

# STORY PAPER COLLECTORS' DIGEST

VOL. 40

OCTOBER 1986

NO. 478

EXCLUSIVE STORY OF **SHACKLETON'S SCOUTS** WITHIN.



No. 123

EVERY THURSDAY

October 15, 1921



TOM AND A RAKER RUSHED AT IT TOGETHER AND BOTH PLAYERS WERE SCRAWLING, BUT AS HE FELL TOM HOOKED HIS LEG ROUND AND SENT THE BALL SPINNING INTO THE NET. (Continued in Group 2, The Football of TOM TOPPING. Within The story is Complete.)

52p.

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# STORY PAPER

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# COLLECTORS' DIGEST

STORY PAPER COLLECTOR

Founded in 1941 by  
W. H. GANDER

COLLECTORS' DIGEST

Founded in 1946 by  
HERBERT LECKENBY

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## 50 YEARS ON

Danny reminds us this month that it is exactly 50 years since two events occurred in connection with our old papers.

No. 1. Way back in the early autumn of 1936 a third Schoolboys Own Library was added to the monthly publication arrangements. The third issue was to comprise a St. Frank's story. It was then quite a few years since the regular weekly publication of the Nelson Lee Library had ended.

Generally speaking, the S.O.L. was a delightful little book. Most of us have soft spots in our sentimental hearts for the S.O.L. I have large numbers of them, bound in red in series, in my bookcases and they make a brave show. For the most part, the handling of the Greyfriars, St. Jim's, and Rookwood stories in this medium was well done.

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Admittedly it was not entirely beyond reproach. At times, the pruning was excessive. The Orris series and the Ravenspur Grange series of the Magnet were marred by the careless omission of integral items in the plot. In the Gem stories, a number of substitute series were included, and there was no necessity for any sub St. Jim's tales to have featured therein. One can think of a number of Gem series from the real Martin Clifford which were not included at all - for instance, the blue cover Mysterious "X" series and the Outram "Strange Secret" series.

Rookwood was generally well handled, but, as we commented recently in this column the title story often only filled a portion of the book, which was made up with other stories. Some indication of this could have been given with advantage.

So how well was St. Frank's handled in the S.O.L.? It occurs to me that here we have a theme for an article by one of our Lee experts.

No. 2. The serials departed from the Magnet, never to appear again in its lifetime. From autumn 1936 onwards, the Greyfriars story was to run from cover to cover in the Magnet. Roger Jenkins has observed that, in the later Magnet, one occasionally had the feeling that the Greyfriars story was just a little too long. It was a very apt comment. Charles Hamilton always insisted that he never padded a story to reach the new required length. All the same, it could not be denied that the later stories often carried sequences - often stock episodes - which were nothing to do with the main plot. Perhaps that is why, though we find splendid series in the later Magnet from the world's greatest school story writer, his very best work, showing his genius is to be found in the ten years or so before 1936.

#### DOES ANYWHERE IMPROVE?

John Arlott, the voice of cricket, was born and went to school in Basingstoke. The town reveres its famous son. Now, in an interview reported in a local paper, Mr. Arlott has described the modern Basingstoke as "a bit grim. A place where some lovely buildings have been pulled down and replaced with the Great Wall of China."

Mr. Arlott may exaggerate a bit, but there is a good deal of truth in his criticism. I remember going to Basingstoke just before the war, and it struck me as a sleepy, rather charming little town. All these years later, I go there occasionally, and it is no longer sleepy or rather charming, though, compared with plenty other towns, it is pleasant enough.

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Basingstoke was, of course, one of the first overspill towns, and any town is at a disadvantage when it is artificially enlarged with an influx of thousands of newcomers.

Casually, I wonder whether any place has improved since the war. Personally, I cannot think of one. Can you?

### OUR RUBY JUBILEE

Next month Story Paper Collections' Digest celebrates its fortieth birthday - our Ruby Jubilee. In a way, it's a bit remarkable for an amateur magazine - any magazine, for that matter to have held the love and loyalty of its readers for so long. Have you any special memories down the years? If so, send them along, and we'll try to use them.

### THE ANNUAL

Preparations are now well in hand for the Ruby Jubilee Edition - the fortieth - of the much-loved C.D. Annual. Have you ordered your copy yet?

#### THE EDITOR

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# Danny's Diary



OCTOBER 1936

The Modern Boy has taken on a new lease of life. They are giving away free gifts, and there is a new programme of stories.

A new Biggles serial is entitled "Biggles Fights Alone" by W.E. Johns, and I expect it is right up the street of the Biggles fans.

A new Captain Justice series begins. On the trail of a Lost Expedition, Captain Justice and Co. stumble on "The World's Last Secret" which is the title of the opening story. Next week came "South Pole Peril" when Justice discovers a region of tropical heat and prehistoric monsters in the everlasting ice of the Antarctic. Then came "Battle of the Monsters", with the friends in great peril in Antarctica. Next came "The Man from the Mists", and final of the month is "Guardian of the Whirlpool", with Justice still battling with prehistoric monsters.

But best of the lot in Modern Boy is a new serial by Charles Hamilton entitled "The Schoolboy Detective". He is Len Lex of the Fifth Form at Oakshott School, and he is on the look-out for the "Sussex Man", a skilful burglar who has eluded the police for years. Three masters at Oakshott are eventually under suspicion. The question is on whose shoulder is the hand of Detective Inspector Nixon to drop? It is Len Lex's job to find out. I am enjoying this serial very much. In a way it is a series, but it appears under the same title every month.

The King has returned to Buckingham Palace after his tour, and his mother, Queen Mary, has moved to Marlborough House which will be her permanent residence from now on.

From now on there are to be 3 Schoolboys' Own Libraries each month instead of two, which is a move in the right direction, providing one's pocket money will stretch to it. It seems that the third S.O.L. each month is now to contain a St. Frank's story. I expect that the St. Frank's fans have been clamouring for it.

The first St. Frank's story in this new move is "The Great Fire at St. Frank's". It is an exciting tale about an amazing new boy who sets fire to the school out of revenge.

The Greyfriars S.O.L. is "The Scallywag of the Third". It stars Loder and Wingate. Loder is determined to oust Wingate from his place as Captain of Greyfriars, and Loder finds an ally in Wingate's young brother, Jack, the headstrong and defiant scallywag of the Third Form.

**THE GREAT FIRE AT ST. FRANK'S!**

*Old Favourites  
to the Fore!*

The vast number of readers who have been asking for stories featuring Nelson Lee and his clever boy assistant, Nipper, are strongly advised to read "The Great Fire at St. Frank's!" By Edwy Searles Brooks. This thrill-packed yarn of the chums of St. Frank's—telling of a new boy's malicious act of revenge and its amazing consequences—is narrated by Nipper himself.

Ask for No. 279 of the

**SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY**

The third S.O.L. this month is a Rookwood one, "Follow Uncle James". It is obviously a little collection of very early Rookwood tales, and I like it a lot. It is largely taken up with the rivalry between Jimmy Silver & Co. of the Classics, and Tommy Dodd & Co. of the Moderns. Lovely S.O.L.

In the Boys' Friend Library I had "South Seas Salvage", a tale of Ken King of the Islands, with plenty of treasure and treachery thrown in. Gorgeous tale.

In the Sexton Blake Library I had "The Motor Show Mystery" by Rex Hardinge. A tale of the Annual Exhibition at Olympia in London. There is a burnt out wonder car, with the charred remains of a man behind the steering wheel. Plenty of action in this one.

In real life the aviator, Jim Mollison, flew from Newfoundland to Croydon in 13 hours, the fastest easterly crossing ever of the Atlantic.

The Gem has been great this month, as it always is. First story was "The Drudge of St. Jim's". Tom Lynn, the new boot-boy, came to St. Jim's with the ambition to better his position in life. But the snobbery and persecution of Levison & Co. made his life a misery. Then came the sequel to this story, "Lynn's Luck" in which Levison comes off second best in his efforts to get Lynn sacked from his job.

Then came a real Gem of a tale, "Micky Makes Things Hum". St. Jim's is in an uproar. Gore has two black eyes and Levison a busted nose. And the reason - Micky Mulvavey, the young brother of Mulvaney of the Sixth, has arrived at the school. Next came "The Schoolboy Raiders", a rip-roaring tale of rivalry with the Grammar School. And after the Grammar School raid, it is found that Gussy's "fivah" is missing.

Finally, "The Last Laugh", and this one is a tale of rivalry between the School House and the New House. Jolly good.

The early Greyfriars stories are also continuing in the Gem. One of them told of the arrival, at long last, of Billy Bunter's postal-order.

It was Mum's birthday on Wednesday, and Dad took a family party up to a London theatre to celebrate. Doug wanted to go to "The Amazing Doctor Clitterhouse" at the Haymarket Theatre. That is a play by Barre Lyndon. I myself would like to have gone to see Jack Buchanan in "This'll Make You Whistle" at the Palace. But it was Mum's special day, and she chose the show. We went to her choice - Ivor Novello's "Careless Rapture" at Drury Lane, and we all reckoned she had chosen well. It was a lovely show.

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It is always great to go to the pictures, and I go twice a week usually. There have been some excellent films in the local cinemas this month. First came "The Magnificent Obsession" starring Irene Dunne and Robert Taylor. A happy-go-lucky young man is partly responsible for the death of a woman's husband and for her own blindness. The young man becomes a surgeon and eventually cures her of her blindness. A lovely film, and there were big queues every night. Another splendid one was "Wife and Secretary" starring Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, Jean Harlow, James Stewart and plenty more. A publisher's wife starts to believe that her husband is paying too much attention to his secretary. This was an M.G.M. film.

A bright little British film, "Happy Days are Here Again", starred the Houston Sisters. I love them on the variety stage, and this film passed a pleasant hour or so. "Big Brown Eyes" starred Cary Grant, Joan Bennett, and Walter Pidgeon, about a private detective and his lively wife who set out to catch a jewel thief, reminded me very much of the excellent Thin Man pictures.

An excellent Technicolour film was "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine" starring Sylvia Sydney, Fred Macmurray, and Henry Fonda, about a girl's brother who gets killed in a family feud. It is said to be the first outdoor film made in Technicolour. Finally Will Hay in "Where There's a Will." This was good, but not so funny as the earlier Hay films. I have seen Will Hay on the variety stage, and always like him.

In the Magnet the serials at the back of the paper have departed and the Greyfriars tale now runs cover-to-cover, being about 5 chapters longer than they used to be. Which suits me down to the ground. More than half of the month is devoted to the series about the escaped convict, James Loder, Convict 22, who is the cousin of Loder of the Sixth. He comes to Greyfriars as games-master, under the guise of "Mr. Lagden", and soon makes himself popular among the boys, though prefect Loder does not guess who he really is. The first story of the month is "The Convict Who Came Back." Then came "The Spy of the Sixth". Loder spying on the new master who has temporarily taken Mr. Lascelles place, is unaware that Mr. Lagden, into whose private affairs he is spying, is really his cousin, James, the escaped convict. The final story in this pleasant series is "The Shadow of the Sack", and at the end the innocence of the convict is established, so all ends happily.

Then, to wind up the month, came two single stories. "His Scapegrace Brother" finds Dicky Nugent of the Second Form in trouble again. I always find the stories about wayward minors a wee bit

tedious, but this one is pretty good. Finally, another single, "Harry Wharton's Amazing Relation." On the mistaken idea that Harry Wharton is against him because he is Jewish, Monty Newland considers it a tremendous lark to land Wharton with an amazing Jewish relation. A slightly uncomfortable tale, this one.

NOTES ON THIS MONTH'S "DANNY'S DIARY".

S.O.L. NO. 277, "The Scallywag of the Third" comprised the first three stories of the Loder-Captain series of the autumn of 1925. This was a fine series full of action, and notable for high drama. 1925 was a year in which there were a great many sub tales, but everything that Charles Hamilton contributed was of the highest quality in the Magnet of that year.

S.O.L. No. 278 "Follow Uncle James" comprised four Rookwood stories (the last 3 were consecutive) from the summer of 1916 in the Boys' Friend. The Rookwood tales were at their longest in this period of the Boys' Friend (the early Mornington features in one of the tales in this little set) and they fitted snugly into the medium of the S.O.L.

I am not sure of the year when the Great Fire series appeared in the Nelson Lee Library. No doubt one of the Lee experts will let us know.

The 1936 Gem story "The Drudge of St. Jim's had been "Straight as a Die" in the late October of 1913. In 1913 the sequel "The Drudge's Chance" had been separated from the opening tale by an exceptionally fine November 5th story. "The Drudge's Chance" followed immediately on the first tale in 1936 and was entitled "Lynn's Luck".

The 1936 story "Micky Makes Things Hum" had appeared early in 1911 and had then been named "Making Things Hum." The 1936 "The Schoolboy Raiders" had the same title in the Gem of the closing weeks of 1913. "The Last Laugh", one of the very best of all the rivalry stories down the years, had been "Caught Napping" at the start of 1914.

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### WILL THE REAL SEXTON BLAKE STAND UP...?

by J.E.M.

The well-known pop fiction writer, Michael Moorcock, has revealed that, back in the late 1950's, he was a great enthusiast of the "new image" Sexton Blake created by Howard Baker - though he admits that "all the old Blake fans were up in arms about it." They certainly were and the 'old-versus-new' debate has continued, on and off, every since. Perhaps, in the light of a recent publishing development, referred to later, the subject is ripe for yet another look.

Hobbyists have owed much to the enthusiasm and publishing skills of Mr. Howard Baker. Nevertheless his "up-dated" Sexton Blake of 30 years ago failed to capture a lasting audience and the question remains: Why? Blame has sometimes been put on a supposed decline in reading due to television but, in fact, more fiction, especially crime fiction, is read than ever.

Perhaps the trouble with the "new" Blake was to be found in the general rule that nothing dates so quickly as the "up-to-date". Where, after all, does one stop? To have been kept continuously "modern", Blake might have had to become not only Computerman but perhaps even Spaceman as well - a sort of Sexton Spock! Which, of course, would have been a nonsense. That other Baker Street sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, remaining firmly fixed in his Victorian mould, has survived and flourished both on the printed page and on the TV screen.

Sadly, Blake had in any case always tended to be a rather changeable chap. In the hands of a large and varied corps of writers, he was sometimes not the same two weeks running. I sometimes used to feel that only the brilliant illustrations of Eric Parker kept a steady image of Blake before us. By the time he became "organisation" man (complete with office suite, sexy secretaries and so on) he had been transformed out of all recognition.

I suspect that for many readers the greatest attraction of the Saga was its vast army of supporting characters, especially Blake's long-running adversaries. This was not only because they were such a colourful lot but also because each remained in the hands of his own creator and therefore presented a consistent image: Zenith the Albino invariably written about by Anthony Skene, Leon Kestrel by Lewis Jackson, Huxton Rymer and Marsden Plummer by G.H. Teed and so on. These creations truly lived and it is interesting that Mr. Moorcock himself admits that one of his own fictinal characters was inspired by Zenith - very far from being a "new look" figure!

Does all this mean there never was a "real" Sexton Blake? Well, I believe we can fix a true and authentic period for him. The 1920's and '30's are regarded by many critics as the Golden Age of the traditional detective story, and it can be argued that the inter-war period also saw the high noon of the Blakian saga. Certainly writers like Teed, Skene, Chester, Evans et al - not to mention the many glittering characters they created - were at the top of their form. If Holmes's ambience was one of London fogs and Hansom cabs, Blake's true setting is surely a world of electric trams, the famous Grey Panther Rolls, exotic crooks with swordsticks and evening dress, and stolid Scotland Yarders like Inspector Coutts, always anxious for Blake's help.

A good many years ago, a highly successful Blake series on commercial TV was set in just this background. Indeed, I believe the actual stories came from the old Union Jack itself and featured the work of writers like Gwyn Evans and G.H. Teed. And, of course, Mr. Howard Baker himself has published reprints of Blake stories from this period. It will surely clinch my argument that, as already announced in CD (August), Dent's are bringing out a collection of stories from roughly this era by some of the star names - Teed, Evans, Stuart, Hardinge and others - under the editorship of the hobby's own "Jack Adrian".

Blakian enthusiasm in our circles has not, perhaps, been quite so high in recent times. The new publication will, we hope, not only rekindle a warm response from CD readers but reach a new and very much wider audience which was too young to enjoy these great stories when they were first published. We look forward to the success of Jack Adrian's collection.

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"MORE FROM THE TREASURE CHEST."

by C.H. Churchill

As I have pointed out in previous articles there were many fine detective stories in the pre St. Frank's Lees written by E.S. Brooks. Some of these were straightforward detective stories, others were of a ghostly theme, others were most unusual in other ways.

One of the latter type was No. 103 "The Sheriff of Blazing Gulch" in which, for a time, Lee became Sheriff of this mid western township. No. 105 "The Ivory Seekers" gave us our first introduction to Dorrie and Umlosi in an African adventure. The second story of these two characters was in No. 119 "The City of Burnished Bronze" another African adventure. I have written about these two stories in articles before so shall not do so now.

Another unusual yarn was in No. 109 "The Case of the Crimson Feathers". This introduced us to the subject of Voodooism of all things. Briefly, the plot of this story is that a young fellow, Cecil Heathcote, came to Nelson Lee asking for help in his endeavours to escape the vengeance of some Voodoo worshippers. He had recently sold his Banana plantation in Haiti owing to the threatening behaviour of these natives. He had incurred their fury by witnessing some of their rites in the neighbourhood of his estate. He was staying with friends in Suffolk now but had been sent crimson feathers by them on several occasions. This meant that the Voodooists were on his trail, seeking to exact revenge by putting him to death. More than once he had come under rifle fire but the shots had missed, luckily. Nelson Lee agreed to go to Suffolk to investigate the matter. Lee and Nipper, on their first night at Wynsidney Hall, were out walking in the grounds when they heard strange beating sounds from nearby woods. Creeping through the trees they eventually found themselves looking into a deep hollow. A fire was burning in the centre and around were three figures. They were all negroes and attired in fantastic costumes. One was beating out a rhythm on a

tom tom. The others were swaying to and fro, gabbling out some chant or other. What a sight to find in a quiet Suffolk wood! If you wish to read how this all came to be solved, borrow No. 109 if you do not possess a copy. You will not regret it.

No. 124 "The Compact of Three" also contains a pretty little plot and is well worth reading.

Readers who commenced taking the Nelson Lee in the later St. Frank's times and have never read these old detective stories do not know what they are missing.

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Always the Bridesmaid - but Never the Bride? by W.O.G. Lofts

Part 5.

Nelson Lee was described as remarkably tall and thin, wearing a blue dressing gown and red slippers and smoking a much blackened pipe. He had thick bushy eyebrows, very keen slate coloured eyes, a strong intellectual face, aquiline nose and firm lips. On the whole, fairly goodlooking but for the many lines and wrinkles under his sunken - but astonishingly clear - eyes. Nipper, too lost his early street urchin appearance and is described as a bright faced youth aged about 16, with brown hair and mischievous blue eyes.

Issue No.16, entitled 'Twenty Fathoms Deep' was by another writer of the name of Edwy Searles Brooks, who was to play not only a part, but probably the main part on the future history of The Nelson Lee Library in about two years time.

Unfortunately, by the middle of 1917 it was obvious that the Library was selling far from the publishers expectations. On the other hand its rival The Sexton Blake Library was growing more and more popular - so much so that already there were now two issues a month. Later this was increased to four, and then even five for a while!

There were two main reasons for this, the first was that Blake had a big advantage in being well known in a weekly story, so consequently readers of The Union Jack wanting a longer novel to read, automatically bought a Blake Library because they were familiar with the detective. Secondly, readers much preferred a 60,000 word story than the shorter one of Nelson Lee.

Some vast changes had to be made if The Nelson Lee Library was to survive. Consequently, someone came up with the brilliant idea of experimenting for a while to see readers reaction, of having a sort of school/detective story element. Edwy Searles Brooks who by this time had written the majority of the stories was commissioned to bring this event about. As a boy he was an avid reader of The

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Magnet and Gem - in fact even having once a letter published in the latter whilst living at Langland Bay in South Wales. This was not all, as later, he had written substitute stories of Greyfriars and St. Jim's. One Gem story entitled 'Misunderstood' being even praised by some of the most critical of Hamiltonians.

### Perseverantia

by Nick Godfrey

St. Frank's has always been beckoning, ever since it's existence first dawned on me - oh, way back in the mists of 1975. The three Howard Baker Nelson Lee volumes climbed their way onto my bookshelves, and I duly enjoyed reading them. Since commencing subscription to Collector's Digest (all of 2 years back), I've always taken in the Nelson Lee Column, and often meant to act on the recommendations and advice offered therein. All it needed was that little extra to get me hooked. This finally came in the form of a bound half-year volume that I bought about a month ago.

It must be fate. There were about ten volumes of the Lee that I could have chosen, but the one that ended up taking me home was that of Jan-June 1925. There was no choice in it on my part really - this was more random than anything - however it wasn't as random as all that.....

The Lee at this time, was just approaching the end of a series of E.E. Briscoe sketches of 'Our Public Schools'. Of course, I assumed they wouldn't have my old school in there.... But there, in the March 28th, 1925 issue of the St. Frank's Magazine - No. 71 in a series of 71 - was Solihull School. Obviously really scraping the barrel by this time! Still, there it was, complete with a drawing of the School House (always my favourite building in the school) - and looking the same as it was to when I first went there 42½ years later.

I remember that the School House in particular, always made me think along the lines of: 'this is how Greyfriars or St. Jim's must look'. But really, I wanted to go to Rookwood, and so that seemed a bit further way and greener. St. Frank's though, even with my limited acquaintance, seems a bit stranger. I'm really glad that I've been accepted there at last. But then, with the old school dragging me in, there was never really any choice in the matter anyhow.

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No. 218 - Magnet No. 3 - "The Mystery of Greyfriars"

by Roger M. Jenkins

This early story continued the theme of Wharton's rebellious attitude towards school discipline and his unpopularity with all the Removities, apart from his only friend, Frank Nugent. Wharton was described as "a dark, handsome lad, with mobile mouth and passionate eyes" and his stubbornness led him into impossible situations.

Harry Wharton had entered for the Seaton D'arcy prize which entailed a written examination in Latin and a viva voce as well. Surprisingly enough for modern readers, Hazeldene was generally thought to be the likely winner. Wharton had entered the competition hoping to win and thus spite the other Removites, and Nugent told him frankly that his motive was caddish. Equally Hazeldene (known as Vaseline because of his slippery ways) had no scruples about playing underhand tricks on his rival, whenever the opportunity presented itself. Wharton had the habit of fingering the middle button on his jacket whenever he was questioned, and Hazeldene contrived to cut it off just before Wharton's oral examination, which left Harry at a psychological disadvantage. It was Bob Cherry who was managed to set matters right, and this was the beginning of his friendship with Harry Wharton.

Some forty-eight years after this Magnet story was written, the Fourth Leader in the Times referred to Harry Wharton's button, and a letter from Charles Hamilton duly appeared a week later. The affair took an unexpected turn when a don from Jesus College, Oxford, wrote to say that a similar example of fiddling with a button occurred in the life of Sir Walter Scott when he was a schoolboy, and hinted that the Magnet story had been based on this. Charles Hamilton wrote to the Times again, saying that the episode was based on real life, and that the daughter of the one-time real life

schoolboy was a titled lady then living in Kensington. The editor then refused to publish this second letter from Charles Hamilton unless he was prepared to allow the lady's name to be printed, but it was thought unacceptable to subject her to the sort of bombardment of correspondence that Charles Hamilton had received on this subject, and there the matter subsided, though not before someone else alleged that the button incident was repeated in the Magnet in 1919. If this were so, Charles Hamilton said, it must have been a substitute writer copying an old theme.

It seems astonishing that memories of a story written in 1908 should have been so vivid in the mind of a Times leader writer in 1950, but of course early memories do have an indelible stamp upon them. Certainly "The Mystery of Greyfriars" turned out to be a mystery of a very different kind in the end.

### A BACKWARD GLANCE

by E. BALDOCK

I imagine that few of us when we were laying out our two-pences each week for our favourite papers had the remotest idea, or gave a passing thought, to the fact that we were unconsciously purchasing a future, our own future, and preparing the foundation of what was to become a life-long habit. Setting in motion within ourselves that process of development which was eventually to turn out the 'old boys' we have since become.

Week by Week we followed the fortunes of our particular heroes. We came to know them intimately and to admire them. We became expert in anticipating their re-actions to almost any situation, and, with varying degrees of intensity we emulated them. Bob Cherry with his breezy and open nature and optimistic outlook was a prime favourite. On the few occasions when it occurred we were immensely bucked to be compared to him. Thus unawares we were building up certain moral barricades against a less desirable set of standards. It is an intriguing exercise to consider the impact made upon our young minds by the 'Magnet' and the 'Gem' (to mention but two) and how these papers have projected their influence far into our adult life, becoming in fact an integral part. The retention of so many jolly memories has helped in no small way to produce a very special type of fellow.

I remember the dimly gas-lit street down which I would run home. The lamp-posts were somewhat widely spaced and cast but a poor illumination on a dark night. Running swiftly beneath them my shadow would leap and jerk ahead growing longer and longer until mid-way between it would begin to fade and as the next lamp was approached it would disappear, only to leap squat and sharp

outline immediately beneath the next lamp, growing ever longer once more, so would the process be repeated. Rushing by the shadowy places, those dark openings where 'danger' was most likely to lurk, with my weekly 'Magnet' clutched in my hand I always made home in record time. These were winter evenings when, after tea, one would settle down before the fire and swiftly become oblivious to the surroundings be entering into the world of Greyfriars with all its wonderful possibilities and adventures. Occasionally pressure had to be brought to bear when it was observed that 'prep' was being rather neglected. This was a great bore through which I hurried with a most unscholastic haste, to resume once more the congenial activities of Harry Wharton and Co.

During the summer 'Utopia' was represented for me by a deck-chair in a secluded corner of the garden out of the direct rays of the sun which seemed to shine far more in those days - with a book. This was for me a near perfect way of spending a quiet summer afternoon. Let the book be a Greyfriars adventure story with all our old heroes in top form, not excluding Billy Bunter, and let there be in the offing the prospect of tea and a peaceful evening thereafter. Simple enough desires, yet deeply satisfying, an approach to a truer understanding of 'living' may be attained with such modest conceptions. Let the world rattle harshly on in its feverish, commercial way with the roar and racket which has become sadly enough an almost niversally accepted way of life. For myself, I would have the quiet and tranquil bye-ways in the company of like-thinking friends - and good books. We have all our own particular ideas of perfection. That state of things wherein we believe we could be completely happy. My own leanings tend to the slower, less traumatic pace of life.

It is significant that as we glide gently down-hill we are able to recall those red letter days (Were they Wednesdays' and Saturdays'? with such warmth and to experience even yet some glimpses of the reflected joys of those early times.

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SALE: H. Baker Greyfriars H. Annuals 1973, 1977; Magnet facsimile Nos. 3, 8, 29; Gem No. 7. "Yaroooh." Collectors' Digest Annuals 1969 to 1975. Offers, or exchange for Nelson Lees.  
Ellis, 13 Albert College Drive, Glasnevin, Dublin 9, EIRE

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REVIEW

RICHMAL CROMPTON - THE WOMAN BEHIND WILLIAM by Mary Cadogan

Published by Allen and Unwin on 16th October, 1986 at £12.95 Hardback/dust jacket

Mary Cadogan attempts - and certainly succeeds - in bringing to us a celebration of the works of this great authoress rather than a detailed biography. Richmal Crompton never published a biography of her own life, simply because she thought it would be of no interest to her followers: people like to read into autobiographies or biographies things that are not there and are disappointed when they cannot do so. To some, Richmal led a rather uneventful life. Only to some that is, for to many who have followed and still do follow, the writings of Richmal Crompton would say that her devotion to writing for the pleasure of others had been anything but uneventful and had created for them an everlasting affection for the characters in fiction, that she created.



*"I've written some jolly good tales," said William, "An' I wouldn't mind helpin' you a bit."*

Rather cleverly, Mary relates Richmal's own life to those of the characters in her books - not only in the William stories, but in the adult novels. Until now, we have not realised that the characters she created were often based on some event or person in her own life. Mary has gone to great lengths by quoting from many of her stories to show us how many of Richmal's characters were developed

Richmal Crompton's William stories - and many of her adult novels - are in great demand at the present time for Richmal was able to bring to us some great characterisations. For a long time, her followers have wanted to read all about her - now is their chance.

This is a beautiful book: and how lovely to see original Thomas Henry drawings at the head of each new chapter. In addition, the book contains a number of

monochrome pictures from the family album which have never been before published.

This book is a must for all followers of the William stories: for the first time, we now have an insight into the life of his marvellous creator. Congratulations must be given to Mary Cadogan and Messrs Allen and Unwin for giving us this privilege.

DARRELL SWIFT

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## REVIEW

PETER AND ALONZO

Frank Richards  
(Howard Baker Special  
Book Club Edition: £18)

The two Todd cousins, so much alike in appearance but so different in temperament and character. Peter stars in the volume's opening story "Peter Todd's Plot." In this one, the "doubles theme" gets an airing. Because Wingate has a cousin who is very much like him in appearance, the juniors get the idea that their Captain is going off the rails, on the racketty road to ruin.

It comes right in the end. "Old Wingate was true blue after all - and it certainly wasn't his fault if he had a cousin who was a rotter. Wingate was the Wingate they had always known, and not in the least in need of Peter Todd's protection."

As Peter starred in the volume's opening story, it is Alonzo who stars in the final story of the book. This is in "Alonzo's Marvellous Mixture", the famous yarn where the duffer puts some of Uncle Benjamin's medicine into the meat pie to be eaten by the Remove Football Eleven. With disastrous results, needless to say. All good fun.

This beautiful book contains six of the Red Cover Magnets from early in the year 1914 - consecutive.

"The Snob's Lesson" stars Snoop, who is expecting a visit from an uncle who lives in Canada. In spite of the fact that his uncle is his benefactor, Snoop, the snob, dreads the visit of this relative who may be too rough and ready for the snob's taste. Plenty of action in this one, and a surprise climax.

"The White Feather" in its day was a famous story, relating the adventures of Esmond, a new boy who is a bit of a coward, and has a rough time till, in his own way, he makes it clear that he is not without pluck.

"Blundell's Prize" is a sub story, but quite a good school yarn and well worth its place on its quality alone. Blundell buys a motor-bike on the strength of a prize for £100 he believed he had won in a competition. But Snoop had changed the notification sent to Blundell. The prize was really £1. We get the stock finish whereby luck and pluck saves the day for the Fifth-Former.

"The Missing Chinese", is one of the mild thriller type for which the Red Magnet was famous. Hop Hi disappears, and his brother, Wun Lung, is frantic with worry. Plenty of fun and thrills and atmosphere in this one. A lovely period piece.

As we said, a truly beautiful book. Some great stories to bring joy to our sentimental hearts, and binding and production could not possibly be bettered. Great stuff for all collectors.



# FAIR PLAY

A Splendid School Tale.  
By CHAS. HAMILTON.

FAIR PLAY  
by CHAS HAMILTON

(The Very First Hurree Singh story  
from 80 years ago)

There was a considerable feeling of rivalry between the Third Form at Netherby and the Form above them, as the new boy had had an opportunity of observing.

The Fourth Form persisted in regarding the Third merely as "kids", and treating them with a lofty disdain, and, needless to say, Redfern and his friends strongly resented this attitude.

Robinson, the head of the Fourth, was a big, overbearing fellow, and he had fallen into a habit of ragging and cuffing the Third which was extremely painful to them.

But it was Redfern's intention to take the Fourth down a peg or two, and when Redfern made up his mind to anything, it generally came off.

He had now made up his mind that when the Form match came off the result should be a crushing

defeat for the higher Form, and he was keeping his players up to the mark with the determination of a slave-driver. In the Form matches it was customary for the higher Form to pull off an easy victory and the Fourth were treating their rivals with a disdain born of complete confidence in themselves. Redfern intended that they should have a rude awakening from their dream of superiority. And Hurree Singh entered into the project with all his heart.

The Indian boy was the most good-natured fellow at the school, but Robinson had treated him very rudely and rudeness was a thing the polite nabob found it hardest to forgive. And the prospect of being included in the team that was to bring low the colours of the Fourth was joyful to Hurree Singh.

"If Robinson wasn't so cocksure about it" remarked Redfern, "he'd make his men buck up, and they might get the better of us. But he's so sure of victory that he won't realise he's

going to be beaten till the time comes, and then it will be too late. And by Jove, the Fourth will have to sing awfully small after they've been licked by the infants!"

"Rather", said Reggie Lawrence  
"Ain't you coming out, Reddy?"

"No; I've got a hundred lines to do, half for Lantham and half for Lummy. Beastly rotten, isn't it? But I'm going to make somebody sorry for it." Lawrence grinned. He knew by the sparkle in Redfern's eyes that something was in the wind.

"What's the joke, Reddy, old son?"

"Wait a bit, Reggie, and you'll see," replied Redfern. "Squattexvous here and do half my lines. Lantham won't know your hand from mine."

The three comrades had the Third Form-room to themselves just then, the rest of the Form being out in the school grounds. At Netherby the Third Form did not have separate studies, like the higher Forms.

The lines, by the united endeavours of Redfern and Lawrence, were polished off as Redfern expressed it, and then the cock of the Third marched off with them. He visited Mr. Lumsden first, and gave in his own work to the Form-master, who was well acquainted with his handwriting, and then went in search of Lantham the prefect.

Lantham was in his study and Jobling, the school porter, was in the doorway, talking to him.

"It's just arrived, Master Lantham, and it's in the boxroom," said Jobling. It's a pretty big box, Master Lantham and it was very heavy getting it up."

"Was it, Jobling?" said the prefect sympathetically. "lucky you're such an awfully strong chap, then."

"I ain't so strong as I used to be," said Jobling. "What with the rheumatics and it was a tug getting that box up, Master Lantham"

"Too bad; you're in want of exercise," said Lantham agreeably, affecting not to know what the porter was driving at. "I should advise a sprint round the quadrangle early in the morning, Jobling."

"I ain't in want of exercise," snorted Jobling. "I'm gettin' too old to carry boxes about, though I like to do things for the young gentlemen. Some of them are werry generous, and'll 'and over a shilling and think nothing of it."

"Yes, there's some generous chaps at Netherby," said Lantham. "I dare say you make a pretty good thing out of it altogether, Jobling." Jobling gave it up then, and went away sniffing.

Redfern grinned as he went into the study, and he found Lantham laughing.

"Hallo, kid! What do you want?"

"My lines, Lantham."

"Your what? Oh, Lines! How many?"

"Fifty."

"Chuck 'em on the fire, my son and cut off."

Redfern looked indignant. He had been given the imposition undeservedly, and to have his work treated in this off-hand manner was too bad.

"Well, you're a nice specimen of a giddy prefect!" he muttered.

"Am I?" said Lantham, catching the words, and catching also Redfern's ear. "Now, I thought that I was pretty good as a prefect, Redfern. I think I shall persuade you to admit it, if I twist your ear long enough.

"Lemme go!"

"Has your opinion of me improved

yet?" asked the prefect blandly.

"Nunno' Lemme alone!"

"There's another twist! What do you say now?"

"Oh, I think you're a beastly bully!" said Redfern, wriggling.

"You're an obstinate little beast," said Lantham, boxing his ears. "Get out of my study!"

Redfern, with his head singing, and his injured ear burning like fire, beat a hasty retreat from the study. Lantham followed him out, and walked away towards the box-room: Redfern shook his fist after the prefect.

"You just wait, you beast!" he muttered.

Lantham went into the box-room, to see to the box whose arrival Jobling has just reported. He left the door open, and Redfern, following him on tiptoe, saw him bending over a box, and cutting the cord with his penknife. Redfern changed the key to the outside of the door.

"Hallo, Lantham, you b-b-beast!" said Redfern, keeping the door between him and the prefect.

He imitated with great fidelity the voice of the stuttering Robinson.

Lantham looked up in amazement. There was only one boy who stuttered at Netherby, and so the prefect had not the slightest doubt that it was Robinson of the Fourth who was addressing him.

He glanced wrathfully towards the door.

"Robinson! Do you want me to come to you?"

"Oh, n-n-no, pip-pip please don't; your f-f-face worries me!" Lantham jumped up. His temper was never good, and cheek like that from a junior made him wild.

"Why, you cheeky little brute, I'll skin you!" he gasped. And he made a rush for the door.

Redfern instantly drew it shut with a slam, and turned the key in the lock.

Lantham grabbed the handle and tried to open it, in vain.

"Yah' You go and eat co-co-cokernuts, you s-s-silly bib-bib-bounder!" came the reply through the door. "Get out of the win-win-window if you w-w-want to get out, L-L-Lantham, you bib-bib-beast!"

Lantham gave the door a sounding kick.

Then he heard the sound of retreating footsteps.

The junior had departed.

"By Jove!" muttered Lantham. "Fancy Robinson having such cheek! I'll tan his hide for him! By thunder I'll make him sit up for this. Nice pass things are coming to, when a Fourth Former locks a prefect up in the box-room!" And he stamped across to the window.

Redfern hurried back to the Third Form-room, grinning gleefully.

"What's the wheeze?" demanded Lawrence.

"Come and see."

Redfern hurried Reggie and Hurree out of the building to a spot where they could view the box-room window.

The window was open, and Lantham was looking out. He slowly and gingerly drew himself out on the sill.

"What's he doing?" exclaimed Lawrence.

"Somebody has locked him in the box-room."

"Ha, ha!"

"But he will experience the extreme anger in the heart." said Hurree Singh dubiously.

"Exactly; but his extreme anger

will fall upon Robinson. The chap who locked him in stuttered through the door at him, you see."

Reggie Lawrence yelled with laughter.

"Oh, my only Aunt Maria! What a howling wheeze!"

"Don't let him hear you, we've got to see and not be seen in this act," grinned Redfern. "My hat! I didn't know that old Lantham was such a giddy acrobat."

Lantham lowered himself and was holding on the sill with his hands. He seemed in doubt about letting himself go, but finally he made up his mind and dropped to the ground. He fell over with a thump, and gave a grunt.

"He's hurt his little self," said Redfern. "Come on, Kids! Hallo, Lantham! That a new course of gymnastics you're going through?"

The senior was picking himself up and dusting his clothes. He looked savagely at the youngsters.

"Have you seen Robinson?" he asked thickly.

"Robinson of the Fourth?" said Redfern reflectively. "Yes, I fancy I saw him in the upper corridor. He went into his study with Hake."

"Oh did he? All right!"

"Do you want to see him?" asked Redfern innocently.

"Yes" growled Lantham. "I want to see him."

"You did that drop awfully well," said Redfern. "I should like to see you do it again, Lantham. Are you going to do any more tricks, Lantham?" The prefect made a dash at him, and the three juniors scuttled off.

Lantham did not pursue; his mind just then was filled with thoughts of Robinson. He hurried off in the direction of the Fourth Form studies, and the three followed at a safe distance to see the fun.

Lantham reached Robinson's study and kicked open the door. Robinson and his chum Hake were sitting at the table doing their evening preparations, at peace with all the world. They had not the slightest suspicion that the hour of vengeance had struck, and when Lantham burst into the room, they jumped up and stared at him in blank amazement.

"Hallo Lantham! What do you want?" said Robinson. "What do you come bub-bub-bursting into my quarters for? Oh, crikey!"

He yelled as Lantham seized him by the collar and began to thump him.

"Lemme alone!" he roared. "What's that for? I haven't done anything."

"Haven't you?" panted the prefect. "Then I'll give it to you for doing nothing, you cheeky rat! I'll teach you to lock a prefect in the boxroom!"

"He's mad!" He's off his rocker!" Thump, thump, thump!"

"I'll teach you to look the door over me and cheek me."

Thump, thump, thump!" "He's raving mad!" gasped Robinson. "Hold him! Help!"

The prefect, panting with his exertions, left off at last, and he pitched Robinson, in a considerably rumped condition, across the study.

"There, you beast, let that be a lesson, to you!"

Robinson sat where he fell with an almost idiotic expression of bewilderment upon his face.

"He's mad," he said faintly -- "raving mad!"

The prefect stalked out of the study, shutting the door with a slam.

"Mad!" said Robinson again, with conviction. "Fancy Lantham going off his chump like that all of a sudden. We might both have been mum-mum--murdered!"

The door opened. The grinning face of Owen Redfern looked into the study. Over his shoulders looked

the equally grinning countenances of Lawrence and Hurree Singh.

"Hallo!" said Redfern genially "Had a rough time of it? You look like it. Sorry now that you bothered us, Robinson? Who takes the cake this time? Ha, ha ha"

Robinson reached for a ruler. The door slammed, the Third Form

youngsters were gone.

"Those little brutes are at the bib-bib-bottom of it, some-how!" gasped Robinson, a glimmering of the truth dawning upon him.

But he felt too used up to think of reprisals just then, and the three were left to enjoy their triumph in peace.

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### CAMBRIDGE

The Club opened its new season with the traditional visit to the lovely Sweffling home of Neville and Ruth Wood. There was a good turn out of members, only the chairman and Malcolm Pratt being unable to attend. Our journey was rewarded with one of the finest days of this year, warm sunshine all day.

With Edward Witten in the chair, the Secretary reported, after the reading of the Minutes, that Jack Overhill had been in hospital for an operation. Unfortunately the wound had turned septic, and Jack had to return for an emergency second operation. The Secretary had sent a message from the club to Jack. Bill Thurbon said that he had spoken over the telephone on Saturday to Jack, and hoped to go to see him. The Secretary and Bill both hoped that Jack would again take part in the club. The Secretary further reported that Jack had presented many of his writings to the Cambridge Collection, where they would be permanently preserved.

Edward Witten then presented one of his famous quizzes on show business. We then settled down to enjoy Neville and Ruth's hospitable lunch. After lunch Neville presented a video of "Destination D. Day", the Normandy Landings and the preparations made for it.

Members enjoyed studying Nevilles records and electronic games, and looked again at Neville's ever increasing library.

Bill Lofts then gave an entertaining talk, based on an article written by Edgar Wallace on 'Is your name Bill'? Bill said that his name happens to be Bill, and, quite honestly, he could not have wished for a better name.

He commented that a far older generation than his own, the melodramatic authors, gave their heroes names such as George, Richard, or Rodney; the villains, of course, being Jasper, Silas, or Basil. Bill Thurbon, on being asked what he thought of the name, said that he was satisfied with Bill, but did not like diminutives like "Willie" or "Billy".

After enjoying a delicious tea, and a session of photographs in the garden, the time came when reluctantly we had to depart, with warm thanks to our hosts. Driving home, we had a splendid evening, and a glorious sunset, finally reaching Cambridge with the last of the sunset and a new moon combining to make a perfect summers day ending.

"When you come to the end of a perfect day"

#### LONDON

There was a good attendance of 21 at the September meeting held at the Beckenham home of Mary and Alex Cadogan.

Mary opened the meeting by giving an excellent treatise on the famous author of the William books, Richmal Compton. At the conclusion of the dissertation, Alex Cadogan operated the tape recorder and members were treated to two separate interviews that took place with the author. It was stated that Richmal Compton had something in common with Frank Richards, both being good Latin scholars. The dust jacket of the book that will be published shortly was exhibited. Ann Clarke exhibited an advance copy of Chris Lowder's book "Sexton Blake Wins". The author hopes to be present at the November meeting with supply of autographed copies.

Who else could read a chapter of Ralph Redway's Rio Kid but Roger Whiter? This he did and the chapter came from the story "The Laughing Outlaw." It was enjoyed by all present. Brian Doyle was an easy winner of Roy Parsons' Quiz and took the first prize. Brian then read the article "The Whartons of Winford" that the late Percy North contributed to Collectors' Digest Annual of 1955.

Votes of thanks were accorded to Mary and Alex for hospitality and a very good meeting.

Next meeting to be held at the Liberal Hall on Sunday, 12th October when members will be able to enjoy a discourse by Bill Lofts. Tea provided but bring own tuck.

BEN WHITER

NORTHERN

Meeting held: Saturday, 13th September, 1986.

It was a smaller crowd than usual - but it was an action-packed gathering as so many things had happened in the past month or so.

Our Chairman read from the Sunday Telegraph article, COMICS CUT OUT THE CANE and showed how comics had altered in their style over the years - with particular reference to the banning of corporal punishment in state schools.

Keith read the obituary of Noel Streatfield who had died a few days earlier, aged 95. She had been a writer of children's books for a number of years and many of her books were still in print.

Paul Galvin gave the latest update on the forthcoming BIGGLES MEETING which was receiving keen interest from W.E. John's fans.

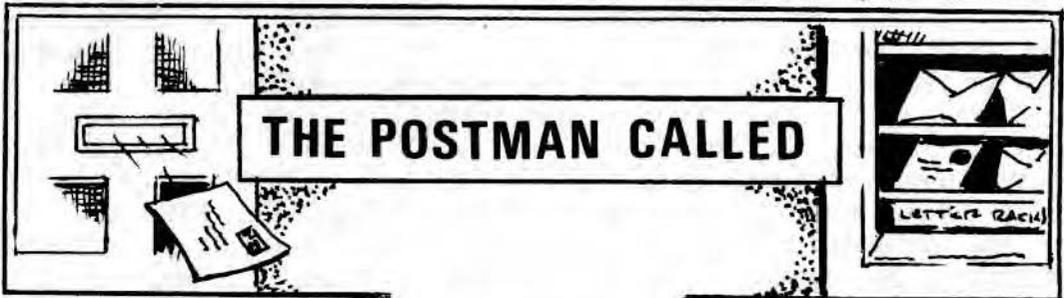
Members were interested in a catalogue from THE OLD CHURCH BOOKSHOP of Sydney, Australia, which advertised a large collection of old boys' books for sale from the estate of the late Syd Smyth.

Darrell reported on the pilot show to be produced by Thames Television "Still - William" starring Dennis Waterman as William grown up. Mixed reaction was coming from William fans.

After refreshments - from Peter PLowman - it was light relief from Molly who presented a short version of a Bunter Drive - causing much hilarity.

JOHNNY BULL MINOR

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J.E.M. (Brighton) The S.O.L.covers reproduced recently must have revived many memories. For me, "The Terror of the Tong" illustration was pure nostalgic joy - a lovely example of Leonard Shields's art. Your comments on the use of "tonnes" for "tons" and the general influence fo our European neighbours are well made. There is another irritating new usage I suppose we owe to the same source. In referring to the army and its supplies the old familiar phrase was

"men and materials." Now it is "men and matériel". No doubt the French word is more precise in its meaning, but its use strikes me as somewhat pretentious. If only some of its users were as careful with their native language!

CLIFF HOWE (Alberton, Australia) I appreciate "C.D." every month. ..it is about the only thing you can rely on nowadays.

HARRY PEMBERTON (Manchester) C.D. arrived today. One of our local newspapers has a regular saying "Like a friend dropping in." I feel the same about the C.D. - more so, because it has more cheer than any newspaper can offer. Congratulations on the coming Ruby Anniversary. I'm not going to be clever and say I know all about these things - I always link them with marriages - but if love, care, and understanding are a part of that institution, it could be applied to the C.D.

SIMON GARRETT (Bath) In reply to Ernest Holman (CD 477), Orwell's letter concerning the 'Boys' Weeklies' article is in Volume One of 'The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell'.

It has written to Geoffrey Gorer, a social anthropologist and old friend of Orwell. The relevant section reads: '...& now the editor (sic) of the Magnet, which you no doubt remember from your boyhood, has asked for space in which to answer my "charges". I look forward to this with some uneasiness, as I've no doubt made many mistakes, but what he'll probably pick on is my suggestion that these papers try to inculcate snobbishness.'

Mr. Holman's memory has served him well, as this extract proves and it is also true that Cyril Connolly was Editor of Horizon at the time. George Orwell's forebodings were also justified, though it is on record that he 'much enjoyed' Hamilton's article.

Interesting, Orwell suggests that public school boys nearly always gave up reading the Magnet at the age of about twelve, being too closely aware of the reality. Orwell was born in 1903, so his early recollections would have been of the Red Magnet c. 1910-15; one of the weakest periods in the paper's history. This may have influenced his opinion in 1939 when, once more, the Magnet was in something of a trough.

DARRELL SWIFT (Leeds) Some of your readers may have seen an article in the September issue of BOOK AND MAGAZINE COLLECTOR entitled "Frank Richards and His Billy Bunter Books". Knowledgeable readers of that article will have spotted a few - albeit minor - mistakes.

Even more serious, is the reference in the article to the effect that appreciation is given to Happy Hours for help in current values

of the Billy Bunter books quoted.

Those of your readers who have dealt with us will know - we hope anyway - that we can be relied upon for good value and fairness. We do not believe that readers seeing some of the prices quoted in that article, will associate us with value and fairness.

We wish to make it quite clear that a number of those prices quoted, were not the ones we supplied to the author of the article and appear to have been inflated somewhat for publication. We dissociate ourselves entirely from such inflated prices and would assure our customers that we shall continue to offer our reputable service offering good value and fairness.

The editor has been asked to correct his misleading price values in a future edition, with the addition that we disclaim all responsibility for a number of those high prices that have been quoted.

LEN HAWKEY (Leigh-on-Sea) I was intrigued by Gordon Hudson's piece on the "Postcard Connection" - the artists who worked on our old magazines - and annuals - were nothing if not versatile. Saville Lumley was only one of these. His career stretched from the turn of the Century, to the late 40's and whilst his work was a bit too "static" for my taste, it was always competent, and knowing his market, it included not only periodicals, and postcards, but also book illustration and poster-work. He drew, in fact, one of the most famous posters of World War I - "What did you do in the War, Daddy?", which became more or less a catchphrase. In the '20's he also did cinema posters for the old silent films.

His career ran strangely parallel with another long-serving Amalgamated Press artist, Ernest Ibbetson, whose approach was much more spirited, and who was - in the 1920's and '30's - used mainly in the sports and adventures magazines. But, again, he undertook poster work for the theatres, the Aldershot Tattoo etc., and like Lumley, as late as 1945/6 was doing a series of Military Uniform cards for Gale and Polden. Other illustrations, apart from those mentioned by Mr. Hudson, who contributed to the "Postcard Connection", were Tom Browne, E.P. Kinsella, H.M. Brock, G.S. Studdy, Albert Morrow, Tom Peddie, Alfred Pearse, and Phil Swinnerton, as well as those splendid "action" artists, R. Aton Woodville and Stanley L. Wood

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COMING IN DECEMBER: OUR ANNUAL. Have your ordered your copy yet?

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TOP OF THE BIG TOPS?

by BRIAN SAYER

At last Danny and the rest of Collectors' Digest have reached my era. After many years of the familiar brown envelope making its welcome plop on the doormat, month by month wallowing happily in the past, Danny has been with Bunter to the circus. Elsewhere I find familiar treasures of early reading: Ezra Quirke, Sexton Blake and such Schoolboys' Own Library issues as "Taming the Bully" and "The Mandarin's Vengeance".

As a matter of fact, I had not made my entrance when these stories appeared print fresh on the newsagents' counters. As a small boy after the war I was aware of the "cupboard on the landing". There it was, way out of reach, small but so tantalizing. I knew that it held books belonging to my soldier brother who did not return from the war. I knew that he had enjoyed stories of Billy Bunter, that fat Schoolboy whose exploits I followed in my weekly "Knockout".

I cannot remember when I first managed to reach the cupboard, perhaps by piling books on a chair, to turn its little catch. But the cream-painted door swung open to a golden hoard; untold treasure for a young and avid reader.

There were these wonderfully-smelling Magnets... Billy Bunter Coatless, running down a street with Mr. Quelch in hot pursuit, a joyous Christmas scene aboard the Firefly... there were excitingly-coloured Gems, Sexton Blakes, scarey Thriller magazines. Wizards, Hotspurs, Adventures, Triumphs, mingled with pre-war Chips and Dandy and H. G. Wells and aircraft books.

Bunter at a "spread" never stopped eating. I never stopped reading and I read them again and again. It was sheer torture, of course, not knowing for years "what happened next". I had a comforting range of S.O.L.s - but now I yearned to read the rest of the China series. I scoured the second-hand shops in vain in search of "The Terror of the Tong" or such "missing" Magnets as "The Haunted Circus". Every older person seemed to have once had stacks and stacks but had thrown them away... My father remembered reading the very first Magnet and a favourite uncle could even quote the first line. I was not nearly as astute as Danny and I can remember complaining that Martin Clifford "copied" from Frank Richards.

Read until ragged: lent to special school chums; I still retain and treasure my first Hamilton stories. Close to the Christmas stories - I was so lucky to have the S.O.L. "Phantom of the Towers" - I loved the Muccolini circus series. For me, it was extra special as it was set partly in Margate - my home town. Of course, only a short distance from me, the Great Man was tapping out his tales in Kingsgate. Years on I met him.

The arrival of the "Bunter Books" was a huge consolation. They lacked the musty charm of my Magnets but my friends and I could quote chunks of Quelch and Prout and Bunter.

Not until I was nearly twenty did I discover it was possible to buy the old papers from dealers. I was a little disappointed with my first purchases. I was not attracted to the salmon covers of the Wild West stories which arrived (and I still feel that Charles Hamilton over-played his U.S.A. characterisation). Green as grass, I sent a dealer some pre-war comics and Thomson papers on an exchange basis only to receive Magnets held together by thick brown-paper tape. I became quite an expert at renovating Magnets for binding!

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I found other suppliers and, best of all, I discovered Tom Porter. His duplicates formed the basis of my collection and he was able to tell me much about the hobby. I had told him that I had enjoyed the circus series and in a reply he mentioned casually that he supposed I meant the Whiffles series.

Another circus series? This was too much! There was not the slightest chance of my reading it. No-one had spares. Now and again, like showing my Dalmatian a chocolate, C.D. would mention this entrancing series. I gained the impression that the first was a real three-ring affair! Roll up, roll up! It was not to be missed.

I had a long wait for my ticket. Not until Howard Baker published "Billy Bunter's Circus" did I hold those long-sought tales. There they were, pre-dating the Muccolini yarns by a decade. With dual ritual, I settled down for a long and happy read.

I cannot say that I found the Whiffles circus series as dry as sawdust. Yet, a little shamefaced, I must say that I was often bored! I felt, too, that the mighty Frank had passed beyond literary licence into absurdity. A schoolboy impersonating a circus boss and running the show? I was not prepared to jump through that hoop! Definitely not a high wire performance was the constant appearance of the thug Huggins in pursuit of Whiffles/Bunter. Now he has him; now he hasn't. I never thought I would be glad to finish a Frank Richards story; pleased to see the circus leave town.

Was it just that then in my thirties I was not prepared to accept what I embraced with joy at the age of nine and onwards? Yet I continued to read "new" Magnet and Gem tales with pleasure.

I believe the truth is that we are all, in a way, locked in our own "time". We are all, in a way, happy prisoners of our own nostalgia.

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### THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH

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