

Mandeville,
Kingsgate,
Kent,

Oct 28 1943

Dear Mr. Gander,

Your letter dated September 13 has just come along. Your note of August 9 I received some time ago, accompanied by the copy of the "Story Paper Collector", for which many thanks. I find that this little paper excites very great interest among old readers, and I have felt that I could not do other than pass on most of the copies you have so kindly sent me: keeping, however, always one for myself.

To reply first to the query of August 9, I am afraid I can give no information about 'John Lance', as I never knew him.

Pentelov was a very decent old chap: though I could not help wishing that he would keep within his own borders and leave my stuff alone. But he used to express such immense admiration for Frank Richards and all his works, that one was rather disarmed in dealing with him when he invaded one's territory. It is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery: and perhaps that was it. He was, at all events, the best of the bunch that butted in on Frank Richards' preserves. That is, with one exception. One or two of the dud 'Gems' were written by a very decent chap, whose surname is probably known to you, as his father was a great gun in the boys' world about fifty years ago, and is not yet forgotten---George Manville Fenn. I used to read George Manville Fenn when I was a boy, little dreaming that in after years his son would be trying his hand at writing 'Tom Merry' for me. Fenn is a friend of mine---both of us now getting rather far on in the vale of years. He was the only one of the scribes who had my blessing when he handled my stuff: he could at least write, and the others couldn't. But perhaps his father's fame did not reach Canada, and the name may be new to you. In this country it was once almost a household word.

The errors you speak of in the dud numbers were sometimes as thick as blackberries. I did not look at many of them, as they always had a very exasperating effect on me,--except, as aforesaid, in the case of Fenn. But he, so far as I remember, made no errors. Some of these hacks were much more suited for the hewing of wood and the drawing of water, than for writing anything. They used to split their infinitives as if they had been brought up to split rails, and couldn't help splitting anything they had in hand. One of them, a man named Cook, who was one of the worst writers that ever was or could be, had the cheek to write to me some time ago, telling me how he had been taken into the Fleetway House when young, specially trained to imitate my writings, and given a job on one of my papers when he was considered proficient in producing a colourable imitation. The queer thing was, that he did not seem to see anything in this that ought to give offence. So I did not answer his letter: had I done so, my reply would probably have made his hair curl.

Your correspondent Mr. Rickard is quite right in thinking that the story "St. Jim's Airmen", was founded on my own experiences in Austria at the beginning of the last war. When the head-waiter at our hotel told us that war had started, we did not quite believe it: we had been in the mountains some time out of touch of news. But we had to believe it when a party of soldiers came to the hotel to place us under arrest till we could be interrogated. I was then writing the Gem called "St. Jim's Airmen": and of course did not leave off because these silly asses were playing the goat: so I went on typing it with a blithering idiot in uniform in my room, standing guard over me with a fixed bayonet. This ass stood at my door, while I typed: and I soon forgot that he

was there. When I had finished my morning's quota, I went to my suit-case for a paper-clip: and then the image woke suddenly to life, as it were, and charged at me with his idiotic bayonet. I suppose he suspected that I was going for an automatic, or perhaps a bomb! His spint was right at my ribs, when the idiot saw it was a paper-clip I was taking out---and then the expression on his silly face was worth a guinea a box! So he went back to the door, and stood there like a graven image till I had to go down to lunch: when he marched with me, and mounted guard over all three of us---my sister and brother-in-law and myself---while we had lunch. Luckily a nice Italian officer--in the Austrian service---came along in the afternoon. He was at first suspicious because the word "Zeppelin" occurred in my manuscript: but when he found that it was only a story about an imaginary Zeppelin coming down on a cricket-field, he was all smiles: and after he had uttered about six thousand words in Italian, it was all O.K. It was only two or three days later that we were at war with Austria as well as Germany: but in that interval, my party got over into Switzerland---and I have realised since that we were very lucky to do so. But I have always remembered the Austrians very kindly, for almost every person with whom we came into contact did all that he could to help us out of the scrape: civilians and soldiers alike. We came across only one bad lot, at a village near the frontier, where the landlord of an inn tried to hold up our car and detain us, with a view to pinching our baggage: but I found a sort of village policeman who came along, and put things right. All this seems like yesterday to me: but perhaps to you the last war seems almost as far off as the Crusades. I have been asked to write my autobiography, and all these things go into it: but I cannot help thinking sometimes that it is much too far away to interest people at the present time. Who can possibly want to know what Frank Richards was doing at Spondinig in 1914? Or that he explored the crater of Vesuvius in 1911, and was lost at midnight in a boat on Lago Maggiore in 1913?

Now, when you write again, tell me your opinion: as a practical man who deals in books. Would you find any interest in Frank Richards' autobiography, or would it send you to sleep? If the former, I will send you a copy when---and if---it appears in print. Now about Hinton's paper, 'School and Sport', for which I wrote a series of school stories under the pen-name of 'Clifford Clive'. I think I mentioned that my set of these went, with a good many hundreds of Gems and Magnets, for salvage, early in the war. But an odd copy has turned up, so I enclose it in this letter, as it may interest you. I imagine that there are very few copies in existence in these days. I have been greatly astonished of late to learn that collectors give as much as 1/- or 1/6 each for old numbers of the Magnet. Although I am the author, I cannot think that they get their money's worth. At that rate, a whole set of Magnets would be worth about £75/-/. This almost makes me wish that I could see that salvage man again and tell him I have changed my mind! However, they went in a good cause: and I shall hope that they helped to give Hitler a knock. Every little helps.

With kind regards,
Yours sincerely,

Frank Richards