

SCHOOL, ADVENTURE, GIRL-GUIDE, AND FARM-LIFE STORIES!

The Schoolgirls' Own



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**WHO HAS STOLEN THE
FOOD FOR THE BANQUET?**

An incident from the grand story of Mercove School contained in this issue.

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at St. Jim's. Yet it was Gussy who inevitably dated St. Jim's. But it was a dating which, in my view, the reader never really noticed.

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DAVID NIXON GOES TO GREYFRIARS

David Nixon, one of the most likeable personalities on television, joins the cast of the Bunter show in the West End this coming Christmas season. With the intriguing title of BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC, the play, which opens at the Shaftesbury Theatre on December 23rd, would seem assured of success.

David Nixon plays a conjuror who can do wonderful tricks when he is all alone, but finds things begin to go wrong when anyone else is present. And when Billy Bunter happens to be present - well, imagination boggles. In recent years there have been a few minor grumbles because the Greyfriars chums spent Christmas abroad. This year they are in good old England - at a lonely place in Cornwall - and surely many hearts will warm spontaneously when we say that the place has been named POLPELLE.

Peter Bridgemont, who was such an outstanding success last year, once again plays Billy Bunter. When he meets David Nixon, who plays a conjuror who has a mild flair for villainy, things really happen.

Last year the Billy Bunter show, though it did the best business of all the Christmas matinee shows, was hard hit by the weather. Another bad season would mean the end of Billy Bunter as a stage attraction. Let us hope for good weather, and give the show every support in our power. If you can display a bill profitably, let us know here at the Digest Office, and we will send one to you.

Make an early appointment to meet Billy Bunter and the Greyfriars chums, not forgetting Mr. Quelch, when BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC at the Shaftesbury Theatre. More news of the show in future issues of Collectors' Digest.

* * * * *

SUPPLIERS OF HAMILTON'S PLOTS

- - -

By Derek Adley

Once again it was a pleasure to read an article by Roger Jenkins in C.D. - I refer to 'More News from Rose Lawn'. It was indeed interesting to read about Charles Hamilton's home and neighbourhood, and note that Roger felt there was little to support the idea that Hamilton was ever supplied with plots for his stories.

(continued on page 18) ..

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GREYFRIARS IN THE WEST END

Preparations are going on apace for BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC, the new production which opens at the Shaftesbury Theatre on December 23rd for a season of a month. The play is written as usual by Mauric McLoughlin, an enthusiastic Greyfriars fan and a keen supporter of Collectors' Digest. Since the last Greyfriars production, Maurice has to his credit "A Letter to the General," which featured Anna Neagle on television and was quite the finest new TV play of the year.

BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC starts in the form-room at Greyfriars, and the scene moves subsequently to Polpelly in Cornwall. This year, an exceptionally distinguished cast has been engaged for the production.

DAVID NIXON, one of television's most famous and lovable personalities, plays a substantial role as Higgins, the crook with a taste for magic. PETER BRIDGMONT, who has appeared with ever-increasing success as Billy Bunter in recent years, once again portrays the Owl of the Remove.

MICHAEL ANTHONY, the brilliant character star who is well-known to many of us, appears, for the first time in a Bunter show, as an Englishman. Previously he has portrayed a foreigner who falls foul of our Greyfriars chums.

Of last year's Famous Five, two remain. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull were superbly cast last year, and we shall see the same talented lads as Bob and Johnny. Harry Wharton will be played by a young artist, recently returned from a successful season on the New York stage. Nugent and Huree Singh will also be played by newcomers to the Bunter shows. No less than fifty lads were auditioned this year for the parts of the Famous Five, ample evidence of the care taken by the producers to ensure expert casting of the beloved schoolboys.

Mr. Quelch will be played by Clement McCallin, currently appearing with great success in "Never Too Late" at the Prince of Wales Theatre.

Advance bookings for BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC are heavy, and all the leading booking agencies have secured large blocks of seats for every performance.

With their usual generosity, City Stage Productions are giving the entire proceeds from the gala opening performance to the SAVE THE CHILDREN fund.

We hope that Collectors' Digest readers will go along in large numbers during the run of the show - and remember, if you can make up a party of twenty you can obtain reduced price concessions in all parts of the theatre.

Eric Fayne will be at the piano at every (continued on page 31)..
.....

Cheltenham, though the Golders Green home was retained. In 1957, Mrs. Harrison became a grandmother, and later that year her husband died. It was about that time that the heart trouble, which was to end her life in 1963, developed.

Mrs. Harrison was a keen and enthusiastic gardener, and was a great cat-lover. It was on account of these hobbies that she could never be persuaded, in later years, to leave her large house to live in a flat.

Mrs. Harrison attended the meetings of the London Club at Surbiton in 1962 and 1963. In spite of her near-blindness, and the difficulty of the journey from Golders Green to Surbiton, nothing would prevent her from attending. She won all hearts at the meetings. She was a sweet and charming gentlewoman, really of the old school. She told me once that, of all her brother's fictional characters, she liked best Gussy and Tom Merry. In her opinion, his finest work was done in the blue Gem.

We shall miss a very lovely old lady at the next Surbiton meeting.

Cremation took place at Golders Green crematorium on November 6th, a simple service which was attended by the editor of this magazine.

Later that day, the editor was shown the engagement ring which Charles Hamilton once presented to the lady of his choice. When the engagement was broken off, he gave the ring to his sister. Also in Mrs. Harrison's possession was a lovely old silver biscuit box, probably over a hundred years old. As a child, Charles sampled the biscuits from this box, which had belonged to his grandparents.

Collectors' Digest extends its deepest sympathy, on behalf of its readers and contributors, to Mrs. Una Hamilton Wright and the family.

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GREYFRIARS IN THE WEST END (continued from page 17)...

performance, and he looks forward to exchanging a wave, a smile, and a handshake with hundreds of his friends during the run of the show.

BILLY BUNTER MEETS MAGIC opens on December 23rd, and plays daily at 2.30 until January 18th.

DANNY'S DIARY (continued from page 20)...

It was fearfully cold and very windy, and Gran kept talking about my poor bare knees.....

(DIGEST readers are invited to turn back the clock, and spend CHRISTMAS WITH DANNY in Collectors' Digest Annual for 1963.)

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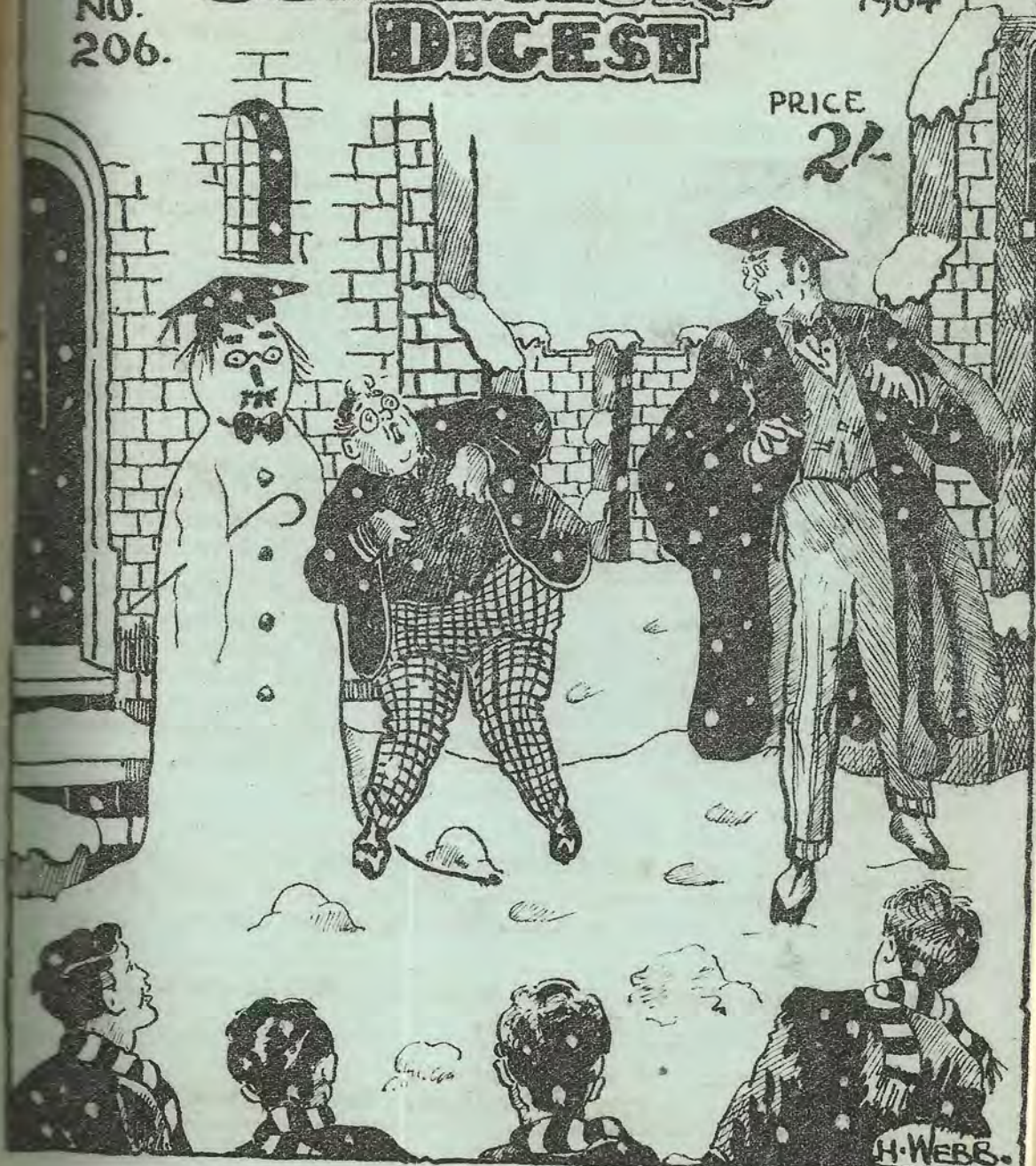
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WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE

A MINNOW AMONG THE WHALES

IN THE BUNTER SHOW.

By ERIC FAYNE

Trembling, nervous, hot round the neck, and cold round the feet, I approached the Shaftesbury Theatre for my first rehearsal. I was undecided whether to go in at the front like the rich people, or whether to use the Stage Door. With the memory in mind of using other stage doors and then searching frantically for 2 hours to find a way out, I went in by the front.

After wandering along thickly-carpeted corridors, tripping over a cleaner, peering into deserted bars and spotless toilets, I eventually found the vast, lush, dimly-lit auditorium.

In one of the stalls at the rear sat a gentleman in a master's cap and gown. He was Clement McCallin who played Mr. Quelch. He was learning his part from a mighty script, and he glared at me as I accidentally knocked his mortar-board askew.

"Who are you?" he rapped.

"I'm the pianist." I said humbly.

The gimlet eyes bored into me.

"Pianists are the lowest form of insect life in the British theatre," he barked.

Feeling that in a moment he would say "Cheese, Mr. Christian," I staggered on.

In the aisle stood Richard Dale, the director of the play. I approached him nervously. I said:

"I'm Eric Fayne. You remember - I played last year --"

"How could I ever forget it?" said Mr. Dale with feeling.

A very attractive young lady swept towards me. Attractive but stern. She was Miss Milnes, the Production Manager. She spoke crisply.

"Good morning! How do you do? Quite well, I hope! Lovely day! Will you kindly remember that a rehearsal called at 10.30 means 10.15, not 10.45!"

"I couldn't find --" I began.

"Quite!" Miss Milnes waved a dainty hand. She called to one of her assistants. "Nigel, kindly show Eric to the pit."

Nigel took charge of me. I followed him through a sound-proof door, along a stone corridor, down some stone steps.

"You're new to the theatre," said Nigel, as I tripped over a scene anchor.

"I've been behind before --" I stuttered.

"Brilliant repartee!" said Nigel.

I emerged into the orchestra pit. Frantically I looked for the piano. I looked under the drum and into the musical director's lunch basket. There was no piano. Desperately I peered out into the auditorium.

"I can't seem to find the piano," I said. "There's a large harp -- but I've never played the harp --"

"The stage hands are bringing in the piano," said Miss Milnes.

The stage hands brought in the piano.

"Is the piano where you want it?" asked Miss Milnes. "It is to be placed exactly where you want it."

"I think --" I began.

"Quite!" said Miss Milnes. "We're ready at last."

I examined the piano, and collected a few cushions belonging to the orchestra which played for the evening show which was entitled "How To Be Trying Yet Not Really Successful."

"Eric," came Miss Milnes' voice, "the entire cast, the entire stage staff, and the entire Shaftesbury Theatre are waiting for you."

I sat down, loosened my collar, and struck a few discords. To my horror I discovered that I had four thumbs on each hand.

An acid voice reached me:

"Eric, you are engaged to play the piano, not tune it."

I started to strum. I raised my eyes. I found that the curtain had gone up. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, seated at desks on the stage, were staring at me.

"Have you finished cleaning that piano?" asked Bob Cherry.

"I was playing it," I said, with what dignity I could muster.

"I told you so," said Johnny Bull.

The rehearsal ran its course, as all rehearsals will.

As I headed for the stage door, I saw David Nixon, the star of the show, coming towards me down some stone steps. I nearly swooned. Here, in the flesh, was the television idol whom I had worshipped for so long from my armchair. I wondered whether he would speak to me.

He did. He said: "Don't block up the gangway!"

Rehearsal followed rehearsal, and my thumbs grew larger and clumsier.

After I had crashed my last chord at the end of the opening performance, a young man leaned over the orchestra rail and spoke to me.

"I was wondering why you played 'Land of Hope and Glory' all through the show," he said politely.

"Sir," I answered frigidly, "that was not 'Land of Hope and Glory,' it was 'Roll Along, Billy Bunter!'"

"I could have sworn it was 'Bluebells of Scotland'," said his fair companion.

On New Year's Eve I decided it would be appropriate to play "Auld Lang Syne" at the end of the show. So, as David Nixon ended his warm little speech to the audience, I struck up "Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot." (At least, that's what I meant it to be.)

The entire cast stood thunderstruck. They forgot to bow to the enthusiastic audience. They just glared at me. Frank Nugent said "I knew that chap was potty," and as the curtain swept down I heard Johnny Bull say "I told you so."

Every evening there was a crowd of autograph hunters at the stage door. I beamed on them all encouragingly, but it didn't have any effect, except on Boxing Day. On that occasion I was buttonholed by a lady in furs, a gentleman in a pepper-and-salt overcoat, and a boy of about twelve.

"Would you please give our son your autograph?" gushed the furry lady.

"Well ---" I smirked, and added modestly: "Of course, you know I'm not ---"

The pepper-and-salt gentleman thrust a Biro into my hand, and the lad held out an expensive autograph book.

"Large and clear, please," said the happy gentleman.

With a flourish I wrote ERIC FAYNE right across a page.

The lady scanned it, and her warm smile faded. She let out a squeal.

"Look, Bertram, it's a nobody. He's ruined Wilfred's book."

"How dare you ruin Wilfred's autograph book? How dare you pass under false pretences? We thought it was Michael Anthony. Wilfred has already got the Beatles and Billy Cotton - and now - you - how dare you?"

I escaped.

I've still got the Biro.

Before you start taking that lot too seriously, I must hasten to add that working with the Bunter Co is a most wonderful experience. It is very satisfying to feel that one is a member of a team - if only a minnow among the whales - like being a member of the Greyfriars footer eleven, off to play St. Jim's. Each doing his best for his side - for the show.

The kindness of everyone, the friendliness of everyone, is something which I shall

never forget. The co-operation is tremendous. For hour after hour, day after day, rehearsals go on, and tempers are seldom if ever allowed to fray.

The company quickly made me feel one of themselves. The stage hands always had a cheery word for the minnow. The stage door keeper could not have been more kindly and courteous if I had been Russ Conway. The ladies on the staff of the auditorium were altogether charming. They used to come down to the orchestra rail for a chat before the theatre doors were opened, and, after the first week, they always brought me a cup of tea and biscuits and passed them over the rail after the interval.

On the last day of the show the theatre manager came down and leaned over the rail. He said: "This is your last day. I hope you have had an enjoyable season, and that you will take away happy memories of the Shaftesbury Theatre."

I assured him that I shall always love the Shaftesbury Theatre.

Usually, after the performance, I would meet Nigel, the Assistant Production Manager, on my way out. Invariably he would say, simply: "Thank you, Eric." And I would reply: "Thank you, Nigel." He was the man who gave me my light signals so expertly.

It was always a joy to hear his "pep" talk to the company, over the intercom, early in the afternoon. He would say: "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. You have exactly half an hour before the curtain rises. I wish you all a successful performance."

David Nixon told me that he had been a keen reader of the Magnet for many years, and was always a Greyfriars fan. He looked at me quizzically. "Another paper I loved ... Was there a paper called the Popular?"

I told him there was.

One afternoon David Griffin (Johnny Bull) sought me out to ask if he could have a copy of Collectors' Digest. I took him one the next day, and I also gave him a copy of the Famous Magnet tale "Johnny Bull On The Run."

Often while the show was on, I used to sit and wonder - and I mean wonder. I would think of the days when I used to buy the Magnet, week after week. The last thing I could ever have dreamed was that one day I should be taking part myself in the presentation of a Greyfriars play in the West End of London.

In those pre-war days they used to say that it would be impossible to stage Greyfriars for the simple reason that it was a sheer impossibility to cast Billy Bunter. Yet Billy Bunter has been perfectly cast, both in Gerald Campion and in his successor, Peter Bridgemont.

The one boy who, in my view, has never been too successfully cast is Harry Wharton. He has proved the most difficult of all. Few members of the audience can realise how difficult it is to cast the boys. This year we had the perfect Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, both held over from last year. In appearance, manner, and speech they could not have been bettered. But outside the pages of the Magnet, boys grow older and bigger. Our perfect Bob and Johnny may be too big by next year. Who can tell?

It could be that this year's Harry Wharton was the best so far. Dark, good looking, with fine eyes, he gave much promise. After a doubtful start, he improved enormously after a performance or two. If he read one or two of the Wharton classics, he might yet make the perfect leader of the Famous Five.

I was almost startled one afternoon to meet Frank Nugent, smoking a cigarette in a corridor. And he was certainly the smallest and probably the youngest of the Five.

People have said to me: "Surely you get bored, seeing the same show day after day." I never did get bored, for the simple reason that something different was always happening. There was the afternoon when the egg broke as Bunter was putting it under his cap. There was another time when I got smothered with egg when Bunter flung out his eggy hands at the hilarious end of the fourth scene. An afternoon when Bunter lost his collar and bow in a scuffle.

"Where's your collar and bow?" asked David Nixon, impromptu.

"I'll tell you when you're older," retorted Bunter.

An afternoon when a scene stuck as it was being lowered, and I received the flashing green light to urge me to let the piano take over from the wind which was sounding over the Tannoy.

The audiences were every bit as fascinating as the players. I was always gratified to see the large number of adults in every audience. On Boxing Day I am sure there were more adults than youngsters in the theatre. The appeal of these shows to young and old alike is very obvious. For this reason I think that the inclusion of the more subtle piece of dialogue here and there is to be welcomed. Such items pass speedily over the heads of children, but make the adults feel that they are also catered for.

At every performance I made friends quickly with a number of the youngsters in the front stalls. They love to have notice taken of them, and it creates a spirit of real bonhomie among their parents.

One afternoon a lad surveyed my piano with his head on one side.

He said slowly: "It's rather an old-fashioned piano, isn't it?"

"We had it sent over specially from Bunter Court," I assured him. He was more than satisfied.

A little girl said to me one day: "The only thing wrong is Bunter's trousers. They are not the same as the other boys'."

"Well," I pointed out, "Bunter is so fat. They have to use three pairs of ordinary trousers to make one pair for Bunter."

Another satisfied customer.

A small boy said to me: "When Mr. Quelch gives Bunter the cane on his bottom, I reckon that David Nixon will make it disappear."

I agreed - though I was uncertain which was to disappear - Quelch's cane or Bunter's bottom.

Sometimes I would impress on the youngsters that the whole show was magic. They were thrilled when, by merely waving my hand in the air, I could make all the lights in the orchestra pit come on, and then cause them all to go out by snapping my fingers.

Parents would come to me after the show and say, in awed voices: "Thank you for talking to my son (or daughter). It's helped to make their afternoon." Now that was nice when folk said things like that. It kind of made me feel a bit important, and it's kind of pleasant to feel a bit important.

I was tickled to death when, during the interval, youngsters would often come and pop ice creams into the pit for me. On the last afternoon of the show I had six. I managed to eat two of them. If Bunter, on the stage, ever caught sight of me wolfing ice creams and then going on to tea and biscuits, he must have felt jealous.

Most delightful of all was to shake hands with Digest readers across the orchestra rail. They came along in their scores, and there was hardly one afternoon during the whole month when I did not have the pleasure of meeting readers, many of whom I had never met before. I was really moved by the loyalty and affection of so many, plenty of whom had come long distances especially to attend the show. Of the long distance folk, there was Jack Wood who had travelled from York; Mr. and Mrs. Whitehead from Fakenham in Norfolk; Les Palmer and his three fine sons from Oxford; Mr. and Mrs. Jim Sutcliffe with their two splendid daughters from Southend; Mr. and Mrs. Ken Ball with a party from near Lincoln, and Mr. and Mrs. Jack Overhill from Cambridge. Can anyone wonder that my month or more at the Shaftesbury Theatre was a period which I shall never forget? My deeply sincere thanks to Digest readers, club members, Old Mods, and all my other friends who came along to make me happy during the run of the show.

I regret to end on a sombre note. I have been compelled to instruct my solicitors, Messrs. Nipper and Handforth, to sue Collectors Digest for libel. In the January issue the Digest reporter wrote, about me: "From the circle he might, at a pinch, have passed for one of the Famous Five, but from the stalls you could see it was Billy Bunter's grandfather in disguise." If that isn't libel, I don't know what is. I wouldn't have minded if they had likened me to Colonel Wharton, Mr. Prout, or (continued on page 12)...

observations and deductions, some good free-for-alls, shadowing, gloomy docks, murky river scenes, shootings, in fact most that we were willing to accept in an SBL of the vintage years. Blake remained completely in character throughout, aloof but lovable, complete with dressing gown and briar pipe in a couple of more homely sequences, and admired and respected by odd characters in the story. Venner wasn't so convincing; he would have been better if he'd been called Coutts. Belford was simply a bumbling assistant with a pronounced accent. But even Pedro was referred to a couple of times and it was good to hear all the familiar names in our own home. Unfortunately the film was screened late - it didn't start till 11 p.m. and finished at about 12.30. Equally unfortunately, when the sequences were interrupted by "commercials," the film was reintroduced with a printed sub-title of "Meet Sexton Black" and that jarred! And in one of our local TV weeklies I read the words "Sexton Blake of Scotland Yard solves a difficult crime." But the other TV book was more accurate in saying "Sexton Blake and Scotland Yard join forces to solve a difficult case." It was a touch of the old days and I loved it. I wasn't the least critical. I couldn't afford to be. It's the only Blake film I have ever seen. And it was Blake the way I like to remember him. (Just one odd note. A young girl who helped Blake and Tinker was called "Nobby Clark" and it was the first time I'd ever heard of a female of that name!)

A MINNOW AMONG THE WHALES (continued from page 8)...

even Gosling, the Porter! But Billy Bunter's grandfather! No, sir! I am suing the writer of the report, the editor of C.D., and York Duplicating Services. I hope to be able to retire in comfort on the proceeds.

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