

THE COLLECTORS' DIGEST

VOLUME 10, No. 109

JANUARY, 1956

Price 1s. 6d.



A tall, strange-looking figure walked into the great chamber and stood surveying the scene with folded arms. His face was invisible by reason of the almost animal-like mask which he wore. He walked forward, but as he did so two dim figures appeared from behind the heavy curtains set far away in the shadows.

Reproduced from "THE BULLSEYE" No. 82, August 13th, 1932.

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The Collectors' Digest

Vol. 10 No. 109

Price 1s. 6d.

JANUARY, 1956

Editor, HERBERT LECKENBY,
c/o YORK DUPLICATING SERVICES,
7, The Shambles, YORK.

From the Editor's Chair

WE DID IT AGAIN: I am writing this on Christmas Day with before me a stack of letters already to hand with congratulations on the Annual. I have just been reading them over again, and I got from them the same thrill and cheer I experienced long years ago when I spent Christmas Day engrossed in a double number of my favourite weekly. It has been the same on nine successive Christmas Days now. I shudder to think what the day would be like if no C.D. Annual had gone out - but, perish the thought.

Well, let's look back a little. On the morning of Wednesday, December 14th the G.P.O. called for the stacks of copies from the Duplicating Agency and I gave a sigh of relief - all subscribers within easy distance would receive their copies in ample time for Christmas. And, two in far off Australia would even get their copies also in time for reading on Christmas morn for so eager were they that they had paid for them to be sent air mail. A nice compliment, indeed.

On the Friday afternoon came a happy little incident. I thought I would call round at the Duplicating Agency to say if a telegram happened to come it could be held until the morning as it would not contain bad news. (I did so because last year that staunch young member of our circle John Stokes had sent a wire of congratulations from his sick room in Dublin, and on that occasion someone had taken the trouble of having it delivered to my home. Just as I walked in Mr. Gore-Browne was replacing his telephone receiver. "Well, well", he said with a smile, "I've just been taking a telegram over the 'phone for you - from Dublin!" How's that for intuition? Thanks a lot, John. It was again a nice thought.

And now on to the Tenth Annual. There's one fine Greyfriars article in hand already.

A LITTLE EXTRA: You will observe that Blakiana runs to eight pages this month, but we haven't cut down any other section to allow for the two extra ones. For, Josie Packman generously offered to pay the cost of them. I added two more, thus giving us a good start to the New Year.

THE NEW TOM MERRY BOOKS: Loyal St. Jim's fans would be pleased to see the long promised Tom Merry books out at last: they will make up for the disappointment when no "Tom Merry's Own" appeared this year. They seem to be jolly good value and I don't quite see why it should be made to appear they have been specially reduced from 7/6. It makes it look to other than devotees that they are old stock 'specially reduced to clear'.

You will find them reviewed together with the two "Jack of All Trades" on another page.

* * * * *

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS: Once again my hearty thanks to the scores of friends who sent me cards; they have come from all over the world. I can only attempt to acknowledge them in this way, and here's wishing them and all my little army of readers a very prosperous New Year and good hunting.

Yours sincerely,

HERBERT LECKENBY.

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BLAKIANA

Conducted by JOSEPHINE PACKMAN

27, Archdale Road, East Dulwich, London, S.E.22.

By the time this month's 'Blakiana' is being read the Christmas festivities will be all over, and I sincerely hope everyone had an enjoyable time.

As for the New Year, let us all hope it will bring more glory to our section of the C. Digest. I can promise at least one real 'scoop' in the near future.

Commencing this month is the article by our new contributor, Mr. Goodhead, which I am sure you will all enjoy.

Derek Ford's 'Annual Report' on the S.B.L's is also included. I know that this feature is always much appreciated.

In view of the length of 'Blakiana' this month, I am adding two of the extra pages in this issue of the magazine. The other two pages are sportingly provided by Mr. Leckenby, who explains the position on another page.

JOSIE PACKMAN.

THE BABBLINGS OF BARDELL

by Victor Colby

Tinker, disguised as Sexton Blake, passed Mrs. Bardell's vision as he went to the door. Ten seconds later, the good lady saw Sexton Blake himself heading in the same direction.

"Excuse me sir. Is it a hop-picker's delusion? Or must I do to the optimist and get another pair of spectacles. I thought as how you had just gone out by that there door."

Later, when Tinker rolled the insensible form of his attacker on to the kitchen table, Mrs. Bardell intervened.

"Mr. Blake, sir, corpses in my kitchen I can't nor won't abide."

(U.J. 1420 "Night Birds")

EXPERIENCES OF A SEXTON BLAKE WRITER

by Walter Webb

PART THREE

Here, there, and everywhere, he saw such parts of Western

Canada as few emigrants see, spending the dollars he earned on railway fares, and earning a few more, sleeping in redskin villages, in trappers' huts, and, in the summer, even in the open air. The author confesses that he was penniless most of the time, but saw things, even if in the doing of it he became almost a hobo. After a year of aimless wandering he arrived at a small Manitoban town, where he made the acquaintance of a man who held a timber farm further north and who offered him his expenses if he would go up there and live on this timber-lot for a winter, his work being to keep an eye on the wood, to prevent it being stolen. The author consented, and found himself in a desolate region, five miles distant from any other human being. Building a lumber shack, Shaw furnished it with handmade furniture and a stove, and settled down to a winter of it. It was a lonely existence, but the author occupied the time mostly by setting traps for mink, marmot and marten, and other fur-bearing animals. Catching quite a number of fine specimens, he was able to sell at a good price. Going out after wolves, Shaw proved his marksmanship with the rifle by killing several, and claimed the Government's bounty of two dollars (8/-) for each carcass brought in. By shooting a moose at the beginning of his stay, the author was kept in food for quite a long time.

By the time the winter was over Shaw was not sorry to get back to civilisation again, and had by then decided to return to England. But with very little money, the only thing left for him to do was to go back to the land once more for the summer, so he engaged with a farmer for the whole season, at twenty-five dollars (£5) a month, and resigned himself to eight months more of the work he never really liked. After being such a rolling stone for so long, it was by no means pleasant to settle down as a staid and respectable farmer's hired man, but it was the only way the author could save anything at all.

At the end of the summer - the year would be that of 1908 - Stanley Gordon Shaw, with two hundred dollars (£40) in his pocket, booked a passage to the old country, not a penny richer than when he left, but with a fund of experience, and a physical condition of perfect fitness. No longer a youth, but a muscular young man of twenty-four, or five, Shaw decided to take up writing, and his early work appeared under a variety of names, such as S.S. Gordon, Gordon Shaw, Gordon Wallace, and Stanley Gordon. During the year

1920 the NELSON LEE LIBRARY ran a serial by him, under the title of "Three Boys in Canada", in which some of the adventures shared by the characters in the title role were those experienced by the author himself during his travels. Shaw's famous character, Janssen the Moonlayer, appeared for the first time in the Christmas Number of the "Union Jack" for the year 1921, and the author followed this up with "The Gold Maker's Secret" (U.J. No. 967), and "Sexton Blake - Lumberjack" (U.J. No. 968). Who better than Shaw to write such a story with Sexton Blake in such a role? The author wrote about fifteen Blake stories for the U.J., his last effort being published in No. 1,466, week-ending 21 November 1931, under the title of "The Man They Hanged".

A sound if not brilliant writer, Gordon Shaw never rose to the heights attained by his famous brother, Captain Frank H. Shaw, and retired from writing in the late 'Thirties' to take up other work. When last heard of he was living in Wallasey, Cheshire.

Yes, those bygone editors who boasted that their authors knew their stuff when writing up the varied adventures of Sexton Blake, were not guilty of any distortion of the facts, as the experiences of the author in this article clearly prove.

-----ooOoo-----

THE BEST - AND THE WORST

by W.H. Goodhead

PART ONE

Before committing myself to the choosing of my own particular "Best and Worst" episodes in Blake's career, I should like to make it clear that my interest in the aforesaid career can best be described as intense but spasmodic.

The main objection to my complete and wholehearted conversion was what I refer to as the "broken series" system of publication, which compelled both the great detective and the reader to switch their attention, frequently week by week, from one opponent (or group of opponents) to another.

Personally I did, and still do, prefer my stories and series to begin at the beginning and to carry on in an orderly manner until the end. It always seemed to me most galling, not to say unfair, that Blake should be forced to quit, at a week's notice, some exotic affair in the Far East with Yvonne, to attend to a Metropolitan mix-up with Zenith in London, and then to be whipped

off again at a week's notice, very likely to assist the Chicago police in their battle against gun-men. I can remember vividly one such occasion when Blake, in the course of his long and arduous battle with the Criminals Confederation was left adrift, with a few faithful followers, in an open boat somewhere in the South Atlantic, and yet duly appeared the next week investigating a comparatively minor affair of a dead body on the top of a London bus.

The very fact that Blake is still with us after sixty years indicates that he not only survived this system, but actually thrived on it, and that my objections place me very much in the minority. However, the "broken series" system made it very difficult for me, at any rate, to maintain a steady interest in the Sexton Blake saga. What generally happened was that my eye would be caught by a particularly intriguing "U.J." cover in the news-agent's window (nowadays such window shopping appears to be a lost art to the modern over-paid and under-worked youth), and I would concern myself most earnestly with the doings of Blake and his opponent of the moment until, on being left high and dry for an indefinite period by the usual meandering abandonment of that particular battle for an entirely different one, I would hurl my copy of the "U.J." into a distant corner with a snarl and return penitently to the "Magnet", where at least I knew where I stood from week to week.

Which brings me, at last, to by 'best ever' series.

Ambling along the street one day, homeward bound from school, and with my mind in its usual blank and unreceptive condition, my eye caught sight of a large black and white poster "Death of Sexton Blake - see this week's Union Jack". My interest being automatically aroused, I rushed to the nearest newsagent's window and cast an eager eye over the periodicals displayed. Sure enough, there on the cover of the current issue of the "U.J." was the picture of a newsboy bearing a placard announcing the death of the great detective, the details of which were apparently contained in the story with the sinister title of "The Gallows Mystery".

Thoroughly intrigued by now, I rushed home, scrounged the necessary twopence, and in a very short time was well and truly enthralled by what was, and always will be, for me, the 'best ever' series - Sexton Blake versus the King Crook and the Double-Four.

Over a period of more than twenty-five years the memory of that particular series still gives me a nostalgic thrill. Gwyn

Evans, for he was the author, had put everything he knew into the story - and, as we all know, when it came to writing an action-packed story the late and great Gwyn knew plenty.

Obeying the oldest and safest rule known to authors and dramatists, he commenced the "Gallows Mystery" with what must be the most startling situation ever conceived in the annals of crime detection, namely, the discovery of the still warm dead body of a man on the scaffold at Handforth Prison, a few moments before an execution was due to take place. Quite an interesting situation in itself, you may think, but as it very quickly transpired that the corpse was that of the very person for whose murder the condemned man was about to be executed, one can only pass the opinion that when the bewildered prison governor gasped "This is utterly without precedent" he was putting it very mildly.

Naturally, under these circumstances, the only course open to the Home Secretary was to send for Sexton Blake (using our old friend Splash Page as his emissary). Blake, whilst accepting the main facts of the case with his usual aplomb, nevertheless was galvanised into showing a certain amount of interest when informed that the affair had been organised by the infamous organisation known as the Double-Four.

In creating the Double-Four, Gwyn Evans had - to use an Americanism - "Gone to Town". Its leader, known as the Ace, was none other than Dimitri Alexis Edward Charlemagne Orlov, King Karl II of Serbovia, Duke of Bechstan, Count of Hohenlinden, to quote a few of his titles. Young, handsome and popular, Karl had wearied of the incessant round of social pleasures and state functions which were accorded him in every European capital. Turning aside from these empty pomps and vanities, he had turned his restless brain towards other and more dubious enterprises. His entry into the sphere of international crime was expedited by the fact that, during his frequent absences abroad, the Revolutionary movement had gained considerable headway (Karl's popularity, obviously was strictly limited to Court Circles) and the usual subservient Chamber of Deputies had been forced to issue an ultimatum to their accomplished but erratic monarch. On receiving a contemptuous refusal to accept the ultimatum, they had taken the unprecedented but logical step of stopping the Royal Allowance, and although Karl had accumulated a large reserve, this was soon expended on the doubtful and expensive pleasures to which this unique combination

of Rupert of Hentzau and Professor Moriarty was addicted.

Accordingly, from being a gifted amateur, Karl entered the ranks of fully-fledged (if anonymous) crime. His plans, which significantly included a detailed study of the penal systems of Europe (with special attention to Prison Organisation in particular) must have been maturing for some years, for in a very short time he had gathered around him as unique, compact and self-sufficient a Commando group of criminals as could be found in the annals of crime.

First and foremost there was Gaston Lenour, psychoanalyst and brilliant physician. Next, there was Carfax Crewe, gentleman by birth and safebreaker by profession - a Raffles gone to seed, apparently. Gold Brick Dann, next in line, was an American confidence trickster of unusual ability, and these were followed by Samson, an ex-circus strong man, whose speciality was escapology and who, in his pre-criminal days had escaped from the death cell at Sing Sing for a wager; Scarlatti, master magician and illusionist; Lou Tarrant, at one time the greatest female impersonator on the American stage, and Colonel Tony, a thirty year old midget, who combined the appearance of a cherubic blue-eyed boy of five with the brain and ability of an expert jewel thief.

Under the daring and ruthlessly efficient leadership of King Karl, the Double-Four had achieved great success until, inevitably, they had crossed the path of Sexton Blake.

* * * * *

SEXTON BLAKE, 1955

by DEREK FORD

In a certain famous guide to authorship, the budding author is advised to write out a card - "I must write something every day" - and pin it above his desk. To the future chroniclers of Sexton Blake's cases - also some of the established contributors, especially Walter Tyrer - I would recommend that they, too, write out a card bearing an extract, slightly modified, from that fine case-book by Gilbert Chester: "The Paper Salvage Crime" (S.B.L. 30.):

'I want the best detective cases. Unusual and interesting cases. Frankly, the commission that is commonplace and rudimentary doesn't attract me much'.

The author who bears these words of Blake in mind cannot fail to turn out a successful case-book. Let them serve as a model for

all time.

Anthony Parsons, principal contributor to the Sexton Blake Libraries since 1945, has no need of such 'advice', his case-books nearly always showing Blake and Tinker at their best. In 1955 he turned out seven excellent case-books in the S.B.L. run from 327 to 350. Three of these cases take Blake abroad, to India, Egypt and Tunis. Supt. Venner appears in all but one of the cases. In "The Frightened Man" (348) Tinker is "fixed" with a six month's sentence in the 'Scrubs', in a (successful) attempt to find out who is helping leading criminals to escape from various prisons, and then murdering them when they have accomplished their tasks. Blake is in it from the first, when one of the escaped prisoners falls dead from fright in his hall. Usually I can say that I have enjoyed one particular Parsons case-book more than any other, but last year all maintained such a high standard that I find it impossible to give this credit to any particular one.

Walter Tyrer produced his usual four case-books. In "The Mystery of the Mad Millionaires" (343) Blake (?) says to his client "Their (the police) inquiries are likely to be much more fruitful than mine". I quite agree. They should have investigated the other three weary cases as well, and then we should never have heard about them in the Sexton Blake Library!

Three case-books from Hugh Clevely; three from Rex Hardinge.

I can't say that I particularly care for the Clevely formula - Who Did It? Why and How? The Investigation - in that order. More mystery, please Mr. C.

The best Hardinge case-book was "The Secret of the Man Who Died" (346), even though it made use of the rather overworked hypnotism plot.

Of the others, one very readable case-book (332) from Warwick Jardine; two from John Hunter - not bad! two from John Drummond, the better one for quick action being 342. Then there was newcomer W. Howard Baker, the first (347) being a "Ninepenny Nightmare". The second (350) was much better.

The single-column page was reverted to in the May to November issues, with a consequent loss of wordage made up, to some extent, by a crisp, quick action case-book, especially in the case of Anthony Parsons.

Only three Parker covers last year, and one of these (341) - as Mrs. Packman pointed out - a reproduction of the third Sexton

Blake Annual cover, having no bearing on the case it illustrated. New cover caption: "Gripping New Detective Thriller" was used on six covers.

It would not be complete to close without mention of THE outstanding event in 'Blakiana' in 1955 which was, of course, the contacting of the son of the originator of Blake - Harry Blyth - following correspondence in the 'Daily Telegraph'. It seemed to provide the missing piece in the mystery jigsaw which is the Sexton Blake Saga.

LATEST NEWS: In a letter from Walter Webb, he tells me he is now finishing another article for Blakiana. More details will be published next month.

The Sexton Blake Circle earnestly solicit your opinion, criticism and comment on their feature in this year's C.D. Annual. Please let us hear from you, and address your letters to me.

JOSIE PACKMAN.

(NOTE: We haven't had a review of a play in the world of the theatre before, but there's a good reason for making a departure here as I am sure you will agree when you have read it. H.L.)

"THE BUCCANEER"

A NEW MUSICAL PLAY

A REPORT BY E.W. COX

Sandy Wilson's "The Buccaneer" is a rare thing in British musicals. It has a plot which doesn't take place in Ruritania or Old Vienna. It has no Gypsy Princesses, no Maid from the Mountains. It is set in the present day! Even more surprising - it has dialogue that is bright and witty! Is this, then, the British musical to challenge the two dozen or so American musicals that have been shown in London since 1947? Unfortunately, no. The direction is slack, the sets are drab, production generally is shabby, and the orchestra might have come straight from a suburban music-hall, although I must admit, a full-sized orchestra would have filled the first four rows of the stalls at the tiny

Lyric Theatre. Happily, however, the good things outnumber the bad, and with its witty dialogue, tuneful and catchy music, snappy lyrics and, for the most part, excellent acting and singing, the show is the best British post-war musical since "The Boy Friend."

What will be of special interest to members of the club is the really original story the show has: "The Buccaneer" is a Boys' Weekly, struggling to keep going after forty years of publication. Its editor is a Mrs. Barraclough, a lady of doubtful years - looking exactly like Miss Primrose of Cliff House (circa 1925) - and she has been carrying on her late husband's work. But, as she confesses to her young secretary, Mabel Gray, the circulation has dropped so much she fears that she will be compelled to sell the paper to an American, Walter Maximus. He publishes a rival (and successful) boys' weekly, "The Atomic Comic". Equally disturbed by the news is old Mr. Donkin, who has just delivered episode 2,447 of "The Adventures of Captain Fairbrother" the long-running serial in "The Buccaneer". Captain Fairbrother, apparently, is a staunch British hero of the Old School, and lives almost entirely in the Far East disposing of Arab slave-traders, cannibals, and wicked Indian Rajahs. Together, the three sing a song recalling old Mr. Barraclough's motto: "Good Clean Fun," a hilarious ski which lampoons, I suspect, the B.O.P. "...the British boy will not be bored by GOOD CLEAN FUN!".

Mr. Maximus arrives, and their fears are proved right. If he acquires the paper, the title will be changed to "Jet Fighter" and strictly modernised. He sings "It's Commercial" a song dealing with present-day taste: "Bare Bosoms, Blood and SEX!".

Horried, Miss Gray runs off to meet her fiancé, Peter Curtis with a plan that might save the paper. Curtis is a schoolteacher, and has a pupil Montgomery Winterton, a precocious boy who has a much-married and frightfully rich mother. Mabel suggests that Montgomery's mother might put up the money to save "The Buccaneer" from a fate worse than death. Peter promises to see Montgomery in an endeavour to get his support, and hurries off to the Winterton's luxurious flat. When he arrives he finds a bored Montgomery, who has just finished "The Naked and the Dead", and is eager for a fresh interest. He listens to Peter's suggestions, and says that he will get his mater to put up the money only on the condition that he can become the editor of "The Buccaneer!". In his haste to save the paper, Peter agrees..... Within a week,

Montgomery has moved into the editorial offices of the weekly, together with his "secretary", a horrid tot whose name is Marilyn Maximus! Yes, she is the American's spoilt daughter. Another week, and the NEW "Buccaneer" appears. From the cover, it looks like a cross between "The Financial Times" and "Time and Tide", and has among its articles: "Are Parents Necessary?", "Exposure of the Father Christmas Racket!", "The TRUTH about Harrow!", "Votes for Children!", and "Mandy Miller's inside story on Diana Dors!". Needless to say, it is a complete hit. Grown-ups are buying it, and the Psychiatric Society have requested a copy for their reading room. All looks well, although Mr. Donkin is disturbed when Montgomery suggests he brings back to England Captain Fairbrother, so that he can get to Westminster in a campaign for the Childrens' Right to Vote!

Before long, however, trouble starts. Marilyn quarrels with Montgomery when he refuses to accept her article "Clothes Sense for Girls". She walks out on him, and runs to her Daddy, telling him who is behind the control of "The Buccaneer". Worse still, Mrs. Winterton's plan to woo Peter Curtis, and to make him her fourth husband fails. Furious, she threatens to wash her hands of the whole thing, and when Mr. Maximus hears this, he naturally starts to make friends with Mrs. Winterton in an attempt to gain control of "The Buccaneer". Montgomery's mother, moreover, sees a fourth (and rich) husband in Walter Maximus....

Is the old paper doomed? Can it be saved from being turned into an American comic-strip? Montgomery, in desperation, has a final plan, and organises a mass-meeting of children from all parts of Britain in Trafalgar Square. (He lets out a rumour that Prince Charles and Princess Anne will be there, and of course, thousands of children turn up.) With the help of Peter Curtis, dressed as Captain Fairbrother - in tropical kit, Mr. Donkin, and the cunning of Montgomery's active mind, the children are soon roused, and promise to revolt if the old "Buccaneer" is sold to the American! They win the day, and the defeated Maximus is soon snapped up by Mrs. Winterton - and its wedding bells for them! Peter and Mary are also on the brink of matrimony.... Montgomery and Marilyn are friends once more, in fact, everybody lives happily ever after.

Kenneth Williams, at 29 years of age, steals the show as Montgomery, the schoolboy terror, and is closely followed by Eliot

Makeham as Mr. Donkin, and Thelma Ruby as the over-sexed Mrs. Winterton.

This show may not be another "Pal Joey" or "Guys and Dolls", but if its Good Clean Fun, you are after, then I can recommend a visit to the Lyric, Hammersmith, to see "The Buccaneer".

HAMILTONIANA

Compiled by HERBERT LECKENBY

The Hamilton schools have again been getting quite a lot of publicity lately, and my thanks are due to all those who have sent me cuttings. I'll deal first with The Times Library Supplement of November 4th. In a long review of boys' and girls' weeklies, past and present, it concludes with an excellent idea, thus:

"The Comics Campaign Council suggest that acceptable children's publications should be given some kind of official stamp, and they propose a little picture of an owl - that creature whose large head is almost all feathers, and whose organs of "viewing" are so monstrously developed as to leave hardly any room for brain. This is too defeatist a symbol. Might we not have instead a picture of that famous owl, Billy Bunter, the Owl of the Remove, in memory of those Greyfriars, St. Jim's and Rookwood stories which though they roused the ire of the late George Orwell, were for many weekly readers among the saddest losses of the war?"

Well, I guess you'll all agree with that except that the reviewer seems to be under the impression that the stories have gone for ever. It isn't as sad as that.

The critic also comments on the Captain, Chums, and the B.O.P. with some rather severe remarks on the present day contents of the latter.

Then this amusing satirical leader appeared in the "Birmingham Post", December 12th:

'I SAY, YOU FELLOWS!'

"The City Fathers who, in an excess of otherwise highly com-

mendable Yuletide solicitude, have decided to include the stories of Billy Bunter in the books they are sending to the children of Sverdlovsk, have only too obviously not even considered the possible results of so rash an act. Do they really want the youth of Soviet Russia - for, to be sure, it will not stop at Sverdlovsk - to know that our educational system tolerates a school (and Greyfriars is certain to be located in Birmingham), where the boys are so brainless that they remain perpetually in the Remove; that those pupils, who have wealthy parents are allowed to send them hampers of food (clear cases of class distinction), which are eaten surreptitiously in dormitories, obviously because the school meals are grossly inadequate; that the school harbours a Lord and a Nabob (more class privilege) as well as one, Fisher T. Fish, the son of a hated American capitalist, who indulges in "big business" deals with his fellow pupils?

As for Billy Bunter himself what more horrible example of lazy ignorance, gluttony, deceitfulness, prevarication and parasitism could be revealed to the little Ivans and Olgas of Sverdlovsk" Even that arch bounder of Greyfriars, Vernon-Smith, would think twice before doing anything so heinous as Birmingham is contemplating. One could go on reciting the shortcomings of this school, which have been notorious for many years, but there is surely no excuse for blazoning them to the world - and the Soviet world at that. Has the Minister of Education been consulted about this - to say nothing of the city's Chief Education Officer, the National Union of Teachers and the National Association of Schoolmasters? (Well indeed might Mr. Quelch murmur "Upon my word" if not "Bless my soul") The authorities really must think again, or the "consequencefulness" of their action, as Hurree Jamset Ram Singh would say, "May be terrific."

Next came a page of pictures from the "Glasgow Bulletin" concerning a Museum of Childhood in historic Lady Stair's House in the Lawnmarket, Edinburgh. One picture is of particular interest to Hamiltonians for it shows a schoolboy, Nigel Smith, standing before a display of Magnets, said to be his father's favourites. What particularly attracts the attention is that

there's a No. 1. Also another 1/2d. number. Well that's another No. 1 we didn't know about. One would like to get in touch with the father of young Nigel Smith.

When sending me this, Dr. Wilson added a postscript - "A car drew up in front of my surgery this evening with the registration letters - PON. Shades of Highcliffe."

Here's more. The South African "Outspan" of October 28th proved that its editor was a real Magnet fan. Commenting on an article on ventriloquism which had appeared earlier he said "Ventriloquism began its peculiar fascination for me long before I ever heard or saw one. I was introduced to the mysterious gift through one of the greatest characters of all time - the immortal Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School."

The editor went on to give quite a lengthy account of some of Bunter's misdeeds by aid of the magic art. He certainly knew his Greyfriars even though he did keep referring to "Dr. Quelch."

Well, all that's very interesting as I am sure you will agree, but we'll now give our own contributors a turn. To start with here's something from versatile Bill Lofts dealing with some stories which have been neglected up to now.

THE GREYFRIARS STORIES IN "CHUCKLES"

by W.O.G. Lofts

Just one month before the well-known "Rainbow" comic - still running - made its debut, another coloured comic, price one half-penny, was launched by the Amalgamated Press. The title was "Chuckles"; and the date, 10 January, 1914.

Len Packman made special mention of this comic paper in his excellent article in the 1955 Collectors' Digest Annual, but here is some additional information of particular interest to "Magnet" readers.

Stories of Greyfriars School, written by the Maestro himself appeared in the first 37 issues of "Chuckles" for Mr. Hamilton has kindly informed me that he wrote all of these stories, none of which have - to my best knowledge and belief - ever been reprinted.

It is true the stories were only short ones, but each was

complete in itself. The majority featured Harry Wharton & Co. versus Dick Trumper & Co. of Courtfield Grammar School, in rollicking yarns wherein each japed the other in endeavours to be the "Top Dog" School.

Several people have written to me in the past accusing Frank Richards of being a snob. This of course is nonsense, and this series of stories featuring a Council School is but one proof of the ridiculousness of the assertion. Strangely, too, in all the encounters between the rival "Co's", the Council School always came out "on top".

There were also stories of Greyfriars in which the girls of Cliff House School were featured. One such story, and a very humorous one, was entitled "The Cliff House Football Match" ("Chuckles" No. 9), in which the girls challenged the Greyfriars Remove at Football. What with Horace Coker as the referee, and the girls playing with 16 players and running with the ball in their hands, it is not surprising that Cliff House won 6 - 1!

Other stories had Billy Bunter well to the fore, usually up to his ventriloquial tricks.

In No. 37 it was stated that another story would appear the following week, but in actual fact it never did. This was not long after the outbreak of World War I (19th September 1914) and the probability is that "Frank Richards" was somewhere on the Continent and unable to write the manuscript or get it through to England. Stanton Hope was the editor of "Chuckles" at that time, and with the cessation of "copy" from his star writer, one can almost visualise him 'tearing his hair' over it! Incidentally, Stanton Hope 'joined up' in 1915, so his editorial worries were not of long duration.

In "Chuckles" No. 96, however, there appeared a new series of stories featuring Teddy Baxter. At first he was at St. Jim's, under the wing of Tom Merry & Co. but in No. 97 he went to Claremont School. The stories from then were of "Teddy Baxter & Co. at Claremont School." Ferrers Locke also appears in some of these stories, all of which were written by that mysterious person "Prosper Howard".

Mr. Hamilton has denied the authorship of any of these stories, although he does admit writing Boys Friend Library (1st series) No. 235 "The School Under Canvas" (not knowing it would be published under the name of Prosper Howard). I am therefore pleased to

inform readers that in the near future Len Packman will be in a position to supply the answer to "The Mystery of Prosper Howard."

The last story of Teddy Baxter in "Chuckles" appeared in No. 265.

In No. 266 a new series of school stories commenced. The author was "Harry Clifton", who was said to have been "One of the foremost writers of school stories" at that time. These stories featured Dick Royle at Bellminster School. Was "Harry Clifton" another name for "Frank Richards" I wonder?

As Len Packman stated in his article copies of "Chuckles" (until the time they came down to the level of "Chick's Own") are extremely difficult to obtain, and I myself have only one copy—No. 100.

Lack of space prevents me from giving the full list of titles of Greyfriars and Claremont stories in "Chuckles", but I am hoping that Herbert Leckenby will find room to publish them in a future issue of the Collector's Digest.

REVIEWS OF

TOM MERRY & CO., CARAVANNERS
TOM MERRY'S TRIUMPH

JACK'S THE LAD
JACK OF THE CIRCUS

by Jack Wood

What a grand Xmas and New Year present these four novels by Frank Richards make, and only 3s. 6d. each! They are really good value from Spring Books Ltd., and, if "Henry" will forgive my bad grammar, have been well worth waiting for!

But where to begin? I hope my St. Jim's friends will pardon me if I look first at the two latest volumes in the story of Jack Nobody, or as he now calls himself, Jack Free, for I have yearned for them ever since the immortal Frank introduced his new character, Jack of All Trades, way back in 1950. Five years is a long time to wait, and even the short stories in the Annuals did not compensate for the lack of information as to what had happened to Jack after he entered the train with Lord Cortolvin's valet, Mr. Jervis, expecting to be joining his lordship before going to school as his protege.

Now we have two long novels, full of fascinating adventure and intrigue, told with all the familiar masterly touches of description and characterisation. Of course, we know that virtue

will always triumph, and despite the machinations of Mr. Jervis, Jack's former enemy Bill Hatchet, the pedlar with a secret, and Dick Kenney, jealous star of Pippet's Imperial Circus, Jack, aided by the clown, Chip and Wad Wadi, the Indian elephant-tamer, and the rest of the happy circus gang, remains triumphant. Until.... but read these two novels for yourselves; you won't want to put them down until you have finished them. Please, Mr. Richards, don't let the publishers keep us another five years before telling us the rest of the story of that delightful character whose life is so bound up with his "double", the Hon. Cecil Cortolvin, his lordship, the snake-like Mr. Jervis, and the bullying ruffian, Bill Hatchet.

And what of the now Tom Merry adventures? The first is in the best vein of those old holiday series - the horse drawn caravan jogging slowly along winding country lanes in southern England under the scorching summer sunshine; occasional House rows as Figgins & Co. overtake the School House caravanners; the egre-gious Bunter "attaching" himself to the party with disastrous re-sults at the hands (and whip!) of an irate landowner; and, behind it all, the mysterious antics of an odd Black Marketeer "type" who chases the caravan from Sussex to Devon to possess himself of its secret. It may be something like the mixture as before, but then that's how we like it, isn't it?

Tom Merry's Triumph is an interesting novel in that it intro- duces us to a new Gussy, a Gussy who is prepared to do something under great stress which normally he would regard with abhorrence. This is a Gussy whose character has been deepened with the passing of the years, but Frank Richards (yes, poor old Martin Clifford has been consigned to the limbo of hallowed memory) tells his story so well that we feel with Gussy that in certain circumstances gambling may be the "wight and propah thing to do." Only Frank at his best could get away with this unusual development of the theme that blood is thicker than water, but in compensation there is plenty of the more familiar Gussy who breaks bounds to see his "tailah" and who is bundled into the wrong train by his helpful studymates and a finely described boxing match to wind up a grand tale.

It is particularly interesting to renew acquaintance with an old friend, Gerald Cutts, the sportsman of the Fifth, whose missing fiver leads to all the trouble.

In short, four memorable stories no member of the clan should

be without. Interesting cover drawings, too, though unfamiliar to the traditionalists.

 My word! Bill Jardine didn't half start something last month with his article "The All Star XI". Here, for instance is:

MY TEAM by W.T. Thurbon

Bill Jardine's article in the C.D. is very interesting and will probably touch off a pretty correspondence.

My own reading of the Hamilton stories mainly covered the 1914-18 era and the early twenties, but I was very keen then on the football stories and I disagree quite a lot with the proposed selection. Here then is my team:

For goal I have always thought Fatty Wynn the outstanding keeper in all the Hamilton Schools (immediately I seem to remember Bulstrode in goal for the Remove in days of yore). Right back is Figgins place - the only other claimant, Johnny Bull lacks Figgins speed and fire.

It seems to me that in selecting our team we may have one or two outstanding footballers who must be fitted in, even though they play in an unaccustomed place.

At left back we have a case in point. Of the regular left backs we have two excellent players in Kerr and Todd - personally I think Kerr the better. But we are so exceptionally rich in half backs that I feel we shall do better to play the best of all rammers, Bob Cherry, at back.

And so to our halves. We have a difficult choice at centre half. So good is Noble, that if we play Jimmy Silver here I think Noble must move over to left half, and I think here he would be preferable to all the regular halves. At right half I just prefer Redfern, on the grounds of its being his regular place, to Mark Linley.

And so to our forwards. I cannot understand Bill Jardine's selection of Vernon Smith over Talbot. Talbot always seems to me the soundest of players and I think he is (apart from the three remaining form captains) easily the best forward in the Schools. At inside right I would play Tom Merry - his partnership with Talbot should be first-rate. For centre forward there's the choice between Nipper and Wharton. Here like Bill Jardine I vote for Wharton, but for a different reason. I think Nipper's the more

adaptable of the two and I would select him therefore for inside left.

For the left wing one might bring across with success Vernon Smith or Pitt. But possibly one of the regular left wingers is better, and my final vote goes narrowly for D'Arcy over Hurree Singh. There are alternatives: If Jimmy Silver prefers to play inside left, then I would move Noble to centre half and play either Linley or Blake (in an unusual place, I agree) at left half. I move Nipper to inside right and transfer Tom Merry to the left wing (vice Arthur Augustus) remembering that Tom has played on the wing for the St. Jim's first eleven, as also, if my memory serves me, has Talbot.

So we get:

GOAL: Wynn, (St. Jims)

BACKS: Figgins, (St. Jims); Cherry, (Greyfriars)

HALVES: Redfern, (St. Jims); Silver (Rookwood) or Noble;
Noble (St. Jims) or Linley.

FORWARDS: Talbot (St. Jims); Merry (St. Jims) or Hamilton;
Wharton (Greyfriars); Hamilton (St. Franks) or Silver;
D'Arcy (St. Jims) or Merry.

This is a predominantly St. Jim's team - but it always seemed to me that Martin Clifford was better at soccer stories, "Owen Conquest" at Cricket and "Frank Richards" at the more serious plot tales away from the sports field.

And now, what about our B team. Here is my choice:

Handforth (St. Franks)

Bull (Greyfriars); Kerr (St. Jims)

Todd (Greyfriars); Grey (St. Franks); Linley (Greyfriars)
Lovell (Rookwood); Pitt (St. Franks); Levison (St. Jims);
Vernon-Smith (Greyfriars); Blake (St. Jims) or Hurree-Singh (Greyfriars)

On the wings I prefer Pitt as being a good "feeder" to his inside men, but Vernon-Smith should be included if at all possible, and here I prefer his dash to my shadowy recollections of Erroll.

I think my first eleven would certainly beat all comers, while I doubt if Mr. Jardine's eleven would come off successful against the following team:

Wynn (St. Jims)

Bull (Greyfriars); Kerr (St. Jims)

Redfern (St. Jims); Noble (St. Jims); Linley (Greyfriars);
Pitt (St. Franks); Hamilton (St. Franks); Merry (St. Jims);
Blake (St. Jims); Talbot (St. Jims).

I think the defence is as sound as Mr. Jardine's eleven, the halves just about as good (though here Bob Cherry has the slight edge over everyone else). Of the forwards my wingers are probably slightly superior, my centre-forward as good as his rival, while at inside forward I have a decided superiority - good enough for an odd goal, if not a two goal win.

Many thanks for publishing so interesting an article.

DO YOU REMEMBER?

By Roger M. Jenkins

No. 15 - Boys' Friends Nos. 1140-1174

Most collectors of school stories tend to regard holiday series with a good deal of impatience. The Rookwood caravanning series of 1918, the St. Jim's Thames boating trip of 1923, and the Greyfriars hiking series of 1933 are given benevolent nods of approval, but these are the exception rather than the rule. The general feeling is that a school story should be in a school setting, and, if there must be a holiday, then it should be spent amid the English countryside. Foreign holidays are nothing but adventure stories which should not be allowed to impinge upon tales of school life. Yet when all this is freely admitted, it is still rather difficult to brush aside all the foreign holiday series just with the wave of a hand. One of the series that so obstinately sticks in the memory is the trip to Canada in 1923, made by the Fistical Four at the invitation of Jimmy Silver's cousin, Hudson Smedley.

It was like old times to have the Fistical Four on their own again, though the Rookwood saga had not much longer to run. It was like old times for another reason, too, for Hudson Smedley's ranch near the Rockies brought back memories of the Cedar Creek stories which had finished two years previously. It has been a never-ending source of wonder that Charles Hamilton has been able to bring to life the atmosphere of so many different countries that he has never even visited. Certainly he never achieved greater success in this line than the way in which he brought to life the lonelier parts of Western Canada as they were thirty or forty years ago.

This series in the Boys' Friend lasted for thirty-five weeks, longer than any other series he ever wrote about his Public School characters, though it must be remembered that the Rookwood stories were only half the length of the St. Jim's and Greyfriars ones. It is doubtful whether so long a holiday series would ever have

been tried out in the Gem or the Magnet, but as the Boys' Friend was not wholly a school story paper it was no doubt considered to be a judicious place in which to experiment, especially in view of the success of the Cedar Creek stories. A selection of tales from the series about the trip to the Windy River Ranch occupied no less than four Schoolboys' Owns - Nos. 146, 150, 154 and 158.

The trip to Canada was unique in that it was really a succession of series; first came the encounter with Pequod le Couteau, then the trouble with Kentuck, followed by the affair of Spanish Kit, the outbreak of the redskins, and the advent of the mysterious Monty Smith (nearly all the villains, it will be noticed, coming from South of the forty-ninth parallel), and in between these episodes occurred single stories such as the attempt of Baldy Bubbin to pass himself off as a hero. It looked as though the Rookwood stories were going to be permanently transferred to Canada, but eventually the juniors did return to Rookwood, together with the amazing Texas Lick. It would be idle to pretend that their return to school was in any way to be regretted, but it is still possible to retain a sneaking affection for the memory of those days in Alberta when Jimmy Silver proved himself even more of a hero and Arthur Edward Lovell, in the certainty that he knew best, proved himself an even bigger idiot.

MAGNET TITLES (Cont'd): 1521, The Heavy Hand; 1522, Billy Bunter's Lucky Day; 1523, The Shadowed Millionaire; 1524, The Bounder's Peril; 1525, The Trail in the Sand; 1526, Billy Bunter's Coronation Party; 1527, Coker the Conqueror; 1528, The Feud with Cliff House; 1529, The Boy Who Wouldn't Split; 1530, On the Track of the Trickster; 1531, Bunter on the Spot; 1532, Billy Bunter's Windfall.

LETTER BOX

MY WORD! HERE'S INTERESTING NEWS:

Rose Lawn, Kingsgate, Kent.
 December 22nd, 1955.

Dear Herbert Leckenby,

Many thanks for your letter, and for the two cuttings. I had not seen these: and they are, of course, very interesting to me. I shall look forward to the January C.D. and what it has to say about "Jack", - something nice, I hope!

I have just finished writing a book called "Schoolboys in Space". Rather a new line for me: my first Martian voyage!

Best wishes for Christmas and the New Year,
Always yours sincerely,

FRANK RICHARDS.

OLD BOYS' BOOK CLUB

LONDON BRANCH MEETING

Like the old Christmas Double numbers of the "Magnet" and "Gem" the Christmas meetings at "Cherry Place", Wood Green have now become firmly established with the members and collectors. The 1955 edition was one of the best so far, everything going with a fine swing. Candlelight reading by Bob Whiter of a thrilling chapter from the Polpelly series of the "Magnet", another fine reading of an article by Jimmy Iraldi of New York, read by Alan Stewart, recently home from a world cruise during which he spent many happy hours with Jimmy, all about Greyfriars and a very fine one on the same subject by Len Packman. Community singing of the Greyfriars choruses, chorus master Bob Whiter, was greatly enjoyed and then an acrostic puzzle by Don Webster who was celebrating his usual Yuletide visit, this time in company with genial Frank Unwin, both stalwarts of the Merseyside Club. As usual the hot mince tarts were forthcoming when the "Rag" spread was enjoyed and great was the applause when Don Webster proposed a hearty vote of thanks to the two sisters in charge of the catering, Eileen and Kathleen. Numerous papers changed hands and several copies of "Tom Merry and Co. Caravanners" and "Tom Merry's Triumph" were also disposed of. Thanks to Alan Stewart for his efforts for securing most of the afore mentioned Tom Merrybooks. A very good attendance and a fitting climax to the old year 1955.

UNCLE BENJAMIN.

NORTHERN SECTION CHRISTMAS PARTY, DECEMBER 10th, 1955

A dozen members partook of a substantial tea at the Craven Dairies, Boar Lane. They included Cyril and Mrs. Banks of Huddersfield, making one of their all too infrequent visits and Miss Dorothy Robinson. Tracks were then made to the Club Room followed by other members who had been unable to get to the tea.

Quickly we got down to an almost non-stop succession of games and the real Christmas spirit reigned. Gerry Allison's fertile brain had been busy long ahead and his first effort was "End of Term Exam" with the members divided into four famous schools. Result after much excitement came out - St. Franks 44 pts; Greyfriars 42½; Rookwood 37½; St. Jims 30. Hail St. Franks.

Next "Found at Greyfriars and St. Jims". Winners: Bill Williamson, 87 pts; Jack Wood, 80; Mollie Allison, 70.

After refreshments two readings by Gerry and a very successful 20 Question session. Then to wind up two General Knowledge quizzes compiled by Edgar Crook.

It was well past the usual hour when the party broke up, leaving one more happy event to be entered up in the records of the Northern O.B.B.C.

Next meeting January 14th. Alas one of those five week intervals.

HERBERT LECKENBY,
Northern Section Correspondent.

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MIDLAND SECTION MEETING, NOVEMBER 28th

Unfortunately Winter brings seasonable ailments and arising from these, apologies were received on behalf of Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Corbett, and Mr. Ingram. During other formal business we were very pleased to learn that our host, Mr. Handley has just been elected a member of Rotary International and offered him our hearty congratulations.

We had just started one of Harry Broster's fine quizzes when Mr. Ray Bennett arrived, and was welcomed. During opening announcements the writer had referred to correspondence with Mr. Bennett who had been unable to visit us for some three years, but now wished to rejoin.

The quiz consisted of the Christian names of twelve ladies who figure prominently in Hamilton stories, and we had to link them up with the appropriate male character or characters. Suitably enough it was won by a lady, (Miss Russell).

After refreshments the cat was set among the pigeons with a vengeance by another terrific onslaught by Treasurer Norman on Hamilton admirers, and really Norman mentioned much that should be considered very seriously before claiming Hamilton as the greatest School Story writer.

To discuss such questions is an important reason for the existence of Old Boys' Book Clubs, as only by sifting and discussing evidence can such questions be settled, if, indeed, they can be settled! It is said that Eton, Harrow and Rugby are the three leading Public Schools, but old boys of, (say), Charterhouse, Hailocbury, and Winchester would probably agree more out of politeness than real conviction.

Naturally, there was an animated discussion after this talk. A very pertinent point made was that the Clubs really owed their existence to the work of Charles Hamilton. As usual, however, it was soon time to go home in a hurry.

EDWARD DAVEY.

—ooOoo—

MERSEYSIDE SECTION, Sunday, 11th December

The festive spirit was prevalent at the Xmas meeting as soon as the members entered the suitably decorated Club Room at Waterloo House. It was pleasing to see Mr. Bartlett and John Burko after long absences.

We were soon rocking with laughter at the entries for the Humorous Press Content - but we did miss Harry Switzer's entry, a bad cold preventing him being present, and Norman Pragnell was similarly indisposed. Bill Horton's parody on "Softly" (which he sung for us) was adjudged the winner and George Riley's short and snappy verses won the second prize. A "surnames" quiz followed, and Eric Coldwell proved an easy winner, the second prize going to J. Burke. It was a pleasing sight to see Mrs. Webster with tea and mince pies at refreshment time (there were none left I may add). After the internal Jim Walsh asked us to give the location of the next Xmas Series (assuming we were Frank Richards and had been commissioned to write same). Switzerland and Canada seemed to find favour.

The meeting terminated later than usual with a toast (not in ginger pop) to our President and "Absent Friends".

Next Meeting, Sunday, January 15th (NEW YEAR'S PARTY) 6.30 p.m.
Club Library 6.0 p.m.

WANTED to complete collections; "Triumphs" Nos. 1 - 190;
"Champions" 1-350. R.J. McCARTHY, WETLANDS, AUGATHELLA,
QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA.

WANTED URGENTLY: Knock Out Comic. Any numbers from 672 to 713 inclusive, 716, 719 and 770 to 825 inclusive. Must be in first-class condition. L. PACKMAN, 27 ARCHDALE ROAD, EAST DULWICH, LONDON, S.E.22.

"MAGNETS AND GEMS WANTED" Whole collections bought. Send me your lists of unwanted copies and price. LITVAK, 70 CRANFORD AVENUE, ASHFORD, MIDDLESEX. (Ashford Middx. 3609)

W A N T E D : Magnets, Gems and S.O.L.'s in large quantities. New Member starting from more or less 'rock bottom'
Details to:- NORMAN WADHAM, "LINDISFARNE",
9 SUNDERLAND ROAD, HEWORTH, GATESHEAD 10,
COUNTY DURHAM.



By Jack Wood, Nostaw, 328, Stockton Lane, York.

New Year is always a time for reminiscence, and perhaps no-one is more interested in the past than those of us who belong to what has been so aptly called the Brotherhood of the Happy Hours. Therefore, in wishing all Old Franciscans a Happy and Prosperous New Year, I feel that in our first article for 1956 we can have nothing better than a finely nostalgic work from the pen of that staunch member of our Alma Mater, Jim Cook, who discusses one of Edwy Searles Brooks's finest characters.....

EZRA QUIRKE

When I began reading this series for perhaps the third time in my life I tried to minimise the enthusiasm that gripped me years ago by looking at the thing squarely and sensibly.

Here was I, 48 next birthday, soured by the harsh hand of time, and infinitely more particular in my selection of leisure and interest, about to wade through eight musty old books minted away back in 1925, whose binder staples had eaten through the pages with rust and threatened to devolve Nelson Lee and all the boys of St. Franks to dust and ashes --- here was I, challenging a conviction borne of common sense that these old yarns could never recapture that glorious adventure of my youth --- could never again tie me to their pages or keep me from the sunshine.

I looked at the first of the series entitled "The Schoolboy Magician" where a most peculiar and lugubrious boy on the cover stared at me. Exotic statuary cast shadows from an oil lamp and a white owl perched on his shoulder defied a thought that had entered my mind. It was that perhaps the artist had got confused by the weird character he's created, or maybe it was that looking at Quirke I too, was seeing things.

I had not seen this particular book for at least 15 years. However, I soon got down to realities and explored inside. The frontispiece is by A. Jones, and is a fine illustration of the prefect Kenmore stricken with blindness. But the small printing which is, I think, of the type called diamond, brought me up with a jerk.

It was easy to read in my younger days - now it was doubtful whether I could stand the strain, and another thing it was all dead and gone, defunct and of no consequence. Nothing that one could talk about in one's immediate circle. But I glanced again - "The wind howled and moaned round St. Franks with a steadily increasing force -- It was a wild October night --- the gale was sweeping in from the Channel ---

"The famous old school was asleep----"

I really should not read this - it was all so cosy and nostalgic....but what if there is a gale blowing at St. Frank's? I hesitated. Those chestnut trees in the Triangle would almost be bare in the morning, they were generally so after one of these gales.

"...a warm glow showed in the Headmaster's private residence.. but that was a long way off..isolated from the school proper..." I hesitated once more, and he who hesitates is lost, once again the Nelson Lee Library had me in it's grip.

Now I defy anybody who is of normal make not to experience a similar mental tug of war such as occurs when going through these old stories.

Maturity of mind should break up the picture framed in our youth, and man's estate is a point reached by a series of painful but nevertheless helpful episodic revelations calculated to banish the flimsy web-trap of security that youth enjoys. That is a logical summing-up of boy's transition to Man.

But visiting St. Frank's again and again is a departure from the schemes laid down by the Great Planners. Even they can be cheated. As a boy I marvelled at the adventures recorded in Prester John, Martin Rattler, Coral Island, etc., but today they have outgrown their welcome. To me that class of fiction stays contemporary to its juvenile admirers. John Buchan never described a gale like old Edwy Searles Brooks. Ballantyne's idea of a tropical island was soon forgotten after reading one by Brooks. There was never so unique a character like Ezra Quirke till E.S.B. invented him. Quirks even arrived at St. Frank's in a gale. At least as far as Nipper & Co. can date his debut.

They were watching a stranger from their bedroom window and he appeared to them as a boy ---- "He was attired in a curious cloak and wore no hat. His long hair was waving weirdly in the wind, and his white face looked utterly ghostly...."

One moment the wind was rushing past the Ancient House in a boisterous flurry of energy, with the rush came the sound of a scream. Something was fluttering in the air, hovering over that spectral figure in the grounds. It looked like a gigantic bat. Then with a swoop it dropped, and perched itself on the boy's shoulder.

Later on we are to associate this long-earned owl as Quirke's Familiar.

Spiritualism, sorcery and witchcraft abound throughout this series and strictly speaking must have been unhealthily interesting to us boys, although there is such a feast of comedy and laughter interspersed that we survive the ordeal.

It would not be fair to put down verbatim the episode of the cake of soap which flew out of Church's hand and tucked itself

under Archie's left foot. That scene must be read from the story and not taken out of it's context.

The editorial beginning the Ezra Quirke series states; "The series will undoubtedly rank as the finest that has ever flowed from the facile pen of the illustrious author...magic, mystery, humour, sport and detective adventure are all represented in their turn, but the central figure, the mysterious Ezra Quirke, is always lurking in the background...always lurking somewhere near, and by his magical powers performing strange wonders that influence the whole course of events at St. Franks during this memorable winter term."

Well, I'm not disagreeing with that, but one wonders and marvels how a cheap boy's periodical was honoured with such a masterpiece of fiction. A great amount of hard work and research must have gone into the making, for behind the schoolboy expressions and comic relief there is an Edgar Allan Poe atmosphere in the background which I suppose shouldn't be there but there it was and the Censor wasn't looking. That is if they have such a thing as Censor at Fleetway House.

At times one is tempted to look over one's shoulder when reading of a seence. All the trappings of spiritualism are there. Read how Study 20 (Quirke's) was fitted out. "It wasn't black as everybody had supposed; there were shaded lights - soft, mysterious and hidden. No window could be seen, no walls, no fire-place. All around were mysterious hangings of some dark material. (This, mind you, a schoolboy's study).

"And Ezra Quirke himself was sitting in the very centre, oblivious of the juniors in the doorway, unconscious of the crash that had announced their arrival". His eyes were wide open but he appeared to be in some sort of trance. In front of him stood a quaint Moorish stool. And on this was a big gleaming globe - a crystal. Ezra Quirke was staring into it with a fixed intense gaze. Most extraordinary of all, a big owl was perched upon his shoulder - a strange creature with long ears and great unblinking eyes. The air of the study was slightly perfumed.

No more dramatic scene could have been discovered in a junior schoolboy's study. It was so unexpected, too, so absolutely bizarre and unbelievable. Griffiths breathes that Quirke is mad. Hipper asserts Quirke is a crank. Armstrong declares that Kenmore as Head Boy of the House should be notified. When Kenmore

arrives he is aghast at what he sees. But his bullying nature comes to the fore. And using his cane and grabbing Quirke by the shoulder he shook him violently. This doesn't pull him out of his cataleptic condition and finally Kenmore is goaded by Quirke's continued defiance and flays him remorselessly with his cane.

Grasping Quirke by the shoulders Kenmore swing him round, and hurled him through the study doorway with tremendous force - such force, indeed, that Ezra Quirke crashed into two or three of the watching juniors, and they collapsed into a heap.

As Jack Grey says "There's something about the chap - I can't quite explain. It may be imagination, of course, but I went all shivering when I was near him. He's like some blessed spook. His very appearance is enough to scare you."

That might sum up Ezra Quirke. But there's more to it than that. Out of the welter of witchcraft, spiritualism, necromancy, plot and counter-plot, Professor Tucker comes into the picture. He has produced a stupendous invention, a strange apparatus which is capable of curing any human ill almost within a few minutes. Now this is rather a coincidence but the writer read the following announcement in the Press simultaneously "There is a forecast of developments in the human brain to extend our power beyond present imagination" (London Evening News. 31.10.55).

This miracle, this plywood panacea is suspect to the reader at the outset. Though for sheer bewilderment it takes some beating. One is sorely tempted to pry into the last book of the series in advance for the explanation. Following this apparently irrelevant incident with the Professor, the Hon. Douglas Singleton enters the main theme. And it is here that the whole elaborate scheme is begun.

It is surprising how little items of St. Frank's lore keep popping out of these yarns. For instance, I am reminded that Singleton has a father although when he came to St. Franks and threw his fortune away - he even bought a school - I was under the impression it was his guardian who came to see him in his distress.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT MONTH

WANTED: Champion Library, also for Exchange. Boys Friend Libraries welcomed. PRICE, Grocer, 22 NORTHDOWN ROAD, MARGATE, KENT.