

FRANK RICHARDS of the "Magnet" and "Gem" looks back

HOW I CREATED BILLY BUNTER, TOM MERRY & CO.

SOMETIMES, as I sit at the typewriter, it seems a little curious to me that Billy Bunter came into existence in the early years of the present century, and that my readers nowadays are mostly the sons - often the grandsons - of those who first followed his adventures, or misadventures, in the pages of the old "Magnet."

In those far-off days, it certainly never occurred to me that the fat and fatuous "Owl of the Remove" would still be going strong "forty years on." But it is often the unexpected that happens.

For over thirty years, our fat friend appeared regularly, week by week in the Magnet; and he has since continued his plump career in book form: and it looks very happily he may last as long as his author.

Seven volumes have so far appeared, the first of which is in its 40th thousand. Three more are written for the next year; and others, still in a sketchy state, are booked for later dates.

Still the same

The reading public seems to regard the differences between 2d and 7s 6d as a trifle light as air where Bunter is concerned. Why? I don't know. I only know that I enjoy writing "Greyfriars" as much now as when I wrote my first Bunter story, and somehow or other that readers seem to share my pleasure: good luck to them.

Tom Merry and Co. came first, in the "Gem," which I wrote under my pen-name of "Martin Clifford." They have now, like the "Magnet" characters, attained to the dignity of book form. Figgins and Co. of the New House still carry on their rivalry with Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's: Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther are still in the Shell: Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is as particular as ever about his toppers.

I must confess that I have an especial affection for these old friends, and when "Frank Richards" has finished a Bunter book "Martin Clifford" is always eager to take his turn on the typewriter with Tom Merry and Co.

Not that I am wholly occupied with the old characters who have been before the public so long. I write, too, a new series about a new character called "Jack of All Trades"; and nourish a hope that he may become as popular as Tom Merry or Billy Bunter.

I have often been asked how these characters were created. The fact is that they were not "created" at all. I don't quite see how any character could be "created" for unless it live already, how can it be made to live.

Two Franks

Every character of which I have ever written has been taken from life: sometimes modified, no doubt, evolving according to circumstances like living things.

Harry Wharton I knew at school; Frank Nugent is no other than Frank Richards himself; Tom Merry is the healthy happy schoolboy whom everyone knows; Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is the twin of an elegant young gentleman who sub-edited the "Gem" in the early days; Johnny Bull is a Yorkshireman whom I met when he was about forty, but whom I could easily visualise at fifteen, and so on with the others.

Billy Bunter is rather a composite character. His plump figure is that of an editor I once knew. His big spectacles are borrowed from a relative who, when I was a boy, used to peer at me rather like an owl. His celebrated postal-order, which is always expected but never arrives, or hardly ever, is in fact a cheque which another relative of mine was constantly expecting but which seldom materialised.

His fat self-satisfaction derives from a very eminent personage whose name it would be polite not to mention. From this mixture Billy Bunter, like Topsy just "grewed": and there he was.

Certainly I have never written about any character whom I have not met and talked with in real life. But after passing through the crucible of the author's imagination, they were not always, or even often, recognisable by the originals. Which, in the case of the naughty characters was perhaps just as well.

It is a little odd to remember now that Billy Bunter, when first produced, was turned down by a publisher on the grounds that readers wouldn't care for him, and had to wait several years for a publisher of a different opinion. Even then I introduced him with some diffidence, giving him only a small part at first, and it was not till considerably later that he "stole the show."

Fan mail

I confess that I am sometimes astonished, as well as tremendously pleased, by the world-wide fame achieved by Billy Bunter, who in himself, can hardly be esteemed an admirable person. True he is good-natured as fat people usually are; but he is lazy, he is untruthful, and nobody's tuck is safe from his fat fingers. He is, in fact, an Awful Example and a Warning to Youth! Yet "fan" letters constantly reach me from the very ends of the earth about Bunter.

It seems that age cannot wither him, nor custom stale his infinite variety! My kind readers, following the excellent example of Oliver Twist, always ask for more. How and why I just don't know: but I do know that it makes me feel very happy to feel that after so many years, I am still able to entertain the young people - and their elders.

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