

Book and Magazine Collector is published on the third Friday of each month. Here are the dates for the next two issues:

ISSUE

ADVERTISING DEADLINE

JANUARY ISSUE (on sale 20 December) .....19 November

FEBRUARY ISSUE (on sale 17 January) .....17 December

## CHRISTMAS AT GREYFRIARS

Christmas is, of course, a special time for publishers and writers alike. A large proportion of the books sold every year are bought as Christmas presents, and to accommodate this huge market many enterprising authors have sought to devise stories with a particularly festive message or setting. At the same time, publishers have vied with each other to produce the most lavish editions of perennial classics like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Andersen's *Fairy Stories*, with the result that Christmas books are amongst the most attractive and collected of all.

The festive season is a particularly busy time for children's authors and, as Alex Kernaghan reveals in his feature this month, the indefatigable Frank Richards always regaled his readers with a special Christmas tale in the run-up to the holiday. Fans of Bunter and Harry Wharton knew that as December 25th approached, they could look forward to a story filled with mystery, adventure and a few laughs as well! It's little wonder that Christmas issues of *The Gem* and *The Magnet* are the most collected of all.

The demise of both these papers in the first few months of the war was a terrible setback for Richards, but the story of the revival in his fortunes in the late Forties makes fascinating reading in itself. The success of the Skilton/Cassell 'Billy Bunter' novels led to the release of a huge range of new publications based on Frank Richards characters, including a number of very collectable Christmas books and annuals.

Illustrated books, of course, also make particularly attractive Christmas presents. Publisher George Harrap was so impressed by Willy Pogány's drawings when he first saw them that he immediately commissioned him to illustrate a series of Christmas Gift Books. As Richard Dalby makes clear in his article, Pogány didn't just illustrate these volumes — he also designed the binding, the title pages *and* the lettering, which he frequently hand-scripted himself! It is this attention to every aspect of book design that make these titles some of the jewels of the Golden Age of Illustration.

None of the authors mentioned in Charles Rollings' feature on WW1 prisoner-of-war books seems to have had time to write about Christmas at camps like Holzminden and Yozgad — they were too busy trying to find ways to get out of them! It's fascinating to read that many of the most famous breakouts of World War Two were actually inspired by some of the many titles listed at the end of the article. Our other features this month assess the collectability of 'Reggie Perrin' creator David Nobbs, poet Stevie Smith, novelist and playwright Patrick Hamilton and crime novelist Julian Symons.

Finally, could I remind advertisers that the copy deadline for the February issue is Tuesday 17th December, as we have to get it ready before Christmas.

### NEXT ADVERTISING COPY DEADLINES:

19 NOV. for JAN. '92 issue; 17 DEC. for FEB. '92 issue

Please post early — we cannot guarantee to insert late copy!



# THE CHRISTMAS STORIES OF FRANK RICHARDS

ON THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH, ALEX KERNAGHAN CONSIDERS SOME SEASONAL OFFERINGS FROM THE GREATEST OF ALL BOYS' WRITERS



**T**hick downy snowfalls. Rosy cheeks and snowball fights. Crackling log fires in big open grates. Frozen lakes to skate on (or fall through) . . . and eerie moans in the December dusk! These were the hallmarks of Christmas stories penned by the most famous boys' storywriter of all time — Frank Richards.

Between the years 1907 and his death in 1961, scarcely a Christmas passed without a seasonal story from Richards, a tale liberally spiced with paper chains and hats, holly and mistletoe, plum pudding and mince pies, crackers, roast turkey, and breathless schoolboy adventure — everything, in fact,

that went to making Christmas what it should be in an age of innocence now long gone. It seems particularly ironic, therefore, that the man who was responsible for all this good cheer should himself have died on Christmas Eve, only hours away from all the festive fun which he described so well. As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of his death, this seems an appropriate time to look back at his astonishing career, and particularly at some of the Christmas books and stories with which he enlivened the season of goodwill.

Frank Richards (or Charles Hamilton, as he was christened) was the most prolific



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*Frank Richards' inexhaustible imagination introduced generations of young readers to the pleasures of reading.*

writer the world has ever known. In a life that spanned 85 years, this mild-mannered, amiable genius wrote a staggering 75-100 million words (estimates vary) — the equivalent of at least a thousand full-length novels.

Under 28 different pen-names he churned out 'ripping yarns' of adventure on the high seas, tough tales of the Canadian outback, detective thrillers, westerns, romantic fiction — even Latin verse and lyrics. But it was as the creator of that blithering, blethering bandersnatch; that podgy, pilfering pirate; that bloated, burbling brigand, Billy Bunter, and the cloistered, ivy-clad walls of Greyfriars School, that he is best

remembered. And it is the Greyfriars Christmas yarns that are today most fondly recalled and cherished.

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Richards' earliest stories appeared in the Traps Holmes' boys' papers *Picture Fun*, *Smiles*, *Vanguard*, *World's Comic* and *Funny Cuts*. In all he created over a hundred schools for a vast range of publications, but it wasn't until the Amalgamated Press launched *The Gem* in the spring of 1907 and *The Magnet* a year later that he really got into his stride.

From the pages of *Pluck* he lifted Tom Merry — that sturdy honest Yorkshire lad of St. Jim's — and ensconced him in the glittering *Gem*, along with his bemonocled, aristocratic 'chum', Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The two of them adventured their way through 1,711 issues of the paper, until its closure in the dying weeks of 1939.

Memorable as the 'St. Jim's' stories are, it is the incomparable adventures chronicled in the pages of *The Magnet* that are most fondly remembered now, all of which centred around what must be the most famous school ever written about — Greyfriars.

*Billy Bunter's Christmas Party* (1949) was the first of two post-war 'Bunter' novels with a Christmas setting.



## BUNTER COMES FOR CHRISTMAS



*Billy Bunter Comes for Christmas* is based on an earlier *Magnet* story, 'The Mystery of Wharton Lodge'.

With a cast of characters that included Harry Wharton, Johnny Bull, Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh (the 'Famous Five'), success was guaranteed for the series. But besides them, there was also that most glorious and garrulous caricature — the fattest and funniest schoolboy on earth — William George Bunter!

For 1,683 issues the crackling cachinnations and anguished howls of "Oh, Crickey! Oh, Lor'! YAROOH!" echoed along the Removite corridors as the fat and fatuous Owl was 'bumped' or kicked for grub raiding, spinning 'crammers', or 'earwiggin' surreptitiously at study keyholes.

For more than 30 years Richards packed *The Magnet* with the rattling escapades of the 'Famous Five' & Co., and never were those escapades more daring, more exciting or more welcome than at that most magical of times — Christmas.



As Yuletide approached, readers could look forward to an extended serial that would take them through the bleak early weeks of December, and the mounting excitement of the Greyfriars and St Jim's men preparing for Christmas hols, right through to the New Year and beyond. They could also be sure of a glimpse through the frost-spangled panes of Wharton Lodge, or Mauleverer Towers, or Vernon House, where the company would invariably spend their 'break' (their holiday), and where Bunter would somehow wangle his way, uninvited.

And the story would be special. Shadowy ghost-like shapes would flit along draughty halls or creaking stairwells, clanking chains in the dead of night in the howling wind and snow. There would be secret panels or hidden staircases, trapdoors or sliding walls, that led to unused basements or unknown dens, where hidden spoils would be unearthed, or ancient documents discovered.

## KIDNAPPED

Sometimes a member of the company would mysteriously disappear — either kidnapped or lost — sending the others out on torchlit midnight tramps, scouring wintry woods or searching the frost-rimed cellars and passages of some ghostly local pile. The readers, meanwhile, followed the chums on their adventures, went with them into the woods, through the creaking door and — waited impatiently for next week's number (or if they could afford it, bought the *Greyfriars Holiday Annual*, in which all the Christmas stories were printed complete).

*The Mystery of Wharton Lodge* (December 1933, *Magnet* Nos. 1349-1351) is a typical example of the sort of Yuletide mayhem and merriment which Richards provided for his readers. Having given the Fat Owl the slip in the Greyfriars quad, Harry Wharton and the chums make for Wharton Lodge, bent on enjoying the Christmas festivities minus one fat junior. Bunter, however, has other plans! Following the chums by train, he awaits his chance in the gathering gloom and, by dint of a little ventriloquism, manages to sneak into the house through the French windows. Uninviting as the attic appears it seems the safest

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This illustration is typical of the superb artwork that accompanied the original 'Greyfriars' stories in the *Magnet*.

place for an unwanted guest — but only after he has raided the larder and snaffled Hurree Jamset's blankets on the way!

Inevitably, however, there are complications. On a midnight prowling along shadowy halls and stairways in search of provender, Bunter bumps into a burglar, awakening the entire household with his yells of terror and alarm. Even the fattest member of Greyfriars School can put on speed when he has to, and both he and the burglar beat a hasty retreat to their respective dens before being discovered.

There are many narrow escapes for Bunter and the 'midnight marauder' during the ensuing days, and only when both cross paths again in the night-shrouded hallways of Wharton Lodge is the intruder's malicious intent revealed, and Bunter welcomed as a hero into the fold!

For three decades Richards filled the pages of *The Magnet* and *The Gem* (a feat which George Orwell roundly declared as "impossible" — he had the good grace to apologise later), until both titles were eventually killed

off by the paper shortage brought on by World War Two. *The Gem* was the first to go, closing on the last day of 1939. *The Magnet* followed it five months later.

The next few years were bleak ones for Richards. Before the war — when his output had been the equivalent of one full-length novel a week — he'd been earning at least £3,000 a year, and probably a great deal more. Now, abruptly, all that had all come to an end.

Then, in 1946, the London publisher Charles Skilton had the brainwave of putting the 'Bunter' stories in book form, the first of which, *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*, appeared in the following year. So great was its success that in the years that followed Richards produced a further 37 books, including two Christmas titles, *Billy Bunter's Christmas Party* (Skilton, 1949) and *Bunter Comes For Christmas* (Cassell, 1959).

*Bunter Comes For Christmas* is something of a reprise of *The Mystery of Wharton Lodge*, with the fat porpoise again secreting himself in the attic, only to inadvertently thwart re-



peated attempts on Colonel Wharton's valuable Tintoretto.

*Christmas Party*, however, reverses the roles: here it is Bunter who plays host to a somewhat reluctant and rather astonished Famous Five. Tankerton Hall, home of Bunter's uncle, Humphry Carter, is the venue for this hilarious Christmas yarn. Even the doubts of hard-headed Johnny Bull — who constantly reiterates that "there's got to be a catch somewhere" — are dispelled when the chauffeur-driven 'Roller' pulls up to the school to take them on their way. But catch there is! Unbeknownst to the chums, Tankerton Hall is a new venture for Uncle Carter — a retreat for fee-paying guests!

## MYSTERIOUS

Fortunately for Bunter there's the small distraction of a £50,000 hidden hoard, not to mention the mysterious ghost of Tankerton Hall. It's perhaps no surprise to readers that the exposure of the latter leads to the discovery of the former! Just as the company wise up to the fact that they are actually paying boarders, a grateful Uncle Carter insists that they stay as his guests — whereupon, as Richards puts it, "the days that followed were merry and bright".

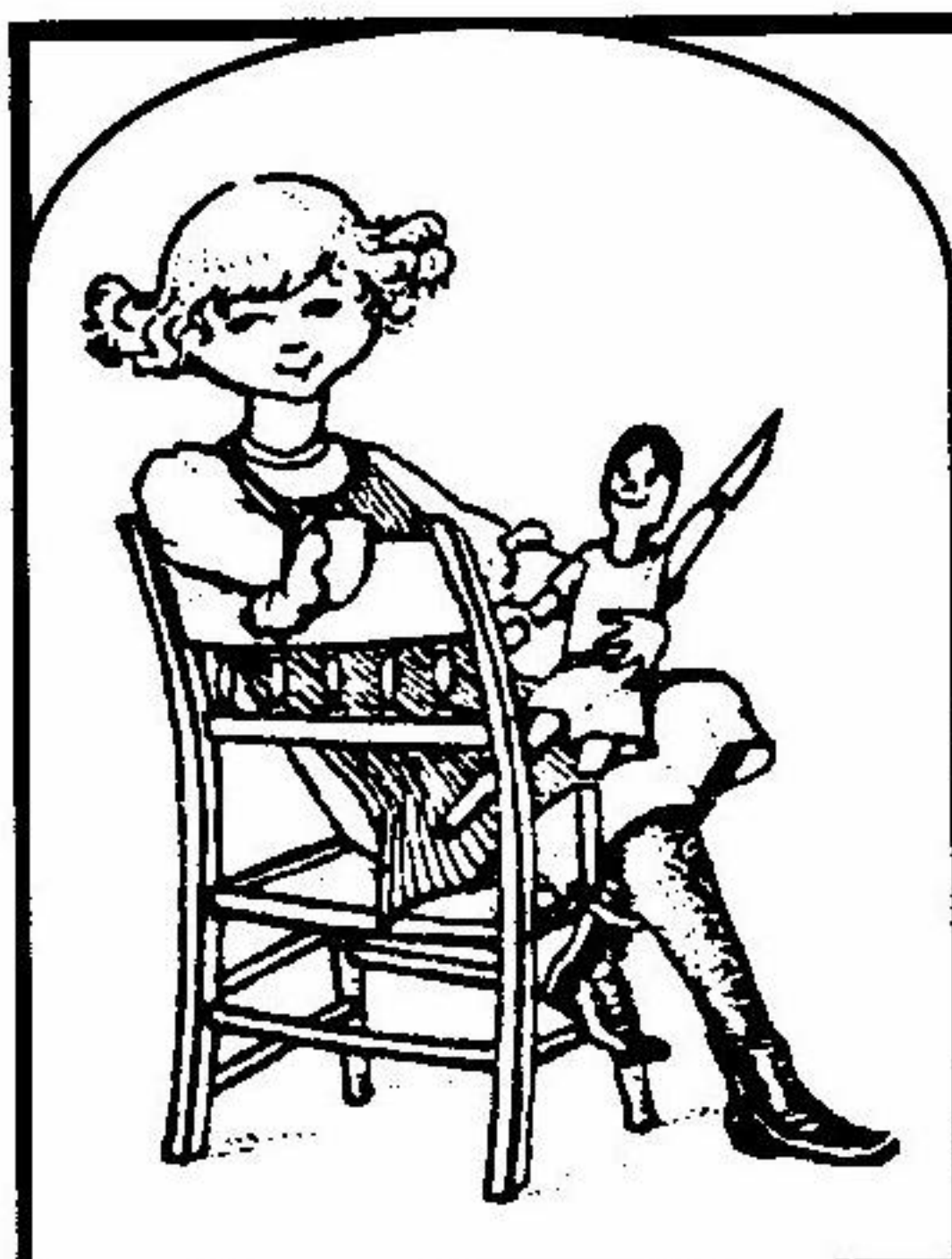
The tremendous success of the Skilton/Cassell volumes (Cassell took over the series after ten books had appeared) lead to the release of a huge range of new publications devoted to Frank Richards' many characters. Oxonhoath Press launched a series of Christmas annuals under the title *Billy Bunter's Own*, whilst Mandeville followed suit with their Christmas *Tom Merry's Annual*. Spring Books



The success of the 'Billy Bunter' novels led to the release of many related publications, like this Christmas annual.

released a complete range of new 'Tom Merry', 'Gussy' and 'Jimmy Silver' novels, whilst Hamlyn, Collins, Goldhawk, Four Square and Granada Publishing showered readers with new 'Greyfriars' and 'Tom Merry' paperbacks, two of which — *Bunter and the Phantom of the Towers* (Armada, 1965) and *Billy Bunter Comes for Christmas* (Granada, 1983) — had a Yuletide setting.

The latter is nothing more than a re-writ-



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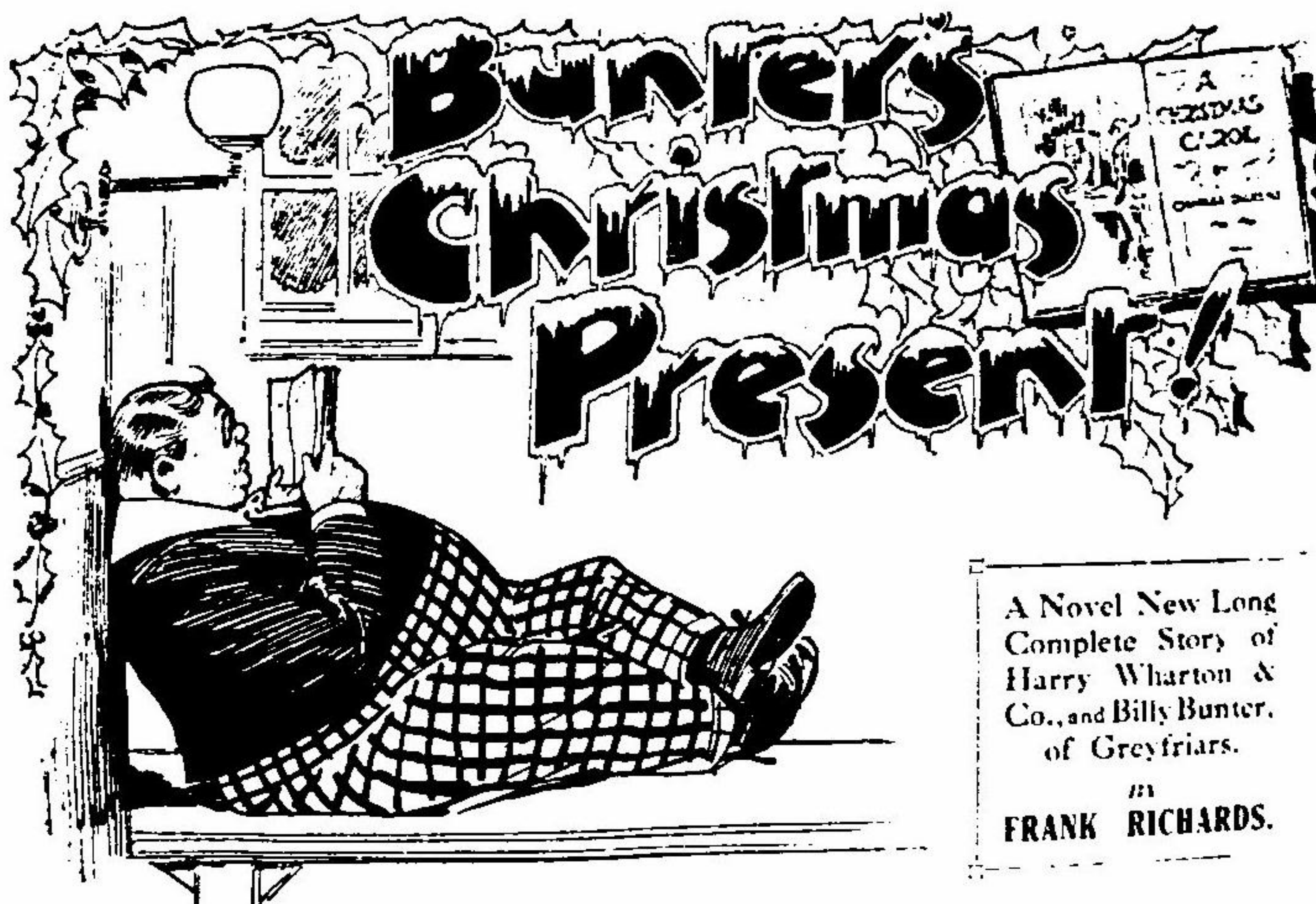
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ten and updated version of the 1959 Cassell volume, edited (to the detriment of the original) by Kay King. *Bunter and the Phantom of the Towers*, however, is vintage Richards, culled from *The Magnet* Nos. 1244-1245. As ever, the Fat Owl wangles his way into accompanying the Famous Five on their Christmas hols, which this time are being spent at Mauleverer Towers.

Amid the festivities, strange notes turn up threatening 'Mauly' with kidnap if he doesn't pay a ransom of £1,000, which the schoolboy earl — with his customary aplomb — dismisses as pranks of the mischievous Owl. Only Bunter knows that they aren't! Sad to relate, however, no-one believes the fat fraud, and when an attempt is made on Mauleverer's life, it's Bunter who stumbles on the truth,



*This illustration shows Bunter in an unfamiliar pose, actually reading a book!*

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almost at the expense of his fat neck!

In addition to this deluge of books, 'Billy' and 'Bessie Bunter' cartoon strips began to appear in comics throughout the country, and Richards' short stories became regular attractions in a dozen different newspapers. Bunter, it seemed, had never been so big.

Richards was advancing in years by now, although he showed few signs of it. In 1952 he turned to writing scripts for the successful *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School* T.V. series, which ran for five years with Gerald Campion in the starring role. Bunter was also the star of six Christmas plays (*Billy Bunter's Mystery Christmas*, *Billy Bunter Flies East*, *Billy Bunter's Swiss Roll*, *Billy Bunter Shipwrecked*, *Billy Bunter's Christmas Circus* and *Billy Bunter Meets Magic*), although these were not written by Richards, but by a former *Magnet* reader, Maurice McLoughlin.

Richards worked right up until his death at the age of 85 on Christmas Eve 1961. Despite his immense popularity, one might have thought that with the passing of the old master the saga of William George Bunter would at long last have come to an end. But in 1969, a Wimbledon publisher, Howard Baker, hit upon the idea of producing exact facsimiles of original *Magnets* and *Gems*, and selling them in bound volumes. The venture proved an enormous success, so much so that more copies of *The Magnet* were printed in the Sev-



er, 'ies and Eighties than in the paper's 'high summer' in the 1920s and 30s.

Today, 22 years on, Howard Baker Press have published more than 250 hardback facsimile editions, each one containing between seven and ten individual papers. Inevitably, it is the Christmas volumes containing such marvellous adventures as *The Ghost of Polpelly* (Howard Baker No. 39), *Bunter's Christmas Carol* (Howard Baker No. 58) and *Greyfriars Christmas* (GBC No. 49) that have sold out the quickest. These are now collector's items in their own right, selling for many times their original cover price.

## SUPERB

Baker Press are justly proud of their superb facsimile editions, and still produce a regular *Greyfriars Gazette* to help readers unearth the most elusive volumes. The *Gazette* also helps maintain links between the various 'Billy Bunter' Clubs up and down the country. For anyone who wants to go the whole hog, there's even a Club tie and cravat (both with 'Friar' motif), a full-colour wall map of Greyfriars and environs, a *Greyfriars Who's Who*, a 'Magnet' *Companion* and an EMI LP entitled *Floreat Greyfriars*.

More recently, Hawk Books have reissued the post-war 'Billy Bunter' novels in excellent facsimile editions. These feature the original artwork by R. J. MacDonald and C. H. Chapman, including their full-colour frontispiece and dustjacket illustrations. The books have blue boards (the Skelton/Cassell originals alternated rather erratically between red and blue) with gilt lettering on the spine, and, of course, the distinctive bright yellow dustjackets. In fact, the only difference between these and the originals (apart from the small matter of condition) is that the 'Hawk Books' logo appears on the spine and the title page, and some new publisher's 'blurb' on the back cover (along with a barcode!).

The books are being published in 'fours', although not in their original order. So far, only one set of titles has been released (published on 17th October): *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*, *Bunter Does His Best*, *Bunter the Bad Lad* and *Bessie Bunter of Cliff House School*. Hawk eventually plan to issue all the



*This Christmas story first appeared in the Magnet, before being released as a paperback by Armada in 1965.*

'Bunter' books, provided that there is sufficient demand. These volumes are superb value at only £7.50 each (printed in the U.K. as well!), and are a 'must' for anyone who can't afford the now very expensive first editions.

All of this would, of course, have delighted Frank Richards. In the timeless world that he created, the hoots and wails of the fattest schoolboy on earth still echo hauntingly along the corridors of the Greyfriars Remove. "Oooooogh! Wow! Yow-ow-ow-ow! Woohoop! YAROOOH!" — Billy Bunter lives!

As the maestro himself might have put it: "On that point there can be no doubt; no possible, probable shadow of doubt; no possible doubt whatever!" Merry Christmas, chaps!

Some of the books used to illustrate this feature were kindly provided by Harrington Bros, Chelsea Antiques Mart., 253, Kings Road, London SW3.