week."

It was No 1 of the first series of "The Greyfriars Herald", and if it was news to me it came as no shock to the readers of "The Magnet" for its coming had been "dinned in their lugs" for months. Experiments in swelling the collection from the Hamiltonians with Greyfriars stories in "The Penny Popular" and "The Dreadnought" had paved the way for this more ambitious scheme of an independent paper; a poll of Magnetites had been announced as resulting in: "For 'The Greyfriars Herald', 105,726; Against 'The Greyfriars Herald', 4", and H.A. Hinton had even printed his "private correspondence" with Dr Locke, showing how he had gradually prevailed on the Headmaster of Greyfriars to permit the general publication of the school magazine. "Tom Merry's Weekly" was similarly scheduled for promotion from supplement to weekly paper. The "Weekly", for some obscure reason, never did materialise as a real weekly, but its rival appeared as scheduled.

After all the ballyhoo, it was a modest enough mouse which emerged from the mountain. The price was only a halfpenny but, even so, it had a rather amateurish look, although that may have been part of the atmosphere of being "Edited by Harry Wharton and Co", and of all the contributors being in the Remove. There were three "foreign" items: "Mark Linley's" serial, "The Pride of the Ring" was set at Earlingham School, "Frank Nugent" had a page comic strip, and "Peter Todd" had a series of spoof detective yarns which were funny enough to have stuck in my mind long after most of the companion features had faded. Probably the funniest thing about Peter's Herlock Sholmes, though, was that when he was transferred to "The Magnet" the editor had to assure some indignant readers that his "detective" exploits were not intended to be taken seriously. St Jim's managed to show the tip of its nose occasionally, but otherwise the new paper was simply an expansion of the old supplement, with news from the Remove Police Court (held in the woodshed), and short stories, articles and "correspondence"

all signed by familiar Greyfriars characters. This pretence of schoolboy authorship makes it difficult to estimate what contribution - if any - Frank Richards made to the paper, and the occasional gleam of his style may simply be because some of the stories are adaptations of humorous interludes used previously in longer tales.

"The Greyfriars Herald", the sixth of the Companion Papers, was no doubt intended to be both a halfpenny bait to hook fish for the penny "Magnet", and a feeler to decide just how much of a good thing the Frank Richards devotees were prepared to buy each week. Even if one makes a cynical discount from the figures of the poll and "Harry Wharton's" claim that it "was launched at the urgent request of the 'Magnet' readers", there can be no gainsaying that the demand for more and more Greyfriars was there. But the Kaiser War was in its second year and in No 17 "Harry" sounded a warning about the paper situation. Something had to go, and the axe fell on the youngest and cheapest of the family. The following week's issue appeared with a notice of suspension, and the promise to re-appear in brighter times. Short as it was, this first run must have convinced the conductors of Fleetway House that they were on the right track, for within two months of the Armistice the paper was back as a fully-fledged member of the "Magnet" group.

This second series lacked much of the appropriateness of character which marked the original version, and neither Owen Conquest's stories of Jack Drake at St Minifred's nor a continual fiddling about with its make-up saved it from an early grave. It was just as inevitable, I think, that the halfpenny series would also have petered out if it had been allowed to continue unmolested. The basic idea, after all, was to present page after page of chit-chat about Greyfriars, which was enjoyable enough in a short supplement, but was not strong enough to carry a full-sized weekly paper. It was impossible to draw indefinitely on a capital of Richards' characters without Frank to infuse them with vitality in their natural sphere - the longish story. The demand for more Greyfriars, as I have said, was very much there, but it was a rather more discriminating and intelligent demand than H.A. Hinton imagined. Proof of this is afforded, I believe, by the much longer run of "The Bonny Popular." "The Bonny Pop" played some queer tricks with its scissors-and-paste policy but it did give the gist or essence of the original yarns and we cheerfully defied myopia at the hands of its often vile print to keep reading it.

Still, I regard the halfpenny series of "The Greyfriars Herald" with an affectionate eye. For me, it was most appropriately named, for it heralded many years of entertainment and amusement with its "staff". For that meritorious service, I think the least I can do if I ever lay hands on the elusive No 1 is to frame it.

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