



Christ Church, Ramsgate

AUGUST

1948

PRICE THREEPENCE

SOME THOUGHTS OF A 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. 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 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 in 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, a 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 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 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 school-boy; 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 and French—other languages came later.

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 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 on 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 tax and sur-tax 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 to him 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. Frank's writing could never come 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 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 days 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.

How did I invent my characters? I didn't. They just grewed like Topsy. I don't 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 until he was in his forties; and I had only to visualise what he must have been like at fifteen, and there he was. Everyone, I suppose, must have known a Bob Cherry; 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 realised. 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 a cat, can laugh instead of swearing.

It has always been one of my ambitions to write a book on religion; 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.

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 copies 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 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 thousand of guineas for it.

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 ex-

tent, 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!"

A FESTIVAL OF ENGLISH ORIGIN

August 7th in the Book of Common Prayer is the commemoration of the Name of Jesus. This is a late festival which had already become popular when it received official recognition in 1500. The commemoration is of English origin and dates from the 14th Century.

The subject of the commemoration is to be found in the events which are recorded in St. Matthew I. 21, and St. Luke II, 21; and in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is told "and thou shalt call his name Jesus."

Devotion to the Holy Name possibly has a longer history than we might expect. Essentially it signified an intense veneration for the Person of Our Lord in the more human aspects of His being. Many well-known hymns (e.g. "Jesu, the very thought of thee") express this feeling of personal love and dedication of life to God through the humanity of the Saviour. The infinite compassion and tender mercy of Jesus were themes of which mystics like Richard Rolle (14th Century) never tired, and formed also the background of much of the teaching of St. Bernard. On these themes Bunyan loved to dwell.

CHURCH FINANCE AND PUBLICITY

The Summer Session of the Church Assembly passed a Budget of £200,780 for 1949, but the whole of that sum will not have to be found by the dioceses in that year as the Central Board of Finance has undertaken to provide £12,580 from the Central Church Fund as a grant made possible (in 1949 only) by the sale of the Board's interest in Canterbury Hall.

Meanwhile a Commission has been appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury "to consider the various activities which have been committed to Boards, Councils, and other bodies, involving material expenditure out of the Assembly Budget and to report whether the expenditure on any of these activities could now be properly curtailed, and if so, to what extent." The Members of the Commission are: The Right Hon. Ralph Assheton, M.P., Chairman, the Bishop of Bath and Wells (Dr. H. W. Bradfield), the Archdeacon of Manchester (the Venerable A. Selwyn Bean), Colonel Innes N. Ware, and Mrs. David.

The Assembly approved the appointment of a Church Information Board, but the debate on its constitution was adjourned until the November Session. When appointed it will have neither functions nor money, but will make recommendations on both to the Church Assembly.

The Assembly gave final approval to the Pastoral Reorganisation Measure.