

UNION JACK

Special Christmas Number.



ERP

The Affair of the BLACK CAROL

A seasonable story of detective adventure, animated throughout by the gladsome
Amstide. Complete, and introducing: Sexton Blake, Tinker, Ruff
Bore and Mrs. Bardell.

1927

Christmas with

SEXTON BLAKE

David Ashford and Norman Wright celebrate the Sexton Blake Christmas issues written by Gwyn Evans

There is no argument among Blakian aficionados that the best of the Christmas stories to appear in *Union Jack* and its successor, *Detective Weekly*, were those written by Gwyn Evans. From 1925 until 1934, the Christmas Sexton Blake stories in *Union Jack* and later in *Detective Weekly* became a seasonal treat in his hands. Evans' Christmas stories were noteworthy for their extraordinary individuality of plot and this, together with a fascinating mix of festive elements, all garnished with more than a touch of the bizarre, made them an irresistible read.

Sexton Blake first appeared in the *Halfpenny Marvel* in 'The Missing Millionaire' by Hal Meredith (Harry Blythe) in 1893 but it was in the pages of *Union Jack* that he was to gain his lasting fame. For connoisseurs, Blake's Golden Age was in the 1920s and '30s, a time that coincided with the appearance of a new illustrator named Eric Parker (BMC 218). It was the unique artistry of Eric Parker that was to create the definitive image of Sexton Blake as well as complementing, with his striking covers and imaginative

compositions, the strongly atmospheric writing of so many of the stories. Parker's drawings first appeared in *Union Jack* in 1922 and, soon after, he became the premier Blake illustrator. For more than thirty years Parker was to be responsible for almost all the illustrations and cover paintings of the various journals devoted to the annals of Sexton Blake.

The Christmas issues of *Union Jack* are a joy to look at, before one ever begins reading the stories, so exciting and inviting are Parker's illustrations. As a *Union Jack* reader said at the time regarding Eric Parker: "Believe me, that worthy gentleman has had more to do with the creation of Sexton Blake and Tinker than I care to say".

Another factor that makes these Christmas *Union Jacks* so wonderfully seasonal are such touches as 'The Xmas Round Table', in which the Editor (Harold Twyman) writes to his readers, wishing them all the Compliments of the Season and enlarging on the delights to be found inside that issue. The editorial for December 1926 is especially interesting in that it is given over to a whole page written by the Great Detective himself:

"Scene: Dinner of representative gathering of *Union Jack* readers. The toast of 'Sexton Blake', proposed by the editor, has just been drunk with acclamation. In response to insistent demands for a speech, Blake rises to reply."

By the following year, however, 'The Xmas Round Table' has disappeared from the pages of the Christmas issues and, in its place, is 'Tinker's Xmas Notebook' spread over two pages, in which "Sexton Blake's jocular assistant decorates... these pages with seasonal brevities".

But, of course, it is the stories that are important and, in Gwyn Evans, *Union Jack* had one of the finest purveyors of the Seasonal Christmas yarn, full of convivial get-togethers, lively scenes of Blake and his guests enjoying a feast that would be the envy of any reader:

"The turkey, a magnificent bird, had done its duty nobly on the altar of Christmas, and there came a solemn, dramatic moment before the entry of the Christmas pudding... a noble, inspiring object, crowned with a branch of holly, and aflame with delicious Jamaica rum"

Gwyn Evans, himself, was extremely sociable and a natural partygoer, and it was this, which was tragically to bring about his early demise.

Gwynfil Arthur Evans was born in Port Madoc, North Wales in 1899, the son of a Wesleyan Minister and great nephew of no less a writer than George Eliot. He was tall and thin and his good looks were somewhat overshadowed by the paleness of his features. Evans had a rigidly strict upbringing with the almost inevitable result that he became a rebel against conformity of all kinds. He was a well-travelled man, which gave his Blake stories set in far-flung places an air of authenticity. His first known story appeared in the last issue

of *Jack's Paper* in 1923, followed by 'The Sensation Hunter' in *Pluck* in the same year. Until its demise in 1924, Evans was a prolific contributor to the Amalgamated Press' *Detective Magazine* and then, in the same year, came his first contribution to the Sexton Blake canon with 'The Time Killer' (*Union Jack* 1071).

It seems Evans was almost completely lacking in self-discipline, with little sense of time keeping and a childish passion for practical jokes. One editor declared: "Everybody liked him, even though nobody dare trust him. He had a most charming personality; but I'm afraid that his best friends could not deny that he was fundamentally unstable and irresponsible". A friend, William Elliott, wrote the following in 'Lost Souls in Bohemia' (Gerald Swan, 1941):

"For a time he did well, worked reasonably steadily, and achieved something of a reputation. Then, of course, he discovered Bohemia – and in it his real background in life, as he regarded it. He was naturally generous and loved to demonstrate his generosity... The wild life of Bohemia – the days spent in pubs and clubs, and the nights in parties and orgies – was just the sort of life he had always longed for..."

There is no doubt that it was this wild life of partying that was to bring about his early demise.

Gwyn Evans' first Christmas offering for the *Union Jack* was 'The Mystery of Mrs Bardell's Xmas Pudding', published in the 'Special Xmas Number' for 1925. Gwyn Evans had a soft spot for Blake's garrulous housekeeper, Mrs Bardell, and it was in his yuletide yarns that her character really blossomed, becoming, for that one time of year, more than just a background character.

Mrs Martha Bardell had made her debut

Finest Obtainable
Anywhere!

CHRISTMAS Detective Story—
UNION JACK 2
SPECIAL XMAS NUMBER of the



**THE MYSTERY OF
Mrs BARDELL'S XMAS
PUDDING**

—A real Christmas Story and a real Detective Story, too!
featuring SEXTON BLAKE, Inspector SCOTTIE, and SPLASH PAGE. Complete in this issue.

No. 1292. 6000. 10000000. December 1954, 1955.

XMAS IS NOT XMAS

without this jolly
detective story!

UNION JACK 2
THE XMAS WEEK



**Mrs BARDELL'S
XMAS EVE!**

Sexton Blake's Jolly Xmas Detective Case, featuring Ruff HANSON,
"Splash" PAGE, TINKER and Inspector COLTIE.

No. 1292. 6000. 10000000. December 1954, 1955.

in the saga in September 1905 in 'The House of Mystery' and was still keeping her eye on Blake and his young assistant, Tinker, almost sixty years later. She had been created by the prolific William Murray Graydon but there is no doubt that her finest hours were in the stories by Gwyn Evans. He rounded out her character, made much of her propensity for malapropism and gave her almost starring roles in a number of his memorable Christmas stories during the 1920s. Mrs Bardell was, perhaps, less refined than Sherlock Holmes' landlady, Mrs Hudson, but she had a heart of gold and was always on hand to provide sustenance, dry clothes, a bed for the night or anything else that was required for the many disparate characters who arrived at Blake's consulting room or "insulting room", as she was inclined to call it. Blake himself thought extremely highly of his housekeeper and once spoke about her to

a friend in the most glowing terms: "She is a quaint soul and a bit of a martinet at times but I do not know what Tinker and I would do without her. She has threatened time and again to leave us when things have grown a little too strenuous for her liking; but, honestly, I do not think she could be driven away. She is too fond of Tinker."

'The Mystery of Mrs Bardell's Xmas Pudding' has the subtitle, "A Yuletide Tragi-Comedy in Nine Chapters". The first chapter is called "Santa Claus - Alias Sexton Blake", which gives the reader an idea of the type of story he is about to encounter. Apart from the purloined pudding, which is actually that of Mrs Bardell's sister, who cooked it for her lodger, a piratical sea captain, who is later found stabbed in the back. How did an intruder get in as the room was locked and it was situated on the third floor? Fortunately, the sea captain was still alive and able to

Special Christmas Week Number—2d.

UNION JACK



The Masque of Time

By Gwyn Evans

Sexton Blake, Ruff Hanson, Mrs. Bardell, Splash Page, and others in a
mirth-and-mystery Christmas Detective story.

December 21st, 1929.

EVERY THURSDAY.

communicate to Blake the words, "Get the pudding! Don't let them find it! The secret's there - it belongs to May - ". The plot obviously owes somewhat to the Sherlock Holmes story, 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle', if one was to substitute the pudding for the goose, but then Agatha Christie's 'The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding' ('The Theft of the Royal Ruby') could also be said to owe something to Evans' story!

It turns out that the vital element in the case of 'Mrs Bardell's Xmas Pudding' is not a blue carbuncle or a Royal Ruby but a piece of knotted string which, as Blake explains in pure Holmesian dialogue, is the clue to a fabulous treasure:

"This string of pampas grass is knotted in this manner for a definite reason. It is known as the Mayan string language, now extinct. The ancient Mayas used string tied into peculiar knots as messages... I have some knowledge of this ancient knot language and, when Tinker recovered the pudding, I at once saw the connection between Mexico and such an English object as a plum pudding."

A year later, Mrs Bardell encountered even more trouble at Christmastime. She became the kidnap victim of 'The Phantom Crook' in 'Mrs Bardell's Xmas Eve'. As the editor of that 'Christmas Week' issue of *Union Jack* put it: "This is the story of the Great Baker Street Hoax; of the kidnapping of Mrs Bardell, Sexton Blake's housekeeper; of a real, old-time baronial mansion and its Christmas ghost; and of the jolliest lark of a detective job that Sexton Blake ever handled." The story featured two of Evans' most famous characters, the ace reporter, Derek 'Splash' Page, who, together with Tinker, is the brains behind a lavish practical joke on Blake and the tough twogun 'tec from 'Noo York', Ruff Hanson.

It is written in Gwyn Evans' best light-hearted style with plenty of action and an abundance of Christmas cheer.

Mrs Bardell does not have quite such a major part in the 'Special Christmas Number' of *Union Jack* for 1927 but, nevertheless, she is a strongly featured player. Proclaimed as "A seasonable story of detective adventure animated throughout by the gladsome spirit of Christmastide", 'The Affair of the Black Carol' is Gwyn Evans' most Dickensian offering. Again featuring Evans' creations, 'Splash' Page and Ruff Hanson, the story combines elements of a Dickensian Christmas with kidnapping and a threat to Sexton Blake's life. Ruff Hanson has become the personal bodyguard of an American millionaire who wants to give his ten-year-old son "a real English Christmas party". When we hear that the boy is "a frail little figure with round, luminous eyes and a pale, pinched little face" and, moreover, has a lame leg, the reader has an inkling of what might just come to pass by the end of the story. He is not disappointed. The millionaire treats Blake and Co. to Christmas at Dingley Dell and insists that they all dress up as Dickensian characters and then, to top it all, 'Splash' Page lays on an ancient stagecoach drawn by four horses and complete with driver and guard.

"'Merry Christmas!' roared the crowd as the stagecoach, with the accompaniment of jingling harness and rumbling wheels, started its historic journey through the snow-laden twilight of Baker Street for the open road beyond."

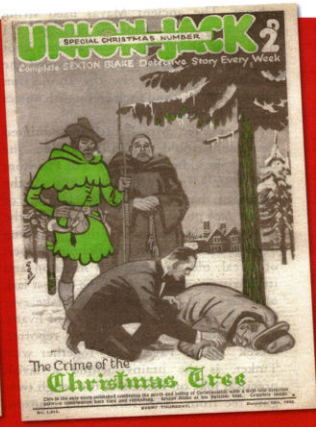
The following year's seasonal offering from Gwyn Evans was 'The Crime of the Christmas Tree', which introduced to *Union Jack* readers The League of Robin Hood, a free-spirited group of young ex-servicemen who had banded together to wage war on

profiteers and other such rotten scoundrels. Like Robin Hood, they would rob the rich to help the poor. The only qualifications needed to join the League were that they "must be young, ex-Service, Public School, with a taste for adventure". The leader of the band was Lord Huntingley, V.C., D.S.O., "big, broad-shouldered, and extraordinarily handsome" (who happens to have a sister called Marion) and his 'League' included the Hon. Toby, youngest son of the eccentric peer, the Earl of Haredale, and well-known for his unusual oblong monocle; Pongo Paget of the Foreign Office and "the fighting parson", the Rev. John Browne, M.C. As is to be expected, the members of the League all dress up in the traditional doublets and hose of Lincoln Green, apart from the Rev.

Browne who is clad, as being "more in keeping with his ample girth and jovial red face", a grey friar's robe.

When, however, the wicked magistrate, Jabez Bruff, is found dead at the foot of the Christmas tree that stood in the grounds of Huntingley Manor, the League become accessories to murder in the eyes of Scotland Yard and only Sexton Blake can save Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

The League appears yet again in 1929's two-part Christmas story, 'The Mistletoe Milk Mystery' and 'The Masque of Time' where Evans gives himself plenty of room to expand his plot and produce what many consider to be his finest Christmas offering. He excels himself here with a plot brimming over with his own unique brand of Christmas fantasy.



As well as entertaining the reader, this pair of stories also makes a social point almost worthy of Dickens himself. The Scrooge figure, in this case, is Sir Cymric Elias Jenkins, Director of the Board of Welsh Amalgamated Dairies who, for purely personal gain, increases the price of milk by one penny a quart. Through the eyes of Sexton Blake we see the impact this, apparently trivial, price-rise has on the poorer classes of society. During the inter-war years, when there was a twenty year period of deflation with generally falling prices and wages, subsistence level workers would have found such a rise a hefty blow and the writer makes his views on the exploitation of the poor very clear. Yet Evans does not get bogged down in moralising his point but has the League of Robin Hood engage in their most elaborate hoax of retribution that involves pseudo time travel that whisks characters out of 1929 and deposits them into the past or the future.

The reader has no sympathy when a terrified Sir Cymric finds himself bound on a stone altar, apparently awaiting sacrifice at the hands of ancient Druids, and revels in the change of personality revealed in Habbakuk Meech, a diffident bank clerk, who, once apparently flung back into the past, reveals a hugely amusing, uninhibited side to his character. We can all likewise enjoy the temporary discomfort felt by Julius Jones, night editor of the *Daily Radio*, who is always urging 'Splash' Page to find him a nice 'juicy murder', when Jones finds himself, allegedly in the future, awaiting execution for murder in the condemned cell! Mrs Bardell is once again strongly featured, this time being apparently whisked back into Elizabethan times and finding herself to be the Virgin Queen herself!

With the extra space at his disposal across two issues, Gwyn Evans was able to fully round out his tale, bringing all the threads neatly together in an ending that even allowed Blake to persuade the mean-spirited Sir Cymric Elias Jenkins to relent on his milk price-rise. The final scene has Blake, Page, Coutts and the League of Robin Hood all enjoying Christmas Day together - with Mrs Bardell in her element cooking Christmas dinner for all of them.

The Christmas offering for 1930, 'The Man Who Hated Christmas', is a far more sombre story where actual murder is committed by a monomaniac, described by Blake as a 'Noelphobic'. There is little to lighten the mood of this tale, although the reader is perhaps left smiling at the suggestion that a few spoilt Christmases as a child can lead to murder in the adult. Perhaps something to be discussed with a psychiatrist!

'The Phantom of the Pantomime', in issue 1470 in December 1931, appeared under the byline of W.J. Elliott but the editor in his 'Christmas Round Table' chat was quick to point out that although the story was not actually written by Gwyn Evans, due to his ill health, he did play a big part in its origination:

"You will be interested to know that he [Evans] has still had a large part in this one. 'The Phantom of the Pantomime' is his conception, and he chose as his collaborator his friend, William J. Elliott, and worked with him on the story throughout."

The story has a brooding and atmospheric Eric Parker cover depicting a character, all eyes upon him, falling from the balcony of a theatre, in a scene that is reminiscent of 'The Phantom of the Opera'. The hero of this Christmas tale is not Mrs Bardell but another member of the Baker Street ménage: Pedro the bloodhound. The

story's 'grand finale' finds the entire theatre company, together with Blake and Co., all raising their glasses to the hound. Pedro could surely have found life-long fame treading the boards if he had not been more than content to remain Sexton Blake's man hunter par excellence.

The final Christmas issue of *Union Jack*, in December 1932, finds Gwyn Evans back on form with 'The Masked Carollers', a story with great sparkle that found Blake, in disguise of course, displaying another of his many talents, that of saxophonist!

At the end of February 1933 the *Union Jack*, which had been dropping in circulation, underwent a dramatic transformation into *Detective Weekly*. It was increased in size, lost its coloured cover and was given a more modern 'look' with creamy-yellow covers. Gwyn Evans was back in something like his old form for the Christmas issue with 'The Christmas Circus Mystery'. The larger pages of *Detective Weekly* gave artist Eric Parker plenty of scope and his brooding black and white illustrations, with their thick, bold lines, gave an extra dramatic dimension of suspense to this story of rivalry and revenge.

Gwyn Evans' final Christmas offering to the Sexton Blake saga was something very different from any of his previous contributions. The main story in *Detective Weekly* No. 95, dated December 15 1934, was an un-seasonal story by Paul Urquhart entitled 'Due For Sentence' but, tucked away in the top left-hand corner of the front cover, were details of an alternative, more festive, item to be found inside and was almost certainly there to lure back 'the old guard' readers who remembered *Union Jack* in its halcyon days. This secondary attraction was a: "Special Christmas Play starring Sexton Blake Detective."

'The Christmas Cavalier', tucked away on pages 21 to 23 and printed in a tiny font, featured Blake, Tinker, Mrs Bardell and Coutts, as well as John Slade, Miss Sadie Bell and 'The Christmas Cavalier', 'a crook with a sense of humour'. The *Daily Radio* has received an anonymous letter from a clever crook known as 'The Christmas Cavalier'. In the letter he challenges Blake to a test of skill by stating that, before midnight that day, he will steal Blake's jade tobacco jar from his consulting room. If he succeeds he expects Blake to donate £1000 to a charity. If he fails he will donate a similar sum to a charity of Blake's choice. This plot would have reminded older readers of Evans' earlier story, 'Mrs Bardell's Xmas Eve'.

All the action of the play takes place in Blake's consulting room. One by one the dramatic personae enter and leave the 'set': any one of them may prove to be the 'Christmas Cavalier' in disguise. It is a well-conceived piece, beautifully written in Evans' own inimitable style with a splendid, unexpected ending.

When Gwyn Evans died a few years later, in April 1938, at the young age of 39, a great writing talent was lost to popular fiction. As someone once remarked, Evans himself was a far more colourful character than any he ever wrote about in his fiction. At its peak his writing powers put him amongst the very best of the 'pulp' detective story writers this country has ever produced. Nothing demonstrates this better than the series of fine Sexton Blake Christmas stories he created for *Union Jack* and *Detective Weekly* between 1925 and 1934 and the 'Christmas Cavalier', despite its short length; was a fitting note on which to end his long run of amusing and bizarre seasonal contributions to the Sexton Blake saga.



The Christmas Cavalier

PRICE GUIDE TO THE CHRISTMAS ISSUES DISCUSSED IN THIS FEATURE

Prices are for copies in VG condition

All published by the Amalgamated Press

UNION JACK

No. 1157. Dec 12, 1925 'The Mystery of Mrs Bardell's Xmas Pudding'	£5-£7.
No. 1210. Dec 25, 1926 'Mrs Bardell's Christmas Eve'	.....£5-£7
No. 1260. Dec 10, 1927 'The Affair of the Black Carol'	.....£5-£7
No. 1313. Dec 15, 1928 'The Crime of the Christmas Tree'	.....£5-£7
No. 1365. Dec 14, 1929 'The Mistletoe Milk Mystery'	.....£5-£7
No. 1366. Dec 21, 1929 'The Masque of Time'	.....£5-£7
No. 1417. Dec 13, 1930 'The Man Who Hated Christmas'	.....£5-£7
No. 1470. Dec 19, 1931 'The Phantom of the Pantomime'	.....£5-£7
No. 1521. Dec 10, 1932 'The Masked Carolers'	.....£5-£7

DETECTIVE WEEKLY

No. 43. Dec 16, 1933 'The Christmas Circus Mystery'	.....£5-£7
No. 95. Dec 15, 1934 'The Christmas Cavalier'	£5-£7.

FURTHER READING

GWYN EVANS: A BIOGRAPHY & BIBLIOGRAPHY by Steve Holland. [A5 card wraps] (Wright, 2004) in print	..... £5
SEXTON BLAKE: A CELEBRATION OF THE GREAT DETECTIVE by Norman Wright & David Ashford (Museum Press, 1994)	.....£20-£25