



Vol.1. No.11

Price 1s.1d

Post Free

NOVEMBER 1947

Next Issue : December 1947

Editor Miscellaneous Section:

Herbert Leckenby, Telephone Exchange,
C/o Central Registry, Northern Command, York.

FROM THE EDITOR'S CHAIR:

Of a truth these are busy days, the monthly C.D. to be prepared, the material for the Annual growing into a bulky file, daily a pile of letters to answer. In addition the work whereby I earn my daily bread. In that room, close by a barrack square, I oft times find my thoughts straying to Greyfriars, St. Jin's, and Baker Street, when I should be concentrating on Aldershot, Catterick and other places where soldiers dwell. This is a rather long-winded way of apologising to those who have sent along their orders and adverts. for the Annual and received no acknowledgement. Let me assure - you that they have been carefully checked and filed and at the same time thank everyone for a very fine response. The orders received have already nearly

reached the figure we had estimated as the likely total.

And as we grow nearer the day of publication we find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma—how to find room for all the features we have prepared, or are preparing. Let's have a look at some of them. First the "Collectors' Who's Who". That alone looks like filling about ten pages, but we're not going to cut that down, for it really is going to be useful. Incidentally, there are still some who have not given us details of their collections, so come along you who haven't, even if with only a few lines. Where we do receive no particulars we will just insert name and address and papers in which we believe they are interested. Next, the "100 years of Boys' Journals". No chance for the blue pencil there, and, with the introduction, another five or six pages are swallowed up. The "Gem, Magnet and Schoolboy's Own Library Key List", that remarkable result of the labours of Roger Jenkins and John Shaw. I'd scrap the whole of the Annual before I would interfere with that. Ditto, the equally praiseworthy effort on the "Nelson Lees" which came from Jack Murtagh in far off New Zealand. "Serials of the 'Union Jack'", "Famous Characters in Sexton Blake Stories", and other intriguing articles, tapped out on my tireless co-editor's typewriter. Shall I interfere with them? Not Pygmalion likely!

What else is there? Oh, plenty! "Milestones of the Magnet and other Popular Papers", "Old Papers Never Die", "Detectives in Schoolboy Fiction", "How My First Collection Started". Well, the latter, written by myself, could be held over for the monthly as it may form the first of a series "Recollections of a Collector", the second of which would be entitled "A Mountain of Bloods". Oh and did you Nelson Leesites know there was once a real individual with the name of your favourite tec Well, there was! He lived 100 years ago and wrote pantomime. Thanks to Mr. Hugh W. Fennell we shall be able to tell you something about him. Well, that's some of the factual stuff, how about the fiction? There'll be at least three stories, a

clever little Nelson Lee effort by Jack Cook "The Careful Murder Case", a good humoured skit on the "bloods" "The Gristly Terror of the Grisly Marshes" by C.W. Daniel, and thirdly "An Amazing Adventure" by Jack Corbett. I'm not going to tell you what this is about, but I can assure you it will greatly interest the Hamilton group, and others too.

And, oh, I musn't forget the illustrations we hope to reproduce. Famous No. 1's, including the "Gem", "Nelson Lee", "Boy's Leader", "Boys Friend Library", a delightful page of Christmas greetings from old Union Jack authors, sketches by some of our own clever artists, etc. etc.

Well, there you are; it may be we shall offer more pages than we originally intended, and hang the expense - if we can get the paper! Anyway we've got to get 'em all in and so, having whetted your appetites I'll leave the Annual for the time being.

:: :: ::

In the time that has elapsed since No. 10, quite a number of you have been reading "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School", for the contents of my mail bag tell me so. On other pages a selection from these letters appear. We think the space devoted to them is justified, for its a real event! You've evidently enjoyed it. There's just a word of criticism here and there, but its genuine, honest, criticism, and so no one will object to that.

:: :: ::

In our last issue I published a letter from Granville T. Waine, in which he invited me to send copies of papers along, badly in need of some repair. I gladly accepted. Back they came again in a few days with covers securely replaced & looking almost as good as new. A far different job than my own clumsy efforts with a paste brush. Thanks a lot, Granville!

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Any more adverts. for the Annual. There's not much time now!

Yours sincerely,

Herbert Leckenby

THE EVENT OF THE SEASON

Greyfriars awakens from it's long Sleep

by

Herbert Leckenby

"Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School", after many delays, is out at last and a grand production it surely is! The publishers, Messrs. Charles Skilton Ltd. are to be heartily congratulated, especially in view of the difficulties they have been up against. The book is printed on excellent paper, the type is just the right size, the dust jacket is very effective, and will look well on the bookstall though maybe copies won't be allowed to remain there for long - not when the famous name catches the eye.

The dust jacket claims a print of 10,000. Readers of the C.D. know that there is to be a 2nd one of the same impressive number. No doubt a big proportion of these will be claimed by those who were avid readers of the "Magnet" before it's sudden demise in 1940. Already many of these, youths, fathers, and quite a lot of grandfathers will have been transported to that corner in Kent, that magic land of eternal youth, there to revel with the inhabitants of Greyfriars once again. It will be agreed that the hand of the master has not lost it's cunning, that he has risen from his nigh eight year's rest like a giant refreshed.

Whilst we ordinary mortals are older by almost a decade, we find all the familiar faces just as of yore, and the Friardale and Courtfield country has not been changed one whit. The kindly Dr. Locke, venerable in 1908, still rules over his boys and the masters are unchanged. Wingate is still

Captain of the school and Mr. Quelch still presides over the unruly Remove. Even Uncle Clegg and Mrs. Mible serve out tuck; on almost pre-war lines.

It may be said that the story is reminiscent of many a one we have read, but who of the faithful would have it otherwise? Bunter is as hopeless as ever, and is warned that if he does not improve vastly by the end of term, his face will be seen at Greyfriars no more. As the holidays approach the Owl appears to be doomed. Then, when the master of the Remove is being attacked by a footpad, the stout one, who has been hidden in a tree to take vengeance on his master, falls on the villain, and into the good graces of Mr. Quelch.

And so Bunter remains at Greyfriars to entertain us once again in the second Billy Bunter book we are told is now in hand.

There are several illustrations by the veteran R.J. Macdonald, so familiar to lovers of the "Gem".

I put down this book, published at 7/6, in all the dignity of stiff covers and grey dust jacket then picked up a slim 16 page, red covered "Magnet" produced for a halfpenny in 1908. I thought of those 1,600 odd numbers issued between, plus - an interval of nearly eight years, to this longest and much heralded Greyfriars story in 1947, and wondered if it was not the most remarkable achievement in the whole history of story writing. If anyone can think of a more extraordinary one I should be glad to hear of it.

* * *

Welcome Back, Bunter.

For all readers of the "Collectors' Digest", the event of the year has been the publication in recent weeks of "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School" from the pen of the wonder-writer of the age, Frank Richards. The crisis, the film shortage, the end of the basic, the arrival of the twins, and every-

thing else, have all faded into oblivion beside Billy Bunter's comeback. We have waited seven long years for this great event, reading and re-reading the old stories in the meantime. We have heard the pessimists say that old Billy was dead - as if he ever could be!

And now he is back. A tragedy of the war was the end, or the suspension at least, of the Magnet and the Gem. The triumph of the peace is the return of Greyfriars.

Every reader must have been delighted at the excellence of the publication of "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars". The type, the binding, the dust jacket - all leave very little to be desired, and reflect great credit upon Messrs. Skilton.

Psychologically, perhaps, as far as we old readers are concerned, it is a pity that either Chapman or Shields could not have illustrated the story. Macdonald's work is first-class, but he is totally associated with the Gem and Tom Merry. I doubt whether, in thirty years, he drew more than half-a-dozen pictures in the Magnet. He is as out of place with Bunter as Shields or Chapman would be with Tom Merry or Gussy.

Of the story - well, the main thing is that Bunter is back. If there is too much Bunter in the story, we have only ourselves to blame. We sent up the cry "We want Bunter", when what we really meant was "We want Greyfriars". Mr. Richards has written to please his hosts of admirers - and he has succeeded. The old gems of clever writing which we love so much are all there.

The story is not a great one as the "Stacey" series was a great one; it has no fine character paintings as the Redwing stories and the Harry Wharthen stories had; it lacks the bright, warm descriptions of the old holiday series; and there are no tense, dramatic moments such as we knew when Ferrers Locke was introduced.

But Mr. Richards has done his best to please us all. He has, as far as possible, introduced all the grand people we used to know. But the Grey-

friars stage is a crowded one, and it is impossible to paint character pictures with huge crowds on the stage.

Perhaps some of us are a little disappointed that, in this story, Mr. Richards does not seem to feel that it is a great occasion - a day to be marked with a white stone. To us it is a very great occasion. We should have liked a fanfare of trumpets on the opening page - a brief description of Greyfriars, nestling in its corner of the Kent coast; we should have liked a brief idea of what happened to it during the war - probably Greyfriars was evacuated to the north, for a great public school could not have remained where it was; we should have liked, for one restful page of pure delight, a calm yet grandiose welcome home to fiction of the greatest school and the greatest characters in living memory.

Though "Billy Hunter of Greyfriars School" does not do full justice to the most thrilling event of the year, we lay it lovingly aside as the first Greyfriars story for many moons, and wish to the maestro, Mr. Frank Richards, many, many more years of successful work with our favourite characters. May his output grow swifter and swifter.

And, one day, we hope to see Tom Merry again smiling at us from his attractive dust-jacket.

* * *

Eric Payne.

A Review

by

John R. Shaw

The long awaited "Hunter" book having arrived at last, Magnet enthusiasts will be eager to compare it with the Greyfriars stories of pre-war days to see whether the characters and general atmosphere of the school seem the same as formerly. It is interesting to speculate as to the reasons for such differences as may be detected. The author returned to writing about his beloved characters after many

years of stress and strain of war, which had a mellowing effect on many people. It is not difficult to perceive that Frank Richards has an even greater affection for Greyfriars, and its characters, than in past years. A story, the writing of which gave so much pleasure to the author is certain to give much delight to an enthusiastic reader. The book does this in full measure.

Bunter is told by Mr. Quelch that he will have to leave the school at the end of the term if he does not mend his ways. Of course, we know that, though Bunter just cannot change his ways, everything will come right for him in the end. Things do come right, but how should not be stated here - suffice to say that Bunter saved himself from this punishment by performing one of his rare - very rare - courageous deeds.

The Greyfriars characters are as well depicted as in the old days: the boys are the same, but somehow more likeable. The chapters concerning Coker and Fish, are among the best in the book. There is also an excellent chapter about Vernon Smith. Mr. Quelch is stern and unbending as of old. Bunter is as greedy and dishonest; though one feels sympathy for him throughout the story.

Some readers will regret that there is only one chapter solely concerning Harry Wharton and Co. There chief purpose is to act as foils to Bunter: they are his stooges in this story. But what does this matter? The book is supposed to be about Bunter: it is certain to increase greatly his already world-wide popularity.

* * *

Extracts from other Letters

My word, its great; only one word of criticism There is perhaps just a little too much Bunter; - nevertheless, I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I guess Frank Richards will be snowed under with congratulations. . . . Jim Shepherd, Sheffield, 7.

Quite up to Frank Richards high standard.

L.M. Allen, Sheffield, 7.

Both my boy, Dennis, and I, are delighted with the Bunter Book. To say it comes up to expectations is, I think, high praise, for Mr. Hamilton has always set such a high standard.

R.G.Hudson, Leeds, 7.

I received my Bunter Book to-day. Oh, boy! Just now my son, Gordon, is buried in it, and forgetting his dinner.

Tom Sinclair, Leeds, 7.

(One likes to hear of these cases of father and son reading it. H.L.)

Here we present an article that is different, an article that has originality. It is written by yet another enthusiast, and after reading it we feel sure that all our readers will hope, with us, that we shall have more from the same pen.

"These we have Loved in the Old Days"

by

Frank Osborn

In the same way that the half forgotten lilt of a one-time popular music hall chorus, heard on the radio or recalled by some mention of the passing of a star of the days when we were very young, impinges on the consciousness, recalling incidents bitter-sweet to the memory, so did the perusal of the first copy of "The Story Paper Collector" that came into my hands bring back to me the dear, dead past.

Old books and papers, old authors and artists, the old characters we loved, the faces of old pals with whom we swapped a "Union Jack" for a "Gem", or a "Scout" for a "Marvel" - all flit before the eyes of a sentimentalist. Shining through, there appears to be now, as I write, the picture of three happy smiling faces, the cover of an old "Boys Friend 3d Library" - "Tom Merry's Conquest". I would give much to see again that book.

"Rogues of the Fiery Cross", the best serial "Chums" ever published, by S.Walkey; "The Pirates of

El Dorado"; "Yoho for the Spanish Main!" all by the same author. Do you remember them?

The early Threepenny Libraries too, I loved. "Pete's Schooldays", "Pete's Christmas", "Wolves of the Deep", "Lion against Bear", and "Wings of Gold", the last three by that master of the boys' story, Sidney Drew, "King of Scouts" by Wm. Murray Graydon and that wonderful story of Sexton Blake, "Lobangu and Troubletummy" by Cecil Hayter, I dare swear - "The Mammoth Hunters".

"Chums of Wycliffe" by Jack North, "The Boys of St. Basil's" by Henry St. John, "Viscount Dick's Schooldays" by Charles J. Mansford. These also I remember, and many more.

Nelson Lee is there also. And Sexton Blake, with Gordon Marsden Plummer, he of the agate eyes, in the old pink covered U.J.'s, with Yvonne, Professor Kew and Count Carlac.

Jack, Sam and Pete, where are these gallant comrades now I wonder? You happy, carefree world wanderers, you were very real to me. I like to think you are still globe trotting as of yore. S. Clarke Hook, I salute your memory.

Happily Charles Hamilton is still with us. He who created Tom Merry, Manners, Monty Lowther, the one and only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Harry Whar-ton, and the immortal Billy Bunter and a host of others whose figures pass before my eyes in eternal youth - he is still with us, with vigour undimmed. Perhaps we shall meet them all again, perhaps the quads of St. Jim's and Greyfriars will echo once again to their merry laughter, perhaps once more old Figgy will blush when Cousin Ethel's name is mentioned, or he might ever attempt to make another and more powerful fig-pudding. Let us hope so.

The old B.O.P. too, is not to be left out. Who can forget Talbot Baines Reed and "The Cook House at Fellsgarth" or Gordon Stables' fine tales of adventure on sea and land, or his hints on the keeping of rabbits, white mice and other creatures dear to the boys' hearts?

And then there were Kettle & Co. of the old Aldine Diamond Library; Alec. Jim and Tinpot of the "Boy's Best"; and the many fine serials of the early "Scouts", of which mention may be made of "The Phantom Battleship" and "Kiddie of the Camp".

All these we loved in the old days.

NOTE: Mr. Osborn wrote his article some time ago. He will now have had his wish so far as Greyfriars is concerned.

COLLECTOR'S MISCELLANY: The oldest Journal for Collectors of Old Boys Books. 96 numbers issued. Profusely illustrated. No.10 (5th series) now ready. 1s.3d post free. Parks, Printer, Saltburn-by-Sea.

WANTED: British Film Magazines especially 1938-1947. Picturegoer, Picture Show, etc. loose or bound. Please write what you have. Will pay 1d each for each single issue or trade one U.S. Movie Magazine for five British. C.F. Rickard, 2026 West 41st Ave., Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Magnets WANTED urgently, between 1922 and 1930. Good price paid. Have Magnets 1936 to 1940 for exchange. Corbett, 49 Glyn Farm Road, Quinton, Birmingham, 32.

WANTED: Exchanges - old boys books. Lists exchanged. All letters answered. Anything old. Henry J.H. Bartlett, Peas Hill, Shipton Gorge, Bridport, Dorset.

WANTED: Magnets between 1929 - 32. Good condition essential. Please state price. John W. Gocher, Junr. Victoria Cottage, Constitution Hill, Sudbury, Suffolk.

WANTED: Early issues of Gem, Magnet, Pluck, Dreadnought, early 1914 and 1915. Eric Fayne, 23 Grove Road, Surbiton.

NELSON LEES for Sale or Exchange. Sexton Blake Bust. Offers invited. Allen, 3 Montgomery Drive, Sheffield, 7.

WANTED: Sexton Blake Idbs. Union Jacks, and Detective Weeklies. W. Colcombe, 256 South Avenue, Southend-on-Sea, Essex.



Letter Box

18th October, 1947.

Dear Herbert Heckenby,

Thank you for your letter with the C.D. Yes, I like the cover - likewise the contents. I had quite a spot of nostalgia looking at the cover of the old "Boys of England". How well I remember my eagerness for it on Fridays, way back in the early eighties. It really was a good paper. Odd that it should have lasted 33 years - just as long as the Magnet in later days.

Mr. Puckrin's article on "Masters of Greyfriars" interested me very much. I hope that the spot of bother alluded to in your editorial won't materialise - but really the paper position seems to be going from bad to worse.

The Bunter book really is out at last, after so many delays. I am told that post orders are being filled first, and hope you have your copy by this time. Letters are coming in about it, all of them very pleasant reading - but many point out that Bunter's celebrated check trousers are missing - a sad oversight on the part of the artist! I confess that I missed this in the proofs. I am taking the matter up with the artist; and in the next volume Bunter will receive his checks if he doesn't receive his postal orders! Some of my kind readers tell me that Bunter is immortal, and if this be so, obviously he cannot be made to pass in his checks!

By the way, I have been asked to write something about Bunter for production in Braille, for the entertainment of the blind, I like the idea, and Bunter in "Braille" will be rather a curiosity.

I am looking forward to the Annual.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely,

Frank Richards.

NOTE:

The Yorkshire Evening Post (Leeds) referred to the stories in Braille a short time ago, and mentions something that Frank Richards doesn't - that he wrote them without payment. Editor.

* * *

ATTENTION! NELSON LEE PANS:

By the courtesy of Mr. Jack Cook, we are able to reproduce a letter he received recently from your favourite author. Its what we have been waiting for, but, oh, what a pity Mr. Brooks has lost interest in those stories which charm you, his admirers, still. Ed.

* * *

13th October, 1947.

Dear Jack,

I've been so busy - working and holidaying - that I can't remember whether I replied to the letter (undated) in which you enclosed a stamped addressed envelope. If I have replied, chuck this letter in the fire; if I haven't, here's saying I'm sorry for the delay.

About the 4d Schoolboys Pocket Library; yes, yours truly is guilty, as you guessed. I wrote quite a number of school stories for Swann's, based on my old St. Frank's stories, during the early days of the war, when, owing to paper restrictions my novel output was considerably curtailed. Why they should have printed one under my own name I don't know. I hope you liked these school yarns - which in my opinion, are far and away better than my old St. Frank's yarns.

With regard to the statement in the "Collector's Digest" I am afraid this is perfectly true. My interest in the "Old Lee days" is dead, the same as

the "Nelson Lee Library". I am fully occupied with those two blokes, "Berkeley Gray" and "Victor Gunn".

Congratulations on the publication of your first fairy tale book. I would very much like a copy, if you can spare one. As for hints on writing school tales, I'm afraid I can't give any. It's not a thing that can be learned. You can either write school stories or you can't. I suppose it's a gift. Fairy tale writing, I imagine, is a similar kind of gift.

With very best wishes,
Sincerely,
E. S. Brooks.

Of Interest to "Magnet" fans and Music Lovers
generally

Mr. Thomas A. Johnson, L.R.A.M., A.R.M.C.M., of Raby Cottage, Raby Park, Neston, Wirral, Cheshire, inspired by the stories he read in the "Magnet" has written a suite of piano pieces concerning the famous school. The suite contains six movements - Greyfriars, Bob Cherry, Billy Bunter, Mr. Queloh, Alonzo Todd and Harry Wharton & Co. A dedicated copy has been presented to Frank Richards, who was naturally much gratified.

When conditions are easier, Mr. Johnson hopes to have them published. All readers will wish him luck.

Ed.

WANTED: Penny Pictorial Weekly (1920 period). St. George's Magazine (sold in schools around 1920). Chatterbox 1911, Boys Friends Nos. 922, 938, 939, 951, 962, 996 onwards. Many various books to offer in exchange. W.H. Thompson 114, Handley Road, New Whittington, Chesterfield.

FOR SALE: 50 Populars 1921-24, 53 Marvels 1921-22, 75 Young Britain 1923-24, 124 Nelson Lees 1927-29, 63 Gems 1938-39. All good condition. W.H. Neate, Wenlock, Burnham, Bucks.

Advertise in the "Collector's Digest"

The second and final instalment of the late F.N.Wearing's article on:-

TIM PIPPIN AND OTHER YOUNG FOLKS' STORIES

Where is it now I wonder? I was offered recently, by one who specialises in juvenile literature of the past, a copy of the shilling edition for £3 fifteen shillings, so it must be getting scarce. When Henderson later on started "Nuggets", "The Garland" and "Varieties" the stories of Tim Pippin and other "Young Folks" serials were republished with the "Puck" (John Proctor) and Wm. Boucher illustrations. Proctor owed everything to the inspiration he derived from Roland Quiz. His drawings of giants were wonderful and I can still remember "Giant Big-feet", "Old Bodysnatcher", "Uncle Two Heads", whose cocked hat provided Tim Pippin with a ready-made boat.

Proctor's vivid drawings are largely responsible for the memory. John Proctor's son became headmaster of the principal school at Mafeking and his grandson distinguished himself in World War one, earning the Victoria Cross. The illustrator who belonged to the same school as Tenniel was just as imaginative as the "Punch" cartoonist. Giants were wonderfully drawn and remarkable for the contrast and the drama of expression. Some of these giants were terrible personages, while others were by no means unaffable. "Young Folks" had many drawings by W.M.B. (W.M. Bowles). I have a Xmas number of "Weekly Budget" 1891 which has a fine cover illustration, size 24 x 15 drawn in his characteristic style depicting a variety of Xmas scenes. I recollect a friend who had a large scrapbook filled with Proctor's "Tim Pippin" illustrations cut from "Young Folks". What vandalism! He only wanted the pictures, the text did not interest him. 1936 saw a reprint of "Giantland" issued by Joiner & Steele in a handsome volume, unabridged with Proctor drawings. Slightly reduced in size the price was 8s.6d. "Young Folks" attracted the budding writers and journalists of the seventies and eighties. Among them were A.C. Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe later on)

Peter Keary of "Pearsons Weekly", J.N. Pentelow, otherwise Jack North, John C. Rowe, who wrote many a fine yarn for "The Marvel", "Pluck" and "Union Jack" in their 1st days. Finally R.A.H. Goodyear, who has a host of well written school stories to his credit. Issued by prominent publishers, a truly worthy record had "Young Folks".

FINIS

WANTED: Aldine Publications, Turpins, Duvals, etc. Landy, 4, Nuneaton Road, Dagenham, Essex.

WANTED: Nelson Lees, Old Series, particularly Nos. 102, 103, 220, 230, also about 80 issues between Nos. 1 and 271. Name your own price. Have hundreds of duplicate copies for exchange. J. Murtagh, Selwood Road, Hastings, New Zealand.

IF ITS MAGNETS AND GEMS you're after send your numbers required along to William Martin, 93 Hillside, Stonebridge Park, London, N.W.10, "Phone Willesdon 4474. Always a large selection in stock, both early and late numbers. Prices upon application. If I have not got what you want, names put on waiting list. Strict rotation. Satisfaction assured.

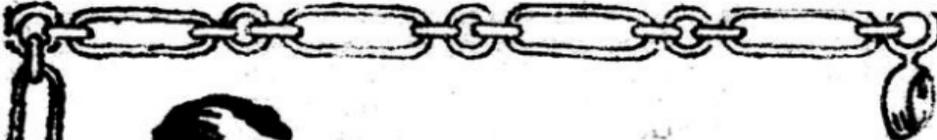
GOOD PRICES offered for Bound Volumes of early Magnets, also loose Magnets, between 1908 and 1929. Eric Payne, 23 Grove Road, Surbiton.

Special for No. 12 - "Forever Bunter" - Eric Payne at his provocative best.

Articles with a Yuletide flavour will be welcomed for the next issue. If written on typewriter, please type to 51 spaces per line or under NOT OVER 51 SPACES.

"An Astounding Adventure" by Jack Corbett, of particular interest to "Magnet" Collectors. Its in the C.D. Annual.

"The Careful Murder Case" - a short story of Nelson Lee, by Jack Cook. It appears in the C.D. Annual.



BLAKIANA



ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO
H.M. Bond, 10 Erw Wen, Rhiwbina, Cardiff.

THE ROUND TABLE

A brief chat this month, for the Zenith item by Rex Dolphin is going to take up most of the room we have allotted to Blakiana, but I must remark on a new book that has just been published. Again, a disguised Sexton Blake has been presented to an un-witting public. In his new book (the first to be published in bound volume form) "Murder on the Mall" (Wright & Brown 4s.6d), Anthony Parsons introduces us to Ruston Carr and his assistant George Mansell, both ex Scotland Yard men, so the author tells us, but in actual fact they are the ghosts of Blake and Tinker, for "Murder on the Mall" is a rehash of "The Loot of France" (S.B.L. 3rd Series, No. 87). The original prologue has been eliminated and most of the characters names altered, but otherwise the reprint is almost word for word like the original. I'm wondering what Tinker would say if he knew that HIS ghost is "big and bulky, with huge hands and a round red face"? I have been waiting for the new Parsons volume for a long while now but must admit that I was disappointed to find that the A.P. has allowed a Blake story to be so handled. No doubt

the book will make a hit with those who don't know their Blake, but it will certainly not please those who have followed the master detective through the years.

H Bond

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ZENITH

by
Rex Dolphin

Sacred to the Memory of Zenith, who was accidentally killed by a falling wall during the Storm of 30th April, 1918.

Thus runs the inscription on the coverstone of a grave in the shadow of the ruined Lindisfarne Abbey on Holy Island off the Northumberland coast. And yet we read of Monsieur Zenith in action during World War II, when he was a guerrilla leader in Jugo-Slavia.

The mystery of Zenith's death was mentioned in Sexton Blake Annual No.2, in which the ed-



Zenith the Albino

itor gave a supposed explanation. He said that Zenith was indeed dead, and that cases published after his death were of earlier adventures. These earlier adventures could not be published before, as the case-books containing the records had been stolen by Zenith's gang. When Blake recovered the books, the stories were then written up.

A very ingenious, but entirely "phoney" explanation. Evidently that editor had not searched very deeply among the Blake files.

Mr. Maurice Bond, Editor of "Blakiana", mentioned this matter in Collector's Digest No. 6, and gave it as his opinion that the S.B. Annual editor had tried to "kill off" Zenith. He was, however, incorrect in this assumption, as there actually exists a story by Anthony Skene in which Zenith was killed. Being a lifelong admirer of both Blake and Zenith, I made it my business to search the files for a true explanation, and now give it, with full documentary evidence.

The recorded history of Zenith the Albino starts with the story "A Duel to the Death", published in Union Jack No. 837 dated 25th October, 1919. Sexton Blake had been for some months engaged in different cases, the crimes in which showed signs of having been planned by the same master-mind - a master-mind who had never shown himself personally. Blake was staying at an hotel in Newcastle-on-Tyne during one very stormy night, and after a terrific clap of thunder, all the lights went out. He told Tinker to re-light the gas. Then -

A voice came out of the darkness close beside him - the voice of a stranger. "Leave it to me!"

The rich deep tones were cultured and commanding, yet bore such a burden of sadness that one longed to behold the being from whom they came.

One by one the gaslights were re-lit, and Tinker found himself gazing at a young and handsome man in full evening dress.

The stranger turned to Sexton Blake.

"Ah, Mr. Blake", he said, "I must apologise for this intrusion". He removed his hat with a flourish and exposed the strange fact that he was a true albino, his hair being white as snow, while his eyes glowed like rubies in the incandescent light.

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me" said Sexton Blake.

"Alas!" said the beautiful voice of the stranger, "Your fame is world-wide, while my name is unknown". Then he added with a bow: "I call myself Zenith!"

It transpired that Zenith had wished to meet face to face the man who had thwarted his schemes. That was the manner, so typical of the man's childish love of the theatrical, in which Zenith introduced himself to Blake and Blake-readers, and the long fight began.

Zenith, the Albino! The man's very appearance was enough to excite interest and wonderment. And that appearance was to become very well known to Sexton Blake, the police, the underworld, and the followers of Blake's adventures, during the years to come.

The broad-shouldered, athletic, slim figure perfectly fitted out in impeccable evening dress and silk hat, the elegant bearing, the elaborate manners, the ebony stick and gold cigarette case. Above all, the startling whiteness of his face and hair against the black of his clothes, and the crimson-irised eyes. The colouring of his face rather took ones attention away from its shape and quality - long, ascetic, virile, intelligent, with a determined yet reckless mouth.

His physical peculiarities were so accentuated that they were very difficult to conceal by disguise, so usually he scorned disguise, flaunting and brazening out his own unique personality. When he did use disguise, dark spectacles were a necessary feature, so we often found him in the role of a half-blind beggar or an Anglo-Indian, though once he was able to get a chemical from Leon Kestrel which tem-

porarily coloured his eyes and enabled other disguises possible.

The man's mental make-up was equally startling as his physical. His dominating thought was that his colouring made him an outcast from society. He likened himself to a white rook. "The normal black rooks make it their business to exterminate the monstrosity. He fights, fights, fights, until he dies. And in the same fashion must I, Zenith, the Albino, fight - fight - fight!" And yet, paradoxically, because he was of royal blood, he considered himself superior to ordinary mortals. He was absolutely without fear, except of captivity. To die would be a release from his curse, but imprisonment! "I am a wild creature, who would die a thousand deaths rather than face captivity!" He carried a poisoned cigarette against that happening.

He liked to claim freedom from all human passions and emotions, knowing no hate, love, anger or pity. But that claim was an overstatement. He often showed himself to be human, as in his desire for friendship with Blake, his hatred of treachery, his love of power over men, his queer conception of sportsmanship, his passionate love of jewellery (except for rubies, which he hated because they reminded him of his eyes), his superstition, and his gesture of sending wedding presents of jewellery to the heroines of the "happy endings". Zenith was always happiest when fighting - because the excitement enabled him to forget that he was an outcast. Opium also helped him to forget. He often smoked opium-laden cigarettes, or, seated on a black divan, in a room furnished entirely in black, indulged in a "pipe", waited on by his Japanese servants.

He exacted immediate obedience from his followers, who were for the most part loyal. Those who weren't soon learned to be. As a prince of the League of the Golden Last, that terrible secret society, he word was law. But he had nothing but contempt for these "jackals", as he called them. Contempt, too, for the big shots whom he came up against, especially the more brutish type. He would

allow no man to address him on terms of familiarity, except Sexton Blake.

His personal relations with Blake were as paradoxical as the man himself. He hated Blake for unsettling his schemes, for being the representative of society while he was the outcast. There wasn't room on the earth for both of them. He tried to kill Blake in a hundred different ways. Yet of all the men he had ever met, Blake was the only one he would call "friend". There was a certain code of sportsmanship between Sexton Blake and Zenith. They were enemies, yet there were things they didn't do. If either gave his word, the other knew he'd keep it. There was no treachery. There were even occasions when they fought side by side against a common enemy.

The physical tussles between the two were a highlight of their adventures. They were almost equally matched in skill at wrestling, boxing, fencing, and rough-housing, and their fights were long, tough, and exhausting. Zenith was made of silk and steel, but his physique was not equal to Blake's, being lighter and undermined by opium. He'd never allow his underlings to touch Blake, saying that the detective should have a gentleman's death.

The adventure during which Zenith was killed is recorded in U.J.No.898, dated 25th December, 1920. "The Case of The Toxic Tulips". Zenith's League of The Last had some sort of affiliation to the Criminals' Confederation, and Blake discovered that the Confederation was holding a convention among the ruins of Lindisfarne Abbey on a certain night. There is a certain discrepancy about the date of this meeting, for in this story it is given as "the 26th" while Zenith's gravestone says "the 30th". Blake, Coutts and Tinker managed to get there on the convention night. They saw Kestrel, Zenith, Reece and Waldo, draw lots for the chair of Honour, Kestrel winning.

The detectives made an attack, but a terrific thunderstorm, of more than tropical fury broke, and there was confusion, amongst which most of the crooks

escaped. A wall of the ruined abbey was blown down, striking Zenith.

Zenith died, quoting Shakespeare, and pleading with Sexton Blake to shake hands with him, his greatest fear being that the detective would refuse. But Blake took his hand.

"He reverently closed the eyes of the dead .. then he turned, and took a farewell glance at that which had been Zenith. Inscrutably, the great detective looked down at the enemy who was an enemy no longer. It may be that in that land of shadows, the curse of albinism, the white hair and pink eyes, which had set Zenith apart from mankind, was a curse no longer. For the bloodless lips were smiling, as if death were happier than life.

I really believe that here, after a run of just over a year, Anthony Skene thought he had finally disposed of the Albino, in the same way that Canon Doyle thought he had once disposed of Sherlock Holmes.

Then the U.J. editor began to receive letters asking for Zenith back again, and the pressure became so heavy that something had to be done. The first intimation that Zenith was returning came in the story "The Case of The Thirteenth Bowl", U.J.No.919. This story featured Nihil, "Zenith's successor", but Nihil was not a character to be compared with Zenith. In this adventure, Blake speaks a few words to a heavily masked man, whose voice, that deep rich voice, was that of Zenith. Nihil is finally overcome, but the memory of that meeting led Blake later to go back to Holy Island to inspect Zenith's grave, he was also aware again of a new power in the underworld.

It is in U.J.No.928, "The Return of Zenith, the Albino" that the tombstone inscription is printed. This adventure introduces Frau Krantz, whom most Zenith admirers know. Blake is up against her and the African secret society, the Leopard Men. He traces their hide-out to a disused pit. Here he meets none other than - Zenith!

"You thought I was safely buried on Holy Island? You have probably seen the stone which purports to cover my remains? So. A certain able seaman who died of pneumonia was granted the honour of taking my place. I am, you see, very much alive. I grant that when you left me, on that grey morning after the storm, I was very near the Valley of the Shadow - very near indeed. But some fool genius of a doctor who had thrown in his lot with the Criminals' Confederation, thought fit to return and drag me back to the world of men. He cared nothing for me, or he would have let me sleep. I was an experiment. He transfused into my body the blood of a negro who was one of the crew on the yacht; and now he is writing a book about it, so that other interfering fools may do likewise."

Zenith laughed, that familiar mocking laugh which was sadder than tears.

"And now it appears that this fellow whose blood flows in my veins was a medicine man, a witch doctor and consequently I am ju-ju, or something of the sort. This precious society of his obeys me as if I were the great mumbo-jumbo himself."

There is Mr. Skene's own explanation of the mystery of Zenith's resurrection, and I think we must accept it, fantastic though it is.

Curiously enough, the stories that followed the re-birth of Zenith were far superior to those that preceded his "death". I believe that Mr. Skene was gaining experience and improving his inimitable style - that has hardly changed. But his power of plotting and story-weaving, and his inventiveness, have improved tremendously.

The Laegue of the Last gradually faded out, and Zenith became for the most part a lone wolf, although he had associates with whom he worked from time to time. Among the best known of these were Frank Oyani, his Jap servant, Frau Krantz, 3 a.m. Smith, and Captain Starlight.

Zenith appeared in many and varied adventures as long as Blake stories were printed weekly.

Many of these adventures took place in Northumberland and Durham, which, I suspect, are Mr. Skene's "home ground". The unique character of the man, the blend of theatricality with convincingsness, the mystery of his background (royal blood, Eton and Oxford education, his mastery of the violin), made him a favourite with readers.

Memorable were the stories in which he joined forces with Leon Kestrel and Wu Ling, "for the purpose of selling Britain's secrets to a group of foreign powers and eliminating Sexton Blake". But Blake and Tinker, Coutts, Harker, and Yvonne on his side. These cases are recorded in U.J. Nos. 956 and 969.

Then there was the fantastic case in which Zenith, the Ex-Kaiser, and other dethroned princes and pretenders plotted to upset Britain's defences by a fleet of planes raining corrosive acid on important centres, while an invading army came by plane from Europe. Here we are told that Zenith was a Prince of Roumania - and part of this plot was to "regain his rightful throne." (U.J. No. 996).

In late 1930 Zenith acquired the chemical known as Formula 4, which could destroy all known substances except rubber. He used it to open safes, and before Blake finally deprived him of it, he'd amassed a million pounds' worth of jewels and cash. Then he commenced war on society with a giant organisation and a fleet of tanks, but this type of thing made a poor story compared with his old lone-wolf clashes with Blake.

Zenith appeared in *Detective Weekly* in a series of non-Blake adventures, during the time when Blake stories were not being printed. Zenith was the central character, the "hero", but these stories were not up to the Blake standard. He was always at his best when fighting Sexton Blake. Zenith had apparently done England a service on a mission to Europe, and the police had given him a clean slate. He'd met Princess Astra and Prince Oscar of Millenia in Europe, and they became his accomplices in England,

the three being known as "The White Trinity", as they were all white-headed. They had occasional clashes with the police, but most of their warfare was against other crooks. This series ended with Zenith being severely wounded and taken to hospital. Astra and Oscar were recalled to their native land because of a revolution. Astra left regretfully, being in love with Zenith. Oyani gets Zenith out of hospital. The doctor warns him he's killing himself. Zenith is merely amused at this. He collapsed into the car and asked for his secret address.

"There, unhampered by the restrictions of nurses and doctors, tended only by Oyani, he could hide like a hurt wild creature, forget that he was a broken man, and travel forward into life or backward into the shadows. To him it did not matter which".

Here once again, it is my opinion that the author believed he had written the final word about Zenith. But the Albino appears once again - in Sexton Blake Library No.49 (3rd Series), "The Bronze Basilisk". He has been a guerilla leader in Jugo-Slavia, and comes to England to gain funds for his comrades - by his usual crooked means.

Zenith the Albino has died - or faded out - many times, but for his countless admirers he, like Sexton Blake, will never truly die.

He is immortal.

The End

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