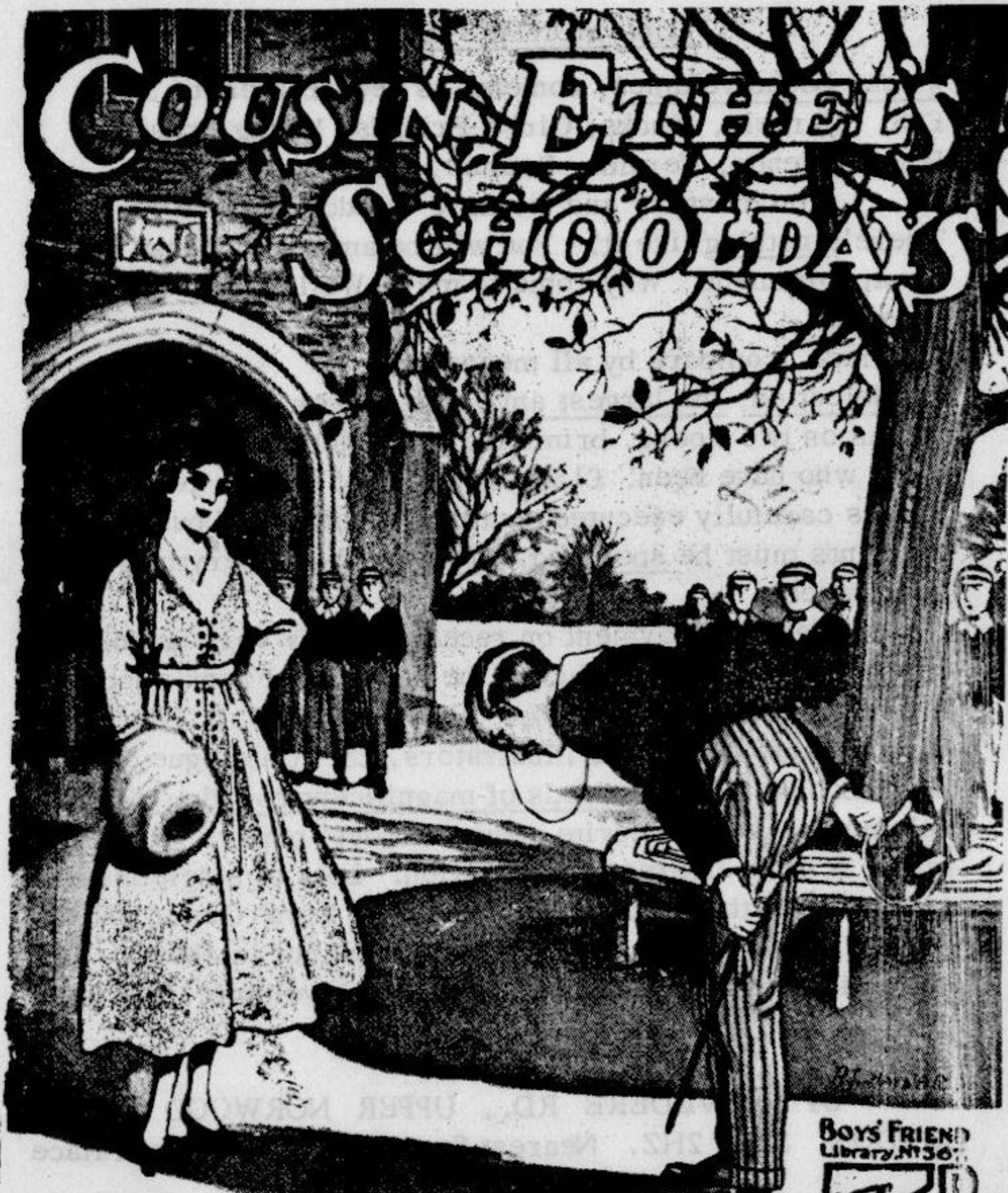


STORY PAPER

# COLLECTORS DIGEST

VOLUME 32 NUMBER 374

FEBRUARY 1978



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STORY PAPER

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# COLLECTORS DIGEST

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A WORD FROM THE SKIPPER

## CHARLIE!

Only those who are old enough to have been living at the time when Charlie Chaplin was the best-loved comedian in the world can realise the enormous impact he had on the youngsters of his heyday. The few years when we sang a piece of doggerel: "The Moon Shines Bright on Charlie Chaplin", to the well-known tune of "Pretty Redwing". I wonder who composed that piece of doggerel, about "his old baggy trousers, they want mending, before they send him to the Dardenelles". I have a feeling that it was never published as a real song, in sheet music, though I may be wrong.

Chaplin had joined Mack Sennett, as a replacement for Ford

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Sterling, at the end of 1913. A year later he had about 35 Keystone comedies behind him, and he had made the full-length feature "Tillie's Punctured Romance", which starred Marie Dressler but made Chaplin world-famous. Most of his Keystone films have been lost for ever long ago, but by 1915 he could command big money, far more than Sennett could afford, and he went to Essansy where he made the string of two-reelers which brought him the crown as the world's best-loved and best-known funny man.

In 1920 he made "The Kid", his most charming comedy. In my opinion, the few later full-length features fell well short in charm of "The Kid" and of his little gems at Essanay.

There are points of similarity between Charles Chaplin and Charles Hamilton. The most poignant coincidence is that both men, so much adored by children in their heyday, died at Christmas time.

Both had their old material re-issued over and over and over again. For years, such films as "The Kid", "A Dog's Life" and "Shoulder Arms", plus the Essanay two-reelers, were hardly ever out of circulation, released in some form or other by some firm or other. They turned up in programmes in all sorts of cinemas - and often chunks of old Keystones were found and linked together by the beloved tramp - until picturegoers, one would have thought, got sick to death of them. There was a little cinema, just off the Strand (Agar Street, I seem to recall) where, for years, they showed nothing but a continuous performance of old Chaplin films.

Between 1916 and the early twenties one finds Chaplin in some form or other in all the periodicals of the era. In 1916 even the Boy's Friend was running, on its front page, the stories of the Essanay comedies by means of stills from the films. And I venture to think that Edna Purviance, for so long his leading lady in early days, was almost as popular as he was.

There were Chaplin Fun-books, Chaplin Scream-books, Chaplin busts, Chaplin free art plates, and a welter of novelties based on the star. And, of course, to talk of "The Funny Wonder" is to talk of Chaplin. He was still there, on the front page of Funny Wonder, many years later, long after his charm for the youngsters of the time had died away completely.

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Again like Hamilton, Chaplin had his imitators. One saw them all the time in the music-halls; even on the screen there were several actors who blatantly copied the appearance and style of Chaplin.

Lastly, Chaplin and Hamilton each caught the attention of some left-wing intellectuals. Hamilton, in his later years, was attacked by them. Chaplin was lauded by them; they acclaimed him as a genius, and, in all probability, he believed them.

Was Chaplin a genius? Was he the greatest comedian of all time? I think not, but your opinion is as likely to be right as mine. But those to whom he brought joy in their boyhood, and who lived through those remarkable years of Charlie-worship, will always think of him with the very deepest affection. Maybe, had he only made films with a message like "Modern Times" and "The Great Dictator", he would soon have dropped into obscurity. But for those who remember the Essanay comedies when they were new, he was something very special, and always will be.

I can think of three Chaplin films which, for some reason or other, seem to escape the net of constant re-issue. Those three were "Sunnyside", "Pay Day", which I think were 3-reelers, and the rather later "The Circus". Even "A Dog's Life", which was second only to "The Kid" in charm, after turning up at cinemas all over the place for years after initial release, seems to have been lost far down the vista of the years.

### SHREWD AGATHA

In these columns, we have commented more than once on the way certain professional scribblers, with only a meagre knowledge of their subjects, dash off some article or other on some topic which they think may prove of passing interest to their readers. Last month, in a letter which appeared in our Postbag, Mr. Tony Glynn, who is himself a journalist, observed: "I am still outraged at the ignorance most of my colleagues show in regard to what is, after all, a picturesque branch of their own profession." Mr. Glynn was referring to the weird and wonderful things we have seen written about Charles Hamilton and his career, in the press and in commercial magazines.

Which brings me to Agatha Christie, who had plenty of knowledge

of professional journalists and of show business. Some of the minor characters in her stories were gems of characterisation, and she had a wide understanding of humanity in general.

Recently I was re-reading one of my favourite Christie novels, "Mrs. McGinty's Dead". At one stage of the story, Poirot is interviewing Miss Pamela Horsefall, who had written a series of articles concerning certain tragic women. They appeared in the "Sunday Comet".

Poirot asks: "You will pardon me, but those notes on the cases which you wrote, were they accurate?"

Miss Horsefall waved a cigarette.

"My dear man! No point in accuracy. Whole thing was a romantic farrago from beginning to end. I just mugged up the facts a bit and then let fly with a lot of hou ha."

So much for Miss Horsefall.

Another character in this book was Mrs. Ariadne Oliver. One has often wondered whether Mrs. Oliver represented Mrs. Christie in autobiographical mood. I think she did. In "Mrs. McGinty's Dead" Mrs. Oliver encounters a stage adaptor who wishes to change her characters in all sorts of ways, and a producer who selects a quite unsuitable leading man, in her opinion, to play her foreign detective. Mrs. Oliver enjoyed a stage performance, but the "ordeal of going back-stage afterwards was fraught with its usual terrors".

The adaptor says to her: "You know, it might be a marvellous idea if you murder your detective. You might make a Swan Song of it - to be published after your death."

"No fear!" said Mrs. Oliver. "What about the money? Any money to be made out of murders I want now."

In view of the publicity concerning the final Poirot book "Curtain", this comment by Mrs. Oliver makes one think, doesn't it?

### MISTER SOFTEE

Many of our readers will be sorry to know that our much loved Mr. Softee is very seriously ill, and has been so for nearly a month now. As we go to press with this issue, hope for him seems to be fading.

THE EDITOR

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# Danny's Diary

FEBRUARY 1928

On the last day of the old year, 1927, the last issue of that once great paper "The Boys' Friend" appeared. I had it for the sake of old times, but found it a pale shadow of what once was. It contained a complete story of Toppingham School; a new Western serial called "Stick it, Cowboy Ken."; a story of the Great War, called "The Fighting Pals"; the last instalment of a serial named "His Convict Father"; a complete story about Harold Hood, Detective; and a complete story about Dick, Dan, and Darkie.

The next week the Boys' Friend was amalgamated with the Triumph, which means that the Boys' Friend was finished - after appearing ever since 1895. It's awful sad, though I haven't had the Boys' Friend since Rookwood finished two years ago.

And now a new paper, called "The Modern Boy", has come out, and Mum has told Mr. Bragg, our newsagent, that he can deliver it every week. I'm not sure whether I'm going to like it or not. It's a bit bitty, by which I mean that there's lots of little bits and pieces.

The first issue had 36 pages; the second issue had 32 pages; and the third issue (the most recent) has 28 pages. If it goes on like that, cutting off a slice each week, it will disappear entirely in about two months' time. There is a good adventure serial named "King of the Islands" which is supposed to be written by the great aviator, Sir Alan Cobham, and, on the title page, they also give the name of Charles Hamilton. I wonder how two people can write a story. Ken King has a ketch, the Dawn, and he rescues a Kanaka named Koko. They set off to try to save an Australian boy named Kit Hudson, who has been imprisoned by Captain Samson on his schooner. At the end of the third instalment, Ken escapes from land crabs who are going to eat him alive unless he tells Samson a secret the bully wants to know. He finds Hudson bound to a tree-stump. All very exciting.

There are also school stories by Gunby Hadath; motor-racing tales by Alfred Edgar; and masses of advertisements for this, that,

and the other.

Two men have been charged with the murder of P. C. Gutteridge, a shocking crime which occurred last summer. The two men are named Browne and Kennedy.

At the pictures we have seen Ronald Colmon and Vilma Banky in "The Winning of Barbara Worth"; Laura La Plante in a good thriller "The Cat & the Canary"; Antonio Moreno and Renee Adoree in "The Flaming Forest"; and Bebe Daniels in "A Kiss in a Taxi". But the best film of all was Billy Sullivan in "Smiling Billy", about a sailor on leave, who gets into some exciting adventures.

A splendid month in the Magnet. To start with, an absolutely tremendous bundle of fun "The Fellow who Wouldn't be Caned" with Coker and Mr. Prout in great form. Then a new series beginning with "Dismissed From Greyfriars". Dr. Locke and Mr. Quelch have been friends for many years, but now, owing to the plotting of Skinner, their friendship ends suddenly, and Mr. Quelch is dismissed. But the Remove won't accept the sacking of their formmaster, and, in "The Rebellion of the Remove", it is Lord Mauleverer who takes the lead. The rebels' stronghold is High Oaks, a large house bought by Mauleverer.

Final tale of the month is "The School Without a Master", and the series continues next month.

In the Schoolboys' Own Library, the two stories this month are "A Disgrace to his School", a Greyfriars tale concerning Hazeldene, and "The Boy Who Found His Father", a tale of St. Kit's.

The Daily News has taken over the Westminster Gazette, and the two newspapers are now amalgamated. On the 12th of the month there were very severe gales all over the country, and there has been much damage done and some loss of life. Some slates came down off our roof.

In the Popular, the first Rio Kid tale of the month is "The Black Sack Gang", in which the Kid has vowed vengeance on Old Man Dawney, who turned him into an outlaw, and when the chance comes the Kid, instead of taking his revenge, saves Dawney from a brutal gang. And the Kid is wounded. Next tale is "Game to the Last". The sheriff and his posse are on to the wounded young outlaw, and he is put in the prison at Frio.

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Then "Lynch Law". The mob are yelling to lynch the Kid, and those yelling the loudest are his old pals from the Double Bar ranch. But they get the Kid away from the Sheriff and take him back to the Double Bar.

This particular series - and a marvellous one it is - ended with "The Whip Hand". At the Double Bar, the Kid gets his chance to clear his name - but he cannot stay on there, though the rancher asks him to do so. The Rio Kid said his emphatic farewell to Frio, and he was gone, laughing aloud as he hit the trail for the open plains. Splendidly-written tales, I think.

There was an explosion in the Haig Pit at Whitehaven, and 13 men who formed a search party lost their lives.

The "Sir Jimmy Potts" series has continued in the Nelson Lee Library. In "The Voice of the Tempter", Vivian Travers wants to show his gratitude to Potts, who saved his life, so he plots against Grayson, the fifth-former, who is the son of the man who ruined Jimmy's father. This good series ended with "The Boot-Boy's Luck" in which Travers succeeded in his plan, so Jimmy was able to reveal to the surprised school that he is really Sir James Potts, Bart.

Then another new series, starting with "The St. Frank's Ice Carnival". It's Handforth's idea, all this skating and ice-racing, but there is a mysterious marauder creeping round St. Frank's.

Last story of the month is "Handforth the Detective", in which Handy and his pals find out who it was who burgled St. Frank's while the ice carnival was on.

Two stories in the Gem are "Standing by a Rascal" and its sequel "Under a Cloud", mainly about Gussy who felt under an obligation to some rascal. Then "Lowther's Love Affair" in which Lowther became engaged to Daphne Fielding who was Cardew in disguise. Too silly for words. Next "A Chum's Test", mainly about Knox.

I see that the Rookwood serial "His Own Enemy" is to end next week. Thank goodness for that.

EDITORIAL COMMENT: S.O.L. No. 69, "A Disgrace to his School" comprised a couple of stories concerning Hazeldene. In the red Magnet, by some weird planning, the two stories were separated by the Christmas Double Number for 1910. No. 70, "The Boy Who Found His Father" came from the Boys' Friend of the mid-twenties, though this particular St. Kit's had

its birth-place in Hinton's paper School & Sport.

Sir Alan Cobham, of course, had nothing to do with the writing of the first King of the Islands serial. As older readers of C.D. will remember, Charles Hamilton wrote to say that he never knew that Ken King had been credited to Cobham in the early Modern Boy, until he read my comments on the matter. It could hardly be true, as I have observed before. The A.P. would not have credited a story to Cobham without some arrangement with the real writer. And it is incredible that Hamilton never saw his new character in print during the week's Ken King appeared under the name of Sir Alan Cobham. It is pretty clear that an arrangement was made with the real author and the supposed author, and, presumably, both were rewarded. We might add, as we commented in an editorial some years ago, that such dubious agreements have not been unknown in quite recent times.)

\* \* \* \* \*

# BLAKIANA

Conducted by JOSIE PACKMAN

First of all please let me say a belated thank you to everyone who sent me Christmas Greetings, whether by cards or in the C.D. Annual.

As you will remember that at this time last year you were reading about the mysteries of the Detective Weekly, I thought the article by our good friend Gordon Swan would be interesting to all so I have included it in this month's Blakiana. The other article by Gordon Hudson is most interesting. Does anyone remember this Sexton Blake serial in the Knockout? A few months ago I saw a TV programme about the future styles of cars, one of them was very similar to this Rolling Sphere. Nothing new under the sun eh?

## SEXTON BLAKE AND THE ROLLING SPHERE by Gordon Hudson

I first met Sexton Blake in the picture-strip series in the Knockout. This was about 1944-45. With one exception I cannot remember anything about the series. The exception was a serial called "Sexton Blake and the Rolling Sphere".

The Rolling Sphere was the remarkable invention of an old Chinese. It was a passenger-carrying vehicle in the shape of a huge glass ball with a single revolving track around the middle. It had two tentacles with large claws on the end which could be extended or retracted as required.

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Sexton Blake, Tinker and the inventor travelled together in the Sphere fighting various criminals. I think there was also a separate series which related the adventures of the inventor on his own and which did not feature the two detectives.

I was rather surprised when a short while ago I read of a similar machine in the north-east newspaper "The Sunday Sun". The article described a single-track ball car driven by electricity or petrol. The heart of the machine is a gyroscope underneath the main compartment. When the gyro gets to peak revolutions stabilising legs automatically retract and the gyro holds the car upright. "Could it be the supercar of the Eighties?" the article asked, and mentioned that even British Leyland admits it has "certain applications".

The "Sunday Sun" said that the car was the invention of a Darlington coach painter who first thought of the idea while in the R. A. F. during the War. He has made working drawings which he hopes to put to use in the near future.

When I read this article it immediately reminded me of the Sexton Blake story and I wondered whether the inventor had got his initial ideas from the Knockout. Could it be in fact that Sexton Blake has inspired a new form of transport?

#### THE BEST OF DETECTIVE WEEKLY

by S. Gordon Swan

Many derogatory remarks have been made about The Detective Weekly and this paper certainly deteriorated, particularly in its later stages, with its cheap, tawdry covers and the re-hashing of old stories. A number of us were unhappy in the first place about the changeover from the old Union Jack, with its distinctive coloured covers and convenient size, which rendered it so much more attractive than its successor. The latter looked drab and unwieldy by comparison with the old U. J. Nevertheless, among the first hundred issues of The Detective Weekly are to be found some first-rate stories.

Although G. H. Teed is a favourite of mine, I would not class his Baron von Kravitch yarns among these. Von Kravitch was not an attractive character; he didn't have the charisma of a Huxton Rymer. His disguise in the first story was oddly reminiscent of that adopted by Count Ivor Carlac during his advent in the Union Jack twenty years before.

Probably the best of Teed's short-lived series was "The Banker's Box", which dealt with the exodus of Jews from Germany when Hitler initiated his anti-Semitic programme which was to lead to the dreadful "final solution".

The Kestrel stories by Jack Lewis rank among the best. One can only regret that they were so few. What happened to this front-rank author between 1934 and his reappearance in The Sexton Blake Library during World War Two?

One story that stands out as a masterpiece is Rex Hardinge's "The Man I Killed". In its way this is a classic of crime detection and one which introduced an innovation into the Sexton Blake Saga. The story was related in the first person by the murderer himself. Hardinge was also responsible for one or two other good tales.

Anthony Skene contributed some excellent yarns, notably "The Falcon of Fambridge", "Seeds of Sleep", "Death in the Mine" and "The Medium Murder Mystery". These were undoubted assets to the long record of Blake's adventures.

A newcomer to the field, George D. Woodman, wrote a romantic tale entitled "The Spanish Circle Conspiracy", featuring an engaging "heroine" in Red Nita, the girl who "merely threw bombs at presidents". Unfortunately this lethal lady would not have so much appeal for present-day readers who have endured a surfeit of such female terrorists in real life.

One must spare a word of praise for some of the writers not dealt with in the above list: Gilbert Chester, Gwyn Evans, E. S. Brooks, Coutts Brisbane and others. So when we think of the much-maligned Detective Weekly, let us remember the gold that shone among the dross.

\* \* \* \* \*

SALE: Greyfriars Prospectus, £5.00; Magnet, facsimile, No. 1, £4.00; Boys' Own Annual, £10.00; Captain, Vols. 25, 24, £4.00 each. H. Baker Magnet, Vol. 1, £4.00; also vols. 2, 8, 20, 30, mint.

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# Nelson Lee Column

## THE INTENSITY OF BROOKS

by Tom Porter

There are writers who gain striking effects by their copiousness, by their ability to amplify and enhance thoughts and situations in successive stages of their treatment, so that the sheer repetition in slightly changed guise of these thoughts and of these situations has an advancing, an expediting, a cumulative and eventually a convincing effect upon the reader.

There are also other writers who gain their effects by their intensity. Their writing is keyed up tautly; it is dazzling, absorbing, overwhelming, like continuous lightning flashes, or like the eternal roar of a mighty waterfall, and we the readers are caught up and rendered breathless with expectation and suspense - and would not have it otherwise. Our expectations are fulfilled and we are satisfied and content to surrender to a spell that binds us to the story's end.

In this latter case I place Edwy Searles Brooks, especially in his earlier work and continuing until the late '20's after this his intensity, his enthusiasm and his magic gradually faded away from the pages of the Nelson Lee Library, and in the end, sadly for myself and many others, the Nelson Lee Library itself also faded away.

There can be no doubt about Brooks' diligence and his intense enthusiasm. His early letters detailing his efforts to break into the market for boys' and girls' literature reveal these qualities very clearly; no-one except a man of Brooks' persistence, supreme confidence in himself, and zeal and zest for what he believed was his vocation in life would have continued to strive in the face of so many difficulties, disappointments, embarrassments and rebuffs as he experienced. Yet persist he did and at length emerged from his struggle triumphant. A man of less enthusiasm, less intensity would have abandoned the task early on. But Brooks' complete belief in himself and in his power to write compelling stories drove him on and on to ultimate victory.

Brooks' intensity showed itself in many ways: it shone through his work. A suggestion made to him, an item from the news of the

day, a thought going through his mind, an incident in his own experience, a story he had read himself, would spark-like, catch his imagination, as a wisp of flame on dry tinder, and begin to smoulder, as it were, until it blazed forth quite rapidly into a surge of fire and lo, another splendid story was unfolded to carry us away into a land of happy hours and many delights, into a wondrous world of pure, joyous enchantment.

This is precisely what happened time and again. Those of us who loved Brooks' stories were caught up by his intensity and as on a flood, were carried away - willingly so - wherever he listed. We were charmed, hypnotised, spell-bound, thrilled, by his irresistible power, we floated gladly, luxuriously, almost without breathing, on the flood, we cared not where - nor did we wish to stop - we only desired to be borne onwards, ever onwards, gliding on swiftly, irresistibly, inevitably to the story's end. Then we were completely, perfectly, finally, satisfied, though it was long before the atmosphere, the mood of the story and all its magic moments finally left us.

This intensity was heightened, I thought, by the effective use of the first person to relate the narrative. There are, undoubtedly, objections to the use of the first person for narrative purposes but the reader, without question, does identify himself with the narrator, he becomes an actor in the story, a participator in the events, he is there present as the plot unfolds, watching it proceed at first hand. Vividness is thereby greatly enhanced and with it there is a corresponding increase of intensity and a heightening of impact upon the reader.

This vividness, this intensity, is apparent in much of Brooks' work.

The Monster Library which was very judiciously and only slightly abridged in editing, contains a great deal of the best of Brooks - not all, of course: the fine series about Dr. Karnak, Moat Hollow and Ezra Quirke, for example, finding no place there; nor do certain splendid stories in the Boys' Friend 4d. Library, in the Boys' Realm and in the Nugget Library. But the fortunate possessor of a complete set of Monsters has much for which to be grateful, and is in an excellent position to discover, to imbibe and to enjoy to the full Brooks' intensity.

Brooks is great in his descriptions of games and particularly of football. Here again it is this intensity that confers greatness.

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Criticism has frequently been levelled at school stories which contain accounts of football matches and of other sporting activities and contests - and little else - and generally the criticism is fair and sound. But it would not be so with Brooks; for his descriptions of football matches are a delight to read because of their intensity.

There is one in the Mysterious X or Bullies of St. Franks' series which is very thrilling and which at the end takes on a new, almost other world dimension - this often happens in Brooks - as the players become aware of a spectator, a strange figure who mysteriously disappears as they approach him. Brooks was an enthusiast and his intense enthusiasm is very rapidly conveyed to us, the readers.

Incidentally this is a remarkable series if only for the skill with which Brooks hides from us for so long the identity of the Mysterious X. For a long time he is only heard of by reports of his activities in the neighbourhood, and the story has run about a third of its course before he is seen - and then only as a dim, dusky shadow in the night.

Brooks is equally great in his descriptions of natural events - of storms, for example. Again it is his zest and his intensity which bring about the effect. He sees a storm or recalls one, he broods about it earnestly, seriously. He sees it now in imagination with his whole soul and is consumed with it; then he begins to write with all his might and - almost - he creates the storm rather than writes about it and you, the reader, watch the storm as you read about it. It is all as graphic as this.

There is a fine description of a summer storm in the Mr. Heath series. This happens some short time before Mr. Heath actually comes to St. Frank's. Nipper & Co. are caught in this storm which is wonderfully depicted as also is the scene in the field where a meteorite is thought to have fallen and which they visit as likewise does Mr. Crowell shortly before his breakdown - a breakdown which brings Mr. Heath to the school.

Another fine storm-scene occurs at the beginning of the Mordanian Series which tells of the airship carried helplessly away, whilst an account of a sandstorm in 'Neath African Skies also is most enthralling.

In several of the pre-St. Frank's Nelson Lee detective stories there are some remarkable sea-scapes, whilst the natural grandeur and isolation of a tiny island off the Scottish coast are finely conveyed to us

in two issues of the BFL (1st series) - No. 708, The Kidnapped School, (which can also be read in Pluck numbers 26 to 35) and No. 709, Phantom Island.

An intensely vivid account of another storm appears in a story in the Union Jack, Number 726, entitled The Riddle Of Yew Hollow, and featuring Sexton Blake and Tinker, who could, for me, just as easily be Nelson Lee and Nipper without spoiling the enjoyment of the story. I am not going to quote. Like much of Brooks it needs to be read in its entirety, completely, without abridgment. It is a personal enjoyment and it would be a gratuitous impertience for me to get between Edwy Searles Brooks and the reader.

Have you ever walked down a country lane on an overpoweringly hot summer afternoon when the heat is tropical, the sun bright and blinding, the air still apart from the occasional murmur of a fly or insect? There may be a solitary cottage silent in this blaze of summer with its garden hushed, luxurious, almost rank with lush green vegetation, dark under the full-grown foliage of ripening fruit trees and bushes. There is such a scene, such a picture, painted intensely, vividly, perfectly in the same Mr. Heath series already cited, when Handforth visits his sister, Edith, secretly married to Mr. Heath, but living near to him, living in seclusion in a secluded cottage in a secluded country lane.

Brooks is equally intense and equally good and convincing when he creates a winter scene. We are there in the blizzard, in a snowdrift, skating or sliding on the ice-capped pool with the snow sparkling in the clear morning sunlight, or moving through the countryside under the frosty starlight. I will quote but one instance, as other admirers of Brooks have already done so on numerous occasions, enthusiastically, fully and with keen judgment. My one instance is the marvellous succession of snow-scapes in the first Nelson Lee Library Christmas Number - Number 78 (old series) entitled A Christmas Of Peril - and published as the Double Christmas Number for 1916.

There are frequent attractive nature pictures in the Boys' Realm of 1919 and of 1927, and also in the Nugget Library of 1920. They are too many all told to quote, and in any case must be read personally and in their entirety to obtain their full flavour. In an early Boys' Realm of

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1919 - Number 7 - to give but one example, however, is a beautifully conceived picture of the evening sunlight with Augustus Hart leaping over a hedge to escape from an angry bull. Again in the Nugget Library, Number 5, dated 14.8.1920, is a most fascinating description of a dark lane somewhere between St. Franks' and Caistowe with the mist blotting out all figures as they descend into a hollow just before coming into Caistowe. In the town itself the scenes inside and around the Grapes Hotel, and again at the town's Railway Station and Police Station are particularly well-imagined and described.

Other well-imagined and well-described scenes occur in the first Rupert Waldo story in the Union Jack, Number 794, bearing the title of Waldo The Wonder Man - the Christmas Number for 1918; and in the startling disappearances of Jerry Dodd from the fairground in the much-loved The Boy From The Bush series; and of Yung Ching from the neighbourhood of the school playing fields into a haystack in the highly intriguing and entertaining China Series of 1922.

All these scenes - and many more, too - are surpassingly good, and readable and enjoyable on their own account, but it must be made clear that they are not works of supererogation, superfluous interpolations thrust into the narrative, but that they are integral to the progress of the plots, part and parcel of the stories in which they occur, not to be separated from them any more than flesh and blood from bones without serious, irreparable, nay mortal damage to the living body.

But above all it is Brooks' sustained intensity that breathes life into these stories and invests each of them with a spirit and a vitality which no-one who reads the stories can miss or will ever forget.

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EXCHANGE one for one: 63 good condition Magnets 1930 to 1937 and 1938 to 1940. Have many Nelson Lees, Boys' Magazines 1928 to 1933, Modern Boy, Film Fun, Chums, Triumph, Union Jack, Adventure, Skipper, Wizard, Rover, Boys' Own Paper, Annuals. Offers invited.

OLYMPUS, SANDFORD MILL RD., CHELMSFORD, ESSEX.

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A VERY LIMITED EDITION OF "BILL'S AMUSEMENT ALLEY" has been published for Christmas 1977. Price 60p, plus postage. From:

BILL WRIGHT, 147 ST. HILDA'S WAY  
GRAVESEND, KENT, DA12 4AZ.

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

by Roger M. Jenkins

No. 3 - Fisher T. Fish

Some people's lives seem to be affected by a ruling passion, an obsessive desire that can never be resisted. Fisher T. Fish, the American junior, was obsessed with a desire to profit at the expense of other Greyfriars juniors. Old before his time, his acquisitive urge was often the mainspring of some amusing stories, especially in earlier days: he set up as a pawnbroker, he insured others against broken windows on one occasion and against punishments on another, he ran a tuckshop, he tried to make a false claim under a guarantee - everything having a catch in it. It was all very ingenious and very good fun, but sometimes it was difficult to believe that a boy of fifteen could be quite so astute and devious, quite so blind to a sense of fun and amusement.

He was all the more unpopular because of his boasting: the first topic he favoured was the superiority of America, and here one cannot help suspecting the influence of Dickens, for certainly some episodes or remarks in the Hollywood series owe something to "Martin Chuzzlewit"; the other topic was the wealth his father possessed. Charles Hamilton had a special dislike of people who kept talking about their money: Smithy was sometimes accused of being purse-proud, and as for Fishy himself, well he was quite beyond the pale. Boasting is a typical schoolboy habit and quite believable so far as Fisher T. Fish was concerned, but the curious fact was that Mr. Fish seldom seemed to have much money, which put Fishy in the same class as Bunter in that he boasted about imaginary possessions. Fishy, however, ceased to be a sympathetic character after a few months of his arrival, and he rarely featured in holiday series as Bunter usually did. The reader had a mental picture of Fishy roaming the desolate wastes of Greyfriars like a shadow in holiday time, looking in vain for Gosling or Mrs. Mimble to bore with his boasting.

A cynic is said to be someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. If this old adage is true, Fisher T. Fish was certainly a cynic when he passed the time on a visit to Wharton Lodge in estimating the cost of the furniture and fittings in the room where he was waiting. This is the type of exaggerated viewpoint which makes amusing

reading even if it does not quite ring true, any more than systematically lending money at interest or hiring bunches of keys at twopence a time could be believed to be within the scope of a schoolboy. Of course it is true that many of Hamilton's schoolboys were more enterprising than they could have been in real life, that they were old for their years simply because the demands of the stories necessitated it. In that case, Fishy may perhaps be regarded as an eccentric rather than an impossible character, one whose humorous possibilities more than compensated for any exaggerations that may be observed.

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### LET'S BE CONTROVERSIAL

#### No. 221. THE ONE THAT DIDN'T CLICK

I have often wondered why it was that more was not made of Charles Hamilton's Cliveden series. The vast majority of our readers have probably only ever come across one Cliveden story - the one, "Christmas at Cliveden" which we serialised in the Digest a few years ago.

Which brings us up against the fact that Greyfriars, St. Jim's, and Rookwood were Hamilton's only school series which really rang the bell. And they made the author, and the papers in which they featured, world-famous.

Very few people seem to bother much about such places as Grimslade, High Coombe, or the Benbow, while post-war stories of Carcroft, Felgate, and the like were a complete flop. No doubt Hamilton always hoped for another Greyfriars, but he never found it.

Throughout the twenties, the demand for old Hamilton material was intense. The Popular and the Schoolboys' Own Library, mainly sustained by earlier Hamilton work - some of it repeated a good many times - were just eating it up for all they were worth. One can only speculate as to why Cliveden did not appear in the Popular for a long run.

The late Osy Wadham of New Zealand did not like Cliveden, but one wonders whether he really knew enough about it to judge.

Mr. Wadham was a great C.D. supporter, and, in many ways, an editor's joy. He used to rain in articles on all sorts of subjects,

and his items were always short, and of great use as fill-ups when, as so often happens, the editor needs a short bit to fill an odd space. Not all of Mr. Wadham's items were used by any means. For one thing, as I have mentioned, they came in, in shoals. For another thing, Mr. Wadham was often inaccurate. This was probably due to his writing from memory or with reference to a small collection of odd numbers of various papers. He would jump to conclusions, and it is risky to do that, as we have all found from time to time.

In 1970 we published an item from Mr. Wadham which escaped close scrutiny before it was included. The subject was Cliveden.

Mr. Wadham enquired whether Charles Hamilton was "below standard" in his Greyfriars and St. Jim's yarns in 1913. "In 1913", said Mr. Wadham, "Hamilton was writing stories of the Fourth Form at Cliveden for the then flourishing Dreadnought. Those yarns must be the poorest sample of any to come from his pen."

This was an example of Mr. Wadham's guesswork and of his inaccuracy. Charles Hamilton was not writing Cliveden stories for the Dreadnought in 1913. The Cliveden stories were written years earlier, and ran for the best part of a year in the Boys' Herald of 1907 and 1908. Pruned reprints of the Cliveden stories ran for a while in the Dreadnought of 1913.

In addition, I would doubt whether the Dreadnought was ever "flourishing". I have referred on several occasions to the changes of format and the muddled editing which was the lot of the Dreadnought, and such things would rarely be features of a very successful paper.

At any rate, the Cliveden series was given a second life when it was reprinted in the Dreadnought. Some C.D. readers will recall that I discovered, after years of wondering and searching, that many of the Cliveden stories were reprinted - as Rookwood stories - in the Penny Popular of 1918. Here they were very heavily pruned indeed, something like two-thirds of the original tales being chopped away. They were published as "the early adventures of Jimmy Silver & Co.", which was blatant cheating, for they were nothing of the sort.

It was not until years after they were published that I found that those early Rookwood tales in the Penny Pop were not Rookwood tales at all. And it was many years still further on before I found their true

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source.

One can only wonder why it was done, for it must have necessitated much close work for the adapter to change much longer Cliveden tales into short Rookwood stories.

Clearly the Cliveden series could have been reprinted in the Popular of ten years later. Then why wasn't it done? The most probable reason is that the material was overlooked. By, say, 1928 it was a forgotten series. True, it was never really top-class Hamiltonia, but it contained all the main Hamilton competence, and the stories, all on the light side, made pleasant reading throughout. Of course, there was the usual feature of favourite names - Trimble, Neville, Gatty, Cuffy, and so on - but they could have been changed. After all, they did a mass change when they converted them into Rookwood tales in 1918. The plots were passably original, and there was the novelty of the chief character being an attractive American lad, one Poindexter.

It is interesting to see what Hamilton Edwards, the editor, wrote about the growing popularity of the author Chas. Hamilton as an introduction to the series in 1907. Editorial blurbs are often suspect, but there is a ring of sincerity in this one.

Edwards wrote:

"Charles Hamilton is gifted with a keen sense of humour, and a deep knowledge of schoolboy life. His stories are successful because they are told so naturally. It is easy for any boy to imagine that he himself is in the midst of the "live" characters who figure in the stories. Another of this talented author's gifts is his sparkling manner of writing. You don't want a dictionary when you read Charles Hamilton's stories. You simply want a cosy nook, an easy chair, and plenty of room to laugh.

"I tell you this - my straightforward opinion of Charles Hamilton's work - so that you may understand my reason for commissioning him to write these stories for you.

"I just know that you are going to like these stories, told in Charles Hamilton's sparkling style. The series will be illustrated by that champion artist, Arthur Clarke."

That the Cliveden series was reasonably popular is evidenced by its good run. Just why did it end some ten months later? Just when a new boy had been introduced to Cliveden, the series ended. Was it

an author's decision or an editorial one? We don't know, though one doubts whether an author would kill off his supply of work.

But those series which ran on for ever and ever were yet to be found, and Cliveden, in any case, was not in that class. Nearly a year's run was good going for any series in the Hamilton Edwards papers, and it was probably never intended that Cliveden should go on for longer.

By the time that Cliveden ended, the Magnet was going strong. And one of the curiosities of Cliveden School was that the porter's name was Bunter.

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### BIOGRAPHY OF A SMALL CINEMA

#### No. 47. STARTING WITH THRILLS AND ENDING WITH INTRIGUE

All but one of our main features this term came from Warner Bros., but this was the last term when one firm was to have such a monopoly. After this, Metro would be back on our screen with the lion roaring away frequently.

We opened with an excellent thriller double-programme. The first feature was British - Emlyn Williams in "They Drive By Night", a real spine-chiller, I seem to recall. In support was Ann Sheridan in "Mystery House".

Next came another double: John Garfield in "Blackwell's Island", supported by "Crime in the Clouds". The following week brought a modest little British picture, Barry K. Barnes in "The Midas Touch", supported by Rosetta Towne (whoever she was!) in "The Adventures of Jane Arden".

This was followed by Dick Powell and Ann Sheridan in "Naughty But Nice", which stood alone with a number of shorts which included a Secrets of Life item "See How They Run". I wonder if it was about a rabbit family.

Next week came another solo feature, Pat O'Brien in "Garden of the Moon", with a bill of shorts which included a technicolor cartoon "Rhapsody in Rivets" and a Secrets of Life item called "Catch of the Season".

Then, this time from G.F.D., came Joseph Cotton in "Shadow of Doubt". It was a Hitchcock picture, and I remember it as a good psychological thriller, though whether it was Hitchcock at his best I am not sure.

Next came Errol Flynn in "The Perfect Specimen" with a big bill of shorts which included a Secrets of Life item named "Perky Cockney".

Then another double-feature programme: Priscilla Lane in "Blues in the Night", plus Elizabeth Allen in "Dangerous Medicine".

After that, James Stewart and Rosaling Russell in a famous film in its day, "No Time For Comedy", with a bill of shorts which included a colour cartoon "Goofy Groceries" and a Secrets of Life film

called "Living in London". The following week brought a couple of modest British pictures: Anne Crawford in "The Peterville Diamond", plus John Loder (we carried a review of his autobiography recently) in "Murder Will Out". In his book Loder blamed his wife for causing him to leave Warner Bros.

Next came a famous comedy "George Washington Slept Here", starring Jack Benny and Ann Sheridan. This was the film version of a play which I had seen at "Q" Theatre, "Queen Elizabeth Slept Here", and I have a feeling that the original was the British version, though I

am not sure. In support was Gale Page in "Trouble in Panama", plus a coloured cartoon "Tortoise Beats Hare", which was the first Bugs Bunny cartoon.

The following week brought George Brent in "You Can't Escape For Ever", plus Jane Baxter in a British feature "Confidential Lady".

The final show of the term was "Casablanca" which may have been Humphrey Bogart's most well-known film, in which he had Ingrid Bergman as his co-star.

(ANOTHER ARTICLE IN THIS SERIES SHORTLY)

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## The Postman Called

(Interesting items from the Editor's letter-bag)

W. T. THURBON (Cambridge): I was rather puzzled by Mr. Godsave's remark in his article on Brooks's Isirium stories that these mark "Brooks as an individualist from the writing point of view". The "Lost City" idea is a very old one, dated back at least to Rider Haggard's "Allan Quatermain" of 1887, and "Queen Sheba's Ring". It was used repeatedly in boys' fiction from the early years of the century, as well as in adult novels. In boys' stories there was Reginald Wray's fine "Phantom Gold" in "Chuckles" of 1915, while Cecil Hayter used the theme both in Sexton Blake tales and in tales in other papers such as "Pluck" and "The Boys' Journal". The theme was also used in Tarzan tales, not to mention many adult novels I have read over the past sixty years. Nor is the "ship of the desert" idea original. The idea was used in the "Frank Reade" dime novels of the 1890's, and by S. Clarke Hook several times in Jack, Sam and Pete tales, e.g. No. 240 of August 1908. Whatever Brooks's merits as a writer there was nothing original in his basic ideas.

BILL LOFTS (London): Re the queries raised by George Beal in his interesting article 'Dead Men's Gold' (Jan. C.D.). This book was

published by Roy Bridges in 1916, so it pre-dates the Warne's Pleasure Book for Boys by some nine years, so this must have come first.

I have perused the first four volumes of the last mentioned Annual, 1925 to 1928. The titles of the stories were as follows:-

- 1925 Rupert's Treasure
- 1926 Doubloon Island
- 1927 The Terror of the Night
- 1928 Bell Island

All were written by C. Bernard Rutley, who with his wife Cecily Marianne, were quite well known writers for juveniles in hard back form. The possibility is that he could have also been 'Roy Bridges', but this remains to be proved.

BRIAN DOYLE (Putney): I have managed to unearth some details about the author in question, which may answer Mr. Beal's query.

Roy Bridges was born in 1885 in Hobart, Tasmania, and educated at Queen's College, Hobart, and the University of Tasmania, from where he graduated with a B.A. degree. He worked on the literary staff of the newspaper THE MELBOURNE AGE, in Australia, from 1909 - 25, and, apart from his busy journalistic activities, was also a noted historian and novelist. His first book THE BARB OF AN ARROW appeared in 1909 and his many other novels and boys' stories included BY HIS EXCELLENCY'S COMMAND (1910), ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERIVE (1914), THE FUGITIVE (1914), THE FIRES OF HATE (1915), THE BUBBLE MOON (1915), DEAD MEN'S GOLD (1916), THE IMMORTAL DAWN (1917), ROGUES' HAVEN (1922), and RAT'S CASTLE (1925). His non-fiction books, dealing with historical subjects, included FROM SILVER TO STEEL (1920), ONE HUNDRED YEARS and THAT YESTERDAY WAS HOME.

His special interests were concerned with Australian history (particularly of Tasmania and Victoria) and the study of old plays and English stage history. He spent most of his working life in Melbourne, later moving back to his home-town of Tasmania.

George Beal mentions that Bridges set DEAD MEN'S GOLD in the islands north of Tasmania, so it appears that the author was writing about a region he knew well.

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N. THROCKMORTON (Biddenden): Wibley has always been one of my favourite characters in the Canon. Of course I read the contribution of Roger Jenkins - in his usual erudite style, with the greatest interest. However, by some remarkable oversight, he omitted to mention the one story, which to me, represented the 'apogée' of the Wibley saga. This was "The Form-Master's Substitute" which appeared in the 1926 Holiday Annual. The illustrations are unforgettable. In this, Wibley dresses up as Mr. Mobbs - probably one of, if not the most contemptible characters, ever depicted by Charles Hamilton.

NORMAN WRIGHT (Watford): What a lot of good reading "Danny" had during December 1927! I continue to enjoy the 'Small Cinema' series in particular. I am a great film fan, my particular interest being the films of Errol Flynn. The details of the cartoons you showed are interesting; most of them seemed to be in colour.

ERIC RUFFLE (Woking): My congratulations on the 1977 Collectors' Digest Annual! It made - like the monthly Digests - delightful and nostalgic reading.

It certainly retains its freshness with constant reminding of the old stories with memories of happy reading as far back as 1912.

My favourite journals were the Magnet, Gem, Boys' Friend, Popular and Greyfriars Herald and favourite comics were Chips, The Favourite, Merry & Bright, Chuckles and The Butterfly. My best wishes to you, and Mr. Softee, and the Digest for 1978.

Miss M. HARLOW (New Milton): The Annual, as usual, was a treat in its own right. I still think it is quite something to produce a December C.D., an Annual almost on its heels, and a January 1978 C.D., all of which I receive with a certain amount of excitement, a feeling one is apt to lose as the years pass.

Have you ever thought of publishing Mr. Buddle in book form, meaning, maybe, six to eight Slade tales in one volume? You will gather I like them!'

A. G. STANDEN (Stockport): It is not often that we hear the views of contemporary writers of stories for the younger people on fellow authors - such views or criticisms usually being heard later from old readers on

new ones delving into the post.

Cecil H. Bullivant, who wrote good adventure stories for the Boys' Friend under the name of "Maurice Everard" during the First World War, and had been editor of the Boys' Herald (I used to have a paperbacked "Jim The Penman" by him at one time) is said to have referred to Charles Hamilton's school stories more or less as "rubbish".

On the other hand, the late Herbert Leckenby sent me years ago a letter written to him by Addington Symonds, the founder of the good old "Champion", in which that great editor of boys' papers called Charles Hamilton "A living marvel".

Two opposite viewpoints of people at the centre of the publication of magazines for the young.

P. CREIGHAN (Monaghan): By now, you must have received quite a lot of letters praising the Annual. May I add my little quota? There is nothing I can say that won't sound trite. Every article was thoroughly enjoyed. I just wish it could be as large again. How do you do it? Professionals must be green with envy. The Annual is still waxing stronger after thirty years. If anyone deserves to be in the New Year's Honours list its yourself and your wonderful band of contributors.

I didn't open the Annual, which arrived on 8th December, until Christmas Day after breakfast. I sat before a blazing fire with a glass of good Irish Whisky and drank a health to you all! Long may it continue.

(EDITORIAL COMMENT: My very grateful thanks to the large number of readers who have sent in such kind comments about the Annual. The postbag in the past month has been massive. It is possible to quote from only a limited number of the letters received, but I have been much warmed at heart by the wonderful support and loyalty of so many readers. Thank you, again.)

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WANTED: Libraries: Boys' Friend, Champion, Boys' Favourite, Fantasy, Monster; Annuals: Boys Cinema, Thomson's, Cinema Annual for Boys, Dixon Hawke Casebook, Film Fun, Speedway, Super Cinema, Triumph, Western Film Annual. Pre-war and wartime Champions, Triumphs, Boys' Cinema, Thomson's, Screen Stories, Film Fun, Football & Sports Favourite.

ERN DARCY, 47 FISHER STREET, MAIDSTONE 3012

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA.

# News of the Clubs

## LONDON

The well attended meeting at the Ealing residence of Bill and Thelma Bradford had some very good items for their enjoyment. Twelve rounds of Roger Jenkins' Greyfriars Characters Grid competition saw three contestants having three correct answers when the final round was reached and Eric Lawrence gave the final correct answer and won the prize kindly donated by the hosts. Mary Cadogan and Pat Craig's book, "You're a brick, Angela!" now in its third impression has also been printed in Braille. A copy of Bill's Amusement Alley, Xmas number, containing an article by Mary, was exhibited. An excellent treatise, entitled, Neglected Authors, was given by Mary and this was followed by Josie Packman reading a paper by S. Gordon Swan entitled 'An Oriental Investigation' and to illustrate the discourse she had brought along the two 1st series S. B. L's The Case of the Japanese Detective, No. 119 and the House With the Red Blinds, No. 143.

Votes of thanks to the hosts at the conclusion of the gathering, and then the details of the Pearl Anniversary Meeting on 12th February, at Hume House, Lordship Lane, East Dulwich S.E. 22. Kindly inform Josie Packman at the Archdale Road Address, phone 693 2844 if intending to be present.

BENJAMIN WHITER

## CAMBRIDGE

The Cambridge Club met at 99 Shelford Road on 8th January. The Secretary reported a welcome visit to Jack Overhill and himself by Cliff Smith of the Northern Club. He also reported that articles by Bill Lofts and himself had appeared in the Henty Society Bulletin.

Jack Overhill opened a discussion on Charles Hamilton and gambling. Jack, who has had 39 years experience in the Bookmaking business, said he was surprised by Charles Hamilton's apparent ignorance of the details of gambling on horse racing, in view of the now well-known fact that Hamilton was a great gambler both at the tables

and on racing. He thought it would have been difficult for Hamilton's experience in gambling not to show through in his writings; he instanced the ignorance of the difference between ante-post and starting price betting shown by Hamilton in his stories. Was Hamilton really ignorant of the finer points of betting, did he deliberately disguise his knowledge of gambling to accord with editorial policy; or was he genuinely anxious to warn his readers off from his own gambling habits? Jack commented in passing that although Edgar Wallace was a great racing man, bad blunders of betting also appeared in Wallace's racing stories; Talbot Baines Reed in "The Fifth Form at St. Dominicks" also showed ignorance of betting; was this genuine, or to accord with the code of the B. O. P? An interesting discussion followed.

The members enjoyed once more one of Mrs. Overhill's wonderful teas; more than one member abandoning thoughts of the bathroom scales as they did justice to this wonderful meal.

After tea Jack Overhill played a recording of one of his broadcast talks on music in the poor man's home, ranging from mouth organs and hymn singing, through ukeleles and gramophones to wireless; Jack illustrated his broadcast with selections on mouth organs, finishing with "There's a long, long trail a-winding". The meeting ended with a very hearty vote of thanks to Mrs. Overhill and Jack for their hospitality.

(EDITORIAL COMMENT: It appears to be an error that Charles Hamilton gambled on horse-racing or was interested in the sport. His sister told me that such gambling as he did was restricted to play at the foreign casinos before the First World War, and that, later on, he would have a flutter on the Stock Exchange. The fallacy that he gambled on horses grew up from our own interpretation, after his death.)

## NORTHERN

Saturday, 14th January, 1978

A lively and exciting meeting which began with Chairm an Geoffrey Wilde's welcome to three guests.

Two slight misunderstandings precluded part of our set programme. We had a tape but no tape-recorder and a speaker who didn't know he was to speak!

A stimulating discussion, however, filled the gap and our guests showed an avid and intelligent interest in Hamilton.

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Then a Christmas reading by Ron Hodgson, from Gem 1242 of 1931, being a reprint of Gem 37 of 23 November, 1907. Not a story, really, said Ron, but a series of unconnected episodes. Ron read to us the last chapter - 'High Jinks at Laurel Villa', in which Fatty Wynn's clumsiness results in a chinese lantern falling over and setting fire to Miss Fawcett's dress. But the old lady makes a quick recovery, all is well that ends well and the dancing continues!

Ron then led us into a discussion on the style of Frank Richards in 1907. Geoffrey Wilde observed that Frank Richards could create an atmosphere in just one sentence.

There then followed a quiz by Geoffrey which he entitled 'Alias Smith and Jones'. Given a pseudonym, we were to guess the name of the character who used it or who was thus known. Clare, of course, was Courtenay and Rupert Crooke was Randolph Crocker!

Not that any of us did particularly well, but Ron Hodgson came top and one member claimed the dubious distinction of not getting any right!

It was, however, a good meeting, and we may even have succeeded in making some converts to the Hobby!

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WANTED: B. B. & Blue Mauritius, B. B.'s Beanfeast. Any H. Baker's collectors' editions and vols. 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 29, 38, 39. Any Monsters.

JAMES GALL, 49 ANDERSON AVENUE, ABERDEEN.

Tel. 0224 - 491716

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WANTED GREATLY: Magnets 755, 762, 768, 769, 831, 833, 850, 865, 871, 888, 902, 941, 948, 949, 951, 985, 995. Many before 498. Good prices or generous exchanges.

J. DE FREITAS, 648 STUD RD., SCORESBY

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA 3179.

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ESPECIALLY WANTED: complete and in good condition: Union Jacks 493, 512, 529, 548, 555, 594, 599, 633; SBL's 1st & 2nd series; Magnets 707, 795, 999, 1111, 1112; Gems 604, 774, 792, 801, 954, 970, 990, 1206. Will pay over the odds for these; please state price.

NORMAN SHAW, 84 BELVEDERE RD., LONDON, SE19 2HZ.

(01-771-9857)

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Stop Press - EDITORIAL MESSAGE

MISTER SOFTEE

Readers will be sorry to know that our lovely and much-loved white pal, Mr. Softee, died this afternoon, 18th January.

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DO YOU READ HENTY?

by D. J. Adley

The collector proudly showed me the Henty books in his bookcase. All were in beautiful condition, many complete with dust wrappers, looking as if they had just been bought off a bookstall. Several were over a hundred years old, and it looked a most imposing collection. "These are worth quite a bit of money these days" said my friend the collector. "That edition alone cost me £75, and is worth a great deal more now". "Do you read many?" I said showing some interest. "Good Lord, no!" was his sharp reply. "The stories actually bore me to tears ..."

This curiously seems to give an indication of the true popularity of the collecting of books by G. A. Henty today. Not for the reading material, but simply for the thrill of collecting First Editions, and making other rare finds in the Henty field. Henty books -- the more perfect the First Edition -- the more valuable they are, has become very big business these days in the world of Antiquarian Booksellers. With the record price of approx. £750 being paid for an original penny paperback at Sotherbys, it puts the prices of the more readable and popular boys papers extremely low in comparison.

Investigation, and corresponding through the years with a great many other collectors, some in a far older age group than myself, reveals the possible fact that few boys really enjoyed them in the Victorian era anyway. To give just one family example, whilst visiting my father, I was shown several copies of Henty that grandfather had won as Sunday School prizes. "Your granddad told me he could never read them, far too dull" explained my father. "Nor, come to that could I ...". Charles Hamilton, probably the world's most popular writer of school stories, was yet another who disliked reading Henty as a boy. When once told of the high prices Henty books were fetching in America,

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he could not understand it. In his youth (the late 1880's) he could never read the tales. "Far too dull and dry" was his comment. Unfortunately he had completely misunderstood the real reason for the collecting of the Henty books.

A brief biography of George Alfred Henty shows that he was a famous Crimea War correspondent, and his vivid despatches that were published in *The Standard* made him famous and a household name. He mixed in the highest Social Circles, owned and raced several yachts in the biggest events, belonged to the top clubs, and was a personal friend of King Edward VII. After writing several unsuccessful adult novels, he branched out into boys fiction in 1865. In those now distant Victorian days, the British Empire ruled the world, and patriotic stories of British pluck and daring were instantly approved by the establishment. This was in the days when the Penny Dreadful flourished, and most boys with a middle-class background were strictly forbidden to read anything but 'healthy' literature approved by their parents or teachers. The Henty books were mainly bought by parents as Xmas or birthday presents. Sunday schools gave them away as prizes, and schools for good attendance rewards, or coming top in certain subjects. Many a boy read the more thrilling and gripping tales in *The Boys' Friend* or *Marvel* in secret, whilst Henty remained as a show piece prize in the family bookcase. Consequently there are so many almost mint condition copies in existence today. Blackies, Henty's main publisher always had a ready sale of his books; they were snapped up by the vast number of religious and educational Societies. Boys did not buy the volumes; they were bought by well meaning people, who thought that boys would grow up to be better citizens if they read this good healthy literature.

Not only in the bound books were Henty stories unpopular, it is a fact, that quite a number of boys papers associated with Henty as editor, ceased publication for lack of support from readers. Included amongst them was the first *Union Jack*, and the short lived paper *Grip*. Personally in trying to read Henty I find it very difficult indeed. The sort of clipped style, heavy descriptive prose, and above all the almost cardboard characters have no sense of life. I can read other Victorian writers with pleasure such as Dickens, Carroll, Stevenson, and many others. The excuse that Henty's style is dated does not give any

weight to the argument, when such classical tales as Kidnapped, Treasure Island, Black Beauty, Lorna Doone, and Tom Brown's Schooldays have never been out of print since they first were published.

On the other hand, there are obvious people who do read Henty, and get some enjoyment out of reading the tales. But even amongst the Henty collectors I have corresponded with there have been some strange reaction to the stories. "If you have read one Henty, you have read them all" was one remark. Another was that "his last six novels were almost unreadable".

Not so long ago, and when the copyright had expired, a publisher attempted to bring out some of the old Henty's in paperback form - with most of the heavy prose cut out. Unfortunately he only succeeded in making the stories almost gibberish. Needless to say they were soon remaindered in Woolworth's, and were still unsold after several months.

Despite my lack of enthusiasm for the Henty tales, I must admit that I have always had more than the usual interest in the Biographical and bibliographical details about this writer. I can well remember Bill Lofts telling me of the great excitement and interest he caused when he discovered a hitherto unknown Henty story in the rare boys magazine Grip. Frank Lay, who in my opinion was one of the greatest authorities in this field, once made the following comment when we were discussing the readability of Henty ...

"Thousands of people collect rare books, and never open the pages, or read the contents. So do the vast majority of Henty collectors. So who is to say that it is wrong? The collecting side of it undoubtably gives an enormous amount of pleasure."

So to sum it up, whether one reads Henty or not, there is no doubt that the seeking and finding rare editions of the Henty books give a great deal of gratification to a large number of people.

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WANTED: Howard Baker books (Greyfriars & St. Jim's); also "Men Behind Boys' Fiction" by W. G. Lofts.

LEESE, BUNNY HILL, COSTOCK, NR. LOUGHBOROUGH, LEICS.