

1. Were the Gem and Magnet created specially as vehicles for your stories?

Yes. The Gem was founded in 1907, the Magnet about a year later. Frank Richards began to write soon after 1890. He first wrote for the Amalgamated Press--then called Harmsworth Brothers--in 1895. Chiefly complete school stories for the Boys Friend and Realm and Herald, and football and cricket serials for these papers, edited by Hamilton Edwards.

Some time in 1906, H. J. Garrish, then editor of a paper called 'Pluck', asked him to write a series of school stories in that paper, and "St. Jim's" was invented for the purpose. The early characters were Blake and Herries and Digby, of the School-House; and Figgins and Co. of the New House. A little later Garrish suggested adding an elegant and fastidious sort of character, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was invented. This character was moulded on a very elegant and beautifully-mannered young gentleman who was a sub-editor at the Carmelite House, and who, many years later, became editor of Gem and Magnet.

In 1907, Frank Richards--not yet called by that name--made the acquaintance of Percy Griffith. At their first meeting, Griffith told him he was starting a new paper, the 'Gem'. The author was asked to invent a set of schoolboy characters: hence Tom Merry, Wanner, and Lowther. The school was called "Clavering": but later on, Griffith took over St. Jim's from Pluck, and asked the author to amalgamate the two. So Tom Merry and Co. went to St. Jim's, and joined up with Blake and Figgins and the rest, with whom they remained in company till the war and the paper shortage. Other characters, such as Levison, Talbot, Grundy, etc, were added from time to time. "Martin Clifford" was invented for the Gem.

Some time in 1908 Griffith told the author that the Gem had been such a success, that he was going to begin another paper on somewhat similar lines. He asked him to invent a fresh set of schoolboy characters, and a fresh pen-name. Harry Wharton and Co., and "Frank Richards" were the result. "Billy Bunter" had long been in the author's mind: he was revived for the 'Magnet'. Actually, Bunter had been offered, years before, to another editor, who "did not see much" in him, so the author put him in cold storage till wanted.

2. How old when the Gem first came out?

In the early thirties.

3. Were the characters mapped out in advance?

Always. But they grew and grew. For instance, I had not met that elegant sub-editor when D'Arcy began. But after I came to know him, Arthur Augustus was modelled more and more upon him, till he might have been his twin.---good looks, beautiful manners, elegant clothes, and a fastidious sense of honour: the only difference being that the sub-editor was a brainy man, and D'Arcy not quite that. Every character in both papers was modelled on somebody in real life, but very often two or three or four somebodies were combined to make one character. Wharton I knew at school--under another name, of course--Huree Janset Ram Singh was founded upon a dark gentleman I met as a boy, who greeted me with "Top of a beautiful morning!" Billy Bunter was originally three persons--a fat editor, an uncle who wore big glasses, and a relative who was always expecting a cheque that never came. But traits were borrowed from many

persons to make up the complete character. Frank Nugent was not unlike myself: Bob Cherry was a near relative; and Johnny Bull was what I concluded a Yorkshire friend of mine must have been when twenty years younger.

4. Is there ~~any chance~~ a chance of the papers being revived?

That is on the knees of the gods----the gods that dwell in the Olympian heights of the Fleetway House.

5. Would I, if starting afresh, write school stories again?

Certainly, I love the subject, and would rather write school stories for a small income, than anything else for a large one. I have written a good many other things, but always came back to school! In younger days I used to write songs and music, and draw; but these gradually went, as the demands for copy grew more and more pressing. One of my songs, called "On the Ball!" was rather successful in its time---utterly forgotten now, of course, though no doubt the British Museum still contains a specimen. I have always written verses, and a good many used to be published: they produced about enough to pay cab fares. However, I am still writing verses and music, while waiting for prose to begin again after the war. I have done translations from French, Italian, German, and Spanish. But the job I always wanted was writing school stories. What success these may have had, was due I think, to my enjoyment in writing them.

6. What advice ~~should~~ would I give a young writer?

Write good English. Stick as far as practicable to words of Saxon origin, avoiding when you can words derived from Latin through the French. Read Dr. Johnson and carefully avoid doing anything that he did. Write easily: but never, never, never sink into ~~the language~~ the language used in newspapers. Never split your infinitives. Shaw may; but you mustn't. Write whatever you feel you have a gift for writing. If you don't feel a gift, don't write. Keep a decent moral standard, and never depart therefrom. On one occasion, in early days, Charles Hamilton was asked to write "something spicy". His reply was "Get behind me, Satan!"--which gave offence, which he did not and does not regret. A writer ought to have a conscience: and to remember that there is a God in the universe, even if he be too modern and damn clever to believe in Him. Never try to be unpleasantly witty on the subject of women--~~any subject~~ a subject that should be sacred to every self-respecting man. Never say caddish things about elderly women--Thackeray and Dickens and Gilbert did, but that does not make it less caddish. Read Dr. Johnson again, and imitate his respect for sacred things. If you want to make money, as most of us do, money comes more freely to a clean man than to an unclean.

7. A million and a half words must have been a strain.

Not in the least. Frank Richards always had an easy day's work. He could easily have passed the 2,000,000 mark if he had chosen to give up other things. His speed on the typewriter averaged 50 words a minute--and still does. Even at that pace it could not keep up with his thoughts. He could type with his eyes shut---which comes in very useful now that they are not of much use to him open. The secret of doing one's job without

getting tired ~~is~~ to keep fit. An author who keeps late hours, and pushes back too many whiskies and ~~so~~ sodas, will never be in the "mood" for writing in the morning. And the morning is the time for good work. Frank Richards played a good game of tennis, till an accident in 1926 dotted his eyes: even now he can give the children a game. Beating was his great delight: in early days on the Thames, later on the Swiss and Italian lakes and the Adriatic. He enjoyed climbing Alps and Apennines. He was devoted to chess, and knew many master-games by heart, and often played them over in his head to while away the time on long railway or steamer journeys.

8. What did I read as a schoolboy?

School stories when I could get hold of them. I liked Talbot Baines Reed, though later on I did not think much of him. I never could stand Tom Brown's Schooldays--a rotten book for boys, in my opinion. ~~But~~ Parts of it, of course, are good, like the curate's egg in the story. But the author does not seem to understand that cruelty to animals is a crime, and there is hardly a page of it not disfigured by the killing or tormenting of some wretched animal, bird, or fish. ~~Like~~ I liked George Manville Fenn---a great boy's author in those days. His son is still a friend of mine, and was formerly with the Amalgamated Press. But I read everything I could lay my hands on, in English or French, as a boy.

9. Who was Hilda Richards?

Myself. Somewhere about the end of the last war, I was asked to invent a set of schoolgirl characters for a new paper for schoolgirls. The Cliff House girls had already appeared often in the Magnet: so the scene was laid at Cliff House. Two new characters---Babs and Mabs---were added: and Bessie Bunter, sister of the celebrated Billy. I chose "Hilda Richards" as a pen-name, with an idea that Hilda was the sister of Frank. But thereby hangs a tale! After I had written six numbers, and the thing was fairly going, it was taken out of my hands--and I never wrote a subsequent number. On this subject I will say only that it was NOT with my consent that my pen-name was used by another writer. But this, my dear Mr. Bagley, is for your own information, as you ask me--I don't want ~~any more~~ that old sore question about the pen-name to be aired in public. But if your feminine readers are interested, you may certainly tell them that I was the original Hilda Richards.

10. Who was Owen Conquest.

Again myself. It was a new pen-name adopted by me for a new series, "Bookwood School" in the Boys Friend. All these were written by me.

11. Publication in foreign countries, translations, etc.

Not that I know of.

12. 46,000 words a week.

Not every week. Sometimes I wrote nothing for a fortnight. The average worked out at 1,500,000 a year. I once wrote a 20,000 word story in a single day. But it was a tough day, and I never repeated that performance.

13. Longhand, shorthand, or typing.

Typing. Every story formed itself in my head, and I typed it out direct. Once, in Italy, I had the bright idea of learning shorthand, so that I could double my output, and do my work out of doors, at the same time. I had it all cut and dried to sit in a boat on Lake Maggiore, with a notebook on my knee! The snag was, that I found that I couldn't learn shorthand. I still remember a few signs like dislocated spiders: but it never would come. So that was that!

14. How long to write a 25,000 word story?

About ten hours---but not all in the same day.

15. Did I do pretty well?

No secret about that--the Inspector of Taxes knows only too well! Income varied from £2,300 to £2,900 year. I never quite touched the £3,000 mark.

16. "When I retired!"

What on earth put that idea into your head? I have not ~~retired~~ retired, and have no intention of doing so. When Henry Irving was "~~resting~~" "resting", had he retired? War and paper shortage shut down my papers: but Frank Richards will be carrying on again as soon as Hitler is hanged, even before he has ceased to kick, I hope.

NOTE below.

17. Press cuttings.

Tons. But I never kept them. Some of the papers were Daily Sketch, Evening Standard, Evening News, New Zealand papers, but I do not remember them all. "Billy Bunter" has been referred to countless times in countless papers, even by a reviewer in the "Observer", which I took as a great compliment. My unworthy self takes up quite a space in George Orwell's book, "Inside the Whale", but I never had a copy of the book. Many references in Noel Coward's "Present Indicative", which I saw a good many years ago. Article in "Horizon" in 1940: another in "Summer Pie" this year.

NOTE. The Magnet and Gem may or may not be revived. But Frank Richards has long been busy on an entirely new series with new characters, with which an enterprising firm of publishers-plan-to step into the young people's market when the piping times of peace are with us once more.