
3. Boys' Writer

by Frank Richards

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The author of this contribution is the inventor of one of the best-known characters in English fiction: Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School. It is not too much to say that the Owl of the Remove is, like Mr Pickwick and Sherlock Holmes, a character known in most corners of the globe. Even the self-sufficient French have heard of him, since a Parisian was once remarked describing someone as 'gros comme le Bunterr.' For more than thirty years Mr Charles Hamilton (for that is the author's real name) kept going three pen names, Frank Richards, Martin Clifford, Owen Conquest, and three schools, Greyfriars, St. Jim's, Rookwood. For the Magnet and Gem he invented hundreds of characters, and the fame of Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, Tom Merry, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and others is not a great distance behind that of Billy Bunter. During all this time Mr. Hamilton was writing a million and a half words a year. At seventy, as his contribution shows, he continues to work hard. Perhaps it reveals another fact too, that he is the youngest man of seventy in the world.*

WHEN an author is invited to talk or write about himself and his work, it seems almost to be taken for granted that he will have something to say about 'early struggles.' How did he overcome the reluctance of publishers? How did he contrive to penetrate the solid editorial head with an idea of the value of his work? And how did he, in the meantime, manage to exist? Did he sink into the depths of the blues at a rejection, and did he strike the stars with his sublime head at an acceptance? Did he, in days of weary waiting, have to say, like Jean Paul, 'to a great height shall the business of hungering go?' Did he emerge, at last, with head bloody but unbowed, into the sunshine of success?

Frank Richards is almost ashamed to say that he knows nothing on the subject of early struggles, never having had any. He sold his first story, in the far-off nineties, before he was eighteen: and was immediately asked for more. Publishers came and went: but as fast as one went, another came—and this continued happily for fifty years. He never saw a rejection slip outside an editorial office. His memory is charged not with

the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but with urgent letters, telegrams, and telephone calls, demanding more and more and more copy. And all this came so easily that he never understood that he was a lucky man. It all seemed to him a matter of course. It was not till he was quite an old bean that Frank realized that he had been very lucky indeed. That was when fortune changed. The paper shortage of 1940 gave him 'furiously to think.' Then, when his income dropped in a day from £2,500 a year to nothing at all, with a taxation hangover by way of consolation, Frank Richards discovered that there were, after all, some uncertainties in the writing life. He could be quite eloquent on the subject of 'late' struggles. But of 'early' ones he knows nothing at all.

Frank began to write almost as soon as he could hold a pencil in his fist. He wrote fairy tales as a little kid: romances of wild adventure as a schoolboy: but when he reached years of discretion—at about seventeen!—he began to take things more seriously. Actually his tastes were almost as much for study as for writing: and he read voraciously everything that came his way, in English or French—other languages came later.

I remember that, as a very small boy, I secretly and surreptitiously taught myself the Greek alphabet, in the happy delusion that it would prove the Open Sesame to my father's mysterious books. But I wrote incessantly, my output being limited only by the quantity of writing paper on which I could lay hands. I wanted to be an author: also I wanted to be a great scholar: at the same time I wanted to go to sea, and also to become a famous cricketer. In my daydreams I saw myself like Byron waking one morning to find myself famous: I saw myself translating the Iliad, ever so much more attractively than Pope or Chapman: I saw myself a 'ship's boy on the high and giddy mast': I saw myself knocking up centuries at Lord's and bringing off miraculous catches in the field, amid delirious cheers. All these things are possible in daydreams: but if I couldn't do them all, I could at least write about them, which was easier, and almost as good, if not quite as good. So I wrote and wrote, wasting reams of paper, putting what were really daydreams into words strangely real to me. It was a curious thing that when I wrote I seemed to see it all happening before my eyes, as if I were looking at a picture: I had a sense of writing down actual happenings. The phrase 'making up a story' would have had no meaning for me: so far as I was aware, a story unrolled of its own accord, with scarce an effort on the part of the writer, who was little more than a chronicler. I was very much older before I learned, with surprise, that all stories were not written in the same way, and that other imaginations were not so vivid.

At an early age an elderly relative pronounced me to be a 'clever fool.'

I endorsed the adjective cordially: the noun seemed to me absurd. Only in much later years have I realised that he was right on both points: my doubt, later, being about the adjective, not the noun. Indeed it seems sometimes like a miracle that a daydreaming, unpractical fathead like Frank Richards ever got through seventy years at all. Anybody could diddle him—and many did. The truth must be that there is a sweet little cherub who sits up aloft and keeps a watchful eye on duffers who do not know their way about this wicked world. For Frank, after all, did survive, and has seen many a keen and wary business-like man go on the rocks.

DIFFIDENCE, a haunting distrust of one's own powers, is always a handicap: often most emphatically present in people who really can do things. They set their standards too high, and, failing to reach them, feel that they can do nothing worth while. Frank Richards knows, now, that he can write a good story: but only, I fear, because so very many people have told him so. In early days, though he wrote and wrote, and delighted in writing, it seemed a sheer impossibility that his writings should ever appear in print. Such glory was for far cleverer fellows than he! It was not of his own volition, but as usual on receiving a push from somebody else, that he made the desperate plunge. It was difficult for him to believe his eyes when the first story he had ever sent on its travels resulted in the first cheque he had ever received.

That cheque was the first of many thousands: and later in life one of Frank's bothers was to remember to send his cheques to the bank, and enter the amounts in his account-book for income and surtax purposes. But all troubles come to an end at last—that one bothers him no longer. Sometimes he rather wishes that it did!

Frank wrote on many subjects: but he settled down at last to write chiefly the school story. He liked school: he liked schoolboys: he even, amazing as it may seem, liked schoolmasters! The subject was ever fresh to him: and time has not staled it: age cannot wither it nor custom stale its infinite variety. It is as fresh to him at seventy as it was at seventeen. Indeed, when he is writing a school story he utterly forgets that he is seventy at all, and is to all intents and purposes seventeen again. Never has he found it difficult to recapture the first fine careless rapture. This probably accounts for what was considered the astonishing output of a million and a half words a year. I doubt whether this article ought to appear under the general heading of **WORK**: for writing what one wants to write is not work but a pleasant pastime. When writing becomes work to write, it becomes work to read: and it is time for the writer to take a rest, and give his readers one.

But there were not roses, roses all the way. Frank had outdoor tastes:

and writing could seldom or never be done out of doors. True, as a boy he wrote reams and reams sprawling in his old boat on summer days. But when more serious times came, and his output ran into millions of words on a typewriter, those easy-going ways were over. He had to make up his mind to sit at the machine for three hours every morning, and sometimes an hour or two in the afternoon as well.

This led him, on one occasion, to one of his brightest ideas. He was staying at that time at a little Italian inn on Lake Maggiore. From his window, as he sat at the typewriter, he could see the shining lake, the boats passing to and fro, the gliding steamers, the lazy boatmen loafing on the old wooden quay: and they called to him with an almost irresistible call. Water, fresh or salt, always had a deep attraction for him: even now he would like to be a sailor, if some discerning sea-captain wanted a recruit of a really ripe vintage. Sometimes, in those days by Lake Maggiore, he would abandon Remington even without completing his quota, and push out his boat, or jump on the steamer going down to Isola Bella. Then his great brain-wave came: to learn shorthand, and, after all, do his work out of doors—on the deck of a lake steamer, or sitting in his boat, with an Italian boatman to see that it did not run aground or under a passing craft.

What could be simpler! On Remington his speed was fifty words a minute. But he had heard of vastly greater speeds on Pitman. With this dazzling scheme in his mind, Frank saw himself out of doors all day long, on a lovely Italian lake, with a fountain-pen in his hand, a notebook on his knee, his output perhaps doubled, and his income along with it. Vast masses of shorthand copy should be produced, to be typed out later by a professional hand at the cost of a few pounds. Immediately he despatched an order home for instruction books, nothing doubting but that he would learn shorthand in a few weeks, and that all would be calm and bright. But it was then that he met his Waterloo.

Frank never had much difficulty with languages: he did not anticipate any with shorthand. But he found them—and found them insuperable. To his surprise and dismay he discovered that he could not learn shorthand. Perhaps he was 'allergic' to it! Dogged attempts to do what he couldn't do made his head ache: and he very soon realized that he would rather be a dog, and bay the moon, than a shorthand writer. So that great and promising scheme had to go into the discard. At a later date, in London, he made one more attempt, with a skilled instructor. But it booted not. Shorthand would not stick in his head, or drip off his pen. It just wouldn't! Willy-nilly, he had to remain faithful to Remington. He still remembers some of the horrid symbols, though he does not remember what they mean, if they mean anything. He shudders at the recollection. Yet he has seen slips of girls dashing down this stuff

as if it were easy! He has always regarded them with awe and admiration.

Want of memory was not the trouble, for Frank Richards's memory is his long suit. If an accident happened to a typescript, there was no difficulty in typing it over again. Carlyle's overwhelming disaster would not have bothered him unduly. He never kept copies of his work, even when travelling in remote and outlandish places, and trusting his MSS to hands that were not always very trustworthy. If anything had happened, it would only have been a question of so much typing to be done. In the *Magnet* there were hundreds of permanent characters, and more hundreds that came and went. It never occurred to him to forget any of them. He was asked once whether he did not 'mix' his characters sometimes, and make them say and do wrong things: a question that made him chuckle. Such a thing was unthinkable. Every character about whom Frank Richards, or Martin Clifford, or Owen Conquest has written remains as fresh in his mind as when it was first created, as far back as the nineties. No doubt this may be because they all seemed real to him: and indeed were real, being taken from life. Authors, like another class of dealers in fiction, should have good memories: and Frank had a very good one.

It seems to me that everyone should train his memory and make the most of it. Good things should be committed to memory: once safely lodged, they are always there if wanted, and one may be independent of books at times when books are not to be had. It has always been one of my pleasures to learn verses by heart. My own, whose name is Legion, may not perhaps be worth remembering: nathless they are all stored in the old nut, and I do not need to keep copies. Along with them are many selections of much more value. Often and often these have come in useful.

When I was about eleven or twelve, I was laid up for a time. It was a sore trial for an active kid, normally unwilling to keep still for five minutes, to have to do so for endless hours that seemed like centuries, weary day after weary day, with a bandaged leg resting on a cushion, and a sharp pang when that unfortunate leg stirred. I found a resource in learning Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and Macaulay's *Horatius* by heart: in those young and innocent days I believed these two sportsmen to be poets!

Later, in more mature years, I realised that I might have done better: they were hardly worth the trouble. Still, there they still are, if wanted. I have never been wrecked on a desert island, or sent to prison, or shut in at the bottom of a coal mine. But these things do happen: and in such circumstances how useful to have even a limited library at hand, stored in the memory.

When the war in Europe was on, and Science was advancing with such giant strides that it bid fair to make an end of all of us, there were many who had sleepless nights. Generally I sleep like a night-watchman: but guns, and bombs, and doodlebugs, and rockets often kept me perforce awake. In the 'dead waste and middle of the night' it would have been a positive torture to lie with an idle mind, comforted only by making cursory remarks. One did not want to turn out of a warm bed on a cold night, and rake together the ashes of a dead fire. But if one had, say, a few scenes from Shakespeare, an ode of Horace and an ode of Keats, one or two of the livelier sections of Goethe's *Faust*, and a few hundred lines of Dante, with Fitzgerald's *Omar* and Byron's *Apostrophe to the Ocean* by way of lighter variety to call upon at will, one need not complain. To run verses over in the mind is as good as reading them—or better.

The war has ended, true; but there is illness, which will always be with us, probably rather crescendo than diminuendo in future days. Medical research never stands still. Dreadful diseases, unknown to our simple forefathers, have been discovered, not to say invented, and brought within reach of the poorest. Progress continues. So there will always be invalids, sleepless o' nights, counting the weary hours to dawn. How much more comforting to run through the *Ode to a Nightingale*, or to stand, in thought, with stout Cortes, when he stared on the Pacific, or to play over again a master-game of Anderssen and Kieseritski in the sleepless head. There was once an editor whose conversation was like an inexhaustible machine-gun. Frank could not walk out of the office before his time was up. Still less could he put a sock in the editorial mouth. But he could play over the 'Immortal Game' in his mind while the editorial chin wagged and wagged. He could recite to himself Dante's story of Paolo and Francesca while the unending melody droned in his ears. And he did.

FRANK'S present readers—that is, supposing, like Gilbert's sentry, that he's got any!—will notice that this article persists in dropping into the third person. They may put this down to Frank's shy modesty. He has, like Stendhal, an insuperable repugnance for the 'je's' and the 'moi's.' Indeed, he finds it far from easy to write about himself at all: facts do not suit him so well as fiction.

Facts, we are told, are stubborn things: they seem also to Frank lacking in interest. Real worlds are not so attractive as imaginary ones. Casanova's and Cellini's autobiographies are much more interesting than anything that actually happened to them. In dealing with facts we are bound like Ixion on his wheel: in fiction we mould the world nearer to the heart's desire. It is a singular thing how very much what is called an 'adventure' differs, in real life, from the same thing in fiction.

Frank Richards, in a wandering life, has had many adventures, more indeed than he had any use for. He has descended into the crater of Vesuvius: he has clung to a thwart in a gale on the Adriatic: he has very nearly capsized in the middle of the Lake of Geneva: he has stood on a mass of ice on a Swiss mountainside, thinking it as solid as Switzerland itself, till it began to glide towards the edge of the precipice: he has hung on the outside of an express thundering through the tunnel between Nice and Monte Carlo: he has taken a wrong turning at Calais in blackest midnight and found himself walking out to sea on top of a narrow groyne, suddenly looking down and seeing death and destruction bubbling and frothing in the gloom deep below: he has sat and typed 'Billy Bunter' with an Austrian soldier standing guard over him with fixed bayonet, ready to run him through, and very nearly doing so in a moment of sudden suspicion—and all these things, in fiction, could be written up into thrilling adventures. But in real life, alas, they were only irritating incidents. Truth may be stranger than fiction: it is undoubtedly much duller. Give me fiction every time.

NO author can write about himself without mentioning his fanmail, which is always enormous. It is a fact that fanmail has always pursued Frank Richards, in the most remote places, whether by Italian lakes, or Tyrolese mountains, Corniche roads or Dutch dykes. But never so much, strange to say, as since he has ceased to write for his accustomed papers. One day in 1944 an enterprising journalist published some paragraphs concerning my very unimportant self in a widely-read London evening paper, unluckily including my address. The result was almost unnerving. I am sure that leaves never fell so thickly in Vallombrosa as letters upon Frank Richards during the following weeks. I was amazed, and in truth deeply moved, to discover how many of my old readers still remembered me. All sorts and conditions of people—men in the Home Guard, in the Army and Navy and Air Force: and civilians of every variety and all ages. It looked like a thirteenth task for Hercules to answer all of them: and for many days the typewriter was as busy as in the days when Frank was producing a million and a half words a year.

But the spate passed: and the fanmail dropped once more to the usual dozen or so letters a week. Such letters are always interesting, and always kind. For some reason nobody has ever written to Frank who doesn't seem to like him!

They are very, very varied. One dear little chap wrote to me that I was a 'jenius': but, as Angel remarked, what's spelling between friends? If you don't know who Angel is, you have a great treat in store when you find out. A schoolmaster wrote me such a jolly letter that I have preserved

it: and was tempted to send him, in return, one of my Latin crossword puzzles, which I really think would be very useful in schools: but I mercifully refrained. It seems strange sometimes that men on active service in India, or in the Eighth Army in Italy, should take the trouble to write to Frank Richards by air-mail. An officer home last year told me that he had taken some of my works into the Western Desert with him: some compliment, for this chap is himself the author of some of the most entertaining books on the market. Perhaps this is enough about fanmail—perhaps even a little too much.

HOW did I invent my characters? I didn't. They just grewed, like Topsy. I don't quite see how any character could be 'invented,' for if it doesn't live already, how can anyone breathe into its nostrils the breath of life? Harry Wharton was mine own familiar friend. He is still sixteen in my mind's eye: for owing to circumstances which it would be interesting not to relate, I never saw him after that age: and I just cannot think of him as seventy-one. In my memory he remains exactly as I saw him last, and as he is depicted in the *Magnet*. Johnny Bull I did not meet till he was in his forties: but I had only to visualize what he must have been like at fifteen, and there he was. Everyone, I suppose, must have known a Bob Cherry: and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh derives chiefly from a dark gentleman whom I met for five minutes in the early nineties. Frank Nugent is, or was, no other than Frank Richards himself, so far as one could draw one's own portrait: quite a nice boy, I am persuaded, but booked always to go in with the tail. Tom Merry is just an average healthy schoolboy such as one may see every day. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy owes his existence to a suggestion from H. J. Garrish, then editor of the paper in which he first appeared: but later he was slowly but surely modelled on a sub-editor, a delightful young gentleman who really knew what clothes were, and how to wear them.

Billy Bunter—the one and only—derived from several sources. There was an occasion when Frank Richards was simply fascinated by an editorial gentleman at Carmelite House, who overflowed his chair to such an extent that it was a mystifying problem how he had got into it, and a still more intriguing mystery how he ever got out of it. From him Bunter borrowed his remarkable circumference. His celebrated postal-order, which he was always expecting, but which never came, was in fact a cheque of which a relative of my own lived in a perpetual state of expectation, seldom or never realized. His big spectacles belonged to another relative, who had quite an entertaining way of peering at one like an owl. In these latter days Frank Richards himself is in still worse case: but retains, fortunately, his sense of humour: and if he stoops in the

garden to stroke a cabbage, taking it for the cat, can laugh instead of swearing.

ECHOES still reach me of an article written in 1940 for *Horizon*, in reply to a diatribe from George Orwell. I quite liked reading Orwell's article, as I still like reading his reviews in the *Observer*, for he is one of the few present-day writers who can write. Even when he writes nonsense he is readable: and my belief is that an author's first duty is to be readable. In *Horizon* his article stood out from the dull mass like a jewel in a toad's head. But he was on the wrong ground. He can write about Burmah and the Spanish War in quite a fascinating way, and apparently with knowledge: but on the subject of Boys' Books he has yet to learn his ABC.

What was the use of telling the public that the *Magnet* was 'specially written' in a style 'easily imitated.' How many wretched imitators have tried to imitate it I could not count without going into high figures: but not one ever succeeded. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The stuff sold like hot cakes: Frank Richards was incessantly dunned for twice or thrice as much copy as he could produce: a publishing firm in London whose name is a household word offered him nearly twice as much as he was receiving from the Amalgamated Press to 'come over into Macedonia': Grub Street still had its hungry population. If Frank's writing could be so easily imitated, why did not a dozen other writers just go and do it, and become surtax payers like Frank?

A good many tried—alternately amusing and exasperating their victim. Not one ever got away with it. George is a very good writer in his own line: but in this matter he simply did not know what he was talking about.

Most of his purblind criticisms were answered in my own article in *Horizon*. One I did not touch upon. In all the long *Magnet* series, said George, there was no mention of God. This complaint was a little perplexing for I have gathered from Mr Orwell's works that personally he has no use whatever for a Deity: though I hope I do him wrong. But surely it should be clear, even to George, that a work of light fiction is not one into which sacred subjects should be introduced. Religion, in a work of fiction, is out of place: either it looks like humbug, or it makes the rest of the story seem silly. Especially in boys' stories should it be avoided.

It was a Victorian custom to put pills in the jam: and my own experience as a boy taught me that pills in the jam make the boy feel sick. All the more because I am a religious man, I carefully avoided putting religion into a boys' story. How well I remember my own feeling of utter distaste when I came upon it in the *B.O.P.*, and in Kingston and Ballantyne, and

other boys' writers of that distant day. It was a matter that I took seriously even in boyhood: and I disliked to see it mixed up with football and cricket and practical jokes. I could never get the impression that the writer was sincere: such a subject, in a boys' book, can only be dragged in. One may pray oneself, and have a deep conviction that one's prayers have been answered: but to make a fictitious character do so with a like result seems to me utterly irreverent. Fiction is always dangerously near the edge of lying: and in such a case it goes over the edge.

It has always been one of my ambitions to write a book on religion: but if I ever do so, certainly it will not begin with 'I say, you fellows,' or be published in weekly numbers. It was once asked, why should the Devil have all the good tunes? As reasonably it may be asked, why should he have all the wit and humour? Religion is attacked by the wits, and generally defended by the dullards. But the weapon of ridicule could just as easily be turned against the witty nitwits who are so much wiser than their Maker.

Here is an experience of my boyhood. An elderly relative, doubtless thinking that so bright a lad required some very solid mental pabulum, presented me with Darwin's *Descent of Man*: never, I imagine, having read it: indeed it is difficult to imagine anyone reading it through. In those days I devoured every book that came within my reach: and one day, for want of something better, I started on the *Descent of Man*. I found it dull and heavy, in fact Darwinian: but entertaining in places—in one particular place a real shriek.

That any man, supposedly in possession of his seven senses, could advance such a theory as that men once had a tail, which they obliterated by continually sitting upon it, seemed to me the limit, and I laughed till the tears came. It was one of my ways to write verses, even at that early age: like Pope I lisped in numbers for the numbers came: though I doubt whether my numbers were so good as Pope's. Darwin moved me to a verse that I still remember:

*If a tail you could once swing a cat on,
Disappeared just because it was sat on,
Why hasn't the stern
Disappeared in its turn,
In the millions of years we've sat that on?*

If the editor thinks this too coarse for THE SATURDAY BOOK, there is always the blue pencil.

HAVE I any hobbies? Many interests at least. I have never been able to understand people who have to kill time—precious time. Surely there are interesting things to fill every moment of the day, if it were forty-eight hours long?

In early days I liked to travel in strange lands and talk in strange tongues. I could enjoy tennis, to a lesser extent golf: and it seems to me that a boy of any age, from six to sixty, must be happy in a boat or in a saddle. These things, for Frank Richards, have vanished like the baseless fabric of a vision. But the vacant place overflows with other things—less regarded in youth, more regarded in age.

I read four or five hours every day: yet it never seems to me that I have enough time for reading. I compose sweet melodies on the piano: my eyes make it difficult for me to write them down, but I carry them all in my head, and chant them every now and then with great satisfaction. I write considerable quantities of 'Carcroft' copy, all ready for the brave new world, and for a publisher who may desire to make half a million pounds, as I have been told one of my former publishers did. I must hope that George Orwell will not read this article, for I am going to say next that I read the Bible regularly, and find great pleasure and profit therein. I translate the sections I like best from *Don Quixote* and the *Divine Comedy*, and dream, just as I did when I was a small kid, about the time when some publisher will ask me to complete the work, and offer me thousands of guineas for it.

I can no longer look at German: the barbarous type is too severe on my eyes: but when the spirit moves me to translate German, I make a new version of some of Schubert's songs, memorized forty or fifty years ago. Of course there are unpleasant things in the world: such as shorthand, mathematics, the 'new' pronunciation of Latin, 20th century poetry, and nine modern novels out of ten. But the pleasant things outnumber them immensely.

The eyes that once looked from the hill of Capri across a lovely bay to Naples glittering in the sun, with Vesuvius smoking his morning pipe in the distance, cannot now see across a room—but they can see a page of Shakespeare. One of the active legs that tramped so cheerily over Alps and Apennines now has to be propped up with care when Frank Richards sits at the typewriter, and at times gives him pangs reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition: but as Tom Merry used to say, why grouse? If old Friedrich put to me the question he put to the recruit, 'Willst Du immer leben?' my reply would be a prompt and emphatic 'Ja: gewiss!'

At seventy every thinking man must, to some extent, have an eye on two worlds: but I don't see that a decent Christian need be unduly perturbed about it. This world is a jolly place, and Frank Richards is going to remain in it as long as ever he can: but, when the time comes to move on, I am sure that he will look on it as little more than changing trains on a long journey. And when I meet unbelieving friends in the Elysian Fields, I shall enjoy saying to them 'I told you so!'