

I say, you fellows, old Bunter is 72!



OODLES of tuck (egg sandwiches, cake, and tarts) were laid out. The fire was a real crumpet-toaster. I was helping to celebrate the birthday of a fat, frabjous, fozzling, frumptious fraud—who has also become a folk-hero of our island race, one of the most famous characters in English fiction.

Billy Bunter is 72.

"It's hard to think of Bunter as an elderly man, almost as ancient as I am," remarked his creator, Mr. Frank Richards, who at 84 still taps out his Greyfriars School epics at a steady 5,000 words a week. "But I first invented him for a story in 1899 and he was 14 to set out with."

As an early *Magnet* and *Gem* addict myself I had with fascination driven down to Kingsgate in Kent to have tea with the legend-maker who has himself become a latterday legend.

His provider

ON the way I passed the huge lettering at Margate, *DREAM- LAND WELCOMES YOU*. That seemed still to apply when I sat down with the tiny, spry old dream-spinner in black skull cap, dressing-gown, scarf, stiff white collar, and bicycle clips functioning as draught-excluders around his brown corduroy slacks.

Filling a curved pipe from a tobacco jar, he observed: "You can't help having an affection for a companion of half a century. Besides, he is keeping me, so I should feel thankful for him. You wouldn't think of Bunter as a provider, would you?"

For although Mr. Richards may continue to describe the Owl of the Remove as a fat tick, a fat grampus and a fat diddler, and record every yaroooooooh of pain as he is jabbed with a boat-hook, bumped, or kicked down a flight of steps that would kill anyone except a folk-hero, he has cause for deep gratitude to Bunter.

For 30 years up to the last war, Charles Hamilton (his real name) was not only Frank Richards but Martin Clifford, Owen Conquest, Ralph Redway and Hilda Richards.

All volcanically erupted one and a half million words a year about boys' and girls' schools, as well as the serialised adventures of the Rio Kid, King of the Islands, and Herlock Sholmes.

For all that golden age he earned £2,500 a year, when that was "yachts and champagne" money, and that traditional "I say, you fellows" opening to another drama in the dorm was rattled off in Rome, Venice, and down the Riviera way.

Luck ran out

"MONTE Carlo was my spiritual home." I heard with some astonishment, and I experienced a slight shock—as if I had caught Harry Wharton smoking a reefer—to learn that the merry japes of those clean-limbed, cricket-playing, sexless and viceless English school lads were bashed out between tough all-night sessions at the roulette table.

The luck ran out along with peace. War-time paper shortage killed off the *Magnet* and the *Gem*. At 70 the playboy

For 30 years the Owl of the Remove helped his creator to earn 'yachts and champagne' money... then came disaster... and now once again Bunter is the golden boy

bachelor found himself without income without a home (he was evicted from the coastal zone), and without savings, for shares bought for 30s. plummeted to 3s. 6d., and what was left went to pay back income tax.

"I have always been lucky, most of all in having a natural buoyancy," he said. "I was rather on the rocks, couldn't get anything published, but being left stranded didn't affect my spirits. I got a house in Hampstead Garden Suburb, and all those six years I used to go to my desk each morning and write my stint. I kept going.

Start again

"THEN, when the war ended, it was a matter of starting again at 72. I've since sold pretty well everything I wrote during the war. And here we are again!"

Where Frank Richards is again is on a high-earning crest. For a curious thing happened during the war-time blackout. A cult interest began to grow in those unearthly

public schools populated by hearty Peter Pans destined never to attain puberty.

In *Horizon*, most egghead of reviews, George Orwell did a brilliant piece of social analysis on the *Magnet* and other boys' weeklies but Orwell took it for granted that no one person could have kept up such a tornado output for 30 years and that "Frank Richards" and "Martin Clifford" were house labels for the contributions of a multitude of hack journalists.

When Frank Richards himself wrote in to clear up that misapprehension and revealed himself as the master-mind behind Bunter and Co., the documentation began really flying.

In the past 15 years the Famous Five and the pals of the Remove have been honoured on the B.B.C. and written about in publications all over the world, including some serious dissection in *The Times Educational Supplement* and *The Manchester Guardian*. Bibliophiles began dredging for old issues and data.

Then Frank Richards came full circle back to popularity—on a wider scale than ever before.

Now Bunter is the prima donna. He dominates the titles of all 21 books that have come out from Cassell's since the war (two a year, four on the stocks, and a quarter-million copies in print). He has his own Christmas annual (20,000 orders before printing this year). He even paraded in enormous effigy in the last Lord Mayor's Show.

His activities are recorded in Braille.

And, of course millions of children, watching Gerald Campion in the TV series, have relearned that curious facetious Edwardian slang ("be-nighted chump," "Oh, had-docks," and "Good egg!") that has throughout been a changeless incantation.

Indeed that is part of the mystery of Frank Richards—that in this Welfare State age of social leveling these stylised, repetitive stories of a sort of soft-drink *Tom Brown's School-days* a Never-Never Land of cads, monocles, titled fags, £5 nambers, and "old grey stones," have obviously still got a strong snob glamour.

No copies

THE explanation is Bunter, a creation as monumentally comic as anything Dickens invented.

Frank Richards finished singing for me a Gilbert and Sullivan song in Latin (one of his hobbies) and presented me with the translation he had just finished typing.

"I don't need it," he explained. "I remember everything I've written, and I've never kept a copy in my life." And he added, with some regret: "But I do wish I'd kept all those thousands of *Magnets* which I always chucked away."

For those rare first editions of the adventures of Billy Bunter (price 1d.) now fetch 25s a copy on the collectors' market.

KENNETH ALISON'S Book Column