

# Collectors Digest

Supplement

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## THE SILVER CORD BROKEN

The closing hours of Christmas were saddened for countless thousands of people who had heard over radio or television that Charles Hamilton had died. Hours, inexpressibly saddened for those of us for whom he had provided a background throughout the whole of our lives; saddened, too, for a new generation which has been swept into the fairyland of Greyfriars by the magic of his pen.

The Grand Old Man has gone. It can be said of him with complete and certain truth that he has left an empty space which can never be filled. Years ago, when writing my History of the Gem, I said that he stood alone - there would never be another like him. That there will never be is as certain as that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Early in the afternoon of Boxing Day the news was flashed through to the Victoria Palace where the Grand Old Man's most famous creation, Billy Bunter, was going through another of his adventures. Behind the scenes a gloom inevitably descended upon the cast, the producers, and everyone connected with the production. But on the stage, in the tradition of the theatre, the show went on - joyful, hilarious, full of life - while the audience roared its delight. Perhaps dear old Frank Richards was there in the wings - rubbing his hands and giving that old familiar chuckle - that his beloved brain-child lives on - and will live on for many, many years to come.

Only last September I was with Frank Richards in that delightful study of his at Kingsgate by the sea. It is an odd fact, but I seemed to have a premonition that he was not to be spared to us for much longer. I had put off going to see him, for Kingsgate is not an easy place to reach from Surbiton. Life these days is such a rush and bustle - there is so much to do. One puts things off. But somehow the message came to me that unless I went at once I should be too late. I am deeply and humbly thankful that I went when I did.

In my article on my visit "Appointment with Perpetual Youth" I commented that the very air of the Grand Old Man's study seemed impregnated with the spirit of the wonderful characters he had created - everlasting boyhood - and that was no exaggeration. Today that lovely study is silent. The spirit of boyhood has left that peaceful room. But, out in the world, that spirit will never die while a single one of us is left. The world which Frank Richards created will always live on for those of us who love Greyfriars, St. Jim's and Rookwood - for those of us who so loved deeply their creator and for those of us who will never feel quite the same again now that he has left us.

All through the years Charles Hamilton was a strange, rather mysterious symbol for we who loved his work. I doubt whether any of us had ever met him or knew anything much about him while the Gem and the Magnet were still alive. The editorial policy of the papers had added to the mystery; the dozen or so pen-names which he used added to the wonder; and the fact that many substitute writers had work published under his pen-names clouded the issue still further.

Some of us, certainly, had penetrated to some extent the uncertainty. I knew - and countless others like me must have known - that one man was writing the best of the stories of Greyfriars, St. Jim's Rookwood, Cedar Creek, Ken King, and the Benbow. I knew that the writer was really named Charles Hamilton, the man who had created St. Jim's long ago in Pluck.

But, beyond that, the obscurity remained, - and, to some extent, remains to-day. Even now, we know little of the fundamental background of the man we loved so much. Perhaps I hope that we never shall know.

Strangely enough, real world-wide fame came to Charles Hamilton long after the peak of his power was passed. His best work in the Gem was done between 1910 and 1914, and again between 1921 and 1924. In the Magnet his greatest achievements appeared between 1927 and 1935. To the keen student of his work down the years it was obvious that the stories of the later Magnet, first class thought they were, lacked something which the stories of a few years earlier had possessed.

We have delighted in the post-war books of Billy Bunter, but nobody would claim that any single one of them came within a long way of the standard of the Magnet stories. They have all been excellent school stories - that goes without saying - but the vivid plots and the characterisation of the old days have been missing. No doubt this was partly due to the insistence on the part of the publishers for the light type of story featuring Billy Bunter.

Again, strangely enough, Charles Hamilton's best post-war work has been seen in the Tom Merry stories published by Spring Books.

Real fame came late to this great man whose influence on the youth of Britain for more than half a century has been beyond compare. If any man did real good with his life - real, lasting good for the world in which he lived - that man was Charles Hamilton. We must all feel this sad morning that Britain herself did him less than justice. Honours have been heaped upon people whose achievements have been infinitesimal beside those of Charles Hamilton. Perhaps he may have been contented that it was so. Perhaps the love of millions was sufficient for the man who asked so little and gave so much.

In 1952 was published the Autobiography of Frank Richards. It was a joy to possess but sadly disappointing in that it left so much unsaid. We learned nothing of his childhood, nothing of his schooldays. He wanted it so. Clearly, it was his wish that the story of his early life should remain untold. I hope that it will remain untold - that there will be no ferreting into that period of his life which he obviously wished to remain private.

We saw him as something of a playboy in the south of France in the few years just prior to the first World War. Then silence until he reappears at Welwyn Garden City where he lived during the second World War. It is only in the past fifteen years that we have seen something of a concrete picture of this man who influenced our lives so greatly.

And now he is gone. God bless him. God Rest His Soul. Maybe he is in a special Heaven, surrounded by all those characters which he brought to life. They will never be forgotten. Neither will he.

## THE FUNERAL OF FRANK RICHARDS

“Wharton Lodge glistened white under a mantle of snow. It was a snowy Christmastide. Wells, the butler, stood at the open doorway of the Lodge, looking out into the bright, cold, keen December morning. Wells looked plump and comfortable and cheerful.”

That, of course, is an extract from one of Frank Richards' Christmas stories in the Magnet. It seemed a strange irony of fate that, at Christmas time, the last word should have been written in the book of this great man's life-story, for Frank Richards always wrote so wonderfully about Christmas. His best loved stories told of ancestral halls, log fires, holly, mistletoe, wind whining in the wide chimneys, jollity and happiness at Yuletide - with the snow flakes falling softly outside, covering the countryside. Nobody ever doubted that Frank Richards loved Christmas.

And it was at Christmas that he died.

The weather on the day of his funeral was something which might have come out of one of his stories. It was hard, bitter - with stinging white roads - snow and ice everywhere. The funeral cars were due to leave Kingsgate at 2.30, to reach the crematorium at Charing at 4 o'clock - a journey of some 30 miles; whether they would ever make the journey I did not know. That day, all day, I felt strangely that I was playing a minor part in one of his stories.

It was dry, but freezing hard. Frost and snow hung on the gaunt branches of the trees. the footpaths were slippery, the roads were like an ice-rink. Friends told me that I was mad to set out - that I should never get there - and, if I got there, I should never get home again that night. But somehow I knew that I must get there - to be with him at the finish.

The discomforts of that long journey, through the fairy-land that was Kent on a snowy day in mid-winter, were never very much in my mind as the different trains joggled along, carrying me slowly but surely on my way. I thought and thought - of the old Christmas stories.

I thought of the time when Jimmy Silver was snow-bound on the rail journey to the Priory - I thought of the Famous Five in a train crash in the snow when they were on their way to Scotland. I'm sure I heard Tom Merry say “Keep smiling.”

It was after three when I reached the cottages, the small church, the village green that was Charing. I asked a rustic the way to the Crematorium, and he pointed, way out to the hills.

The countryside was a magnificent sight. the roads, the banks beside the roads, the hedges, the fields, the trees, the five-barred gates - all were clothed with snow. Frost, frozen snow and ice everywhere - as far as the eye could see.

On the right-hand side, at the summit of a steep hill, stands the crematorium. It is situated, far back from the roadway in the midst of rolling park land. It is a modern building, but it looks like a lovely old country mansion from the distance.

I thought of Wharton Lodge. I went through the large, open, high iron gates. I walked up the wide, snow-covered drive. It was quite a walk to the house. On either side of me was vast, sweeping park land, dotted with lovely old trees. Trees, majestic and beautiful in their glittering whiteness, lined the drive. A bird landed on a branch, and a shower of icy flakes of snow tumbled around in the pale sunset.

It was not difficult to see the Famous Five among the trees. Bob Cherry kneading snowballs; Inky, muffled up against the bitter winter of a country which is so different from his native Bhanipur; Frank Nugent breaking a long icicle from a low-hanging bough; Johny Bull growling "I told you so!" Harry Wharton, the youthful host, with his dark eyes gleaming with happiness to have his pals with him.

Billy Bunter was not there, of course. He would be fast asleep in a chair before the fire in Wharton's den.

I walked on. Two men were brushing snow away from the front of the building. Wells and Thomas, perhaps - or two gardeners.

A gentleman came out of the house. Kindly, sympathetic - I tried to think it was Colonel Wharton.

"The waiting room is on the right," he said. "It is warm and cosy there...."

It was, too. A bright gas fire was burning. Vases of flowers stood on the table. There were comfortable chairs.

I did not sit down. I went to the window. I could watch the long drive, with the iron gates in the distance. Presently I went in to the carpeted hall. I exchanged a few words with the clergyman who would conduct the service.

The daylight was fading in the sky when the funeral cars arrived. The members of Frank Richards' family joined me in the waiting room. I talked in low tones to Mrs. Harrison, Frank Richards' sister - sweet, gentle, kindly. The facial likeness between the brother and sister is striking. She had received a letter from her brother on the day after Boxing Day. With it came the telegram announcing his death. This brother and sister always exchanged letters twice a week.

I said: "Your brother was a very wonderful man."

"Yes," she echoed softly, "a wonderful man."

I met Mrs. Wright, Frank Richards' niece, who had spent many holidays with her much-loved "Uncle Charlie" at his home by the sea. She and her family had been with him last summer - it seemed like yesterday - the weather was so different then....

I spoke for a moment or two with Miss Edith Hood - "Deedy" - who had looked after Frank Richard's' welfare for thirty years. She will miss him most of all: for these three ladies a light had gone out - a light which would never shine again.

We were called into the peaceful Chapel, with its rows of pews.

Before us, on a most beautiful table of carved wood stood the coffin. The mortal remains of the greatest boys' author of all time. On the coffin, the flowers of his nearest and dearest....

The service began. Not an intimate service, but simple, peaceful, restful, solemn, dignified...

For a while I felt a grief surging within me that, for this man who had entertained and guided millions, there were not hundreds of his old boys present when "The End" was written at the close of the book.

Suddenly - and I can't explain it - I felt that I was there to represent the millions who had loved him down the years. I, who had followed his stories for so long - I, who had been an insignificant unit among the millions all over the world who found joy in his stories - I was here alone with him at the end, representing them all.

The Clergyman's voice came softly: "Let us kneel and pray."

We knelt. For a moment I gazed at the coffin, surmounted with its glorious flowers. I lowered my head. I don't think I heard the prayers which were being said... I was thinking of Tom Merry, dear old Arthur Augustus, Harry Wharton, Henry Samuel Quelch, the Rio Kid, Putty Grace...

When I raised my head the coffin had sank out of sight. Silently the mortal remains of this great man had left us while our heads were bowed. But his spirit lives on - his influence for all that is good.

Out on the verandah all the beautiful floral tributes had been placed. The winter darkness had fallen, the artificial light on the verandah was not good. We walked among the wreaths, and read the cards. In low voices we talked together for a while.... the family which was mourning the loss of a good man.. and I, who was representing millions.

At last, under the shadowy trees, through the whispering country side, I crunched away through the snow, the way I had come.....

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