

# THE 'TOM MERRY' & 'JACK' BOOKS OF FRANK RICHARDS

ALEX KERNAGHAN TAKES A LOOK AT TWO FURTHER  
SCHOOLBOY HEROES FROM THE FRANK RICHARDS ROSTER

Frank Richards found considerable fame and fortune with his immortal creation, Billy Bunter — The Fat Owl of the Remove, who is still the most popular fictional schoolboy of them all. After initial publication in the early decades of the century, Richards' tales of life at Greyfriars reached an entirely new generation when they were reissued in book form from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s.

But Billy Bunter was not the only Richards' character to discover renewed popularity in the post-war period. A couple of years after the appearance of the first of the Bunter books, the adventures of another well-loved schoolboy creation, Tom Merry, began to appear in the bookshops. The exploits of Tom and the lads from St. Jim's, recounted in thirteen books and five annuals, are all very sought-after by collectors today.

It was, in fact, the reissue of the Bunter books (initially from Skilton), and their immense popularity, that gave Spring Books of London the idea that what Skilton had done for Bunter, they could do for Tom Merry. In 1949, they released the first two Tom Merry novels in their 'Halcyon Library'

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— MANDEVILLE PUBLICATIONS —

The first "Tom Merry's Annual" was published by Mandeville Publications in September 1949. Copies of this issue sell today for around £5.

series: "The Secret of the Study" and "Talbot's Secret", under the pseudonym that had always accompanied the Merry stories, Martin Clifford. They were attractive little volumes with full colour dust-wrappers, though the paper on which the novels were printed was somewhat inferior (even Mint condition copies today tend to be slightly yellowed). Both were exceptionally good yarns, but "The Mystery of the Study" must rank as one of the most



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*Frank Richards pictured at work at his typewriter, dressed typically in skullcap and smoking jacket.*

finely crafted and funniest juvenile novels ever — surpassing even Richards at his best with the inimitable Fat Owl.

Richards undoubtedly greatly relished the idea of resurrecting Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's, who had to endure the trials

and tribulations of their aristocratic, lisping, bemonocled chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy: "Bai Jove"! You uttah wotter. Pway, are you wefewwin' to me?"

It was D'Arcy who had become the unsung hero in the days of the 'Gem', and

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who had irrevocably won the hearts of millions of readers, despite (or perhaps because of) his bungling knack for landing his pals in one disaster after another. By comparison Tom Merry, the Junior Captain, is rather insipid, having few of the personal complexities of, say, Harry Wharton, Captain of the Greyfriars Remove.

## HUMOUR

In many respects Merry was altogether too good to be true – honest, hardworking, equable and sensible to a fault. It was left to Gussy the Swell to bring the rich humour and adventure to full blossom. This is curious when you consider that Gussy was, in fact, almost forcibly foisted on Richards by H.J. Garrish, the editor of 'Pluck', and that Richards really wanted very little to do with the swell of St. Jim's. His was not to reason why, however, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy became not only an integral part of all St. Jim's stories, but the mainstay – just as Billy Bunter was in the Greyfriars tales, only Gussie never matched the superlative ingenuity that had been infused into that larger-than-life character. That D'Arcy's popularity was recognised by Spring Books is apparent: it is the bemonocled Gussy who adorns the spines of the novels.

In full spate Gussy is priceless: aloof, naive, hilarious and utterly impervious to sarcasm. In "The Secret of the Study" Gussy, in surreptitiously recovering a confiscated 'footer' from Housemaster Railton's study, falls under suspicion for the theft of a pound note. For fully three-quarters of the novel it does not even occur to the guileless Gussy that he is under suspicion: he blissfully accepts as the consensus of opinion that such an unmanly and contemptible act would be totally beneath him. And only when the truth dawns slowly on his exalted brain does he set about proving his innocence.

"Talbot's Secret" brought to life again another memorable character from St. Jim's, Reginald Talbot, the "Toff" of the Shell; a reformed schoolboy cracksman first introduced to readers thirty-five years earlier. Talbot was forever to find life a rough and bumpy ride, as he repeatedly chanced upon old criminal acquaintances who inevitably endeavoured to enlist his aid in their nef-



*"Jack of the Circus" (Spring Books, 1957) was the last of the 'Jack' books to be published.*

arious schemes. On this occasion it is "Jimmy the Cat", under the guise of a new form master, Mr Spender, out to burgle the nearby Rylcombe Grange.

Having assumed the identity of a new master at St. Jim's, the Cat has leisure to observe the Grange on his rambles, to choose his moment carefully, to burgle and hide the loot, and to awaken next morning as sleepy-eyed and innocent as the other members of St. Jim's. It seems to be the perfect alibi, and it is left to Talbot, who has been watching the Cat alias Spender assiduously, to reveal all to Inspector Skeat, and later his chums.

## MANNERS

"Weally, I am not vewy surprwised!" comments Arthur Augustus. "Of course, I had no ideah that the man was a cwook, but you fellows will wemembah that I said fwom the first that he was a wottah, a boundah, a wank outsidah. On his vewy first day he was absolutely wude to me . . ." To Gussy, good manners came first, last and always.



September of 1949 also saw the launch of the first 'Tom Merry Annual' by Mandeville Publications (again it was Gussy who adorned the spine and frontispiece). Timed to catch the Christmas trade, and with the same cover price as the Spring books (7/6d), it was a veritable treasure trove of 'Hamiltonia', reintroducing many old favourites besides the St Jim's boys. It brought back to life Jimmy Silver and the chums of Rookwood, the old gang from Carcroft, Jack Nobody (sometimes known as Jack Free) the pedlar's lad, tramping the lonely lanes of Kent, Ken King of the Islands, the Rio Kid out West, tales of Cedar Creek, and others. And, with the exception of the first Annual, they included Greyfriars stories.

The Annual also contained a wide range of hobby features, such as building a crystal set, collecting stamps, performing magic tricks and solving puzzles; along with articles on football, cricket, motor racing and exploring the Antarctic. There were, too, black & white photographs showing deep sea whaling, famous battleships, modern aircraft and the like. But 75% of the contents was penned by Richards himself,



*"Talbot's Secret" (Spring Books, 1949), the second book in the Tom Merry series, was written under the pen-name of 'Martin Clifford'.*

under the names of Martin Clifford, Owen Conquest, Charles Hamilton, Ralph Redway, Harry Compton and, of course, Frank Richards. Most of the tales had the sort of Christmas setting so beloved by his readers.

The problem for the aspiring collector is that none of the six Annuals, published between 1949 and 1954, was numbered or dated (this applies also to the 'Billy Bunter's Own' Annuals, which we hope to feature in a future article). Some dealers list the volumes as though numbered from 1 to 6, while other give the year when known. But the truth is that very often dealers are no more certain of the number and date of their Merry Annuals than the budding collector, and the safest way to order an individual book is to describe the dust-jacket. As a guide, we have included descriptions of the six dust-jacket illustrations that accompany the Annuals in the bibliography at the end of this feature.

Mandeville Publications were rather hedging their bets when they announced in

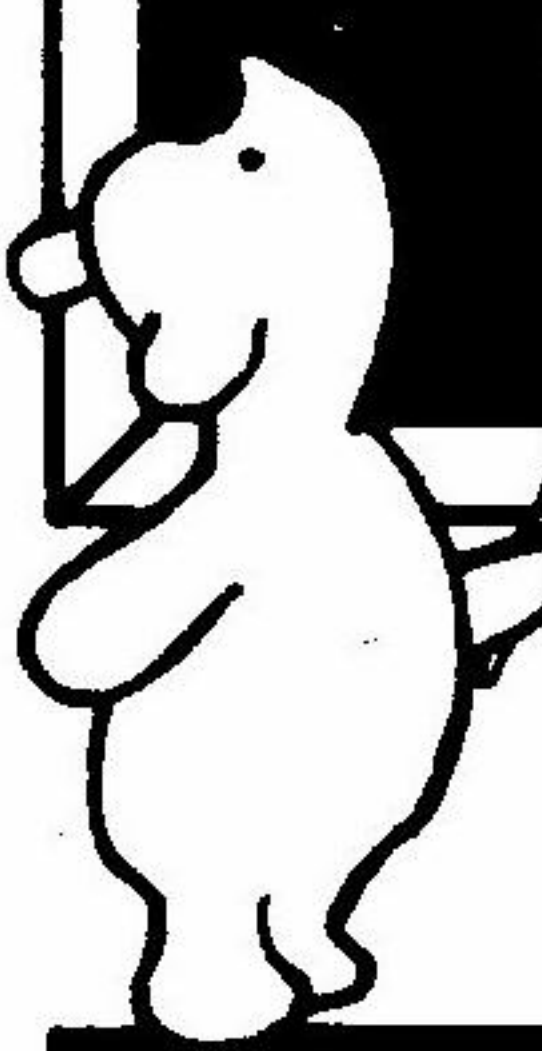
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their first issue: "The ideal gift book for young and old alike". But it is undoubtedly true that the success of the Annuals was as much due to the already established Tom Merry following as to the younger readers coming across St. Jim's for the first time. (Inevitably, too, the Annual was often bought by parents, uncles or aunts as Christmas presents for children.)

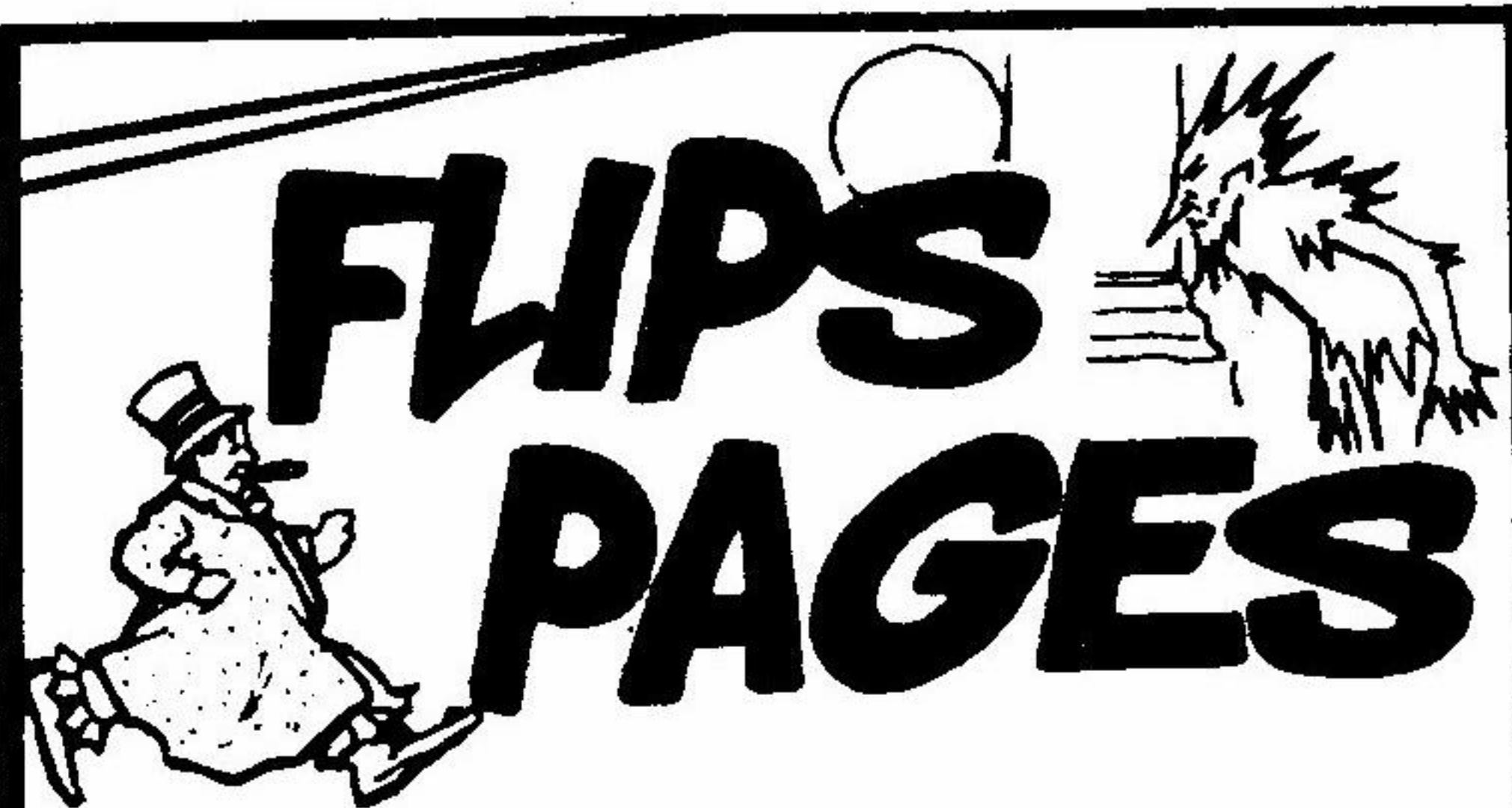
There was a lapse of two years before Spring Books released their next pair of titles in 1951, "The Scapegrace of St. Jim's" and "The Rivals of Rookwood"; the former concerning a fierce feud between the scapegrace Ralph Reckness Cardew and the amiable Harry Manners of the Shell. "The Rivals of Rookwood" was the only novel ever to appear featuring Jimmy Silver and his pals Lovell, Raby and Newcombe. It was also the last novel issued under the 'Halcyon Library' banner.

## STRATEGY

Spring Books then set about rethinking their strategy. The books had been a modest success, but in an attempt to boost sales they decided to release all future titles under the name of Frank Richards, and in 1953 issued the first of seven volumes by Richards in their new 'Fanfare' series. "Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's" was quickly followed by "Trouble for Tom Merry" and "Down and Out". The 'Fanfare' series was somewhat smaller than the 'Halcyon Library' series, although rather thicker and printed on better quality paper; and, undoubtedly to help reduce production costs, all seven volumes were printed in Czechoslovakia. The covers, too, were less stylized and better illustrated, and all the books carried a full colour frontispiece and black & white line drawings. The intention, obviously, was to produce a book that was an imitation in many respects of the Skilton/Cassell Bunter volumes, and hopefully to capture a chunk of that market.

The following year, 1954, they released "Cardew's Catch" and "The Disappearance of Tom Merry" (with a rather lurid cover showing the black-hooded kidnapper shoving Tom into a stone-walled vault); and in 1955 "Rallying Round Gussie" and "Through Thick and Thin".

Around this time Richards was beginning



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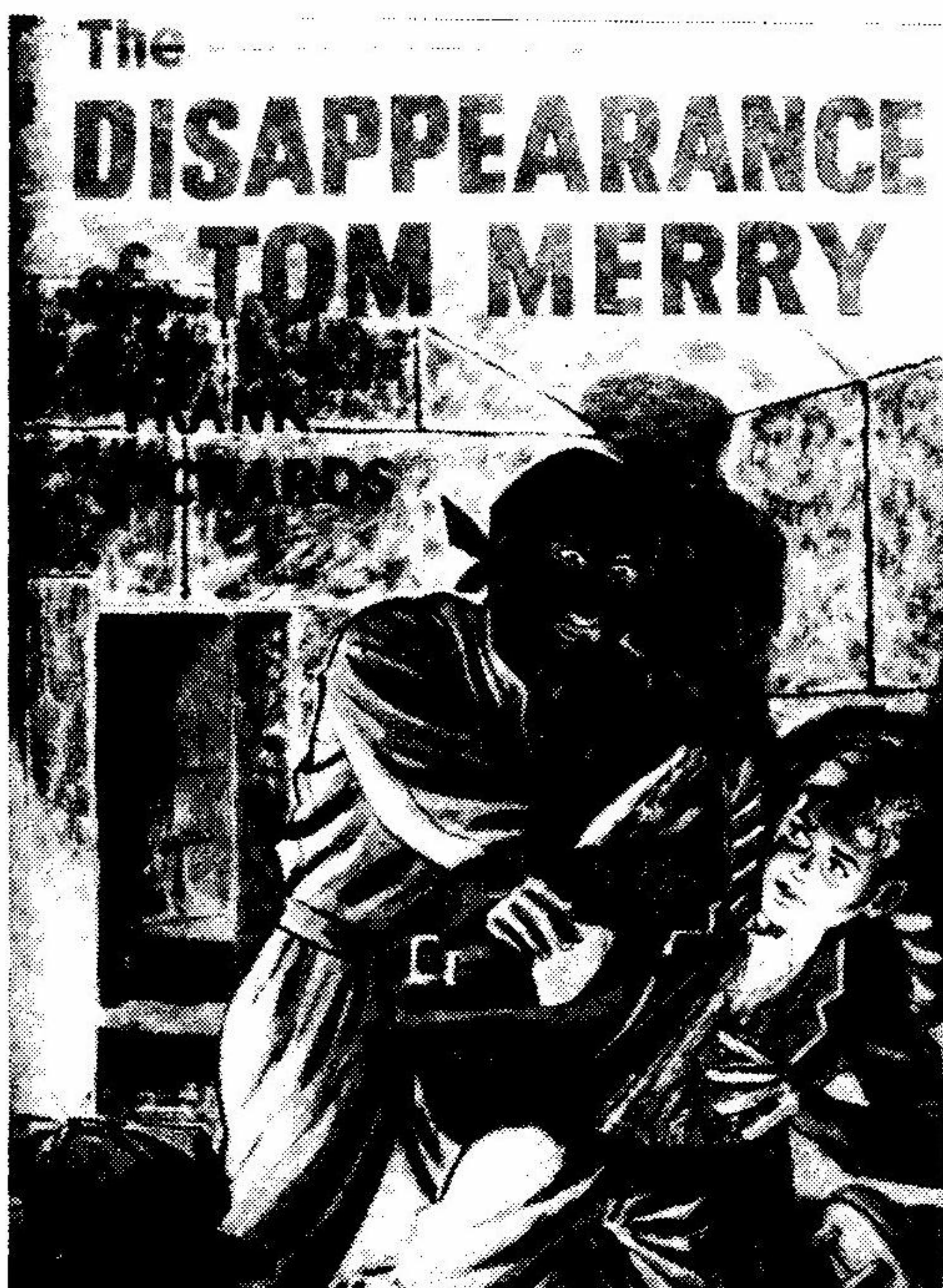
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*By the time of the publication of "The Disappearance of Tom Merry" (1954), the books were shown as being the work of Frank Richards.*

to feel that perhaps there was no longer the same demand for the characters of St. Jim's. He was, after all, now 79 years of age and was writing two Bunter novels a year for Cassell & Co., along with the Greyfriars stories for "Billy Bunter's Own" — and Bunter had become a big hit on TV. In December 1951 Richards had been commissioned by the BBC to write six television scripts to star 29-year-old Gerald Campion as the fattest schoolboy on earth. The first episode, "The Siege of the Remove", was screened on 19th February 1952 and was a tremendous success, despite some criticism from the 'Old Guard', and a rather spartan cast.

So yet another generation (myself included) was introduced to Bunter, confirming, if confirmation were needed, that Richards was indeed the most popular writer of school fiction in the world.

Between 1952 and 1961 Richards wrote thirty-eight television scripts (many of which were rescreened as repeats) and it is evident from the following comment that he thoroughly enjoyed tapping out the epi-

sodes: "For myself I can only repeat that I like it very much indeed. If it isn't quite perfect, is anything in this imperfect world? I just love watching the plays and wish they would go on forever." A decade of TV wasn't bad for a man now into his eighties!

The fame of Richards had never been greater, and Spring Books still felt, understandably, that there was mileage in his magic name. They owned five more titles by Richards, and in 1956 issued "Tom Merry's Triumphs" and "Tom Merry & Co. Caravanners" in their third new series. All five books were in uniform edition, simply released as 'Spring Books London'. They were far and away the best produced books they had ever issued, and all five covers now read "By Frank Richards, Author of the Billy Bunter Series."

## PUGILISTIC

"Tom Merry's Triumph" is a readable enough tale, with Tom having to employ the pugilistic art to extricate D'Arcy and his young brother Wally of the Third from a scrape concerning a missing £5 banknote. Tom enters 'Handler's Ring' in an attempt to survive three rounds against 'Johnny Jones The Game One' to win that much-needed fiver and the title of the novel says all. But it is apparent in "Tom & Co. Caravanners" that Richards was becoming weary of the books. Slow and heavy and with the thinnest of storylines, it is totally lacking in the sparkling touch of the grand master. Even the inclusion of Bunter in the plot could not save it. For Tom Merry it was the end of the line, and it was the last St. Jim's novel ever to appear in hard cover. Early in 1957 Spring Books released their final three titles, "Jack of All Trades", "Jack's the Lad" and "Jack of the Circus".

Jack Nobody was a character Richards had devoted much time and energy in developing during those lean years of the war, hoping that the lad might take the place of the Greyfriars' bunch to provide him with a moderate income. As it turned out, the rebirth of Billy Bunter did more, and Jack was relegated to brief appearances in the Tom Merry Annuals and 'Billy Bunter's Own'. Even so, it is obvious in reading the novels that Richards had had extensive plans for Jack Nobody.



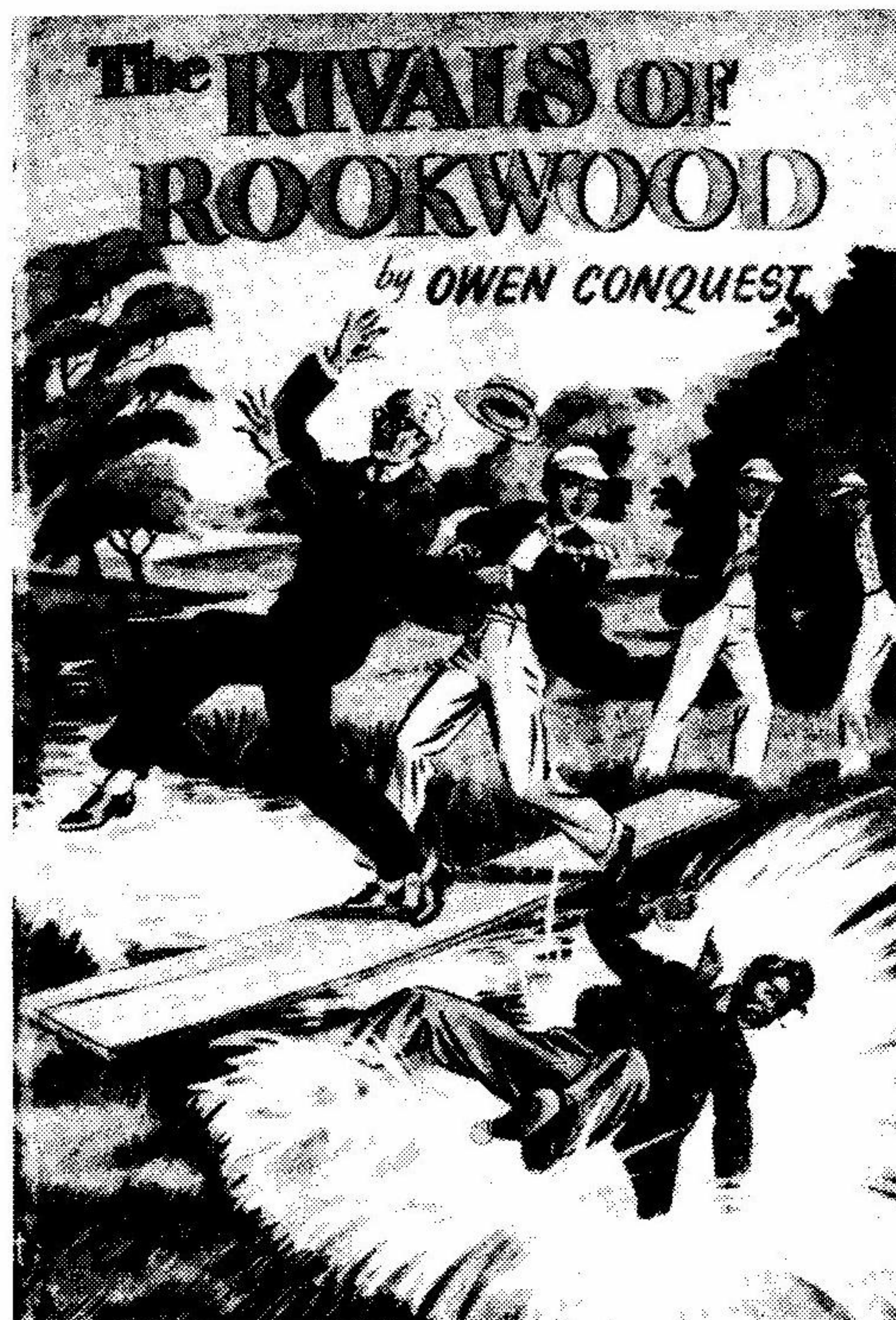
The trilogy opens with the orphaned Jack in the hands of the brutal Bill Hatchet, pushing the pedlar's cart around the lanes of Sussex and Surrey where Hatchet plied his wares (often stolen) to make the money necessary to supply his constant intake of alcohol. Regularly beaten and harangued, Jack eventually escapes from Hatchet to be befriended by a pair of matronly caravaners, Miss Hunt and Miss Brown. The first novel closes with the startling news that Jack has acquired a new benefactor in the form of a 'kindly' peer, Lord Cortolvin, who wishes to take Jack into his care. Jack sets off with Cortolvin's valet, the smooth-talking Mr. Jervis, with promises of good schooling and a bright future.

In the opening chapter of the second novel we soon discover that neither Jervis nor Lord Cortolvin have any such intentions, and Jack is duped back again into the savage hands of Bill Hatchet. It soon becomes apparent (though no explanation is offered) that it is in the interests of Cortolvin to keep Jack in obscurity, and we are left to assume that the orphaned Jack is in fact heir to the Cortolvin fortune, and that the mighty peer does not mean to have the lad in his way.

After some time on the road Jack manages to escape again and joins up with a travelling show, 'Pipper's Travelling Circus', where he makes friends with Mr. Chipmonk the circus clown, El Greco the lion tamer and Wad Wadi the Indian elephant trainer. Always fond of horses, Jack becomes a ring-rider with the show, and for a while finds peace with his new chums, despite continued attempts by Jervis and Hatchet to spirit him away.

In the third novel, "Jack of the Circus", Jervis finally succeeds, with the aid of Dick Kenny, a jealous and malevolent ring rider, in having Jack kidnapped when the show is making an appearance at the London Hippodrome. The boy is drugged and wakes to find himself aboard a Dutch ship, bound for he knows not where.

"Now, while he was rocking on a wild sea, it did not come into his mind that he was to become very closely acquainted with ships, in many seas, in many parts of the globe. He could only wonder as he lay on the hard bunk, listening to the heavy swell



*"The Rivals of Rookwood" (1951) was the only book issued under the name of 'Owen Conquest'.*

thumping on the timbers. The outlook was dark, but he remembered that the darkest hour was always before the dawn!"

It is certain that Richards intended more adventures for Jack, but if they were written they were never published, and we were never to discover the fate of the kidnapped Jack Nobody. It was one of those very rare occasions when a story by Frank Richards did not have the usual, satisfyingly crisp, happy ending.

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# BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FRANK RICHARDS' 'TOM MERRY' & 'JACK' BOOKS

A guide to books in Very Good to Fine condition with dust-wrappers

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