

FRANK RICHARDS
REPLIES
TO GEORGE ORWELL

THE Editor has kindly given me space to reply to Mr Orwell, whose article on Boys' Weeklies appeared in *Horizon* No. 3. Mr Orwell's article is a rather remarkable one to appear in a periodical of this kind. From the fact that *Horizon* contains a picture that does not resemble a picture, a poem that does not resemble poetry, and a story that does not resemble a story, I conclude that it must be a very high-browed paper indeed: and I was agreeably surprised, therefore, to find in it an article written in a lively and entertaining manner, and actually readable. I was still more interested as this article dealt chiefly with my work as an author for boys. Mr Orwell perpetrates so many inaccuracies, however, and flicks off his condemnation with so careless a hand, that I am glad of an opportunity to set him right on a few points. He reads into my very innocent fiction a fell scheme for drugging the minds of the younger proletariat into dull acquiescence in a system of which Mr Orwell does not approve: and of which, in consequence, he cannot imagine anyone else approving except from interested motives. Anyone who disagrees with Mr Orwell is necessarily either an antiquated ass or an exploiter on the make! His most serious charge against my series is that it smacks of the year 1910: a period which Mr Orwell appears to hold in peculiar horror. Probably I am older than Mr Orwell: and I can tell him that the world went very well then. It has not been improved by the Great War, the General Strike, the outbreak of sex-chatter, by make-up or lipstick, by the present discontents, or by Mr Orwell's thoughts upon the present discontents! But Mr Orwell not only reads a diehard dunderheaded Tory into a harmless author for boys:

he accuses him of plagiarism, of snobbishness, of being out of date, even of cleanliness of mind, as if that were a sin also. I propose to take Mr Orwell's indictment charge by charge, rebutting the same one after another, excepting the last, to which I plead guilty. After which I expect to receive from Mr Orwell a telegram worded like that of the invader of Sind.

To begin with the plagiarism. 'Probably', says Mr Orwell '*The Magnet* owes something to Gunby Hadath, Desmond Coke, and the rest.' Frank Richards had never read Desmond Coke till the nineteen-twenties: he had never read Gunby Hadath—whoever Gunby Hadath may be—at all. 'Even the name of the chief comic among the Greyfriars masters, Mr Prout, is taken from Stalky and Co.', declares Mr Orwell. Now, it is true that there is a formmaster at Greyfriars named Prout, and there is a housemaster in Stalky named Prout. It is also true that *The Magnet* author is named Richards: and that there is a Richards in Stalky and Co. But the Fifth-form master at Greyfriars no more derives from the Stalky Prout, than *The Magnet* author from the Stalky Richards. Stalky's Prout is a 'gloomy ass', worried, dubious, easily worked on by others. The Greyfriars Prout is portly, self-satisfied, impervious to the opinions of others. No two characters could be more unlike. Mr Prout of Greyfriars is a very estimable gentleman: and characters in a story, after all, must have names. Every name in existence has been used over and over again in fiction.

The verb 'to jape', says Mr Orwell, is also taken from Stalky. Mr Orwell is so very modern, that I cannot suspect him of having read anything so out of date as Chaucer. But if he will glance into that obsolete author, he will find 'jape' therein, used in precisely the same sense. 'Frabjous' also, it seems, is borrowed from Stalky! Has Mr Orwell never read 'Alice'? 'Frabjous', like 'chortle' and 'burble', derives from Lewis Carroll. Innumerable writers have borrowed 'frabjous' and 'chortle'—I believe Frank Richards was the first to borrow 'burble', but I am not sure of this: such expressions, once in existence, become part of the language and are common property.

'Sex', says Mr Orwell, 'is completely tabu'. Mr Noel Coward, in his autobiography, is equally amused at the absence of the sex-motif in *The Magnet* series.* But what would Mr Orwell have? *The Magnet* is intended chiefly for readers up to sixteen: though I am proud to know that it has readers of

sixty! It is read by girls as well as boys. Would it do these children good, or harm, to turn their thoughts to such matters? Sex, certainly, does enter uncomfortably into the experience of the adolescent. But surely the less he thinks about it, at an early age, the better. I am aware that, in these 'modern' days, there are people who think that children should be told things which in my own childhood no small person was ever allowed to hear. I disagree with this entirely. My own opinion is that such people generally suffer from disordered digestions, which cause their minds to take a nasty turn. They fancy they are 'realists', when they are only obscene. They go grubbing in the sewers for their realism, and refuse to believe in the grass and flowers above ground—which, nevertheless, are equally real! Moreover, this 'motif' does not play so stupendous a part in real life, among healthy and wholesome people, as these 'realists' imagine. If Mr Orwell supposes that the average Sixth-form boy cuddles a parlour-maid as often as he handles a cricket-bat, Mr Orwell is in error.

Drinking and smoking and betting, says Mr Orwell, are represented as 'shady', but at the same time 'irresistibly fascinating'. If Mr Orwell will do me the honour of looking over a few numbers of *The Magnet*, he will find that such ways are invariably described as 'dingy'—even the 'bad hats' are a little ashamed of them: even Billy Bunter, though he will smoke a cigarette if he can get one for nothing, is described as being, though an ass, not ass enough to spend his money on such things. I submit that the adjective 'dingy' is not equivalent to the adjective 'fascinating'.

Mr Orwell finds it difficult to believe that a series running for thirty years can possibly have been written by one and the same person. In the presence of such authority, I speak with diffidence: and can only say that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I am only one person, and have never been two or three.

'Consequently,' says Mr Orwell, cheerfully proceeding from erroneous premises to a still more erroneous conclusion, 'they must be written in a style that is easily imitated.' On this point, I may say that I could hardly count the number of authors who have striven to imitate Frank Richards, not one of whom

* "They were awfully manly, decent fellows, Harry Wharton and Co, and no suggestion of sex, even in its lighter forms, ever sullied their conversation. Considering their ages, their healthy-mindedness was almost frightening." Noel Coward in *Present Indicative*, 1937.

has been successful. The style, whatever its merits or demerits, is my own, and—if I may say it with due modesty—inimitable. Nobody has ever written like it before, and nobody will ever write like it again. Many have tried; but as Dryden—an obsolete poet, Mr Orwell—has remarked:

The builders were with want of genius curst,
The second building was not like the first.

Mr Orwell mentions a number of other papers, which—egregiously—he classes with *The Magnet*. These papers, with the exception of *The Gem*, are not in the same class. They are not in the same street. They are hardly in the same universe. With *The Magnet*, it is not a case of *primus inter pares*: it is a case of the Eclipse first and the rest nowhere. Mr Orwell in effect admits this. He tells us, quite correctly, that Billy Bunter is a 'real creation': that he is a 'first-rate character': that he is 'one of the best-known in English fiction'. He tells us that in *The Magnet* the 'characters are so carefully graded, as to give every type of reader a character he can identify himself with'. I suggest that an author who can do this is not easily imitated. It is not so easy as Mr Orwell supposes. It cannot be acquired: only the born story-teller can do it. Shakespeare could do it as no man ever did it before or since. Dickens could do it. Thackeray could not do it. Scott, with all his genius, could only give us historical suits of clothes with names attached. Can Bernard Shaw make a character live? Could Ibsen or Tchekov? To the highbrow, I know, a writer need only have a foreign name, to be a genius: and the more unpronounceable the name, the greater the genius. These duds—yes, Mr Orwell, Frank Richards really regards Shaw, Ibsen, and Tchekov, as duds—these duds would disdain to draw a schoolboy. Billy Bunter, let us admit, is not so dignified a character as an imbecile Russian, or a nerve-racked Norwegian. But, as a nineteenth-century writer, whom Mr Orwell would not deign to quote, remarked, 'I would rather have a Dutch peasant by Teniers than His Majesty's head on a signpost'.

Mr Orwell accuses Frank Richards of snobbishness: apparently because he makes an aristocratic character act as an aristocrat should. Now, although Mr Orwell may not suspect it, the word 'aristocrat' has not wholly lost its original Greek meaning. It is an actual fact that, in this country at least, noblemen generally are better fellows than commoners. My

own acquaintance with titled Nobs is strictly limited; but it is my experience, and I believe everybody's, that—excepting the peasant-on-the-land class, which is the salt of the earth—the higher up you go in the social scale the better you find the manners, and the more fixed the principles. The fact that old families almost invariably die out in the long run is proof of this: they cannot and will not do the things necessary for survival. All over the country, old estates are passing into new hands. Is this because Sir George up at the Hall is inferior to Mr Thompson from the City—or otherwise? Indeed, Mr Thompson himself is improved by being made a lord. Is it not a fact that, when a title is bestowed on some hard man of business, it has an ameliorating effect on him—that he reacts unconsciously to his new state, and becomes rather less of a Gradgrind, rather more a man with a sense of his social responsibilities? Everyone must have observed this. The founder of a new family follows, at a distance, in the footsteps of the old families; and every day and in every way becomes better and better! It was said of old that the English nation dearly loves a lord. The English nation, in that as in other things, is wiser than its highbrowed instructors. Really, Mr Orwell, is it snobbish to give respect where respect is due: or should an author, because he doesn't happen to be a peer himself, inspire his readers with envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness?

But Mr Orwell goes on to say that the working-classes enter only as comics and semi-villains. This is sheer perversity on Mr Orwell's part. Such misrepresentation would not only be bad manners, but bad business. Every paper desiring a wide circulation must circulate, for the greater part, among the working-classes, for the simple reason that they form nine-tenths of the population. A paper that is so fearfully aristocratic that it is supported only by marquises and men-servants must always go the way of the *Morning Post*. *Horizon*, I do not doubt, has a circle of readers with the loftiest brows; but I do doubt whether Sir John Simon will bother it very much for the sinews of war. Indeed, I have often wondered how so many young men with expansive foreheads and superior smiles contrive to live at all on bad prose and worse poetry. Directors, editors, and authors, must live: and they cannot live by insulting the majority of their public. If Frank Richards were the snob Mr Orwell believes him to be, he would still conceal that weakness very carefully when writing for *The Magnet*. But a man can believe that the 'tenth

possessor of a foolish face' has certain qualities lacking in the first possessor of a sly brain, without being a snob. I am very pleased to be an author, and I think I would rather be an author than a nobleman; but I am not fool enough to think that an author is of such national importance as a farmer or a farm labourer. Workmen can, and often do, get on quite well without authors; but no author could continue to exist without the workmen. They are not only the backbone of the nation: they *are* the nation: all other classes being merely trimmings. The best and noblest-minded man I ever knew was a simple wood-cutter. I would like Mr Orwell to indicate a single sentence in which Frank Richards refers disrespectfully to the people who keep him in comfort. There are three working-class boys in the Greyfriars Remove; Mr Orwell mentions all three by name: each one is represented as being liked and respected by the other boys; each in turn has been selected as the special hero of a series: and Mr Orwell must have used a very powerful microscope to detect anything comic or semi-villainous in them.

It is true that if I introduce a public-house loafer, I do not make him a baronet: and the billiard-marker does not wear an old school tie. But something, surely, is due to reality: especially as Mr Orwell is such a realist. If Mr Orwell has met public-house loafers who are baronets, or billiard-markers wearing the old school tie, I have never had a similar experience.

Of strikes, slumps, unemployment, etc., complains Mr Orwell, there is no mention. But are these really subjects for young people to meditate upon? It is true that we live in an insecure world: but why should not youth feel as secure as possible? It is true that burglars break into houses: but what parent in his senses would tell a child that a masked face may look in at the nursery window! A boy of fifteen or sixteen is on the threshold of life: and life is a tough proposition; but will he be better prepared for it by telling him how tough it may possibly be? I am sure that the reverse is the case. Gray—another obsolete poet, Mr Orwell!—tells us that sorrows never come too late, and happiness too swiftly flies. Let youth be happy, or as happy as possible. Happiness is the best preparation for misery, if misery must come. At least, the poor kid will have had something! He may, at twenty, be hunting for a job and not finding it—why should his fifteenth year be clouded by worrying about that in advance? He may, at thirty, get the sack—why tell him so at twelve? He may, at forty, be

a wreck on Labour's scrap-heap—but how will it benefit him to know that at fourteen? Even if making miserable children would make happy adults, it would not be justifiable. But the truth is that the adult will be all the more miserable if he was miserable as a child. Every day of happiness, illusory or otherwise—and most happiness is illusory—is so much to the good. It will help to give the boy confidence and hope. Frank Richards tells him that there are some splendid fellows in a world that is, after all, a decent sort of place. He likes to think himself like one of these fellows, and is happy in his day-dreams. Mr Orwell would have him told that he is a shabby little blighter, his father an ill-used serf, his world a dirty, muddled, rotten sort of show. I don't think it would be fair play to take his twopence for telling him that!

Now about patriotism: an affronting word to Mr Orwell. I am aware, of course, that the really 'modern' highbrow is an 'idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone, all centuries but this, and every country but his own'. Why should not a fellow feel proud of things in which a just pride may be taken? I have lived in many countries, and talked in several languages: and found something to esteem in every country I have visited. But I have never seen any nation the equal of my own. Actually, such is my belief, Mr Orwell!

The basic political assumptions, Mr Orwell goes on, are two: that nothing ever changes, and that foreigners are funny. Well, the French have a proverb that the more a thing changes, the more it is just the same. Temporary mutations are mistaken for great changes—as they always were. Decency seems to have gone—but it will come in again, and there will be a new generation of men who do not talk and write muck, and women with clean faces. Progress, I believe, goes on: but it moves to slow time. No real change is perceptible in the course of a single lifetime. But even if changes succeeded one another with kaleidoscopic rapidity, the writer for young people should still endeavour to give his young readers a sense of stability and solid security, because it is good for them, and makes for happiness and peace of mind.

As for foreigners being funny, I must shock Mr Orwell by telling him that foreigners *are* funny. They lack the sense of humour which is the special gift of our own chosen nation: and people without a sense of humour are always unconsciously funny. Take Hitler, for example,—with his swastika, his 'good

German sword', his fortifications named after characters from Wagner, his military coat that he will never take off till he marches home victorious: and the rest of his fripperies out of the property-box. In Germany they lap this up like milk, with the most awful seriousness; in England, the play-acting ass would be laughed out of existence. Take Mussolini—can anyone imagine a fat man in London talking the balderdash that Benito talks in Rome to wildly-cheering audiences without evoking, not wild cheers, but inextinguishable laughter? But is *il Duce* regarded as a mountebank in Italy? Very far from it. I submit to Mr Orwell that people who take their theatricals seriously *are* funny. The fact that Adolf Hitler is deadly dangerous does not make him less comic.

But what I dislike most is Mr Orwell telling me that I am out of date. Human nature, Mr Orwell, is dateless. A character that lives is always up to date. If, as Mr Orwell himself says, a boy in 1940 can identify himself with a boy in *The Magnet*, obviously that boy in *The Magnet* is a boy of 1940.

But it is quite startling to see what Mr Orwell regards as up to date. The one theme that is really new, quoth he, is the scientific one—death-rays, Martian invasions, invisible men, interplanetary rockets, and so on. Oh, my Hat! if Mr Orwell will permit that obsolete expression. This kind of thing was done, and done to death, when I was a small boy; long before *The Magnet* was born or thought of. Before I reached the age of unaided reading, a story was read to me by an elder brother, in which bold travellers hiked off to the moon packed inside a big bullet discharged from a tremendous gun. The greatest of submarine stories—Jules Verne's 20,000 *Leagues*—was published before I was born. The Martians invaded earth, while I was still mewling and

puking in the nurse's arms. In the nursery I knew the Invisible Man, though his invisibility was then due to a cloak of darkness. More than twenty years ago I wrote a death-ray story myself: but did not fancy that it was a new idea; even then it had an ancient and fish-like smell. Some of my earliest reading was of flying: there was a strenuous character in those days, who sailed the skies in what he called an 'aeronef'; a direct descendant, I think, of Verne's *Clipper of the Clouds* of twenty years earlier: and Verne, I fancy, had read *Peter Wilkins* of seventy years earlier still; and I believe that the author of *Peter Wilkins* had not disdained to pick up a tip or two from Swift's writings in the eighteenth century. Did not Lucian tell them something about a trip to the moon in the second century? The oldest flying story I have read was written in Greek about three thousand years ago; but I don't suppose it was the earliest: I have no doubt that when they finish sorting over the Babylonian bricks they will find a flying story somewhere among the ruins, and very likely a death-ray and an invisible man keeping it company. If this stuff is new, Mr Orwell, what is old?

To conclude, Mr Orwell hopes that a boys' paper with a Left-wing bias may not be impossible. I hope that it is, and will remain, impossible. Boys' minds ought not to be disturbed and worried by politics. Even if I were a Socialist, or a Communist, I should still consider it the duty of a boys' author to write without reference to such topics: because his business is to entertain his readers, make them as happy as possible, give them a feeling of cheerful security, turn their thoughts to healthy pursuits, and above all to keep them away from unhealthy introspection, which in early youth can do only harm. If there is a Tchekov among my readers, I fervently hope that the effect of *The Magnet* will be to turn him into a Bob Cherry!