

Profile of a Boys' Writer

The Man Who Invented Billy Bunter

by Eric Hiscock

WHEN Hitler decided to go to war in September 1939 he wrecked the schooldays of a posse of British boys who had been together for some thirty-two years. To explain that away it is necessary to slip back to the year 1907 and the old Carmelite House, which in those carefree days housed the up and coming Amalgamated Press. A.P. was getting under way, cashing-in on the free education of the masses with a flood of publications designed, if not to elevate, then to amuse. The boys of Britain were in the process of being charmed for their coppers, and a journal called *Pluck* was making considerable headway.

The editor, able, enterprising, affable, called Garrish, asked a thirty-three years old writer, Charles Hamilton, to supply a series of school stories, to appear fortnightly. Hamilton, who had been spilling words on to paper since he had got a short story accepted at the age of eighteen, agreed, and at once evolved a fictional scholastic set-up that was destined to rival in fame those expensive establishments for the sons of gentlemen, Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Rugby. Charles Hamilton, in short, created St Jim's.

To-day, thirty-seven years later, St Jim's is synonymous with Tom Merry and Co., Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and the rest of the Fourth Form heroes. In *Pluck*, in 1907, the first boys on the scene were Blake, Herries and Digby of Study No. 6 in the School House, and Figgins and Co. of the New House. To these, on a suggestion from editor Garrish, was added Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, modelled on a member of the Carmelite House staff. Hamilton, who confesses to taking parts of most of his creations from real life, kept a watchful eye on this elegant sub-editor and was always deriving from him some new detail for the adornment and amplification of the D'Arcy character.

'The young gentleman remained blissfully unconscious of the process,' says Hamilton.

He recalls that the first St Jim's stories were written in a very friendly atmosphere. It was just as well, for always—although later he got round to writing one and a half million words a year—the lightest word of adverse criticism discouraged him. 'I could not help it,' he says, 'I could only unfold in the sunshine. I have often wished I was a little more pachydermatous. Adverse criticism reduces me to the state of a soda-syphon that has expended its final squish. Once, when I was being fiendishly dunned for income- and sur-tax a spot of criticism from an editor about a series I was writing for him caused me to close down, and so lose nine pounds a week when I could ill afford it. I cannot write unless what I write pleases. When fault is found with it, it immediately seems to me mere piffle, and I cannot go on with it. No doubt it is absurd that an old bean who has lived for fifty years by scribbling should still be so thin-skinned, but there it is.'

When the *Pluck* St Jim's stories had been running a year, the author was again called to Carmelite House to meet, not editor Garrish, but a slight, handsome, vital-looking young man called Griffith. 'He seemed to breathe up all the air in the room, leaving everybody a little breathless,' says Hamilton. Griffith, clever and determined, outlined a plan for a new paper. The creator of St Jim's was to write for it. He would write a new school series for it. The series, which was to have a dominant, attractive central character, must give the impression of being written by a new writer. Hamilton, dictated editor Griffith, could pick on any pen-name he liked, and after selecting and discarding hundreds he finally settled on Martin Clifford. Martin, says Hamilton, was arrived at from *Martin Rattler*, which he had read when he was eight years old, and Clifford came from *Paul Clifford*, a novel of Bulwer's.

The day following the interview Hamilton, who finds thinking easier in a boat, went on the river to think it over. First of all, he hit on the central character's name, Tom Merry. Then came the name of the school, Clavering. Merry's future loyal study-mates, Manners and Monty Lowther, were next visualised. Then from being a fortnightly attraction the Martin Clifford stories in the new paper, which was called the *Gem*, were ordered to appear every week.

One day Griffith told Hamilton that he had decided to amal-

gamate the *Pluck* St Jim's stories with the Tom Merry yarns in the *Gem*. So Clavering School was shut down, 'quite plausibly,' says Hamilton, and Tom Merry with Manners and Monty Lowther migrated to St Jim's. Soon came the doubling of the size and price of the *Gem* (which started life at a halfpenny), and Hamilton found himself booked to write a double-length story every week. At this period, he says, he was also writing serials for three other papers, and a good many songs. One of these, a football song called 'On the Ball,' did well. 'No one is likely to remember it now,' says Hamilton, and adds wistfully, 'it's probably not to be found outside the British Museum.' The extra work did not distress him, however, and he found that the more he wrote the easier it came.

Griffith, penetrating, restless, knew he was on a willing horse and pushed him to the limit. Some of Griffith's ideas were too big for Carmelite House, whose nets were out only for British boyhood. Griffith planned to publish a paper similar to the *Gem* in French. A French *Gem*, he claimed, would have no difficulty in disposing of the weak, rubbishy competition to be found in France. Hamilton, a good linguist, approved of the idea of writing in French, and agreed, cheerfully, to do the job.

The plans failed to mature, which was just as well, thinks Hamilton, for not long afterwards editor Griffith, after a few desultory remarks about the rising tide of *Gem* readers, said, 'I'm starting a new paper.' The author of the *Gem* did not see how the new paper could concern him: so, assuming a polite interest in the venture on the surface, he played over in his mind the 'immortal game' of Anderssen and Kieseritski, a habit he had when required to present a semblance of attention. 'I often played mental chess while people talked,' he says. 'Many people said I was a brilliant talker; what they really meant was that I looked as though I was very good at listening.' Griffith said the new paper was to be called the *Magnet*. There was going to be a long complete school story, and a serial. 'You,' said Griffith, 'will write the school story. When can you let me have the first number?' 'Oh, in a few days,' said Hamilton, carelessly. '*Gem* copy as usual, of course,' said Griffith. 'Naturally,' said Hamilton.

It is here that Hamilton admits sitting in his hansom after leaving Carmelite House and coming to the



conclusion that writing, which had seemed more or less of a pastime, now looked dangerously like work. He was not afraid of work. It was just that he considered that writing which was work to the author to write might become work to the reader to read. Hitherto, he had divided his time among writing, music and drawing. It was obvious now that to make room for the *Magnet* he must put aside music and art. This, temporarily at least, he was willing to do. After all, it *was* only temporary. . . . But had Hamilton been able to look into the far future he would have seen the *Gem* and the *Magnet*, marching side by side, week by week, for over thirty years.

For the *Magnet* a new pen-name was necessary, and found. He took great care with his pseudonyms. He said once that a man of thought has only to imagine Beethoven named Schmidt, Shakespeare dubbed Jimmy Wilkins, Romeo hailed as Timothy or Mike, to realise that there is plenty in a name, at that. He decided on Frank Richards. Frank came from Scott via Frank Osbaldistone ; Richards was simply the christian name of one of Hamilton's brothers, pluralised into a surname.

He claims that by allowing himself Martin Clifford for the *Gem* and Frank Richards for the *Magnet* he was able to write as different persons, and from a somewhat different angle. He says that men who do not write regard the theory as fanciful. 'That only means they don't understand,' he adds. The pen-name



'Nursie, nursie, come quick—I've twisted my stripes again !'

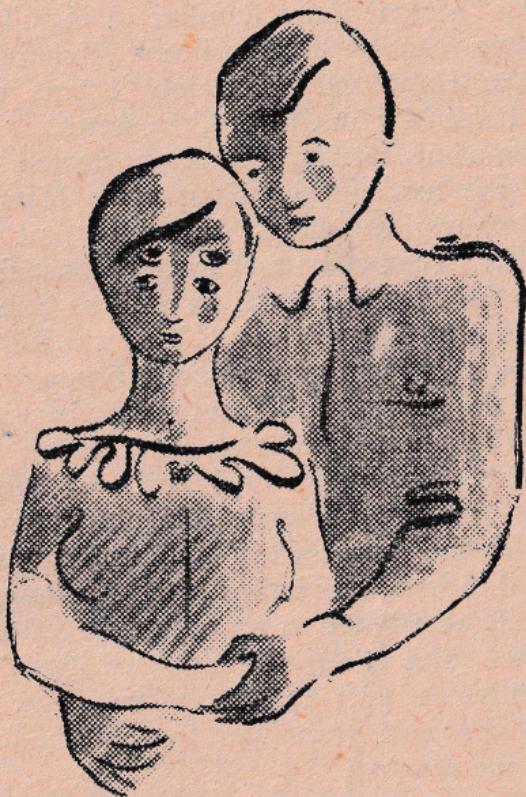
'Frank Richards' became more familiar to Hamilton than his own, and in later years he became Frank Richards more than he was Charles Hamilton. 'Certainly I was more Frank Richards than I was Martin Clifford,' he states.

With the pen-name settled, Hamilton started to plan his characters for the new paper. First came Harry Wharton, whom he had known at school. Frank Nugent was another portrait from life. Then came a character whose fame reached Canada, Australia, New Zealand, as well as penetrating the length and breadth of Great Britain. This was Billy Bunter.

Bunter's fame, says Hamilton proudly, brought letters from every corner of the globe. He is one of the best-known characters in English fiction. He is as well known as Sherlock Holmes, Pickwick, Tarzan, Robin Hood. In Paris once, his creator heard a Frenchman describe someone as 'gros comme le Bunter.' Bunter had long been in Hamilton's mind. Indeed, before he started to write regularly for the Amalgamated Press, he had shyly offered Bunter to an editor for whom he wrote occasional yarns. The editor did not 'see much' in Bunter. Hamilton, sensitive as ever to adverse criticism, put his fat creation behind him until, years later, he ventured to revive him in the pages of the *Magnet*.

At first Bunter remained in the background, but gradually, convinced that he was on to a good thing in the Owl of the Remove, Hamilton brought him into the limelight. He admits that there was a Billy Bunter in real life, but 'like Gaul,' he says, 'he was divided into three parts.' There were, in fact, three male Bunter blueprints. Bunter's fat form came from an editorial gentleman who seemed, to Hamilton's eyes at least, to overflow his chair. The large, thick spectacles, through which Bunter blinked like an owl, belonged to one of Hamilton's relatives. Another relative was drawn upon for the celebrated postal-order which Bunter always expected and which rarely materialised. The fat youth's impenetrable fatuousness was lifted bodily from an eminent Victorian statesman. Hamilton declines to reveal the politician's name.

The Indian, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, had appeared earlier in a series written for another of Griffith's papers. Hamilton, forced to suspend the series on account of overwork, took the Nabob over to Greyfriars School, where he soon had his special niche in the affections of British youth. His creator, always a staunch Conservative and British Commonwealth enthusiast,



'Has anybody ever told you you're so different, darling ?'

considers that by making an Indian boy a comrade on equal terms with the choice spirits of Greyfriars he was doing his bit towards the unity of the British Empire, and helping to clear the youthful mind of any colour prejudices.

The *Magnet* went off with a bang from the first issue. Although most *Gem* readers took both papers, few guessed that they were written by the same author. One correspondent had the perspicacity to identify Martin Clifford and Frank Richards with Charles Hamilton. This was certainly remarkable, for while Martin Clifford was writing the *Gem*, Frank Richards the *Magnet*, Charles Hamilton was writing serials and a series for other papers taken by the same readers. Later, Hamilton added the pen-name Owen Conquest (the school was Rookwood) to his quiver. He owns to being a busy man those days, and confesses that it 'was rather a lark to be three authors all at once.' He was three authors all at once for over thirty years, during which time his writings never missed a single week.

Hamilton first started writing for publication at eighteen. As a boy he had dreams of becoming either an author or a black and white artist. He was not completely without thought of becoming a professional music writer. 'Although I was never quite happy without a pen in my hand I hardly dared to hope for print,' he says of himself at this period. He was diffident, sensitive and easily discouraged. He could do many things pretty well, but unless someone told him so he never thought what he had done was worth serious consideration. He read and loved books, but treated them atrociously. 'Even to-day most of my books have the corners of pages turned down, and they are pencilled with comments in the margins,' he admits sadly.

Hamilton's first accepted story was a school yarn, which seems feasible enough in the light of later events, and encouraged by a favourite uncle he had submitted it to a Glasgow publisher. He received a cheque for five guineas for it, and the cheque at once became a symbol. It meant that he was going to be a writer, that he would live by writing. With the coming of that cheque the phantom of a City office disappeared. 'My pen was going to be the open sesame to a treasure cave,' says Hamilton. He was right. Since that day he has received some thousands of cheques, from many publishers, generally for much larger sums. 'But I never experienced the same delight again. Subsequent cheques were merely money. The first cheque was the key that opened Paradise to the Peri.'

When he went to bed that night he pinned it over the bed-head. If it was there in the morning he would be assured it wasn't all part of a dream. It was no dream: and many days elapsed before the youth with the runaway pen could make up his mind to part with the cheque and pay it, prosaically, into a bank.

In 1926 Hamilton's eyesight failed badly, but even this made no difference to his capacity to write. Until 1940, when the *Gem* and *Magnet* were closed down owing to the paper shortage, he still tapped out his usual annual million and a half words on his typewriter.

Hamilton is not likely to forget the beginning of the last war. A great traveller—with his dog and his typewriter—he rambled over France, Belgium, Holland, Southern Germany, Switzerland, the Austrian Tyrol, and especially Italy. When war broke out in 1914 he was in Austria, and although he was prevented from returning home the supply of *Gem* and *Magnet* stories had to be written. 'It is odd to remember typing away about

Tom Merry and Billy Bunter at fifty words to the minute with a blithering idiot in uniform in my room, keeping guard over me with a fixed bayonet. The ass came near to finishing me off when I went to my suitcase for a paper-clip. He thought I was going for a revolver at least, and charged at me with his silly bayonet. The point was at my ribs before he realised that his worthless life was in no danger,' he says.

Much of his increment from St Jim's and Greyfriars went at Monte Carlo, where his renewed attempts to follow the glorious example of *The Man Who Broke the Bank* were incessantly baffled by suave croupiers. He was continually on the move until 1915, and Billy Bunter rolled off the Remington in many queer places in many countries. From 1918 to 1926, with the advantage of an income that allowed him to type his stories in any clime he fancied, he was always shifting his quarters.

In an endeavour to see his world he admits to having developed a perpetual frown which belies 'his sweet temper.' When someone labelled him erudite he boasted that he had never studied anything that did not attract him. 'I have an extensive smattering of utterly useless knowledge,' he admits.

Nevertheless, he is prepared to turn out a new translation of *Don Quixote* or the *Divine Comedy*. He has compiled cross-word puzzles in French and Latin, and recently he made a new translation of Vulcan's song from *Philemon et Baucis*, and has written the music to it, too. 'It's as good as Gounod's,' he says, 'but I would not expect Charing Cross Road to admit it.' He has a volume called 'Barcroft Ballads' in typescript ready for a publisher with paper to spare, and he has written the libretto of a musical play. The scene, naturally enough, is laid in a public school. He had an idea to send this to Noel Coward—who admits in his Autobiography that the *Gem* and *Magnet* formed part of his boyhood reading—but did not persevere with it. 'I thought it might look like presuming on the great man's mention of Frank Richards in "Present Indicative",' he says.

Now, in a North London flat, the man with the runaway pen sees the world as through a glass darkly, and must not venture out unguided to drop a letter in the pillar-box. As he waits for the days when paper and peace are plentiful once more, he says, uncomplainingly, 'A sense of humour will save anyone from taking the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune too seriously.'