

COLLECTORS DIGEST ANNUAL

1970



STORY PAPER



Collectors' Digest

CHRISTMAS 1970

Annual

TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR

Editor: ERIC FAYNE, Excelsior House, Grove Road, Surbiton, Surrey, England.

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Another Annual. Another Christmas. Another link in the chain of sweet memory. Another footprint in the Sands of Time.

I hope that you are going to like this, the 24th edition of a book which has become a part of the actual life of each one of us. My own life has become inextricably interwoven with the hobby, with Collectors' Digest, with the Annual - more than I thought could possibly ever happen. I live in a world of literary work in connection with the hobby, of editorials, of planning. Occasionally I think it's a hard life, and wonder whether it is all worth while.

But if my faith in my job ever wavers, it is soon restored when my mail arrives. I get several thousands of letters every year, and I only wish it were possible to reply to everyone who writes. This year I think the following has been my favourite letter. I found it poignantly heartwarming. It comes from one of my most loyal readers, Raymond Taylor, who lives in Wolverhampton. I think he won't mind my printing his letter. I don't think he will. He writes:

"Once again the time has come to think about Christmas and our beloved Annual. I have seen a few Christmasses (nearly 80), and I still have vivid recollections of the old days. What a grand Christmas it would make if the publishers would reprint one each of the old Xmas Double Numbers of the Boys' Friend, Boys' Realm, and Boys' Herald - and the Jester - and bind them together in one cover.

"Do you remember the 1920's and 1930's? I had a stall in Bilston Market on Saturdays and Mondays, and I used to sell Boys' Friends, Realms, and Heralds in bundles for 3d. I sold all kinds of old periodicals, and, believe it or not, some of them I could not give away. I used to get a continuous run of Chums, Captains, Boys' Own, Young England, which I sold for a shilling a volume. Those indeed were the days. And now all these old papers are worth their weight in gold. I have not got anything at all now except my collection of Collectors' Digest and all the C.D. Annuals, and I would not part with them for anything.

"I have thought about getting a few old Boys' Friends, Realms, or Heralds, but I find the cost is simply too much, as I have practically nothing but my old age pension. However, I shall be looking forward to my Annual, and I know that it will be chock full of good things, so please accept my very good wishes to yourself and your devoted staff."

Mr. Taylor signs himself "Your faithful and loyal subscriber for ever." Letters like that make every minute of the year's work worth while.

In conclusion, happy memories of those stalwarts who have gone on before, leaving so much goodwill and happiness behind them - great men like Herbert Leckenby, Bill Gander, Len Packman, and others. My grateful thanks to all our contributors who have excelled themselves this year, and to our printers, York Duplicating Services, for their incomparable work at all times down the years.

And, to each one of you, dear friends - thank you. A Merry Christmas to you all.

Eric Fayne

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CLIFF HOUSE SCHOOL -

No. 1 OF A GRAND SCHOOL STORY PAPER!

1909 to 1940

THE SCHOOL FRIEND

Every $1\frac{1}{2}$ Thursday

No. 1. Vol. 1.

Three-Halfpence.

Week Ending May 17th, 1919.

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THE ARRIVAL OF BESSIE BUNTER! (An incident from "The Girls of Cliff House" in this issue.)

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I find it fascinating how vividly Cliff House has lived in my memory for thirty years. I read of its adventures for only three years, till THE SCHOOLGIRL ended in 1940, when, unfortunately, I neglected to keep any of the magazines, and read nothing again about the Cliff House girls until early this year. Happily then coming into contact with COLLECTORS' DIGEST, I've been able to acquire some old papers, renewing my acquaintance with schoolgirl heroines of the 1930's, as well as getting to know the earlier Cliff House of THE SCHOOLFRIEND of the 1920's. Cliff House School is a very vital entity, in spite of many inconsistencies and omissions due probably to its stories having been written by different authors during its eventful history. As a child I was absolutely convinced that 'Hilda Richards' was a woman - though in fact she was then apparently John Wheway - because she had such insight into the hopes and aspirations of her schoolgirl characters!

Cliff House's history seems to fall into four phases:

1. Cliff House School as created by Frank Richards in early MAGNETS (first mentioned in Magnet No. 59 in 1909) and as it continued to appear in the MAGNET till the late 'thirties. The same characters and atmosphere exist in Frank Richards' book, BESSIE BUNTER OF CLIFF HOUSE SCHOOL (1949), and in the first six issues of THE SCHOOLFRIEND of 1919, when Frank Richards wrote the Cliff House stories each week, developing his characters more fully.
2. THE SCHOOLFRIEND from then until 1929 - when the Cliff House stories were written, I understand, by Horace Phillips (Marjorie Stanton, the creator of Morcove School), by R. J. Kirkham (Hilary Marlow) and L. E. Ransome.
3. John Wheway's stories in THE SCHOOLGIRL from the early 'thirties till the paper finished in 1940.
4. Bessie Bunter continues in 1970 - as a comic strip character in the weekly JUNE AND SCHOOLFRIEND. In this, only Bessie's grossest attributes remain, and all the other familiar Cliff House characters have been dropped and replaced by caricatures.

As well as different writers there have been different artists.

Of course it is the characters in the stories who make the school - but I always have a curiosity about the building itself and its grounds. In its long history Cliff House has never been so clearly physically defined in my mind as Greyfriars. It was built about 300 years ago - and from various illustrations seems to be in the Jacobean style. It was apparently not used as a school until 1880, was enlarged in 1885, and in 1906 'drastic changes' were supposed to have taken place, which seem to be the installation of electricity. By 1920 the building was all that a school should be, well equipped with studies, library, model kitchen for domestic science lessons, needlework room, physics and chemistry labs., studio, gymnasium, languages room, music room, detention room, commercial room with typewriters, adding machine and duplicator, Great Assembly Hall and the lower or Dining Hall which used once to be the servants' hall.

The building's relationship with the sea was often very strong in the Cliff House stories. Nearby Belwyn Island is the scene of many adventures, kidnappings and goings on! Cliff House is appropriately connected by secret passages to an old ruined house on the cliffs at Pegg, and to Monks' Folly. The ruined tower of Cliff House dates back to the seventeenth century, and there is one wonderful John Whewy story about the early days of Cliff House when Clara Trevlyn's ancestor, Clarice Trevlyn, then a schoolgirl, discovered from the ancient tower a plot by Napoleon's spies for the invasion of England. Needless to say, single-handed she foiled this attempt and saved Lord Nelson from capture and assassination at Courtfield into the bargain. A great day for Cliff House!!

The sea was always in evidence and contributed many delights to the Cliff House adventures. The very first description of the building must be that given by Frank Richards in 'THE SCHOOL DANCE - MAGNET 59,' which tells the story of the beginning of Miss Primrose's school.

"Cliff House was in a blaze of light. From the windows the lights shone out far over the shadowed sea, visible to the fishermen in the bay."

So we see that Cliff House really was the house on the top of the cliff.

In the MAGNET, Frank Richards creates many happy moments of relationship between Greyfriars and Cliff House. Apparently subsequent Cliff House writers were not allowed to mention Greyfriars, so they had to introduce another local boys' school (Friardale School) to provide male interest for the Cliff House girls. Jimmy Richmond of that school was a very pleasant and likeable boy, but the relationship never sparkled in the same way as the Greyfriars/Cliff House one.

MAGNET 59, which incidentally gives a delightful description of Bob Cherry learning to dance and nearly crippling Hurree Singh in the process, deals with a dance held at Cliff House, to which the Greyfriars' Remove are invited: the closing paragraphs of the story, in which the girls and the boys each hold a post-mortem on the dance are rather intriguing.

"What a beautiful evening!" said Marjorie to Clara, after the guests were gone.

"Hasn't it been lovely!"

"Splendid," said Clara, enthusiastically.

Similar opinions were being exchanged by the Greyfriars juniors as they walked home, following the stately form of the Head.

"Ripping," said Bob Cherry. "I never thought an evening spent with girls could be half so ripping."

"Yes it was ripping," said Harry Wharton. "We shall have to return the compliment sometime - somehow!"

Many of you will remember Frank Richards' original Cliff House characters, some

of whom continued to appear in the MAGNET throughout the years. His Cliff House girls were very robust, but their characters were often much modified by subsequent writers. Thus in the 'thirties in my brother's MAGNET I was reading about Frank Richards' Marjorie Hazeldene, Clara Trevlyn, Dolly Jobling and Bessie Bunter - and finding many differences between them and the Marjorie, Clara and Bessie, John Wheway was at the same time creating so skilfully week after week in THE SCHOOLGIRL! (Dear old Dolly Jobling alas seemed no longer to exist as a Cliff House character in THE SCHOOLGIRL of the 'thirties.)

It is interesting that in THE SCHOOL DANCE the fat, comic and gluttonous character was not Bessie Bunter but a German girl, Wilhelmina Limburger. She probably was dropped and Bessie Bunter substituted when THE SCHOOLFRIEND began after the first World War in 1919 - doubtless anti-German feelings were then very strong!

Marjorie Hazeldene in the MAGNET appears as a girl with guts and integrity - and it is rather a let-down that in THE SCHOOLFRIEND of 1920 she is described as follows:

"Marjorie Alice Hazeldene, bobbed light brown hair, soft blue eyes.
Rather weak by nature, but can be strong on occasions."

John Wheway usually referred to her as 'the gentle, sweet-natured Marjorie,' in the 'thirties, and made her rather a milk-sop, whose obsessive preoccupation with needlework and embroidery I found slightly irritating!

But if Marjorie deteriorated over the years, many of Frank Richards' original characters matured and developed for the better with John Wheway. Bessie Bunter, as created by Frank Richards, was often quite malicious, untruthful, self-centred and greedy, with no good characteristics. She was drawn by MAGNET artists to express all this, and G. M. Dodshon, illustrating THE SCHOOLFRIEND 1919-1929, made her so fat and ugly that she appeared deformed. John Wheway translated her into 'a really lovable duffer,' rather stupid, certainly greedy, but loyal to her friends and often extremely considerate and self-sacrificing towards others. T. E. Laidler's pictures of this period show her accordingly. Bessie's arrival at Cliff House is entertainingly described by Frank Richards in SCHOOL-FRIEND No. 1 (1919):-

Marjorie and Clara go to Friardale Station to meet Bessie, who arrives complete with male parrot, Polly, 'a fat green parrot with an evil eye.' Bessie is described as 'Fat, shiny, greedy and conceited' and as very closely resembling her brother Billy, both physically and psychologically. Bessie immediately imposes on Marjorie and Clara, treating them patronisingly, loading them with her luggage and with her parrot, who bites Clara almost as soon as she picks up his cage.

"What's your name?" asked Bessie Bunter.

"Marjorie Hazeldene."

"Oh I know your name. Billy's mentioned you at home. He told me he's very friendly with you!"

"That horrid, fibbing little bounder!" exclaimed Marjorie, crimson with anger. "I'll ask Bob Cherry to thrash him!"

"And what's your name?" (said Bessie to Clara).

(Frank Richards, by the way, describes Clara as 'quite a good hearted girl in spite of her wilful and emphatic manners and customs.')

"Clara Trevlyn. Has your beautiful brother said anything about me?" asked Clara with a gleaming eye. "If he has, I won't ask Bob Cherry to thrash him - I'll thrash him myself!"

"Oh he's mentioned you," said Bessie Bunter carelessly, "he says you're a tomboy."

Clara clenched her hands. It was perhaps fortunate that Billy Bunter had not come to the station to meet his charming sister on her arrival. There would really have been danger of a case of assault and battery.

"A - a - a tomboy!" breathed Clara.

"Yes, he says you've got feet as big as a boy's."

Clara can then only stutter in rage and Marjorie does her best to smooth the situation. Bessie, on the way from Friardale Station to Cliff House, shows complete disregard of Clara and Marjorie's feelings, lands them with a bill for fifteen shillings for a tea at Uncle Cleggs, for which she, Bessie, had promised to stand treat, insists on a taxi to the school, and tries to make them pay £1.3s.6d. for the fare. (A lot of money in 1919!) So it is not really surprising that later that afternoon, in answer to Babs' enquiry about what Bessie is like, Clara says, "Imagine everything that's fat, and unpleasant, and horrid, and ---- she's like that!"

Clara Trevlyn is a rather brusque and heavy-handed girl, according to Frank Richards; later in THE SCHOOLFRIEND of the 1920's she is an eton cropped tomboy - and in the 'thirties she becomes a much more rounded-out character, crisp, energetic, junior games Captain, passionate, loyal, with short curling tawny hair - a marvellous girl!

Other original Frank Richards' characters of interest are the teachers, Miss Primrose the Head, Miss Bullivant and Miss Bellew. Miss Primrose, through all the various writers and artists, remains dignified, fair and generous natured. The following description comes from a 1920 SCHOOLFRIEND:-

'Miss Penelope Primrose, M.A. Loved by all her scholars. Teaches the sixth in languages and gives a few lessons to the fifth. A warm supporter of everything which adds to the welfare and happiness of her pupils. Worked strenuously for the amusement and care of wounded soldiers during the war.'

Miss Bullivant (maths and gym), was always something of a martinet, but was softened and humanized by John Wheway in the 'thirties.

Miss Bellew, Frank Richards' fourth form mistress, remained in THE SCHOOLFRIEND in the early twenties but married the games coach Cyril Hartley, and was replaced first by Miss Steele, then Miss Matthews, and in 1935 by Miss Valerie Charmant, known as 'The Charmer' - who was young and pretty, with modern clothes and hair, so much admired by her girls of the fourth form that even robust characters like Clara would sometimes blush with sheer pleasure when she addressed them!

Barbara Redfern (Babs) did not appear in the earliest MAGNET stories mentioning Cliff House but was in Frank Richards' first SCHOOLFRIEND story. She became the captain and leader of the fourth form (the Harry Wharton type character). In THE SCHOOLFRIEND Babs had long, waving chestnut hair, and in John Wheway's stories (and T. E. Laidler's illustrations) she was a very with-it schoolgirl of the 'thirties, with honest, bright, clear blue eyes, short chestnut hair, usually described as glossy, waving or crisply curling. She had generous, quiet strength.

Mabel Lynn (Mabs) was her great chum and backer-upper, and also the actress and playwright of the fourth. Like Babs her hair was always crisply curling - but it was golden in contrast with Babs' dark hair.

Intriguing that in THE SCHOOLGIRL to have straight hair, unless Eton cropped, seemed synonymous with having a sneaky, unpleasant personality. The two unpopular prefects, Connie Jackson and Sarah Harrigan, were drawn with lank, straight hair, as were some of the fourth form sneaks and toadies.

The bad hats amongst the Cliff House girls didn't have as much scope for their evil doings as the boys of Greyfriars - they never visited pubs, or bet on horses, for instance. The most usual and despised misdoing of the villainesses was to run up excessive bills with local dressmakers or milliners which they could never hope to pay off! Occasionally a greatly daring and irresponsible girl might break bounds at night, to go to a fancy dress dance - and once I read of a girl playing cards for money (and smoking) but at a private house, and not, of course, at a pub or any other den of public iniquity.

Earlier I mentioned certain inconsistencies in the history of Cliff House. The school colours in the 1920's were described as red and white, in 1930 blue and white were the uniform colours, and in 1936 Cliff House blazers were said to be gold and blue (perhaps because the cover of THE SCHOOLGIRL was then being printed in gold and blue!!).

Many intriguing personalities remained at Cliff House throughout the 'twenties, but seemed to disappear without trace in John Wheway's stories of the 'thirties. But, of course, he introduced new characters of his own, and developed extremely vitally, many of those already existing. (Jemima Carstairs, for instance, became an absolutely scintillating person later on.)

Fashion in clothes and hair, etc., changed greatly. The saga of Cliff House makes me more aware of history and change than when reading about the boys' schools. The girls progressed from long hair, through shingling and bobs to the wavy coiffures of the 'thirties. At the beginning of Cliff House's history they wore

Edwardian clothes, later the short skirts and cloche type hats of the twenties, and then the neat gym tunics of the 'thirties. Wool and lisle stockings were worn (silk for best), much emphasis was laid on finery for special occasions of silk jumpers, crêpe de chine, taffeta and chiffon dresses - but unhappily the demise of Cliff House came before the advent of nylon, terylene and man-made fibres! Over the years monitresses changed into prefects: another reminder of changing times was the frequent dependence of certain Cliff House stories on the fact that in the 'twenties and 'thirties any letter posted in England seemed to reach its inland destination on the same day, or on the following morning at the latest. Those days - and the days of dear old Cliff House - are, alas, no more!

No. 1 of a Fascinating Series for Your "Cliff House Album."

CLIFF HOUSE CELEBRITIES

BARBARA HILDA REDFERN is her real name, and, as you are all aware, she is the captain of the Junior School at Cliff House.

Cheerful, a lover of fun, a good, all-round sportswoman, Babs combines all the qualities that make a good leader, and is one of the most popular girls in the school.

"Babs" was born at Holly Hall in Hampshire, which is still her home. Her age is fourteen years and six months. She has glossy chestnut hair, deep blue eyes and a rosy complexion. Her chief hobbies are drawing and painting, and her best friend is Mabel Lynn, who shares study No. 4 with her and Bessie Bunter.

Doris Redfern, of the Upper Third at Cliff House, is her sister. Babs also has a brother, Reggie, aged three and a half years.

The girl Babs most admires in the school is Cliff House's head girl, Dulcia Fairbrother. Her favourite mistress is, of course, Miss Valerie Charmant, of the Fourth.

The girl Babs least admires is Sarah Harrigan of the Sixth, who for long has been Babs' enemy. The mistress she likes least is Miss Bullivant.

She takes size two in shoes, having rather small feet. Her height is 4 feet 10 1/2 inches. Her favourite colours are blue and gold, possibly because these are also Cliff House's colours, and her favourite flower the daffodil. She has no particular favourite among authors, but confesses to a weakness for Dickens and Agatha Christie. Her two favourite film stars are Joan Bennett and Robert Montgomery.

In the realm of sport Barbara has made her mark in hockey, cricket, and tennis. She is a fairly good swimmer, but not in the same class as Janet Jordan or Diana Royston-Clarke.



Barbara Redfern.

She is also quite a good actress and takes part in most of the Junior School plays and concerts. As an organiser she is brilliant.

She maintains a fairly good position in class, last term's examination placing her as No. 3.

Like Clara, she is enormously fond of all animals, and one of her proudest possessions is her golden retriever, Brutus, who has won many prizes.

Her great ambition is to be an artist, and have her pictures exhibited at the Royal Academy.

EDITORIAL COMMENT: Our pictures show Cliff House as it was at the start of the School Friend (1919) as illustrated for many years by G. M. Dodshon, and, in the second picture, Cliff House, many years later, in The Schoolgirl (1937).

HAPPY XMAS and PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR to Vernón Lay, Eric Fayne, Bill Lofts, Derek Adley, Bob Blythe, Norman Shaw, Josie Packman, and all those whose names are too many to mention here, lovers of, and enthusiasts for the Hobby.

LAURENCE S. ELLIOTT

WANTED: MAGNETS 1189, 1204, 1220, 1323. 20 very good condition Magnets all complete series and singles offered in exchange.

SETFORD, 24 COLWYN AVENUE, DERBY

SPARSHOTT

by ROY PARSONS

With the end of the "Magnet" and the "Schoolboys' Own Library" in June, 1940, the name Frank Richards disappeared from the bookstalls. To quote his own words he "was at a loose end." Under the pressures of war the world turned its mind to sterner things and few had much time to consider the world Charles Hamilton had created or to enlarge further the gap in his personal obscurity which the "Horizon" articles earlier in 1940 had created. How Hamilton managed to survive the war years still remains something of a mystery.

However, as the war drew to its close and people began to think of a return to normality, interest began to revive in what we now call Hamiltonia. Articles - by Hamilton and others - were published, but more important, he again began to write. A second career, as it were, was just beginning. It was a remarkable achievement for a man who was in his mid-seventies when it began. No-one would claim that this period contains his best work, but some aspects of it are interesting.

The beginnings, like that of most writing careers, were a little intermittent. No doubt Charles Hamilton thought that Greyfriars and St. Jim's were dead and gone, never to be revived. Again to quote his own words he "was always prepared to produce a new school" and he started off by doing so again. In an article published by Picture Post in 1946 entitled "Do You Remember Billy Bunter?" the author, Sydney Jacobson, gave details of three. He said that Hamilton was writing Carcroft stories in the magazine "Pie," Sparshott stories for William Merrett and a series of Ferndale School for Sankey and Hudson.

If I may be allowed a personal digression here, this article was something of a revelation to me as a young schoolboy. Firstly, it confirmed my belief that Frank Richards, Martin Clifford and Owen Conquest were one and the same. Secondly, the news that Charles Hamilton was writing new stories gave me something to look for on the bookstalls. "Pie" magazine was easy to obtain, although its format never appealed to me much, and I never became a Carcroft enthusiast. The Ferndale series I never traced, and have still never seen a copy. The Sparshott series, however, I did manage to find - starting with number 3 and quickly picking up the back numbers. Numbers 4 and 5 followed at monthly intervals, but I missed number 6 and it was many years before I was even aware of its existence. Eventually I did obtain a copy through the generosity of a fellow collector to complete the set.

Just to dwell on the Picture Post article for a moment longer: in his introduction the Memorial Edition of Frank Richards' Autobiography, Charles Skilton tells how this article led him to the idea of publishing the Greyfriars stories in bound form, and how he contacted Charles Hamilton with this end in view.

In this way Hamilton was really launched on his second career, producing 50 books in 14 years as well as innumerable other stories. Not quite up to his pre-war output perhaps, but good going for a man in his late seventies and eighties. The article, therefore, served both to publicise Hamilton's current activities and perhaps to sow the seeds for their destruction.

Now let us look at the Sparshott series and examine the stories, the cast - and even one or two minor mysteries without which no Hamilton saga, however short, seems to be written.

Naturally, in this short series of relatively short stories Charles Hamilton had little time to introduce characters let alone give us any character development. All the members of the cast appeared, as it were, as ready-made transplants from other Hamilton schools of the past, with new names and a few altered characteristics. Action takes place in the Fourth Form, Captain Harry Vernon (not difficult to place at Greyfriars) whose friends are Tom Rake and Plum (Eustace) Tumpton. Tumpton is a good-natured Bunter character. I offer no prizes for guessing the nature of a character named Barnes-Paget and nicknamed the Buccaneer. Other Fourth Form characters include Carboy and Root - Skinner and Snoop in Greyfriars terms. The captain of the school is Wilmot of the Sixth and the Headmaster, Dr. Oliphant - naturally known as the Elephant.

These names all sound typically Hamiltonian - as is the setting. Sparshott School is set in the country in Southern England and near the sea. It is in fact near enough to Greyfriars to make day visiting possible as we shall see later. The nearest station is at Rodwood and other places nearby include Oke and Parsley. Then there is the inevitable public house near the school for the convenience of the sporting set - in this case The Feathers.

So much for the background; now for the stories themselves. Nothing new in the way of plot, of course, but the stories make light, enjoyable reading. The first is called "The Secret of the School." Plum Tumpton breaks bounds at night to visit the old Keep as a dare. There he comes across an intruder who, on seeing him utters one startled word - "Dummkopf" and then knocks him out. Plum is found by his unpopular temporary form master, Mr. Rackstraw and brought back. No one believes Plum heard the German word - except the Head, Dr. Oliphant. The mystery is soon revealed - Rackstraw is a wanted German Spy. Although published in 1946, this story was obviously written by Hamilton late in the war.

No. 2 in the series is "The Black Sheep of Sparshott." The black sheep in this case is our old friend Vernon-Smith under his nom-de-plume of Barnes-Paget. The Buccaneer, dodging Wilmot the head prefect, passes a packet of cigarettes to Plum for safe-keeping. Unfortunately for Barney the fatuous Plum, not realising the packet contains cigarettes returns it to Barnes-Paget in the presence of his form master Mr. Lamb (replacing the Teutonic Mr. Rackstraw). Barnes-Paget gets his revenge and the result is a feud between the two juniors with Plum, of course, making a complete mess of his attempts to rag Barney. Finally, while attempting to ship the Buccaneer's study at night Plum overhears Wilmot and Lamb preparing to catch a junior on return from breaking bounds - the Buccaneer

of course. Plum naturally warns Barney, saves him from the sack and the feud ends with Plum receiving the largest cake ever seen at Sparshott.

The third story is entitled "First Man In." Barnes-Paget breaks detention for a cycle ride, is chased by Wilmot and escapes by climbing down a dangerous cliff-face to the beach. In doing so he hurts his leg and is rescued by a walker along the beach. This is Lamb's nephew, Captain Randolph Lamb who carries Barnes-Paget away from the danger of the rising tide. Captain Lamb, an old boy of the school and a keen walker arranges a seven mile walking race. He has, incidentally, discovered that Barnes-Paget, by intercepting his (Randolph's) telephone call to his uncle the form master, had caused him an unnecessary ten mile tramp on the day of the rescue. Despite his game leg, Barney enters and wins, thus regaining the Captain's good opinion.

These first three stories are the best of the six. The fourth, "Looking After Lamb," contains one of Hamilton's more used plots. Mr. Lamb is being blackmailed by an ex-bookmaker's clerk who has proof of a racing debt paid by Mr. Lamb. Naturally the debt was incurred by one of the form master's weak young relatives. The juniors discover this by accident and regain the evidence for their form master. With embellishments this simple plot is spun to the accepted thirty-six pages.

The plot of number 5, "The Hero of Sparshott" is equally thin and well-worn. A new boy, Irishman Michael Egan, is on his way to the school and stops a runaway horse ridden by Sir Algernon Lovelace of the Sparshott Fourth. Lovelace incidentally bears a remarkable resemblance to Gussy in the Macdonald cover drawing. Lovelace has to go into the sick-bay, but tells of his narrow escape not knowing Egan is a Sparshott new boy. Meanwhile tricks played upon Egan by Carboy, Barnes-Paget and Root cause trouble for Egan and this comes to a head when he, naturally, refuses to join in the general praises of the mystery hero. All is cleared up when Lovelace returns to health.

Number 6, the last of the series, is entitled "Pluck Will Tell." Another new boy, Merrick, is being continually bullied by his Bolsover-type study mate, Scafe. Through the encouragement of the more generous-minded Fourth Formers he learns to box, eventually takes on Scafe and wins. The interesting point about this issue, however, lies in the appearance of one William George Bunter in his usual role of money-borrower and tuck-disposer. This appearance may give a clue as to the mystery of why the series ended at this point. Possibly the publishers went out of business - newsprint was still difficult to get and distribution problems must have abounded. The price, at 1/- a copy, may have hindered sales. Perhaps, however, Charles Hamilton was preparing for the reappearance in the bookshops of Greyfriars stories - albeit in hard-cover form - and the introduction of Bunter might have been a trailer to the main feature of the first Bunter book, "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School," published in the following year.

In this connection there is an oddity about the six Sparshott issues. On the cover of the first issue the story was billed as by Frank Richards (Author of Billy Bunter). The (Author of Billy Bunter) part was omitted on Cover 2, returned

larger on Covers 3 and 4, larger still on Cover 5, while on Cover 6 the name Billy Bunter is larger than the author's. Very curious.

To sum up, the series presented no more than a gentle reworking of fairly hackneyed plots in a new setting. Nevertheless, its appearance filled a gap and helped to keep my interest going at a time when the hobby might, as it were, have slipped away from me. I shall always be grateful to Sparshott for that reason alone and even if it contained nothing outstanding it did have one oddity - how many other Hamiltonian schoolboy characters are called Eustace?

* * * * *

MAGNET on exchange basis

For disposal — (Spine mended - otherwise good and complete)
1531, 1532, 1533, 1534, 1535, 1536, 1537, 1538, 1539, 1540,
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Brooks and Bad Luck

by CHRIS LOWDER

Now I don't want to make, as they say, too much of this - but it does strike me that Edwy Searles Brooks was at one with Defoe, when the latter wrote: "The best of men cannot suspend their Fate..."

Fate, ill fortune, the "slow, sure doom," or, to put it more bluntly ... sheer bad luck - however you care to describe it, Brooks seemed to take a positive delight in teeing up certain of his characters, and then dealing them a hefty swipe with Kismet's driver.

The jumping-off point for this theory (and into what depths have I plunged, indeed?) is the Union Jack story "Once A Crook...", in which Rupert Waldo, erstwhile Peril Expert, returns to a life of crime.

It's not the best Brooks story I've read, by any means, but it rattles along effortlessly, without pause for much philosophical digression (Brooks was always pretty good at keeping things going - whatever he was as a writer, he was never dull) and there are some nice humorous touches thrown in for good measure.

Waldo is champing at the bit. For quite a while (I don't know exactly how long, not having the relevant data) he has been on the side of Law and Order - tackling other people's problems with his usual insouciance, but without his usual disregard for the laws of the land. In a word, he is reformed.

But - can a leopard change his spots? (I'm surprised, incidentally, that Brooks doesn't use this phrase in the story.) It would appear not. In "Once A Crook..." Waldo returns to crime - indeed, he embraces it with a fervour that would have outraged any child psychologist who might have read the story ... if child psychologists had been invented in 1932.

However, the normal, average reader would, I am sure, not have been moved one iota. A life of crime, or demi-crime, suited Waldo down to the ground - as it suited any ebullient, extrovert, pre-war rake-hell (the archetypal Brooks hero).

The manner of his fall from grace is this: Waldo sees a man about to commit suicide and saves him. The man, Sir Rodney Merrick, is being bled white by a loan-shark, Hungerford Boyne. Waldo destroys the evidence of the loan (trumped-up and crooked anyway, so we've no need to waste our sympathy on the financier concerned), but, in the process, kills Boyne - "by the merest fluke..."

That is: Waldo is covering Boyne with his gun; Boyne flings a heavy paperweight at Waldo; the paperweight hits Waldo's trigger-finger; Boyne is shot through the head. Waldo's in trouble ...

But there's still time to back out. We know, even as we hurtle on through the story, that somehow, somewhere along the line, Waldo will escape the capital charge. And we're right. Blake discovers the vital witness, the mean little crook who saw it all. And, as they say, from here on in it should be plain sailing for the Wonder Man.

But, of course - it's not. If Waldo kills Hungerford Boyne "by the merest fluke," his final descent into the maelstrom is caused by what can only be described as a monstrous piece of shocking bad luck.

Blake, with the vital evidence in his hands, so to speak, hurries over to the police station where Waldo has been detained. But, alas, "stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage" - especially where Waldo's concerned. The bird has flown, and has already helped himself to a quick hundred pounds from a local bank ... thus effectively destroying any chance he ever had of living the life of a normal, God-fearing, law-abiding citizen.

Of course, in reality, Waldo wants it this way. He's positively revelling in the situation. No more boredom, no more weeks full of endless Sunday afternoons - he's free at last.

But, consider - if Waldo had not been so previous in walking out of the police station, if Inspector Lennard (in charge of the Boyne case) had not been so stubborn, if Blake had got to the station half an hour (or whatever) earlier ... then none of the above would have happened, and Waldo would still have been on the side of the angels.

And we would have lost some good stories from the Brooks typewriter ... For, of course, it is a fictional device we are discussing.

And yet ... although Waldo would obviously have it no other way, Brooks the author does tend to pile on the events in any case in such a way as to make it impossible for the Wonder Man to escape his fate. Every step that he takes is another nail driven into his coffin (if you'll excuse the metaphorical mix-up), until there is no exit - and he is trapped forever in a situation that he, doubtless, enjoys to the utmost but from which there is absolutely no escape.

However, as I followed (a mite breathlessly, let it be said) Waldo's headlong dash towards the inevitable, I became aware that I had been here before.

The manner of Waldo's downfall was too familiar - bad luck, missed meetings, a certain pig-headedness on the part of those most intimately involved in the affair.

And suddenly I was back nearly a decade to when I was first savouring the delights of pre-war juvenile papers (and when, by God(!), I could pick up Detective Weeklies at a bob each - not so now, alas. But that is entirely by the way.)

Then I read, as I have read again, many times since, what I regard as one of the finest school stories I've ever come across - Brooks' "The Cads of St. Frank's."

Now, I've written about "The Cads" before - nearly nine years ago, in the

first full flush of enthusiastic discovery - and though my writing style may have changed during that time (drastically, I trust!), my opinion hasn't. I do think it is one of the very best school stories I've read.

Not the best, certainly - but the writing is so powerful, the characters so ably portrayed, the emotions of those concerned so starkly etched ... that it is one of those stories that will remain with me until the end of my days. A somewhat high-flown statement, but true nonetheless.

However - to get back to the matter in hand...

"The Cads of St. Frank's" occurs mid-way through the famous "School On Its Honour" series, in the Nelson Lee Library. I won't clutter up this piece with a lengthy resume of the series - and, indeed, I would rather you went out into the highways and byways (or phone up your favourite dealer) to search for it yourself, as it is well worth the seeking ... and the sum you will doubtless have to pay to get it - but will briefly sum up the situation as best I can.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood is a reformed character. But ... he's had a shout-up row with his study-mate, Canadian Clive Russell, over a sum of £20. Fullwood (once the arch-blot of St. Frank's) has gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick - he thinks that Russell got the money by gambling. Good character-drawing here, incidentally - like all reformed characters, Fullwood is slightly more intolerant of his fellow human beings than is normal for a man to be, and his thinking is inevitably coloured by his past actions. That is, he is seeing Russell (no matter how wrong he is) in the same way as others once saw him.

For various reasons Bernard Forrest (the new Public Enemy No. One at St. Frank's) wants to revenge himself upon Fullwood. In the course of the story, Brooks sees to it that poor Fullwood is given no chance to see his mistake and, likewise, Russell is effectively stopped from making up with his erstwhile study-mate.

At last we get to the point when Forrest (or, indeed, Brooks) has lured Fullwood to a gambling hell (lovely phrase, that!) and placed Russell's £20 in his hands. As the little ball clatters around the roulette wheel, Fullwood is steadily drawn nearer and nearer to the table, until, by the end of the night, he's gambled away money that is not his own, proved Forrest's theory that a leopard can never change his spots, and done an excellent job of placing himself beyond the pale of St. Franks' society.

And, as in the case of Rupert Waldo, it could all so easily have been avoided ...

At one point in the story Clive Russell, on his way to see Fullwood and patch up their quarrel, bumps into Forrest. Fullwood is some way down the corridor. It is the turning-point of the story.

"Forrest acted on the instant.

'Hallo, Clive, old man!' he cried cheerily, as he slapped the Canadian

youngster on the back. 'Doing anything this evening?'

Clive gave him a cold glance.

'Not with you, Forrest!' he retorted shortly.

'Good man!' grinned Forrest, his voice louder than ever. 'Come along to my study, and I'll give you a great time. In half an hour then? Fine! That'll suit me to perfection. We'll have the cards already.'

'Cards?' repeated Russell, staring. 'What are you talking about?'

But Forrest had gained his end ..."

Indeed he has. By this time, Fullwood's disappeared into the lobby, only having heard Forrest's end of the conversation - and getting completely the wrong idea.

Brooks calls this little episode "an atrocious piece of bad luck" - and I can think of no better description.

Apart from this story being an excellent example of Brooks' tendency to pile misfortunes on to his characters, the latter half of the tale is, as I hope I've hinted, a fine description of the gradual disintegration of Fullwood's character.

And certainly I think that, in this particular instance, Brooks was a more effective writer than Charles Hamilton, who also wrote some very good pieces around gambling.

Before I'm called to order by the vast mass of Hamilton zealots, I'd better point out that I, too, am a Hamilton man, and always have been so, rather than an enthusiast of Brooks.

Notice, I said "effective" just now. Brooks, I suspect, had no particular axe to grind in the matter of gambling, whereas I think that Hamilton found it very difficult to be even slightly objective on the subject.

In real life, I think Hamilton lost a great deal of money at the tables, and despite his apparently amiable recounting of his misfortunes at Monte Carlo (in the Autobiography and elsewhere), I suspect that, as with a lot of other things, he hid his true feelings behind a pretty hefty facade.

Vernon-Smith at the tables never really rang true with me. I always felt that Hamilton was piling it on a bit too thick - the message (that gambling was a bad thing) was hammered home with pile-driver force.

Brooks on the other hand, having had (as far as I know) no particularly unpleasant experiences linked with gambling, could concentrate on the characters involved, when he wrote about it. He used gambling as a peripheral thing, a literary device - purely for the purposes of the story. Thus, he could be completely objective.

And thus, too, he could inject a great deal more atmosphere and suspense into his description of, say, Fullwood standing by the roulette table, with £20

clutched in his hand, waiting for someone who would never turn up ... and gradually letting his eyes stray from the door to the spinning wheel, gradually letting all noises fade from him, save the insidious clatter of the ball jumping and sliding over the slots. And the Satanic Forrest, gloating in the wings with hooded eyes, watching his mesmerised enemy teeter on the brink of the abyss ...

No, this is fine work. Parts of the story, for me, go far beyond the bounds of mere sub-literature.

Reverting back to my original theme - Brooks and bad luck - we can say, I think, that one of the main differences between Hamilton and Brooks was that, while Hamilton treated his characters more as human beings (the things that happened to them could have happened in real life, given a certain set of circumstances ... the qualifying clause is very important), Brooks gave himself God-like powers.

Even given that certain set of circumstances, the things that happened to the boys of St. Frank's, Rupert Waldo, Conquest, et alia, were pretty wild and way-out.

Brooks' world was a microcosm - but a microcosm where anything went. And Brooks, as sole arbiter of Fate, manipulated his puppets with a ruthlessness that nearly defies description - giving us, the readers, some wonderful stories in the course of his pragmatical peregrinations.

Indeed, come to think of it, I feel that Brooks would have gone further than Defoe - "The best of men cannot suspend their Fate for I will not let them!"

* * * * *

Gerry Allison, Eric Fayne, Jim Swan, Bob Blythe and all Hobby friends thank you all for enriching 1970. Best wishes for the coming year.

DEAR SANTA - Please send me some Dixon Hawke Libs.

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The hobby lingers on

by TONY GLYNN

I'm back in the fold after being absent for quite some time and following sundry wanderings across the Atlantic. Back to the pages of the C.D. and back to the friends and acquaintances of the world of old boys' books.

Not that I have really been away in spirit for, whether winging over Canada or travelling in the United States, there was often something to bring my thoughts back to the hobby.

Flying over Quebec, for instance, I watched Montreal slip away, saw the mighty St. Lawrence - frozen at that time - and the marching acres of forestry. I thought of G. H. Teed. Didn't the saga of Mlle. Yvonne have its beginnings in this piney country of French Canada? Or was I thinking of Mlle. Roxanne?

Then, in Cleveland, Ohio, I encountered a souvenir shop owned by a youngish veteran of the U.S. Navy and his wife. Their speciality was Americana: all manner of objects and books dealing with American history and traditions. On the wall were several posters from the first world war, humorous publicity for war bonds and the U.S. armed services. But wasn't there something extremely familiar about that friskily old chimpanzee in doughboy uniform? And there was the same chimp in another poster, wearing the characteristic outfit of an American fireman. It was our old friend "Gran'pop" and, sure enough, there was the familiar signature in the corner of each poster: "Lawson Wood."

"He was a British artist," I told the proprietor. "He must have had commissions from the U.S. government at that time."

"Well, what do you know?" exclaimed he. "Have you ever seen these? They have a lot of British pictures in them." From under the counter, he produced a number of copies of "Frank Leslie's Newspaper," a publication which went in for vigorous pictorial reporting. If you are an enthusiast for really old boys' books, you will remember that Frank Leslie pirated Bracebridge Hemming's "Jack Harkaway" stories after their original English publication. In true collector fashion, we browsed through pages which showed British soldiers in action against the Boers, sleeping on the veldt and herding prisoners along.

"My grandfather was in that war," I said. "He chased General de Wet along the Orange River in 1900."

"Well, what do you know?" said the proprietor and he sold me an American Civil War medal, with a generous discount off, because a friendship had grown up between us.

Speaking of the Civil War, when making a bus trip along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, heading for Philadelphia, I passed through Harrisburg, the state capital, where William Murray Graydon was born in 1864, only a few months after the guns had ceased to roar at nearby Gettysburg. He left those Pennsylvania farmlands to come to England and become famous among those who contributed to the saga of Sexton Blake, as well as to provide the world with a son who also did his share in taking the Baker Street detective along the roads of adventure. The younger Graydon - under the style of "Murray Roberts" - also created that science-fiction original, Captain Justice.

Did I mention science-fiction? Let me tell you about my encounter with my own past in the basement of the home of Bill Thailing, comic dealer of Willow Station, Ohio.

"Bill, I'd like to get my hands on a 'Buck Rogers' sequence which must have been published around 1938," I told him. I explained that I had remembered these comic strip adventures for 30 years. Ever since I was a small child, I have seen the pictures vividly: Buck Rogers captured by the inhabitants of a far planet and tied to a stake on a high mountain while fierce vulture creatures winged about him. I never saw the follow-up and didn't know how he escaped.

Bill checked his stocks of comic-books and found the sequence and sequel in question. We did a deal as Bill marvelled at my memory of a comic-strip sequence last seen in childhood.

Since we're on the subject of science-fiction, let me tell you about my all-night conversation with Lloyd Eshbach, a veteran science-fiction author, who was active in the field in the 1920's, when he was a very young man. He is a friend of my brother-in-law and he paid a surprise visit when I was at my sister's Ohio home. Our conversation went on until the early hours. It was full of books and authors.

Not the least of Mr. Eshbach's achievements is his ability to rattle off all the titles of the "Tom Swift" books like a man saying a multiplication table. Tom Swift, in case you don't know, was a fictional American lad of many years ago, whose adventures are still being reprinted.

Mr. Eshbach recalled an experiment in an American pulp detective magazine of long ago in which several established authors had to develop a story, each taking up where the other left off, all having been provided with certain properties which were to figure in the story. I, of course, told him of the "Proud Tram" series which ran in the "Union Jack," fashioned on very similar lines.

It would be interesting to know which came first, the American experiment or the English one.

Recalling the days when he was a tyro in the science-fiction field, Mr. Eshbach remembered the editor of a famous American science-fiction magazine, a scholarly Ph.D., who edited the magazine because it offered a living and who, in private life, had nothing but scorn for any suggestion that men would ever reach

the moon or the planets.

But, just a little north of where our conversation took place, lies the town of Wapakoneta, Ohio, where, just about the time this scornful editor was buying Mr. Eshbach's earliest stories, there was born a baby named Neil Armstrong. He would grow up to be the first man of earth to set foot on the moon.

Say what you like about collecting, you who think we are all fuddy-duddies, steadily facing the past. It has given me an outlook, an enjoyment and an understanding of kindred spirits which is all the richer for spanning the wide Atlantic.

And I'm glad to be back. Although, as you can see - I've never really been away!

* * * * *

BUY MAGNETS: 748, 761, 763, 797, 848, 862, 876, 1117, 1125, 1126, 1169-1174, 1191-1194. GEMS: 334, 336, 337, 350, 461, 564, 600, 704, 720-721, 722, 816, 822, 824, 825, 826, 827, 829, 839, 841, 845, 847, 920, 923, 924, 935, 936, 952, 953, 970, 973, 974. £3 offered for clean, untrimmed, binding copies. My copy to you.

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Most Evenings 01 771 9857

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS to all readers and thanks to those who have helped me in my first year of collecting. STILL WANTED: Schoolfriend Annuals 1933, 1934, 1939, 1940, and Hard Cover Books in "Nancy" Series by Dorita Fairlie Bruce.

MARY CADOGAN, 46 OVERBURY AVENUE, BECKENHAM, KENT.

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Early Days at Morcove

by RAY HOPKINS

In *The Schoolgirls' Own*, for 15 years, Horace Phillips, using his most celebrated pen-name, Marjorie Stanton, chronicled the adventures of Betty Barton, her enemies and her friends. The first 18 issues, which I read so that I could write this article, each contains a tale 12,000 words in length. Perhaps tale is a misnomer because it implies something complete in one issue, and these first 18 issues are really one long narrative. My guess is that the author was not writing haphazardly but working from a definite plan, so that he is able to plant little seeds along the way which grow into dramatic incidents further along in the saga. A case in point occurs in the very first issue when Betty Barton meets the Junior Mistress of the Fourth Form, Miss Ruth Redgrave, whose visage told Betty "something touched her life with sadness." It is not until *Schoolgirls' Own* (S.O.) No. 11 (*The Junior Mistresses' Secret*) that we learn that an escaped convict called Seagrave, who is in hiding near the school, is none other than Miss Redgrave's father. This style of writing gives a very definite feeling of continuity to the reader and no doubt was one of the reasons for the S.O.'s successful run of 15 years.

When I was going through the files of *The Schoolgirls' Weekly* of the 1920's looking for material to use in another article, I found several titles indicative of the fact that stories of home life and stories of Mill life were very popular at that time. Here are some of them: *The Duffer of the Family* by Louise Essex; *She Had to be a Mill Lass*; *A Drudge in her Sister's House*; and *"I Will be a Mill Lass,"* the latter three all by Enid Earle. I mention this because the major portion of the first ever Morcove story sounds very like a combination of the two.

The story begins in Ribbleson in Lancashire where the Grandways live in tremendous style at the posh end of the town and the Bartons exist at the opposite end of the scale in a dilapidated hovel which they rent from Josiah Grandways, the owner of the Mill in Ribbleson. The two families are connected not only by the miserable dwelling in which the Bartons live but also by the fact that Joe, Betty's crippled father, has a light job at the mill, for which he is paid 18/- a week, and Mrs. Barton "cleans house" at the palatial mansion where live the Grandways. The Grandways are blessed with two unpleasant daughters, unkind and snobbish Cora and Judith, while the Bartons have Betty, Doris and young Joe. So how then, you will be wondering, does Betty happen to be able to go to an expensive school like Morcove located in the West Country?

In order to free the Bartons from their miserable existence and dependence on the Grandways family, the author introduces that old literary device which derives from the Greek drama, "*Deus ex machina*" (God from the Machine) in which a difficult situation is resolved by an unexpected event. God in this case is Uncle

George, who returns after five years in America, very wealthy from acquisitions of land there, and rescues the Bartons by buying them a fine house, paying all their debts (Josiah Grandways has just threatened to throw them out of their house unless they pay £2 back rent by Saturday), and engages servants to wait on them. I did wonder how Uncle George was able to go to America in 1916, in the middle of the Great War, and amass a vast amount of wealth in such a short time, but I quickly brought myself back from reality and faced the fact that Morcove exists in that same timeless atmosphere resided in by the inmates of Greyfriars and St. Jim's.

However, it is not until S.O. No. 5 (The Form Against Them) that we find the first description of the environs of Morcove.

"Morcove stands high up on a breezy hill, overlooking the Bristol Channel. One part of the boundary wall is only 200 yards to the edge of the cliffs. Easy access to the beach is by a deep chine or "combe." Prettiest of the highways is one that goes all along the top of the cliffs, with the sea in sight on one side, and glorious stretches of moorland on the other."

In S.O. No. 8 (The Runaway Schoolgirl) appears the following:

"Morcove School was a little world in itself, standing high on the cliffs of North Devon. Outside the boundary walls and hedges of the school ground, not a single habitation was to be seen. . . . One or two fisherfolk's cottages there were hidden away amongst the steep valleys - or "combes" as they are called in Devonshire - that opened out at one end onto the rugged seashore. But up here, on the mighty cliffs, one could roam away from the school across the uplands in all directions, without meeting any dwelling place."

Much use is made of the cliffs, the seashore and the wooded areas around Morcove as the narrative follows on from the opening stories which are all about Betty's entry into the world of school.

The author has Betty thrown into what appears to be a Form of malcontents led by those two hated girls from her home-town, Cora and Judith Grandways. They had only come to Morcove a short time before Betty but already Cora's forceful personality has turned the easily-led Fourth Formers into slackers and snobs. This state of affairs has been encouraged by the fact that the Fourth has a very weak form-captain by the name of Paula Creel, of whom more later, and the fact that Miss Massingham, the Fourth Form Mistress, encourages "the girls to boast about their parentage." Cora is not slow to inform the other girls of Betty's humble beginnings and urges them to make life purgatory for Betty. There is a nice touch of irony here for Betty on arrival at Morcove believes that when she tells her new friends of her humble beginnings, they will all say how pleased they are that she has been able to enjoy the advantage of a good education at Morcove. This too is a shape of something to come as when Betty and Polly Linton, her first friend, in S.O. No. 10 (Friendship Wins), discover a hidden treasure, they tell Miss Somerfield, Morcove's Headmistress, that they would like their share of the treasure trove to go into a fund to provide schooling for poor girls.

The main theme of the first 18 Morcove stories is Betty's fight for recognition and friendship, and her chief opponent is Cora Grandways. It is obvious who out of Cora and Betty is the real lady. Cora is full of bad-tempered invective and is not averse to knocking Betty onto the floor and keeping her there by force. Betty's replies to Cora are always dignified and in perfect English so, Council School product though she may be, Betty Barton has more self-control and good breeding than Cora, who, one presumes, has known wealth from her earliest days.

When Betty first arrives, apart from the Form Captain and the Grandways sisters, only two other girls are mentioned by name, Grace Garfield and Ella Elgood but, with the introduction of the cunning Ursula Wade in S.O. No. 2 (For Another's Wrong), we find ourselves confronted with a girl whose ways are more devious than Cora's. Betty Barton, herself "Scorned by the School" which is the title of S.O. No. 1, takes pity on Ursula Wade, a girl who is not very much liked by the other girls. She is ill-natured, disloyal, and a sponger on her studymate, Polly Linton. One night early on, Betty stops Ursula from breaking open Grace Garfield's moneybox. Ursula pleads that she is in desperate need of £1 and big-hearted Betty promises to give her 30/-. However, in taking the knife with which Ursula is trying to open the moneybox, Betty cuts her finger. When, the following day, Grace finds the bloodstained knife in her study and the marks on the moneybox, the only one in the Fourth with a cut hand is Betty. Betty, accused of interfering with the moneybox, is not unduly worried because, among her profuse thanks on receipt of the 30/-, Ursula had promised to be a true friend to her. So Betty looks to Ursula to get her out of her jam and is thunderstruck when Ursula, "knowing that in silence there was safety for herself" does not confess. True to the code of the school stories of pre-war days, Betty also remains silent. Ursula is perpetually in need of money (reason not given) and in S.O. No. 6 (A Schoolgirl's Secret) has pawned a necklace valued at £50 for £3. When Miss Massingham, the owner of the necklace, belatedly discovers its loss, the Form immediately conclude that Betty is the thief, but Betty, catching sight of Ursula's white face, knows who is the real thief and not being twice shy after having been bitten once, she gives Ursula the £3 she needs to redeem the necklace. Ursula, in her haste to retrieve the necklace, drops the pawn ticket in her study and Betty, who has found it and arrived at the pawnshop before Ursula gets there, is discovered by Miss Massingham with the ticket and is accused of having stolen the necklace. Once again, Betty is let down by the silence of Ursula Wade and is in fact only saved from expulsion in S.O. No. 7 (The Schoolgirl Detective) by Polly Linton who takes a group photograph of the Fourth Form to the pawnbroker who picks out Ursula as the one who pawned the necklace. Ursula runs away from Morcove and is missing for such a long time that when she does return and throws herself on the Head's mercy, she is pardoned. While she has been missing, Ursula has found the whereabouts of a treasure hidden in 1588 by the only survivor from a wrecked Spanish Galleon. Betty and Polly also locate the inner cave where Ursula believes the treasure is buried and while they dig, Ursula seals up, as she believes, their only exit, a narrow fissure leading to the outer cave. Cora and Co. have gotten wind of the treasure and are hunting Betty and Polly in another cave, and Ursula makes their attempt to leave the cave hazardous by dislodging a couple of rocks in the centre of a pool which is at the

only entrance to the cave. Ursula isn't just doing all this sealing up out of meanness; she hopes by putting the girls in danger that the Head will put the caves out of bounds so that she can find the treasure for herself. But she is caught out of gates by Miss Massingham after being gated by her, and the finding of the treasure falls to Betty and Polly.

In S.O. No. 13 (A Schoolgirl's Scheme), Ursula tells Cora that she will vote for her to become Fourth Form Captain if she makes it worth her while because the school is convinced that Betty will win the election. Paula Creel has been removed from the Captaincy by the Head and Betty, who is gaining popularity due to her prowess at cricket and tennis, and Cora, are the only two candidates. Cora, to gain votes, invited everyone to a sumptuous repast in her study, but only four people turn up and Ursula tells her that nobody came because they think that Cora will "Queen" it over them if she is elected Captain. Ursula suggests to Cora that something be made to happen that will damage her in the eyes of the form; however, Cora will have an alibi and so it will look as though someone else is trying to discredit Cora. This will, Ursula promises, eventually make Cora Captain. So Ursula dresses herself in Cora's Carmine dress, of which there is no duplicate at Morcove, and lets herself be seen, but not recognized, smoking among the trees by Ethel Courtway, Morcove's Head Girl, who is watching a nearby cricket match. Cora has a perfect alibi in that she was seen playing croquet at the time the smoking incident took place. Ethel has noted Betty's surprising absence from the cricket team and Betty has no alibi as she has been in her study alone, writing an urgent letter home. Polly once again saves Betty from disgrace by observing Ursula searching for something in the trees where the unknown girl was seen smoking and finds the hair slide that Ursula was apparently searching for. Once again Ursula escapes punishment because, as the outcome of the Carmine Dress plot has caused many of the girls to vote for Betty, Betty pleads with Miss Redgrave that the Head not be told about the plot.

Betty never learns how to deal with schemers and Ursula's conscience never allows her to go over to Betty's side because in S.O. No. 16 (The Pinkerton Prize), Ursula again plots with Cora to discredit Betty who has entered for the £20 prize because her Uncle is having some legal troubles over his American property; the money has come to a halt, and Betty's parents are almost penniless. Ursula, who is herself going in for the Pinkerton Prize, discovers that the subject of the essay type test is to be India and so she and Cora check books about India out of the school library and place them among Betty's books in her study. When Betty is named winner of the Pinkerton Prize, Cora objects and says Betty had prior knowledge of the subject. The tell-tale books in Betty's study lead the Head to believe that Betty is a cheat, and so the prize is awarded to Ursula Wade - the real cheat. This leads Betty to resign the Captaincy of the Form, Cora becoming Captain in her place. Ursula blackmails Cora into acknowledging her as a close friend but Cora, who thinks Ursula is a clever schemer but a despicable person, refuses and Ursula threatens to tell the truth about the prize. Ursula, Cora and Judith shout so loudly as they quarrel that they are overheard, thereby giving themselves away, and Cora is forced to resign in order to save herself from

expulsion.

From the above it would appear that Morcove is peopled mainly by unpleasant characters, but it is only when they are given names and brought out in supporting roles that some turn into interesting characters who, more often than not, end up on the side of Betty Barton.

Polly Linton in S.O. No. 3 (The Friend She Found) is the first to take pity on Betty. The snobs play havoc with Betty in the Dormitory, pounding her with pillows and fixing her bed so that it collapses as Betty wearily falls onto it. Betty gives up trying to repair the bed and sleeps on the floor but in the morning finds that she has been covered by two blankets during the night; however, her unknown benefactor makes no sign. Betty has been assigned Study 7 with the Grandways sisters but they attempt to throw Betty out and Miss Massingham, thinking that Betty is the trouble-maker, transfers her to a small, filthy box room round the corner from the Fourth Form passage. Cora, hoping to get Betty expelled, cravens scurrilous remarks on the box room walls with the help of some of the other girls, but Polly, who has seen them doing it, tells Miss Redgrave that Betty was not among those who wrote the rude remarks on the walls. "How can I thank you?" says Betty, and Polly answers, "How can I help you, Betty? For that's what I want to do." Polly leaves her cadging studymate, Ursula Wade, to join Betty in the small box room.

Madge Minden, who is one of the unnamed girls who backs Cora against Betty in the beginning, is named in S.O. No. 9 (The Schoolgirl Treasure Seekers); however, she is inclined to laugh at Cora and Co.'s discomfiture when their schemes against Betty fall apart and she finally tells Cora in S.O. No. 10 (Friendship Wins) that she thinks Betty has been ill-treated long enough. Cora tells Madge that she is only changing her mind hoping to get a share of the treasure when Betty and Polly find it. It is Madge who rescues Betty and Polly when they emerge onto a ledge 20 feet above the shore which is being lashed by angry waves; Betty and Polly having again been sealed in the inner cave by another villain in search of the treasure. Madge persuades Grace Garfield and some of Cora's other friends to carry a wooden roller coiled about with wire to the cliff edge, and Madge winds the wire about herself in order to weight it enough to get down to the ledge. Betty and Polly urge Madge to become their friend but she turns them down because she has been accused of only wanting to be friends because of the treasure. Betty tells her the finding of a true friend is better than finding hidden treasure. Madge therefore consents, but warns them that she gets tired of most people and things after a time. This sounds as though Madge will later become a complex character of more than usual interest. Her talents as a gifted pianist are featured in later series.

Tess Trelawney, the schoolgirl artist of later stories, is first mentioned by name in S.O. No. 14 (Rivals for the Captaincy) as one of the nine girls who decide to vote for Cora after the affair of the Carmine Dress has discredited Betty. In S.O. No. 15 (Betty Barton's Banquet), Tess is saved from a burning study by Dolly Delane, a new girl known as "The Doormat" who has quickly become disgusted

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



**WHO HAS STOLEN THE
FOOD FOR THE BANQUET?**
(An incident from the grand story
of *Morave School* contained in this
issue.)

with Cora and Co. and has allied herself with Betty and Polly.

Paula Creel who, in S.O. No. 1 (Scorned by the School), is the weak captain of the Fourth when Betty first arrives, has quickly come under the bad influence of Cora Grandways, whose arrival with her sister Judith preceded Betty's by just a few weeks. Paula thinks Cora's sardonic jibes at Betty are very funny and on Betty's first meeting with Paula, who has been tipped off by Cora as to Betty's mother's profession, the Captain of the Fourth informs Betty that she needs someone to do "a bit of Spring Cleaning." Betty tells her she's a new girl, but Paula calls her a "common skivvy," so it's obvious that it's going to be a long time before Paula will be won over to Betty, and in fact she holds out right to S.O. No. 17 (The Heroine of the Storm).

After Betty resigns her Captaincy because she has been accused of cheating in order to win the Pinkerton Prize, Cora automatically becomes Captain because of a Morcove rule which states that if a Form Captain is compelled to give up the position within one month of the election, the girl who came next in the polling takes office for the rest of the term. Two miles from Morcove along the cliffs lies Cove Castle and here is Marjorie Stanton's description of this spot:

"Cove Castle, the merest relic of bygone times, and its fragments of walls and towers - the walls were five feet thick - gave little suggestion of what the mighty stronghold had been like in former days. But the cluster of ruins made a very picturesque scene, famous for picnic parties. One of its great charms, too, was its complete isolation."

It is at these ruins that Cora provides a picnic, celebrating Betty's resignation and Cora's attaining of the Captaincy. Only six girls attend, including Paula, and the proceedings are ruined by a violent thunderstorm which sends the girls racing back to Morcove leaving behind not only the picnic things but also Paula, who has fallen over some masonry and has sprained her ankle. Betty, who has been on an errand of mercy to a penurious couple who live in a tent in the woods, finds Paula lying on the grass, soaked to the skin, and helps her to her feet. But Paula faints with the pain and Betty carries her all the way back to Morcove after wrapping her in her own coat, becoming herself soaked to the skin in the process. This brave act has two dramatic consequences. Paula refuses to be a snob any longer and joins Betty's Co., and her rescuer develops rheumatic fever. In S.O. No. 18 (A Guilty Conscience), when Cora is forced to resign or be exposed as one of the instigators of the Pinkerton Prize Plot, the Head tells Betty she is reinstated as Captain and Polly will be her deputy until she is well enough to take over the reins again.

This rapid run-through of the first 18 stories will give you an idea of the characters and events to be found in early issues of *The Schoolgirls' Own*.

Later on, there is the emergence of Polly Linton as the madcap of the Fourth and the introduction of her jolly brother Jack, of Grangemoor School. In 1923 (S.O.'s 116-120) the Co., by this time consisting of Betty, Polly, Madge and Paula, is joined by Naomer Nakara, the girl queen from North Africa. Naomer is essentially a comic character who, with the help of Polly, continually throws the

elegant Paula into all kinds of flutters and provides laughs with her curiously accented English, "What ze diggings!" being one of her better-known indignant catch-phrases. In the future, too, are the holiday trips to Turania (S.O's 76-81 in 1924; S.O's 544-547 in 1931; S.O's 654-657 in 1933; S.O's 760-763 in 1935) and Nakara (S.O's 155-163 in 1924; S.O's 389-396 in 1928; S.O's 529-534 in 1931; S.O's 755-759 in 1935), and the introduction of that mysterious figure "Rose of the Desert" who invariably materializes to help the Morcovites when they meet danger, as they always do on their trips abroad. Morcove also made a trip to India in 1933 (S.O's 650-653).

Reformations take place at Morcove, too, an early one being that of Judith Grandways. Too good a character to lose entirely among a bevy of other "decent" girls, Judith in 1931 (S.O's 564-566) is again brought to prominence when Mrs. Grandways admits that she is not her own child and it is discovered that she is one of the long-lost children of a Mrs. Cardew. The other turns out to be Jack Linton's great friend at Grangemoor, Dave Lawder. Henceforth, they are known as Dave and Judy Cardew.

In 1925 (S.O's 251-254), Jemima Carstairs arrives at Morcove. She is the same odd Jemima, with the same playwright father, who appears in *The School Friend* and no explanation is given as to her sudden transference to Morcove. No mention is made of her previous schooldays at Cliff House and at the end of this one short series she vanishes from Morcove forever. A further mystery connected with this series is that my information has always been that Jemima was an invention of E. L. Ransome. It is highly unlikely that Horace Phillips, who wrote the Morcove tales under the name of Marjorie Stanton, would have borrowed a well-known and continuing character like Jemima for one short series; however, Bill Lofts' January 1965 *Collectors' Digest* article states that Mr. Phillips did in fact write all the Morcove stories which appeared in the weekly *Schoolgirls' Own*, so there is a possibility that he and not Ransome introduced Jemima into the Cliff House stories.

1928 saw the introduction of Pam Willoughby (S.O's 373-382), one of the later, very popular, continuing Morcove characters. A wealthy girl, popularly known as "The Little Lady of Swanlake," who, after a bad start, charms them all by not throwing her weight about. Her hesitant, "Yes, well" was to become as well-known a verbal trade-mark as was Betty's famous phrase from the early days, "We'll manage."

Romance was not ignored, and two form-mistresses were married during the saga. Miss Redgrave, Betty's good friend and mentor in her early, unhappy days, was married in 1929 (S.O's 414-419), and the Fourth Form lost her replacement, Miss Everard, to a husband in 1934 (S.O's 679-682).

The name of Cora Grandways crops up in story titles over the years, so evidently her vendetta against Betty continued unabated. The last title in which her name is mentioned is "In Conflict with Cora" (S.O. No. 540). Following Judith's reformation, Cora has for a side-kick, a doll-like schemer, Hetty Curzon

by name.

The last issue of *The Schoolgirls' Own* (No. 798, dated 23rd May, 1936) contains a story called "Morcove's Jungle Quest," which ends with these words:

"An odd thought struck Betty. It was only that the fitful light upon all those faces around her was very like that from a torch, upheld in the darkness. But, from such a simple fancy as this, she fell to thinking of that symbolic torch which Britishers, through the ages, have kept burning, handing it on and on. And, with a smile, she murmured to herself, 'We'll manage.'"

In the same way that *St. Jim's* was reduced to appearing as part of the secondary program in *The Triumph*, so Morcove similarly was given roughly four pages a week in *The Schoolgirl* in the form of a serial, the first one, "Morcove in Unknown Africa," continuing the holiday adventures recounted in the last issue of the weekly *Schoolgirls' Own*. There were six more Morcove serials, the last being, "Schoolgirls in Society," which ended in February 1938. The narration above from S.O. No. 798 was actually the last written by Horace Phillips. Bill Lofts in his January 1965 *Collectors' Digest* article revealed that the Morcove serials in *The Schoolgirl* were written by authors other than the original creator.

An interesting oddity in connection with Morcove is the appearance of a serial entitled, "The Rivals of Morcove," which ran in a paper produced for readers older than those who read *The Schoolgirls' Own* called *The Girls' Favourite*. The leading characters were the Head Girl, Ethel Courtway, and her adopted brother, Cyril Dudley. The Fourth Formers were mentioned but action centered in the main around the Sixth Formers. This story was never reprinted in *The Schoolgirls' Own Library* (S.G.O.L.), but may have appeared in *The Girls' Friend Library*, a monthly publication for girls who had left school.

Morcove appeared in the monthly library until S.G.O.L. 730, "On Trial at Morcove" (May 1940). It is an interesting point that Morcove reprints in the S.G.O.L. were so far behind the weekly stories that they had only reached 1931 when the end of the Library came suddenly in June 1940. Marjorie Stanton wrote two "New and Original Stories" (never before printed elsewhere) for the Library (S.G.O.L. 8 in 1923, and S.G.O.L. 264 in 1930). Only one of *The Schoolgirl* Morcove serials was reprinted in the Library.

In general, from a chapter by chapter comparison of some of the original series with the reprints in the monthly Library, it would seem that there was a vast amount of cutting done to squeeze them into the 64, and later 96 page format of the S.G.O.L. A three-story series could be reprinted in full in one issue, but as many Morcove series ran to more than five issues, it will be seen that, as in the case of *The Schoolboys' Own Library*, it would be more rewarding to read the originals than the reprints. It is too late now to discover the whys and wherefores of this editorial policy, but it is interesting for researchers to come across these discrepancies and ponder the reason. How much more satisfying the Library would have been had the 120 page format of the very early 3d. *Boys' Friend Libraries* been retained.

Take a pew.

Put on a smoke.

Trot out the wicked pasteboards.

and join up with

Loder, Carne and Walker

suggests LES ROWLEY

Horace James Coker never thought much of the Sixth Form at Greyfriars, and if one disregards the almost god-like Wingate, his pal Gwynne and Tom North, little is known that reflects credit on the most senior form at the school. Doctor of Divinity, Master of Arts, brilliant scholar as he undoubtedly was, Dr. Locke acted like a very gullible goat in his appointment of prefects in the persons of Loder, Carne and Walker. But just as the villains in the silent films we used to see on Saturday mornings served their purpose, so - in their turn - did the bullies of the Sixth serve theirs.

The record clearly shows all three as deserving immediate expulsion for those jaunty little trips to "The Three Fishers," "The Cross Keys," "The Bird in Hand" where the hospitality was not all that was desired by the school authorities. Visits to those hospitable establishments did not feature on the School curriculum, especially in the stilly watches of the night! One wonders why they commended themselves to Loder & Co., returning to school at midnight leaving behind them the smokey atmosphere of an inn parlour and most, if not all of their pocket money. "Putting on the dog" was a prospect that was only enchanting whilst the possibility existed of winning at cards and Messrs. Banks, Lodgey and Sanders saw to it that the possibility was short lived.

What money they did not lose on cards they lost on racing. All the expert advice to be culled from such classical publications as "Sporting Snips" availed the prefects nothing but loss. Dead certs such as "Gay Goldfish," "Blue Peter" and "Pork Pie" featured only in the "also rans." Experience, said to make fools wise, did not deter Loder, Carne and Walker, and when money ran out there was always the inevitable I.O.U. to place them firmly and more deeply in the mire. When the day came to settle and funds were non-existent, an irate bookmaker or card sharper would threaten to visit the school and it was then their minds would be filled with thoughts that were dark and paths that were dangerous.

"I just want to ask Loder a question," murmured Lord Mauleverer. "You had the bank note last night, Loder. I know now that you intended to keep it back

when you pretended to forget to give it to Prout. What was the big idea?"

Loder stared at him. The weak-kneed, white-faced, almost cringing fellow who leaned on the table was hard to recognise as the over-bearing bully of Greyfriars. Never had a tyrant looked so utterly crushed and beaten.

"I swear that I never meant to steal it!" Loder's voice came in a husky whisper. "Mauleverer, at least you know that."

"Yaas," his lordship nodded amiably. "You've sailed pretty near to the wind, Loder! Frightfully near! Plenty of evidence for Prout to sack you or for a judge to send you to chokey! What?"

Loder shuddered.

"Gee-gees gone the wrong way?" asked his lordship. "Pushed for cash and trying to make yourself believe that you were only borrowin' the banknote. Do I get you?"

"Yes, almost," whispered Loder. "I swear it! I had to have the money, and -- and it's only for a time! I swear I was going to put it back in your study in a day or two, Mauleverer, for you to find there. I know what it looks like -- but I swear --"

The next morning, in break, Lord Mauleverer found a ten pound note under the inkstand on his study table.

Loder had not found it easy to get it back from Mr. Joseph Banks whom he had visited specially after lights out for the purpose.

Indeed, Mr. Banks had positively refused to part with it till Loder gave him a hint of how it had been acquired

Arthur Carne also was not particular in what he did to obtain reserves of that necessary article, cash. In his turn he was prepared to assist in the downfall of Cholmondeley of the Remove to facilitate that boy's cousin, Cyril Rackstraw, in becoming heir to the wealth of Sir George Cholmondeley

"He is simply a savage from the slums, but my grandfather thinks there is magic in a name. He expects a tinker's boy to turn into a gentleman as soon as he is called Cholmondeley instead of Tatters. He will find out his mistake as soon as the young rotter's sacked from the school. All you've got to do is to keep a special eye on him, find out the rotten things he gets up to and get him the proper punishment."

Carne nodded slowly.

"That's all right," he said, "it's only a question of nailing him."

"That's it! That and nothing more," said Rackstraw. "You'll be doing your job as prefect, and doing me a good turn at the same time. And as one good turn deserves another, I'll do anything I can for you in return. If you have bad luck with the gee-gees you may find it useful to know where to borrow a tenner from

sometimes, for instance."

Carne laughed and rose to his feet.

"I'll remember that if Bully Boy doesn't win at Wapshot on Wednesday," he said. "I should be in rather a hole."

Walker, like his friends, had trouble with the gee-gees. Unlike his friends, he kept within more closely defined limits. Smokes, cards and horses - yes. Quick with the ashplant and sometimes giving way to an uncontrollable temper - again yes. Theft, bribery, or corruption - no! "Walker," we are told, "was a good deal of a blackguard, but when he was amongst better fellows, Walker was a better fellow himself. His character was rather like a blank page for other fellows to write upon. At bottom he was far from being a 'bad hat' like his pals, and Walker would have jibbed most emphatically at many things which Gerald Loder would have done without turning a hair." Nevertheless, he could sit down with the others and enjoy a share in tuck that had been confiscated, on Loder's initiative, from a junior study. He was ready to avail himself of dubious advantages that Loder and Carne had procured by equally dubious means. Yet, although he lacked the courage - if courage it can rightly be called - to initiate the hard lie or the dishonest act himself, more than once he demonstrated a truer, greater, courage in halting at those limits beyond which his own dormant sense of decency told him he could not go. Whereas Loder often qualified as a candidate for Borstal and Carne richly deserved the order of the boot, Walker, removed from evil influence, may have done well. His is a very plausible character indeed, but alas he was not only of, but with, the despicable company he kept. The love of gee-gees, smokes and cards, kept him there! Here is a glimpse of Walker at his best.....

"I think you must be mad!" went on Walker. "A fag's trick - a rotten trick on a junior to land him in a row with his beak - and you a prefect! Dash it all, Loder, ain't you jolly well ashamed of yourself?" Walker spoke warmly, "and if the School knew --"

"You're making a silly mistake," said Loder evenly. "And you're going to hold your tongue, Jimmy, so that nobody else will make the same mistake."

Walker turned to the door.

"If Wharton's sacked, I go straight to the Head, and tell him every word!" he flung over his shoulder. "Mind, I mean that - every syllable! I'd be ashamed to look a decent chap in the face if I let it go on! Gerald Loder, you're a dashed rascal and rotter!...!"

So we have Loder and Carne free-wheeling, as it were, on the steep downward path with Walker as a passenger sometimes applying the brakes when the speed limit had been reached.

When the pace got too hectic there were also others, not only ready to apply the brakes, but to put forcibly a spoke in the wheels of the bullies of the Sixth. The Famous Five, past masters at the art of introducing gum into Loder's bed when he was out on the tiles or the erecting of a booby trap for a spying Carne,

could exert themselves to greater, more stringent or dramatic measures when the need arose.

Wharton, as a rebel with a feud against his Form-master, provided opportunity upon opportunity for Loder to score against him. But just as often the tables were turned and with dramatic effect. Quite a large proportion of life at Greyfriars was acted out 'neath starry skies and in gloomy box rooms through the windows of which the midnight moon glimmered fitfully. Masters fondly expected their boys to be cosily asleep in dorm after being seen their by dutiful prefects. On this occasion a dutiful prefect is out in the quad trying to get in and Harry Wharton, in the box room is barring the way.....

Harry Wharton looked through the glass at the staring prefect standing outside, with a cool smile on his face. His hands were on the sash. He was prepared for a desperate attempt on Loder's part to force it up. But that was impossible so long as the junior held it within.

Loder stared at him blankly.

"Wharton," he breathed.

"Little me," assented Wharton.

"You young scoundrel!"

"Go it!"

"Open the window at once!"

"Any hurry?"

Loder trembled with rage and terror. It was the junior whom he had persecuted - the junior who had come within an ace of the "sack" - who held him at his mercy! Wharton who ought to have been asleep in the Remove dormitory more than two hours ago, was in his study, holding the window. If the junior whom he had wronged wanted vengeance, he had it now. He had only to fasten the window again, and leave the blackguard of Greyfriars out for the night. Loder would not escape what Wharton had so narrowly escaped.

"Let me in!"

"You're all right where you are, old bean!" Wharton laughed softly. "Stay there and think of the morning. You won't get off with a flogging, Loder! They don't flog the Sixth. You came jolly near to getting me bunked. How near to it do you think you are yourself?"

Loder gritted his teeth.....

Of course, Loder managed to survive this exciting experience - one of many in which he came near to getting the sack. One would have thought that it would have cooled his love for gee-gees, cards and smokey inn parlours. One would have thought that he and his friends would learn that it paid to steer clear of the Remove and to emulate the repentant sinner. But the call of villainy and vengeance

was always too strong.

Bullying was not a prerogative of Loder's. His pals also used their prefectorial powers to excess and, like Loder, they too had to learn that the way of the transgressor was hard! When Hacker was Acting Headmaster he chose, in his wisdom, Carne as his head prefect. Carne was not slow in using the opportunities thus presented to paying off old scores. The Remove was equally on the ball in teaching a bully that such vengeance did not pay.....

"Scrag him!"

"Give him beans!"

It was a wild roar from the whole crowd of Removites. Vernon-Smith stood tottering. Every other fellow was pushing and shoving to get hold of Carne.

He struggled frantically in many hands. His ashplant was torn away, his hat squashed over his ears, his collar jerked out, his coat split up the back. Breathless and dishevelled, the bully of the Sixth struggled and roared.

"Bump him," roared Bob Cherry.

"Ooogh! Leggo," raved Carne.

Five or six fellows swept him off the ground. He came down again with a heavy concussion on the hard, unsympathetic earth.

Bump!

"Ow!"

Bump!

"Yoo-hoop!"

"Duck the cad!" panted Herbert Vernon-Smith. "Yank him along to the fountain!"

A yelling crowd of juniors swept Carne onward to the fountain in the middle of the quad. Many hands heaved him up over the rim of the big, shallow granite basin.

Splash!

Carne went in sprawling.

"Urrrrrgh!" came a gurgle.....!

Occasionally one of the three would be deprived, temporarily, of his prefectship. His power gone, he was prey to those who sought retribution; it was never long in coming.....!

"Oooooogh!" gurgled Walker. Never had he realised so clearly that he had fallen from his high estate. Only a short time ago he had walked in state, his official ashplant under his arm, and fags had trembled at his frown! Now he was a fellow who could be ragged --- and who, evidently, was going to be ragged!

"Ink!" roared the Bounder.

Ink was speedily forthcoming! Inkwells galore were up-ended over Walker. He streamed with ink! He was drenched with ink! He lived, moved, and had his being in ink! He was of the ink, inky!

He gurgled and gasped and roared! But there was no help for him! Nobody was about the Form-rooms on a half holiday, and there were no ears to hear!

"Soot!" howled Smithy.

"Oh my hat! Ha! ha! ha!"

Skinner shovelled soot down from the chimney. The juniors backed away from Walker as it scattered over him. They did not want any! Walker was welcome to all of it.....

William George Bunter, who could always be relied upon to interest himself in the affairs of others, often proved the fat fly in the peculiar ointment of Loder, Carne and Walker. Discovered reading a sporting rag or smoking a surreptitious cigarette, he would be hauled in front of Quelch by one of the three only for the searching questions of the Form-master to bring to light that the racing papers or cigarettes had been purloined from the study of the very prefect who was reporting him! Even more exciting were the occasions when the Owl of the Remove came into possession of incriminating evidence such as a note to Lodgey or Banks. With such power in his hands Bunter would indulge in the dangerous 'game' of blackmail, inviting himself to tea or having his postal orders cashed in advance by the fellow who had written the note. This happy - for Bunter - state of affairs would continue until, unknown to William George, the incriminating evidence had been restored to its originator by the Famous Five. Something like the following would then ensue...

Bunter was not normally a sticker for punctuality, but he could be punctual at mealtimes - very punctual. Unconscious that his hold over Loder was gone, he presented himself at the prefect's study promptly at tea-time. He was hungry, having had nothing to eat in the past hour but a bag of bullseyes he had 'discovered' in Study No. 1 and a dozen doughnuts for which Smithy was even now searching. He pushed open the door of Loder's study, his fat eyes going immediately to the table. To his surprise the table was bare except for Loder's cane - the closer acquaintance of which he was soon to make!

"Ah, Bunter!" welcomed Loder, his hand straying toward the ashplant. "I rather wanted to see you!"

"I say, Loder," began Bunter in his most haughty manner. "What about tea. I haven't much time to waste and I'm famished so it had better be good. It's rather usual, when expecting a guest, for the table to be laid. I must say I'm rather disappointed in you, Loder! This will not do. Trot out the grub without further delay. Come on! Sharp now!"

Loder regarded the fat Removite almost wolfishly.

"I rather fancy there isn't going to be any tea," he replied, a grin on his

face which the Cheshire Cat would have envied.

"Then you'd better fancy otherwise!" retorted Bunter, adopting a bullying manner. "Unless, of course, you'd rather I went to the Head with a certain letter!"

"What letter?" asked Loder coolly.

"You know what letter," Bunter exclaimed sneeringly. "A letter from a Sixth-form man to a bookie named Banks. Come on now ----"

"If you know of such a letter," interrupted Loder calmly, "it is certainly right that it should be placed before the Head. Otherwise it is my duty to see that anyone spreading malicious gossip about it gets the punishment he so richly deserves." His glance went toward the grate in which the embers of his note to Joey Banks still smouldered.

Bunter's fat eyes followed the direction of Loder's gaze. Suddenly he understood! The power he had held over the bully of the Sixth had gone! Somehow - Bunter's startled wits could not grasp quite how - Loder had recovered the note that had been the fat Owl's ticket for free meals and the encashment of non-existent postal orders! Bunter was not haughty or bullying now! He was alarmed! One look at Loder's face confirmed the cause for that alarm; he backed hurriedly away.

But if Bunter was quick, Loder was quicker. With one hand he grasped his ashplant, with the other he grasped Bunter!

"And now, I think," said Loder unpleasantly, "I think that I must make it clear to a fat, spying rascal that it does not do to come here with accusations he cannot prove. When I've finished with you my pippin, you'll wish you'd never been born!"

Swipe! The cane rose and fell eliciting clouds of dust from the largest trousers at Greyfriars and yells of anguish from its largest mouth!

From all of this it becomes apparent that the life of a Sixth-form rogue at Greyfriars School is not a bed of roses. But if you want your share of raggings and blackmail; if you want the suspense and worry of how you are going to pay Lodgey or Banks; or perhaps a losing session of nap,

take a pew.

put on a smoke.

trot out the wicked pasteboards.

there is always plenty of excitement if you join up with Loder, Carne and Walker!



recollection of St. Katie's

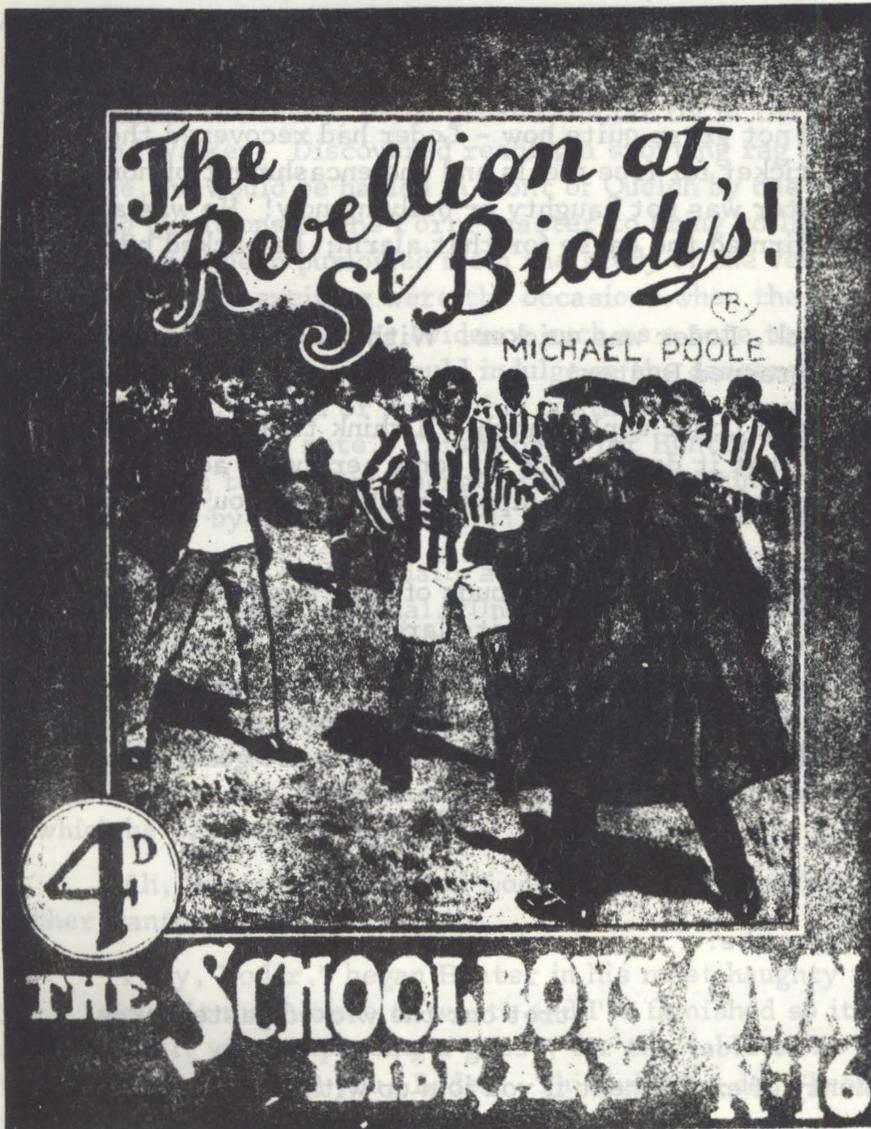
by WILLIAM CHAMPION

During my brief acquaintanceship with the C.D. I have failed to notice any mention of the "St. Katie's" stories, by Michael Poole, although I have no doubt there have been articles written and published about them.

I remember there was a series running, at the back of the Gem, way back in

the early 'twenties; but, unfortunately, I have none of these particular copies left in my modest collection. This series was about a junior secret society, and I know I considered it, at the time, exceedingly entertaining and well-written — also, I can vividly recall the illustration which appeared with the title each week, that of a bunch of schoolboys attired in robes and strange headgear, in an eerie, candlelit cellar.

Thrice-blessed am I for having so carefully nursed my Holiday Annuals all through the years, for in the 1922, 1925, and 1926 volumes appeared, respectively: "Katie's Wedding March," "St. Katie's Big Splash," and "Lincoln Beck's Farewell,"



Most of the Schoolboys' Own Libraries contained stories of either Greyfriars, St. Jim's, Rookwood, or St. Frank's. Very few tales in the S.O.L. featured other schools. This picture shows one of the few -- the author being Michael Poole.

three short school stories that I have read over and over again, and which, in my opinion, are equal to the best.

Mr. "Jolly Roger" Blunt, form-master of the unruly *Transitus*, and later, Headmaster of "Katie's," is truly a grand character, with all the attributes of a really fine schoolmaster; Richard Dexter, the "Kid," is at least on a par with "Putty" Grace, of Rookwood; Bill Strong, Curtis the "Kangaroo," Dobbin, Smithy of the fifth, "Big" Hallam ---- oh, what a wonderful crowd of chaps they are!

A remarkable thing about the *Holiday Annual* stories is the fact that, in each and every one, there figures a boisterous procession of schoolboys.

In "Katie's Wedding March," Jolly Roger marries Nancy Frayne, eldest daughter of the M.P. for Dulchester, a certain Mr. John Frayne, who lives near the school. The *Transitus* form-master, planning a quiet wedding, has wisely not broadcast the event, informing only the Head and the other masters; but, naturally, the "Kid" and his pals obtain knowledge of what is portending. Imagine, then, the unbounded surprise of Mr. Roger Blunt when, on emerging from the Church after the ceremony, he finds the entire school waiting gladly for him outside. Hallam, the school Captain, ably supported by the "Kid" and his friends, certainly have everything well organised, down to the minutenest detail, and the triumphal march from church to Mr. Frayne's house goes without a hitch. I enjoy immensely the description of the musical proceedings: "the bugles were going ahead with every call they could play, from reveille to 'Lights-out,' while the little bag-pipes were just squealing out any old thing, and so was the flute and the mandolin, but the comb brigade were sticking fairly steadily to 'Macpherson swore a feud against the clan Mactavish,' because Big Hallam had chosen that as the opening item, as he thought it had a bit of a military touch about it."

There is rather a good touch when they eventually arrive at the house, and Hallam realises it is perhaps time to call a halt and get the boys back to the school: "Before you could say 'Boo,' he had hopped up on to the top of a car and held up his hand. Instantly, everybody cut the cheering, and in the background Lord Velwood" (a governor of the school) "touched the Head and murmured, 'Splendid! Oh, splendid, my dear Head! Discipline, you know ---'"

In "St. Katie's Big Splash," an American newcomer to the school, Lincoln Beck, with a view to "stirring things up a bit," thinks up an audacious but brilliant scheme for putting "Katie's" on the map. It happens about this time that, in the news, is a certain Sir George McLachan, who, apparently, existed in the eighteenth century, and had spent most of his life in the U.S.A., where he had done much good in the way of "founding one or two states, getting a few odd towns started, and founding a number of schools." In George's biography, the author, a certain Mr. Thomlin, bitterly laments the fact that nothing is known about his earlier years, beyond the fact that he must have been educated at one of England's famous public schools.

So "Linky" Beck decides that the great man may as well have been a "Katie's" boy as any other, and, with the aid of a friendly chemist, forges the necessary

school-records,

Of course, the newspapers make much of the momentous discovery - especially the Yanks - who send their ambassador down to St. Katie's in order to unveil a tablet in McLachan's glorious memory. This very important occasion naturally gives the lads the opportunity to indulge in more musical exercises, when they march proudly from the station to the school, with the ambassador and other distinguished visitors riding in cars in their midst.

It is perhaps extremely fortunate for Linky Beck that some authentic old records are later unearthed - for it is discovered that Sir George McLachan really was educated at St. Katie's!

The third, and, to my mind, the best story, is "Lincoln Beck's Farewell." The story opens at Mr. Frayne's house, on the eve of the Annual Meeting of the Governors of St. Katherine's School, where some of the "big noises" are enjoying themselves, nostalgically, over a few drinks in the big lounge. Lord Velwood, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Hubert Rawson and so on, are joyfully recounting various escapades of their boyhood days such as "freeing half-a-dozen snakes" and "letting loose twenty rats," etc., they were also decrying modern youth, and the namby-pamby ways of schoolgirls. This latter observation thoroughly annoys one Margery Frayne, younger sister of Nancy, and friend of the Transitus form at "Katie's," who straightaway resolves to teach these patronising and high-and-mighty governors a lesson; the outcome being that she, disguised as a schoolboy, goes to the school, where she persuades the innocent Linky Beck to chaperone her into the Big-Hall. Once there, Margery places a small box containing six white mice on the table, and hides the box already there under the table.

Next day, during the auspicious proceedings, Lord Velwood impressively opens the box, intending to present Mrs. Roger Blunt with a silver casket - and out jump the six white mice!

Of course there is a terrific uproar, and the indignant governors insist on the culprit being found and expelled instantly. It comes to light that Lincoln Beck was seen in the Hall on the preceding evening and he is automatically accused by Jolly Roger. It is jolly hard lines on poor old Linky, as he really hadn't a clue, the night before, what was in the box and he couldn't very well peach - so that was that: he received his marching-orders!

The school soon finds out that "good old Linky" is innocent, is shielding some person or persons unknown, is bravely taking the rap - and what a send-off they give him. My word! All the available horse-drawn cabs are brought into commission and the procession from school station is really unique, the aforementioned musicians coming out even stronger! The part where the boys are marching sturdily along the country lane, on each side of the cabs, singing lustily "There's a long, long trail a'winding, unto the land of my dreams," is particularly touching, and never fails to moisten my eyes when I read it. Again, when they really let themselves go with "Bonnie Linky's noo awa', safely o'er the friendly main" - and when they come to the refrain "Will ye no' come back again? Better

lo'ed ye canna be, will ye no' come back again?" ... "it seemed frightfully pathetic in a jolly cheerful sort of way," - and invariably brings a lump to my throat!

And "Linky yells out for all he's worth: 'I will, boys! I'll be coming back to the old burg! And it'll be pork pies at Dawson's....'"

It goes without saying that Margery confesses before the train comes in; and then, what a rush on the part of Jolly Roger, etc., to pile into cars and drive like fury to the station in order to put a stop the the proceedings.

"Linky was gently ticked off, quietly crushed back into his proper place. He wasn't a giddy hero or anything. He was just Beck Major of the Transitus form of St. Katie's! That was Jolly Roger's little way!"

* * * * *

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=====

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MRS. J. PACKMAN, 27 ARCHDALE ROAD, E. DULWICH, S.E.22.

=====

WARMEST GREETINGS and GRATEFUL THANKS to our esteemed Editor, to Bill, Harry, Ian, Ivan, Jack, Ted, Tom and all Midland Club members, to Cyril Rowe, to New Zealand chum Albert Watkins and especially to Henry Webb and family, not forgetting Uncle Ben, Frank and all London Club members -

STAN KNIGHT

=====

Sir Hilton Popper

by ROGER M. JENKINS

One of the pleasing aspects of the Magnet was its habit of making repeated allusions to extraneous characters and places. This continual reference to the background of the school invested the stories with an air of reality, and Sir Hilton Popper was probably one of the most well-known outside characters. It may, therefore, come as something of a surprise to collectors to know that his first appearance was made in the pages of the Gem. It was in No. 117, entitled "Tom

Merry's Masterstroke" that we find the first pen-portrait of this irascible landowner who objected most strongly to those who trespassed on his land, particularly the island in the river Ryll:

He always carried a stick under his arm, and with that stick he had been known to rap the shoulders of village lads who did not treat him with the amount of respect that he considered his due.

Sir Hilton Popper's ideas were quite feudal; in fact he seemed to regard all English history since the time of the Plantagenets as a series of practical jokes.

In Popper Hall were the portraits of a long line of Poppers extending back into the dark ages, to the time of Sir Guy de Popper, who came over with William the Conqueror.

And Sir Hilton was a reproduction of one of those gallant old knights who, clad from top to toe with impenetrable armour, led their unarmoured men to battle, and gallantly chopped down unarmoured foes, and gallantly returned home with what was left of their followers.

In this story Gussy told him he was no gentleman,



and Skimpole patiently explained to Sir Hilton that according to Socialist theory ownership of land was impossible. It turned out that Sir Hilton and his head keeper were being impersonated by Gordon Gay and Frank Monk, but nevertheless it was of course supposed that there was a real Sir Hilton in existence. It is interesting to note that when Gem 117 was reprinted in Gem 1376, Sir Hilton Popper became Sir Francis Fortesque.

Moving forward from the year 1910 to 1911, we find Sir Hilton firmly ensconced in the neighbourhood of Greyfriars. Magnet 186, entitled "The Only Way" was one of the Courtney and Valence tales. Valence with blackened face was caught poaching on Sir Hilton's preserves, and stated that his name was Courtney. Sir Hilton sent a message to the effect that the matter would be referred to the police unless Courtney preferred to take a flogging from Sir Hilton as an alternative. The hot suns overseas, we were told, had warmed up the baronet's temper, and certainly in this period piece he acted the part of the Edwardian landowner to perfection.

In the famous double number "Schoolboys Never Shall Be Slaves" (Magnet 392), Sir Hilton's island, now in the river Sark, was the scene of the first part of the drama. It transpired that Greyfriars possessed fishing rights all along the river for a mile past the island. These rights dated back to the time of Henry VII and there were documents in Latin in the school library to prove it, but the school would not embark on a lawsuit. Bob Cherry wrote "RATS" across a sign saying that trespassers would be prosecuted, which infuriated the baronet. It became known that Sir Hilton had just been appointed a governor of the school, and deeming the school discipline to be slack he persuaded the other governors that the boys should be drilled by an ex-serviceman, one Sergeant Sharp. The sergeant was eventually dismissed when recognised as a traitor by Colonel Wharton, back from the front, but Sir Hilton still believed in the principle of drilling, and being out-voted he decided to resign from the board of governors. This sort of situation, which is very true to life, occurred many times during the history of the Magnet: one determined member of a committee, like Sir Hilton, can get his way by sheer force of personality until he meets another strong character like Colonel Wharton, who was often abroad when the governors met to make crucial decisions.

Sir Hilton's appearances became more frequent from this time onwards. In No. 402, entitled "The Midnight Marauders" he thrashed Bunter for trespassing and put up wire fences on the towpath to impede the right of way. He was kidnapped by German spies and concealed in the hollow oak on Popper's island. Despite the melodramatic theme, the story still reads well, and it is famous for containing Sir Hilton's first words of praise - "Greyfriars, sir, should be proud of these boys" - after he was rescued by the Famous Five.

Sir Hilton was shown in a better light in No. 431, "The Hero of Greyfriars." Bob Cherry, out of bounds, saved the baronet's niece, Cecily, from being run over by a train at a level crossing, and Sir Hilton went to Greyfriars to congratulate the hero. As no one claimed the credit, Bunter stepped forward, and a few days later sent Sir Hilton a bill for £7.18s.0d. for compensation for clothes damaged by

collision with a locomotive. The dawn of comedy was beginning to break around the figure of Sir Hilton, but there were still some serious stories to come.

One of Sir Hilton's meanest roles was in the Clavering series. He took it upon himself to write to Mr. Clavering in Chile, telling him that it was his duty to join up, and he said that, if Mr. Clavering fell in his country's cause, friends would undoubtedly see that the boy came to no want. Sir Hilton was speaking generally, and was annoyed to discover that Mr. Clavering took this to mean that Sir Hilton would look after his son. Mr. Clavering fell in Flanders and the baronet reluctantly decided in Magnet 517 to send Clavering to Greyfriars. We learned the following week that he had once again become a governor of the school, and his conversation with the Head reveals his character completely:

"One moment!" rumbled Sir Hilton. "As the boy is here, I will speak to him. I called in order to do so, though I was far from expecting to be greeted with a snowball by the lad I am keeping from beggary."

The Head winced and Mr. Quelch quietly left the study. Sir Hilton's mode of speech was brutal, though he was far from realising the fact.

Most collectors know that Redwing changed places with Clavering, whom Sir Hilton had never seen, and it was only poetic justice when Clavering, who had joined the army, returned to thrash Sir Hilton in No. 522.

It was at this time that J. N. Pentelow was writing his celebrated Greyfriars Gallery, a series of informed and penetrating character-sketches, based on years of knowledge of Magnet stories. In No. 76 of the Gallery (Magnet 540) he declared, "Sir Hilton Popper is no friend of the Greyfriars boys, seniors or juniors. He is a distinctly crusty and narrow-hearted old fellow, with a large sense of his own importance and selfish ideas as to property ... an ill-tempered, wrong-headed, selfish, stubborn old tyrant." This was an accurate assessment at the time it was written, and the stubbornness of Sir Hilton was well portrayed later on, in No. 743, when he repeated the charge of slackness originally made in No. 392. This time he succeeded in bringing pressure to bear on Dr. Locke, who agreed to resign and let Mr. Carnforth take over, an experiment that was no more successful than the earlier one.

By 1923 a mellower note was beginning to creep into the Magnet, and no permanent character was shown to be without any redeeming feature at all. Sir Hilton in No. 819 was described for the first time with amused tolerance:

Sir Hilton was an autocratic gentleman accustomed to having the ways of life made easy for him. At Popper Court fifteen servants appeared to have no object in life but to make things comfortable for Sir Hilton; though what they said of him to one another below stairs would have made the old baronet jump, could he have known it.

Mick the gipsy had saved Sir Hilton's life and the baronet actually spoke to him graciously and offered to do anything for him. When Mick asked to go to the same school as Bob Cherry, Sir Hilton was taken aback, but nevertheless he kept his word, and the following week he visited Dr. Locke. The interview is described with a dry irony that encompasses both the baronet and the headmaster:

"The boy can read and write," said the baronet, "but his ignorance is abysmal. He has never heard of the dead languages and does not know the difference between Latin and Greek."

"Bless my soul!" said the startled Head.

"It is fairly well known that I am not prone to pamper the lower classes, or to approve of any low person who attempts to rise out of his proper station," said Sir Hilton, with a snort. "I entirely disapprove of practically everything that has happened in this country in the last fifty years."

Nevertheless, Sir Hilton did arrange for Mick to enter Greyfriars, and when that was done he had no further part to play in the plot. Sir Hilton was a pawn in the opening moves of the game, and was not needed in the end-play.

In the series about Mick, Sir Hilton had appeared as someone we might regard with comic indulgence, tinged with respect. By the time of the Bright series, the baronet was more a figure to be pitied, as this extract from No. 1028 shows:

Sir Hilton was a managing gentleman. He managed his estate with an iron hand - and heavy mortgages. He dealt with poachers so severely that any poacher in the county would have walked ten miles to do him a bad turn. He governed his servants like a little Tsar, with the result that he was constantly changing most of them, and those who remained for a lengthy time remained to cheat him.

Sir Hilton had mis-managed his estate, and Mr. Bright, the moneylender, was about to foreclose on the mortgages. His price for restraint was the entry of his son to Greyfriars. Dr. Locke had refused this, and it was made clear that Sir Hilton (described for the first time as an old pupil of the school) was faced with the distasteful task of having to recommend as a pupil a boy he knew to be unworthy of admittance:

Sir Hilton Popper was silent, his features twitching. If there was anything the old tyrant had close at heart, it was the well-being of his old school. His pride in Greyfriars was arrogant, unreasonable, snobbish, but so far as his limited intelligence went, he acted for the good of the school. He would have ruined Greyfriars had he been able to govern it unchecked; but he would have ruined it with the best intentions. Knowingly to give it a push on the downward path was a thing Sir Hilton was incapable of - if he could have helped it.

The description of Sir Hilton in the toils of the moneylender is first-class reading: despite the baronet's unattractive character, we are forced to sympathise with him in his dilemma. The Bright series probably provides the most revealing character-sketch of Sir Hilton to be found anywhere within the pages of the Magnet. Four years later he was in the same dilemma, and in No. 1211, he was compelled by Mr. Sylvester Sugden to nominate Lancaster for Greyfriars, but despite the unquestioned merits of the Lancaster series the description of Sir Hilton Popper on that occasion was only a pale echo of the former one.

In the Brander rebellion series Sir Hilton was found playing a novel role, not blackmailed but willingly and actively supporting the new head all the way through. In No. 1169, it was revealed that he was hoping to persuade Dr. Locke to resign, and he had actually gone so far as to introduce his nominee, Mr. Brander, to nearly every member of the governing body. When Mr. Brander became headmaster, after a mysterious accident to Dr. Locke, Sir Hilton kept appearing at the school to try to break the rebellion, and there was a sequence of hilarious scenes that almost verged on slapstick, but Sir Hilton's character was so firmly etched that the incidents all managed to carry conviction. Never again did the baronet interfere in such a personal way with the running of the school.

It was the Popper's island rebellion which allowed Sir Hilton so much scope, as it was played out on his own ground, so to speak. He took it as a personal affront

in No. 1378, that the juniors were actually camping on his island:

The fact was that Sir Hilton's claim to that island was very nebulous. Sir Hilton's wide estate was covered with mortgages, as with a garment. But he had found difficulties in raising a mortgage on that island. There was a lack of title-deeds. Lawyers were more particular about title-deeds than was the Lord of Popper Court.

After making a number of personal attempts to eject the Removites, he decided to give it up quite early in the series, but the hollow oak on the island, in which he had been incarcerated almost twenty years before, still had a part to play in the drama.

Sir Hilton's relatives were referred to in two series in the 'thirties. In Nos. 1166-8 we heard about his nephew Cedric who had been brought up in a circus, and ignored by his uncle until a bequest made it profitable for Sir Hilton to become the boy's guardian. The story of Pop of the Circus himself is not perhaps so interesting as some of the incidental matters, like the opening scene at Wharton Lodge. Charles Hamilton once confessed that he was always intrigued by circuses, and it is not always a wise plan for an author of fiction to indulge himself in his own particular interests too much. The other nephew of Sir Hilton's was Archibald Popper whom he decided, after all, he would not send to Greyfriars. When Wibley was expelled in No. 1536 for impersonating Monsieur Charpentier, he came back to Greyfriars in disguise as Archibald Popper, hoping to earn the French master's forgiveness. Sir Hilton became quite indignant when he discovered that someone was pretending to be his nephew, and there was an amusing scene when Wibley, disguised as young Popper, persuaded the Head and Mr. Quelch that Sir Hilton was subject to delusions, and had to be humoured, but apart from this the baronet had little part to play in the series.

It is impossible to trace every story which featured Sir Hilton Popper, but the pair in Nos. 1479-80 have long been favourites with Magnet readers. There had been a burglary at Popper Court and the loot was discovered hidden on Popper's island. In an attempt to show gratitude Sir Hilton invited the finder and his friends to Popper Court for tennis and tea, but Bunter contrived to arrange for the invitation to be accepted by the wrong group. The hilarious Popper Court tea-party which ended with Sir Hilton horsewhipping his guests down the drive to the gates was a memorable occasion, and also provides a good example to prove that Charles Hamilton's skill with the shorter, comic stories was still on a high level at this late date. It is also interesting to note that Sir Hilton's propensity to use his whip on the slightest excuse was a consistent element of his character, but the sadism in No. 186 is far removed from the farcical scene at the end of No. 1480. With age comes mellowness, and there is no doubt that Sir Hilton improved as the Magnet grew older.

The change in Sir Hilton's character was one that is typical of many such changes in the Magnet, and it has often been pointed out that the Greyfriars characters developed whereas the St. Jim's ones were static. This may be because Charles Hamilton wrote little for the Gem after 1923 and consequently there were practically no St. Jim's stories written when he was at the height of his powers. Be this as it may, there is no doubt that after 1923 the appearance of Sir Hilton

on the scene would always result in some lessening of tension: the reader would be invited to smile at the ironic description of a would-be tyrant, attempting to regulate his life and other people's according to an outmoded code of behaviour. There can be no question that the more Sir Hilton's estate was mortgaged and the more his servants' wages fell into arrears, the more the reader found him a figure of fun. His opposition was not powerless, but at the same time it was not completely ominous or threatening as it had once been. To the adult reader of the Magnet he was a constant source of pleasure and amusement, laying about him with his whip on all sides in a futile attempt to regain his lost privileges as an important landowner, but beneath the crusty exterior there was just enough evidence of gratitude and goodwill at times to let us sympathise with him to some extent. Selfish and inconsiderate, bigoted and imperceptive, Sir Hilton added much to the gaiety of the Magnet, and for that reason alone we must acknowledge our debt to the lord of Popper Court.

* * * * *

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"BERT" HOLMES, 13 ST. LUKE'S STREET, BARROW-IN-FURNESS, LANCS.

YULETIDE GREETINGS. HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL.

UNCLE BENJAMIN

Grand and Final Appearance at Greyfriars

by GERRY ALLISON

It would be an expert Hamiltonian who could answer the quiz-question "Who was Montgomery Snooks?" And yet, Mr. Snooks appeared more than once at Greyfriars School.

Montgomery Snooks was an actor 'late of the Theatre Royal, Courtfield,' from whence he had been fired owing to an addiction to strong drink.

On all the occasions where I have read about Mr. Snooks coming to Greyfriars, he was introduced by that rather malicious young humorist Harold Skinner of the Remove Form. This is how he first appeared - the extract is from Magnet 397, "Coker's Canadian Cousin."

Harold Skinner jumped off his bike in a little seedy street in Courtfield. He knew where to find Mr. Montgomery Snooks at home. Skinner knew all sorts of things that the other fellows did not know. He mounted the public staircase of a cheap loding house, and knocked at the door of an apartment that was as near the roof as the builder could put it.

"Enter!" called out a deep voice.

Skinner grinned and entered. Mr. Snooks could not say "Come in!" like a commonplace person.

"Welcome, my young friend," said Mr. Snooks, turning a rather puzzled look on Skinner. "Those features - I have seen them before!"

"I was looking on the other day when you were fired out of the theatre," said Skinner.

Mr. Snooks frowned.

"I've heard about you, you know," said Skinner. "The only good actor we've ever seen at the Courtfield Theatre."

Mr. Snooks smiled.

In this very funny story, Montgomery Snooks appears at Greyfriars as James Coker, of Alberta, Canada - a member of the Canadian Contingent of soldiers. He is given a speech of welcome by Mr. Prout, who says "It is the proudest moment of my life when I shake you by the hand!" Mr. Snooks replies in a speech even more flowery.

By the time Coker's real cousin arrives, Mr. Snooks is uproariously drunk. However, all ends well, and Montgomery marches off to join the colours, histrionic to the last.

Four years later - in Magnet 600, "The Hero's Homecoming," dated August 9th, 1919, Mr. Snooks again visits Greyfriars. He is not the hero referred to in the Magnet title, who was Lieutenant Lawrence Lascelles of the Loamshire Regiment. When the Removites hear the news of "Larry's" return home, having won the Military Cross and being twice wounded they feel that he must be given a real hero's welcome.

There are only two dissentients. Billy Bunter cannot believe that the beast who used to teach them rotten maths - and even gave him extra maths - deserves a welcome back.

In Harold Skinner's opinion too, the idea is "Rot!" Skinner wasn't glad to hear that Larry was coming marching home again, and he was quite candid about it. There was, according to Skinner's own statement, no humbug about him. He didn't like the man, he never had liked him; he was glad when he went, and he was sorry he was coming back.

Skinner's candour was a little too much for the Removites and the Famous Five in particular. "You can't help being a worm, Skinner," said Harry Wharton. "We can make allowances for that. But there's a limit. You're going to give three cheers for Larry. We'll bump you until you do!"

There followed a very funny scene. Skinner was severely bumped, until, with a face like a demon, and groaning from the pain of the bumping, he gave three cheers for Larry. As Vernon-Smith remarked, the expression on his face was worth a guinea a box.

Next day, on visiting Courtfield, intending to go to the cinema, Skinner noticed a rather tall bony man, resting on a wooden seat under a plane tree.

"Good afternoon, Master Skinner," the man called out, and to his surprise Harold Skinner recognized his old acquaintance Montgomery Snooks.

Well, as you might expect, history repeated itself, as it were. Skinner persuaded Snooks to arrive at Greyfriars in an officer's uniform - borrowed from Mr. Lazarus's second-hand shop. It was known that Lieutenant Lascelles had been wounded, and so Mr. Snooks appeared with his face swathed in bandages. As he said - "the Huns had succeeded in spoiling his beauty a little!"

Nevertheless, a great welcome was accorded the returned hero, and at a feast held in the Rag, 'Mr. Lascelles' actually ate as much as Billy Bunter.

Many Magnetites will have read the two stories I have mentioned in which Montgomery Snooks was the star turn. However, there is another story about Mr. Snooks at Greyfriars which very few people know. That is Magnet No. 1686, entitled "What Happened to Hacker!"

Perhaps, therefore, I may be allowed to record in some detail the facts

about Montgomery's last and final appearance at Greyfriars.

Owing to Mr. Hacker being temporarily resident at Popper Court, where he is giving tuition to Sir Hilton Popper's nephew, Ethelred, the Shell Form at Greyfriars are without a master for the time being.

In the second chapter of "What Happened to Hacker," Skinner and Co., hoping to enjoy a game of cards in a box-room in the Shell passage, find Claude Hoskins practising his cello. They eject the Greyfriars musician, only to be interrupted by Price of the Fifth, who is wanting a quiet cigarette. Peace is signed, and Price joins the three Removites at cards.

Suddenly the door is flung open, and Hobson and Hoskins, with other Shellites burst in. The card-players are very severely dealt with, and are made to give each other twelve across the bags, with Mr. Hacker's cane. Skinner vows revenge, and, once again meeting Montgomery Snooks, arranged with him to appear at Greyfriars - this time as temporary Master of the Shell. Stephen Price agrees to pay Mr. Snooks. So now, here are the two chapters from "What Happened to Hacker," which tell how Skinner & Co. got even with Hobson and Hoskins - with the aid of Montgomery Snooks.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE NEW MASTER

The Shell were just about to begin Third Lesson with Loder in charge, when the door opened and Mr. Moss, the temporary Form-master entered.

His face, or what could be seen of it behind his beard, seemed rather flushed. Dismissing Loder with a curt gesture, he turned to the waiting Shell fellows, extracted a flask from his hip pocket, poured some of the contents into the stopper, and faced the Form.

"Gentlemen, your health!" was his opening remark.

After that, he placed the stopper to his lips, and drank. Then, placing one hand upon his breast, he addressed the Shell.

"My friends - my dear young friends, I look upon you as brothers."

The Shell fellows seemed stunned, but Hobson got up.

"Welcome to Greyfriars, sir," he said.

"Thank you, one and all, for those kind remarks, but we are here to work. To work our fingers to the bone. All for one, and one for all!"

After taking another drink from the flask, Montgomery Snooks, alias Mr. Moss, extracted a battered cigar-case from his pocket, took out a long, black cigar, lit it, and began to fill the Form-room with thick black smoke.

"Ah! I feel better now," he remarked. "Tell me, Pogson, the nature of

your present studies."

"History, sir; Roman history, dealing with the life of Julius Caesar. We, that is the Shell Dramatic Society, are to produce a play, and are going to show 'Julius Caesar' in Big Hall next week."

"No time to lose then," said 'Mr. Moss.' "Step out those of you who have roles, and we will produce a play, the magnificence of which will shake all the critics."

Eight Shell fellows got up and came out in front. They included Hobson and Hoskins. 'Mr. Moss' addressed them.

"Now, are you all word perfect; are you familiar with your lines? I will be stage manager, and will allot you your parts. To me, there is one of you who is made for the title role - one whose poise fits him for the role. I therefore appoint Hobson as Julius Caesar."

Hobson, who originally had been Mark Antony, tried to speak, but Mr. Moss held up his hand.

"Do not thank me, Hobson, but give it your all. For the rest, you can be Artemidorus; you Cassius; you Brutus; and Hoskins here can be Casca. I will be the Soothsayer. To work, then. Enter Caesar from the wings."

Hobson stepped forward.

"The ides of March are come," he began.

"Good! Very good! Now I will speak my line," and with rolling eyes, the new Form-master allowed five words to emerge from the brushwood. He spoke in a rich, rolling voice.

"Ay, Caesar; but not gone. Now, where is Decius?"

The rehearsal continued until Hobson spoke Caesar's line - "Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?"

Mr. Moss held up his hand.

"Stay! We require stage props now. In the absence of daggers, all of you except Hobson take a cushion. Et tu, Brutus."

Seven juniors each took a seat cushion, and after the Soothsayer had put down the flask, and laid the still burning cigar on the blackboard, he exclaimed:

"Now, Caesar, your last line again."

"Ah," said Hobson, and repeated the tongue-twister, "Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?"

"Splendid! Come on, Casca! This is where you stab him."

"Speak, hands, for me!" exclaimed Casca, and proceeded to smite Hobson with the cushion. Six other juniors used their cushions, and as poor Hobson stood

reeling, the Soothsayer gave him a mighty swipe with his cushion, which felled him to the ground.

"Not realistic enough! Not enough action! Let us have it again; and, Hobson, or, as I ought to call you, Caesar, do not forget to say your last line - 'Et tu Brute!'"

Once more the actors plied their cushions, and once again, Caesar was laid low. But Hobson, instead of saying his last line remarked instead -

"Groogh, you silly asses. Ow, ow, ow! Oh, my napper!"

"Get up at once, Hobson! Do not loaf there on the floor!" interrupted the stage manager. "Very poor, very poor indeed. You have only made yourself an object of ridicule. You are nothing more than a buffoon. We must have someone else for the title role. You, Hoskins, you be Caesar, while I myself will be Casca."

While Hobson, licking his wounds, retired from the scene, Hoskins stepped forward, and began -

"Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?"

His answer to that interesting question was a heavy blow from the cushion of the Soothsayer - or rather, Casca - which sent him staggering against the other Romans. Each of them hit him with their cushions, and once more, 'Et tu Brute' remained unsaid.

What Hoskins did say was -

"Yaroooh! Leave off, you silly asses. Are you all mad? Grooogh! Stoppit! Ow! ow! ow!"

Mr. Moss coughed.

"That was much better, but it sill needs more action. Keep on. Practice will make perfect - do it about another six times. I must leave you now to go to my study. What I go to do is a far, far better thing than I have yet done. Hobson - er - will you give me a call when it is time for dinner?"

The new master picked up his flask and the still burning cigar, and emitting clouds of smoke, walked rather unsteadily to the door and was gone.

The Shell fellows looked at one another.

"Well! Did you ever?"

"Groogh! I'm hurt," said Hoskins.

"I feel as if I've been under a roller," said Hobson. "Thank goodness we never did anything like this with Hacker. I'm afraid, you chaps, we didn't appreciate old Hacker."

At lunch-time, Hobson slowly wended his way to Mr. Hacker's study. He tapped twice, and as there was no reply, entered the room.

Mr. Moss, still in his tattered gown, was lying on the bed, fast asleep. His large mouth was wide open, and the sound of his unmusical snoring filled the room. A cigar was burning away on the carpet. Hobson put it out, regarded the sleeping beauty without speaking, and tiptoed quietly out of the room into the passage, closing the door behind him.

"My hat!" said Hobson.

(CHAPTER 8 - "HACKER'S CURSE!" omitted)

CHAPTER 9

A LESSON FROM THEOPHRASTUS

Mr. Montgomery Snooks woke with a start.

He looked at his watch - half-past two. Half an hour to opening time, he reflected.

He gazed round him with some perplexity for a few moments, then he remembered he was "Mr. Moss" - temporary master of the Greyfriars Shell. Evidently Hobson had not called him for dinner, as he had been instructed.

Most likely the Shell would now be waiting for their master to take afternoon classes.

Mr. Moss had plenty of confidence in his power to 'ad lib' himself through any scene, and decided that to make sure of the extra two pounds, which Price was to pay for his "retribution" of Hoskins and Hobson, he must tackle the job again.

He went down to the Shell Form-room. There was considerable noise coming from the room, but when he opened the door and entered it ceased abruptly.

Mr. Moss looked round the class, and smoothed his beard.

"As you by their faces see, all silent, and all damned!" he quoted impressively.

"Did you not hear the bell, sir?" faltered Hobson, after a pause.

"The bells! The bells! Silence that dreadful bell; it frights the isle from her propriety."

Whether or not Mr. Moss had ever silenced the bell, he had certainly silenced the Shell.

He crossed to Mr. Hacker's desk and opened it. Mr. Hacker had cleared it before he left, but there was one slip of paper he had overlooked.

Mr. Moss picked it up. In Mr. Hacker's crabbed writing was a single line: "Theophrastus; Enquiry into Plants."

Who or what Theophrastus was, Mr. Moss had no idea, but the enquiry into plants gave him a lead.

"We will have a Theophrastus lesson," he declared.

"A what, sir?"

"An enquiry into plants. Let me see. It is a beautiful afternoon, and already twenty to three - we must not waste the time indoors."

Mr. Moss walked to the window and looked out. An idea was forming in his mind.

"Ah, yes," he said, turning again to the class. "Hobson and Hoskins, you will accompany me. We shall indicate selected plants by marking them. The rest of the class can follow in a quarter of an hour, and try to recognize the marked plants."

"You are laying a trail for us to follow, sir?" asked Stewart.

"Something like that. To make it easy we will select plants in alphabetical order. Come!"

Almost in a dream, Hobson and Hoskins found themselves hurrying down Friardale Lane after the amazing Mr. Moss.

"Get on with it. You, Hoskins, mark that ash tree; you, Hobson, mark that beech."

"What shall we mark them with, sir?" asked Hobson.

"Here. Tie these round the branches," said Mr. Moss, tearing strips from his tattered gown. "Higher than that. Climb up, boy, climb up!"

The two Shell-Formers struggled to climb the indicated trees, to the detriment of their clothing and appearance.

"Come along! Now that chestnut," said Mr. Moss, giving Hobson another strip of his gown.

"What is D, sir?" asked Hoskins, doubtfully.

"D, D? Hmm! Duckweed, of course."

"Duckweed?"

"Yes. Tie this round a stick, and put it in the middle of the ditch."

Hoskins found a dead branch. He tied the strip of cloth round it, and gingerly approached the ditch.

"No, no - right in the middle. I'll hold you."

Hoskins hung over the muddy ditch, while Mr. Moss held him by one hand.

Perhaps it was an accident that he let go too soon - Hoskins had the impression he was pushed. He landed on his knees in the ditch.

"Oooooooh!"

"Come along, Hoskins! Don't dawdle there!"

"I'm all wet and muddy, sir. I'll have to go back and change."

"Nonsense. It will soon dry in this hot sunshine. Hurry! Now, you, Hobson - that elm."

The trio had now reached the common, and Mr. Moss looked about him.

"Ah, yes. Here, Hoskins. Tie this on to that clump of furze. In the middle, lad!"

"Oooh! It's prickly, sir."

"Get into the middle - it won't hurt you."

"Ow! It does hurt!"

"Now, Hobson, don't hang back. Tie this on to that bush."

"Do we want two F's, sir?"

"Not at all - that is gorse."

"They both look alike to me, sir."

"Get on with it - it's nearly three o'clock, already."

"Ooo! Ow! Ow!"

"Now, let me see. On the top of that bush," said Mr. Moss, indicating the highest hawthorn in the thick hedge that separated the common from Sir Hilton Popper's woods.

"We can't do that sir. It's private property."

"Nonsense. There is a path through the wood."

"From the stile in Friardale Lane, sir. There is always trouble if we break through the hedge."

"Jog on, jog on, the footpath way, and merrily hent the stile-a," sang Mr. Moss, hurling a strip of his gown on to the bush, and then forcing a way through the hedge into the wood. "Come along, boys, follow me. I can see ivy in the wood."

With an expressive look at each other, the unfortunate pair scrambled through the hawthorn after their master.

They had only well got through, when a voice called out:

"Hey! You there! What do you think you're doing?"

"It's old Joyce," said Hoskins. "We're for it now!"

"The course of true love never did run smooth," said Mr. Moss, setting off at a trot down the path to the river. "I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes."

"Not if Popper gets hold of us, you won't," murmured Hobson, as the three ran on.

They soon outpaced old Joyce, who panted after them, calling out. Soon his voice died away behind them.

Mr. Moss was still leading as they turned on the towpath, and came to the back gate of the Three Fishers.

"You can hide here," he said. "Then are they glad, because they are at rest. And so he bringeth them into the haven where they fain would be."

"We can't go in there, sir," said Hoskins, aghast. "It's out of bounds."

But Mr. Moss seemed not to hear. Leaving the boys standing he went up the path between the unkempt shrubberies. Then, taking the tattered remains of his gown from his shoulders, he tied it to the handle of the Three Fishers door.

"Letter I. Ingress," he said as he entered.

Post-script. And so we take a final farewell of Montgomery Snooks, by no means the least amusing of Frank Richards' minor characters.

Perhaps I should explain that the final chapters are from the sequel to the Hacker and Wharton series, which began in Magnet No. 1683, "The Shadow of the Sack."

The four missing Magnets - Nos. 1684 "The Battle of the Beaks," 1685 "Bandy Bunter," 1686 "What Happened to Hacker?" and 1687 "The Hidden Hand," have been written by members of the Northern Section of the Old Boys' Book Club for private reading at meetings. The author of Chapter 7 "The New Master" was Tom Roach; whilst Chapter 9 "A Lesson from Theophrastus" is by Jack Allison.

* * * * *

WANTED: "Knockouts" and "Wizards" any condition, pre-war, wartime, post-war. Buy or exchange other boys' papers/comics.

W. J. WRIGHT, 147 ST. HILDA'S WAY, GRAVESEND, KENT.

MERRY CHRISTMAS and HAPPY NEW YEAR to all O.B.B.C. members - especially those who have helped me to enjoy 1970.

TOM SHERRARD, POTTERS BAR.

THE MYSTERY OF GREY TOWERS

by R. J. GODSAVE

Much has been written of the first St. Frank's Christmas Double Number "The Phantom of Tregellis Castle," O.S. No. 130. Of the second St. Frank's Christmas Number "The Mystery of Grey Towers," O.S. No. 186, which was not a double number, little has been written.

Actually, this issue was the third Christmas Number by E. S. Brooks. "A Christmas of Peril," O.S. 78 was before the St. Frank's saga. Brooks could always be relied on to write a Christmas yarn full of mysterious happenings and well described wintry scenes.

The story opens with Sir Crawford Grey gazing out of the window of Nelson Lee's consulting room in Gray's Inn Road. Outside it was snowing hard and the white mantle was very seasonable.

In addition to Nelson Lee and Nipper, there were Sir Crawford and Jack Grey, Reginald Pitt, Tommy Watson and Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis West.

It was getting near Christmas, and St. Frank's had broken up for the Yuletide vacation. Sir Crawford and his son were just about to start for Grey Towers, in Berkshire, taking Reginald Pitt with them. Nelson Lee, Nipper and his two chums had been invited, but would not go down for a few days.

It was only the previous night that Sir Crawford had definitely established that the junior known as Jack Mason was none other than his son Norman Grey. Pitt, too - he was a good chap, it seemed that only a short while ago that he had been one of the most despised fellows in the Ancient House Remove. But that was all over now, Jack Grey's influence had wrought wonders in Pitt, and had turned him into one of the best fellows in the school.

Sir Crawford, his son, and Pitt were seated in a warm, first-class compartment, speeding towards Gadsbury, the nearest station to Grey Towers. The country through which the train travelled looked cold and cheerless, but seasonable.

Jack Grey had known nothing but poverty and squalor until he had met Sir Crawford Grey. St. Frank's had been his first real taste of happiness in life - and even there his path had not been exactly a smooth one.

When the trio descended upon the platform at Gadsbury, their feet sank into a deep carpet of snow. The station was a comparatively small one, but there was an unusual bustle about it. The platform was piled with boxes, hampers and packages of all kinds - an indication of the nearness of Christmas.

A pair-horse carriage was awaiting outside - a closed brougham. The three

travellers took their seats, the luggage being placed in front by the coachman, and the drive to Grey Towers commenced. After passing through the village of Pellton, the journey lay through a heavily wooded country lane - through, indeed, the Grey Towers park. At first the trees concealed the view ahead, but a turn brought Grey Towers into view.

Although he was going home, Jack Grey was going to a home he had only seen as a baby, and had no memory of the house. Grey Towers did not afford him any disappointment. It was a noble looking pile, although not of any great vastness. Built of grey stone, solid and substantial, it had stood the blast of winter for hundreds of years.

There was a wide space before the noble flight of stone steps which led up to the great door. The snow upon them was untouched and undisturbed. Proving that life at the Towers was very quiet. The servants had the place to themselves, and of course, did not use those great steps.

"Here we are at last!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, alighting from the carriage. "And now for Rance."

The great double door at the top of the steps had opened, and they revealed the neatly attired figure of a man about middle age; and his clothing pronounced him at once to be a butler.

"Ho, Rance!" cried Sir Crawford. "Surprised to see me, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I am surprised," he exclaimed, running down the steps towards the little group. "I understood that you weren't coming for Christmas, sir."

"Yes, I arranged to say at my London house for the holidays," said the owner of Grey Towers. "Well, Rance, I'm here - with my son."

"I don't think I understand, sir," said Rance. "I'm afraid everything is unprepared. It would have been better if you had warned me."

"Undoubtedly, Rance - undoubtedly," replied Sir Crawford. "However, I am the master of my own house, and I think I am permitted to change my plans if I so desire. I want you to attend in my library very shortly, as there are quite a host of orders I wish to give."

"Yes, sir," said the butler unemotionally. "But there's no fire in the library, and Mrs. Baldwin isn't here -"

It appeared that Rance had given all the servants a holiday for Christmas, with the exception of three or four footmen. Sir Crawford gave instructions for the servants to be recalled and compensated for the loss of their holiday, meanwhile fires were to be lit in the rooms.

In this way Norman Grey came home to Grey Towers.

* * * * *

A powerful touring car ploughed through the deep snow steadily and

relentlessly. In the front seat of the car were Sir Edward Handforth and the Chauffeur. Seated in the rear were Handforth, Church and McClure. The car belonged to Sir Edward, and had been to fetch Handforth's chums - the whole trip being Handforth's idea, an idea which his father had good-naturedly indulged.

This was the day following the arrival of Sir Crawford at Grey Towers, and it looked very much as though an ugly snowstorm was brewing. The wind was already howling biting and viciously. Evening was drawing near, and the dusk was deepening.

The journey continued in pitchy darkness, for the black clouds which had rolled up had brought night on very suddenly. The clouds were releasing their burden with such vigour that it was almost impossible to see a couple of yards ahead.

Suddenly the car came to a halt, throwing the three juniors in a heap on the floor. The car appeared to be standing at a very acute angle.

An examination shewed that the car was half in a ditch, with a broken wheel.

"What a bothering nuisance," exclaimed Sir Edward disgustedly. "This means that we've got to trudge through this infernal snow until we get to a station, which might be six or seven miles off."

There was nothing for it but to walk along the road until they came to a town or village, The unfortunate Fisher, the chauffeur, was left with the car until relief could be sent to him.

The trudge through the storm wasn't long, for within ten minutes the quartette came within several twinkling lights which resolved themselves into those behind the windows of several small shops in a village street.

Enquiries by Sir Edward of the local policeman, proved the village to be Pellton, the nearest station four miles away, and owing to the storm no trains running.

"Is there a decent hotel here, my man?" asked Sir Edward gruffly.

"I dunno about a hotel, sir," replied the policeman. "I reckon you had better go to the Blue Lion, up the street."

They stamped up the street through thick snow, and at length arrived at the Blue Lion. Sir Edward, already irritated beyond measure, glared at the old building almost balefully.

It certainly wasn't much of a place, and it was fortunate that Handforth suddenly remembered that he had received a letter that morning from Nipper, who gave the information that Jack Mason wasn't Jack Mason at all, but the son of Sir Crawford Grey. Nipper had informed him that he and his chums, together with Nelson Lee were spending Christmas at Grey Towers which was only a mile from the village of Pellton.

In ordinary circumstances Sir Edward would never have dreamed of thrusting himself upon a stranger because he was acquainted with one of Sir Crawford's guests.

With his good humour restored Sir Edward viewed the prospect of trudging through a snowstorm for a mile with almost pleasure. After making arrangements for the chauffeur to be lodged at the Blue Lion the quartette struggled through the stinging snow to Grey Towers.

The great gateway of the Towers was reached at last and within ten minutes the snow-covered travellers were mounting the wide steps of the mansion itself. Sir Edward vigorously pulled a huge old-fashioned bell-knob, and the peal was heard within the mansion far distant, but clear in a momentary lull in the storm. Heavy bolts were drawn back and one of the great doors opened. A man in butler's attire peered out into the gloom.

"Oh!" he exclaimed after a moment. "Come in, sir, come in, young gentlemen. I didn't expect you until to-morrow."

He stood aside, and Sir Edward and his companions followed. They didn't exactly understand the man's words, but that mattered little.

"Oh, that's better!" exclaimed Sir Edward shaking the snow off his shoulders on to the great mat.

"I presume you are Sir Crawford's butler --"

"Yes, sir," said the man. "I'm Rance, sir."

"Very well, Rance. Will you tell your master that four weary wayfarers crave his hospitality?" said Handforth senior.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lee ---" began Rance.

"Eh?" interrupted Sir Edward. "I'm not Mr. Lee."

Rance's face underwent a quick change.

"Not Mr. Lee?" he repeated sharply. "Who are you then?"

"There is no necessity for you to use that tone, my man," said Sir Edward curtly. "I am Sir Edward Handforth, and these boys ---"

"I thought you were Mr. Nelson Lee," interrupted Rance. "Sir Crawford told me that Mr. Lee would be coming with three boys, I naturally mistook you ---"

"Of course - of course," said Sir Edward interrupting in turn. "Tell your master that we are here."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Rance, "but Sir Crawford is not at home."

Sir Edward and the boys looked startled.

"Not at home!" repeated the former sharply. "But I understood --"

"Sir Crawford is not at home, sir," persisted Rance, his voice cold, but respectful. "There is nobody at home. All the servants are away for the Christmas

holidays, except four ---"

"They told us in the village that Sir Crawford arrived yesterday," put in Handforth bluntly.

"That is quite correct," said Rance. "But the master went away again almost immediately, with the boys. He left no orders, and only told me to make apologies to Mr. Lee when he arrived. No, sir, I shouldn't take your coat off," he went on quickly.

"Indeed, and why not?" demanded Sir Edward grimly, removing his fur coat with great deliberation. "I don't like your tone, my man. It strikes me Rance, that you are inclined to be impertinent.

"I must ask you to leave at once, sir, Sir Crawford made no mention of your name ---"

"Confound your impudence!" snapped Sir Edward angrily. "How dare you order me out. We intend to stay, Rance, I will make my own explanation to your master. Go and see that food is prepared and beds made ready.

Just for a moment Rance stood quite still; then he bowed.

"Very good, sir," he said quietly. "If you will remain here for a short while I will have a fire lighted in the library."

There was no doubt that Sir Edward acted in a high-handed manner. It was, of course, only common courtesy to take in strangers on such a bitter night.

Rance was as good as his word, and a fire soon blazed in the grate of the spacious library. The dinner served was simple but appetising, and it was served on a small table which Rance brought into the library and placed before the fire.

Although the situation at Grey Towers was very different from what they had expected, this comfort was far superior to any they would have experienced at the Blue Lion.

Sir Edward Handforth expanded under the comfort and warmth, and regarded the butler almost genially.

"We must forget that little incident in the hall, Rance," he said, lighting a cigar. "No doubt you were taken aback, and I was somewhat sharp. Everything is all right now, and Sir Crawford will hear no complaint from me.

Shortly after, Rance again appeared carrying a massive silver salver, on which could be seen four cups of steaming hot coffee, with a little sugar basin beside them and a silver jug of cream.

"I thought you would like coffee before retiring, sir," said Rance respectfully.

The coffee was consumed by all with the exception of Handforth, who did not like coffee. Under the influence of the warm beverage and the glowing fire,

Sir Edward, Church and McClure felt sleepy and decided to go to bed. Sir Edward pressed the bell and Rance appeared to escort them to their bed-chambers.

Both apartments were stately and luxurious, and glowing fires burned in their grates.

Handforth said good-night to his father, and he and his chums prepared for bed. Handforth was most disgusted, for he had quite a lot to say, and Church and McClure paid very little attention, being shockingly drowsy. They fell asleep, indeed, almost as soon as they had snuggled down between the sheets.

Handforth couldn't sleep, somehow. It seemed to him that hours passed, and still he couldn't slumber. The fire had died down to a mere handful of cinders.

Suddenly Handforth sat up in bed.

Outside in the wide corridor he had heard a strange sound - a sound as though something was being bumped along the flooring. It died away, and all became silent once more. Handforth slipped out of bed, his face grim. He opened the door of the bedroom and looked out into the dim corridor. He saw the door of his father's room standing open, for a glow of light was streaming out. Arriving in the bedroom he found it empty - Sir Edward's bed had been slept in, but its late occupant was not there!

For some minutes Handforth stood about the room, wondering why his father had gone out. He heard a slight sound, and thought his father was returning. He went to the door again and was startled to see a light gleaming out of his own bedroom - and he had left it in darkness.

He ran down the corridor, a strange feeling of alarm gripping him. He hardly knew what to expect, but he was amazed to find that both Church and McClure had vanished! Their beds were empty!

And then the most startling thing of all occurred. Dark forms, almost invisible in the gloom, sprang at him. He was gripped, held in spite of his struggles, and borne to the floor. Within one minute Edward Oswald Handforth was helpless - a prisoner!

* * * * *

"Grey Towers," said Nelson Lee, with a wave of his hand. Nipper & Co. regarded the old place with interest, and decided that it looked quite splendid in the wintry sunshine.

They were ploughing along the drive of Grey Towers in Nelson Lee's big touring car, through the thick snow.

Nelson Lee had not sent a wire, because Sir Crawford knew that they would arrive on this particular day just after noon, and they naturally expected to find Grey Towers full of activity and Christmas cheer.

They mounted the snow-covered steps, and Nelson Lee pulled the great bell-handle, somehow the sound it brought forth from somewhere in the remote

distance seemed to ring hollow and desolate.

The door opened and the staid form of a man in butler's attire stood before them.

"Ah, I have no doubt that you are Mr. Lee, sir?" he asked at once.

"That is quite correct," replied Lee. "Sir Crawford is expecting us ---"

"I am Rance, sir, Sir Crawford's butler," interrupted the man. "I was instructed that you would come down to-day, and the master further told me to express his apologies during his absence."

"Absence!" echoed Nipper, wonderingly. "Isn't Sir Crawford here? What about Pitt? What about Sir Crawford's son ---"

"I am sorry, young sir, but the master is not at home," replied Rance, turning to Nelson Lee again. "Sir Crawford is very sorry," he went on. "He greatly regrets that he is not able to welcome you as he would like."

Nelson Lee regarded the butler steadily.

"I don't quite understand this," he said.

"But come in, boys, there is no necessity for us to stand in the cold, surely? Now, Rance, what is this you are saying? I understood Sir Crawford was here with his son and another boy."

"That's quite right, sir," replied the butler. "Sir Crawford was called away, however, and he went the day before yesterday. Not a soul has arrived since; the house has been completely empty except for myself and three or four menservants, Grey Towers is shut up for Christmas."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This is remarkable - it is really! Surely there is something wrong somewhere?"

"Obviously, Montie," said Nelson Lee. "This is a most unpleasant surprise - and strange, too. I cannot imagine Sir Crawford allowing us to come down here without sending a line of explanation. You will oblige me, Rance, by giving your master's present address."

"I don't know it, sir," replied the butler. "Sir Crawford went away and left no instructions - except that I was to make apologies to you, and ask that you should return to London and await the explanation which will be forthcoming. At all events, it is impossible for you to stay here."

"On the contrary, Rance, it is not impossible, because I intend to stay," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"I can say nothing further, sir," replied Rance steadily.

"Has nobody called since Sir Crawford left?"

"Nobody, sir."

"In short, not a soul has used the main steps to the front door since your master went away?" proceeded Lee.

"Not to my knowledge, sir. As you saw, the snow was quite undisturbed," replied Rance. "There has been a great fall within the last day or two. Would you care to take a little refreshment before leaving, sir."

"These boys and myself will remain here, as I said before, until Sir Crawford returns or communicates with me direct."

A cold light leapt into the butler's eyes.

"You will pardon me, but you cannot stay," he began.

"That is enough!" snapped Nelson Lee, curtly. "Do not dare to give me your orders, Rance. You may go. I will ring when I want you again."

Rance bit his lip, bowed, and walked away.

Nelson Lee and the boys entered the house and found themselves in what was evidently the library. The air was cold, but not exactly chilly. There was no fire in the place, but Nelson Lee bent down and felt the firebricks at the back.

"Warm," he remarked. "There was a fire in this room yesterday, at all events. If Sir Crawford left the day before yesterday, why was there a fire here last night. No warmth could have been retained in the firebricks for such a time as Rance had intimated."

"But - but what can it mean, sir?" Nipper asked. "What reason has the butler got for telling lies? And why did Sir Crawford go?"

"Really, Nipper, I can answer no questions as yet," said Lee. "There is certainly a mystery we have to deal with. Rance for example, stated that nobody had been down the front steps during the course of yesterday."

"Well, that's true, sir, isn't it?" asked Watson.

"I don't think so, my boy. There were no distinct footprints in the snow, I will admit, owing to the fall during the night; but certain inequalities on the surface hint that the fresh snowfall had covered up some tracks which were made during the course of yesterday."

"You think that something has happened?" asked Nipper.

"Precisely," said Lee quietly. "Something has happened, Nipper, I am convinced that Sir Crawford has met with foul play. Over ten years ago I was present at the Old Bailey, during the trial of two men for burglary and assault. One of those two men is in this home at this very moment - calling himself Rance. His name then was Thomas Hawker."

A few minutes later two footmen entered the library. One of them proceeded to light the fire, and the other took possession of the bags and other things and carried them upstairs. A hastily prepared luncheon, coffee and sandwiches being the chief items on the menu, was then served to which full justice was done

by Nelson Lee and the boys.

It was soon after the meal that Watson called the others attention to a St. Frank's cap he was examining. Written across the lining inside was the name "E. O. Handforth" in large, sprawly letters.

"I say, this is jolly queer!" said Nipper. "Jack Grey and Pitt left their school things at our place in London, gov'nor. They came down here wearing top-pers. How in the name of wonder did Handforth's cap get here?"

Nelson Lee looked at the fireplace meditatively.

"There was a fire last night - some people came yesterday, if I read the signs aright," he said in an absent manner.

"Act as though everything is quite usual, boys," he said. "I intend paying a visit to the village. While I am away you must keep together - all the time. Don't separate under any consideration."

Pellton village was deserted when Nelson Lee strode briskly up the single main street. It was generally quiet, but this afternoon not a soul was to be seen in the open.

It was natural, perhaps, that he should commence his enquiries at one of the small village inns. Gossip generally finds its way into the tap-room sooner than anywhere else.

Neither was it very surprising that the detective should enter the Blue Lion, since this was far better than the other in outward appearance. The bar was cosy and warm, and quite empty except for a worried-looking man who sat over by the fire, a mug of beer near him.

From his uniform he was without doubt a chauffeur, and didn't seem to be an inhabitant of the village.

Nelson Lee obtained a glass of beer from the rather unintelligent looking girl behind the bar, and took it over to the fireplace and sat down opposite the worried-looking individual. He stirred as Lee sat down, and looked up half eagerly.

"You don't happen to come from the Towers, sir?" he asked respectfully. "My gov'nor went up there last night, sir, I'm Fisher, and I drive Sir Edward Handforth's car. We had a bit of a smash up the road last night, and couldn't get no further - Sir Edward, me and the three nippers."

Nelson Lee knew he had struck oil at once. The news that Handforth's father had gone up to the Towers was strikingly significant.

The chauffeur was exceedingly surprised and delighted to receive a ten shilling Christmas Box from an absolute stranger. Nelson Lee considered the ten shillings well spent, for he had gained all the information he required without asking any direct questions.

He became rather anxious about Nipper and Sir Montie and Tommy, and

walked back briskly, after paying a visit to the post-office.

After an excellent tea Nelson Lee took the boys into his confidence - to a certain extent. "We mustn't talk too loudly, boys," he said almost in a whisper. "Rance and these other men may be listening."

Having related the result of his enquiries in the village, he again cautioned the boys to act as if everything was normal.

Dinner, at Rance's suggestion was served in the library. The meal contrary to their expectations was excellent.

A knock at the door announced the butler was there. He entered bearing a big salver, upon which stood four steaming cups.

"I thought you might like coffee, sir," he said respectfully. "Your bedrooms are ready when you choose to go up, sir."

"Thank you, Rance; you are excelling yourself," smiled Nelson Lee. "Yes, we shall enjoy the coffee. It was most thoughtful of you."

Rance retired.

Nipper helped himself and the others to cream. Sir Montie and Tommy sipped theirs whilst Nipper stirred his thoroughly. Nelson Lee lighted his cigar and was now lolling back in his chair, his coffee as yet untouched.

Placing the cup to his lips, Nipper sipped the delicious beverage. It was quite nice, but - but there was something strange about the flavour. He sipped again, and noticed that Montie and Tommy were getting on with theirs.

"Can't you taste anything rummy?" he asked.

"Eh, dear fellow? asked Sir Montie. "Rummy? The taste is rather ---"

"What?" snapped Lee, sitting forward in his chair. "The coffee tastes queer? Stop drinking, boys. Let me test it?"

He picked up his cup, sniffed at it carefully, then tasted it gingerly. The next moment a hard glint appeared in his eyes. The boys stared almost fearfully.

"The coffee is splendid - eh, boys?" said Nelson Lee in a genial voice. "That's right! Drink it all, as I have done. It will do you good."

Whilst speaking, he rose from his chair, nodding his head towards the door. He took each cup and emptied the contents into a great vase which stood on a pedestal.

Nelson Lee resumed his seat and bent towards the boys. "Fortunately, you only consumed a slight proportion of the coffee," he said in a soft voice. "We must make Rance believe that we drank the stuff. Yawn once or twice when he comes in presently."

Five minutes later Rance entered the room in order to escort them to their bedrooms. It was Lee's intention to keep watch while the boys slept. He

thought he would be marked down first rather than any of the boys. He stood by the fire, constantly on the alert.

Something sounded out in the corridor - something different from the occasional creaks of the old woodwork. Lee was waiting for it. He believed Rance would make the first move in the direction of his - Lee's - bedroom.

But the detective waited, the hands of the clock passed midnight, but nothing happened, and the sound in the corridor was not repeated. Nelson Lee looked rather grim, and softly crossed to the door.

He opened it gently and looked out, all was in darkness, except for a tiny slit of dim light coming from a bedroom further along the corridor. Lee started slightly, and quickly moved forward. "The boys' bedroom!" he muttered. "Have I been careless?"

He knew the truth a few moments later, for entering the apartment he saw Sir Montie's bed was empty. Nelson Lee grasped Nipper's shoulder and shook it. The next moment he was fully awake, sitting up, and blinking at Nelson Lee.

"Where is Montie?" said Lee sharply.

"I - I don't know, sir! I've been asleep, I suppose. I meant to keep awake, too. What a silly idiot I've been ---"

"Rubbish, Nipper!" cut in Lee. "I told you to go to sleep as I supposed Rance would attend to me first. I am the idiot - not you."

At that very moment Sir Montie was being carried by two men down a long narrow passage. He had been taken from his bed fast asleep, and during a short period of half wakefulness he was dully conscious of a jolting, swaying movement. At last he opened his eyes, and saw a lantern swinging from the hand of a man who walked immediately ahead.

The affair was startling, but Montie remained calm. He was chilled, for he was only wearing night attire. The passage took a turn to the left, and then a long flight of stone steps was descended. The air was not only cold, but clammy and dank.

And then he suddenly knew the truth. This was an underground tunnel. He was being conveyed somewhere beneath the ground - far beneath. Grey Towers was an old, old house, and the presence of secret passages and hidden chambers was only to be expected.

Further progress was barred by a great iron-studded door. There was a massive lock and two huge bolts.

"Don't ask questions, boy, because they won't be answered," said Rance curtly. "As you are awake you can put these slippers on and draw this blanket over you."

The heavy bolts were softly pulled back, and the massive key turned in the lock. They had recently been oiled, and worked smoothly and noiselessly.

The door swung open, and Sir Montie was pushed through the opening before he could guess what was about to happen. The door closed behind him with a soft thud, and he heard the bolts shot home.

He was in a low passage, and strangely enough the air was quite warm. At that moment Montie saw a big oil-stove at the end of the passage, beneath a hanging lantern.

And then Reginald Pitt appeared clad like Sir Montie, wrapped in a blanket. For several seconds the two juniors stared at one another silently. It was Pitt who spoke first. And Pitt as of old was cool.

"Where the dickens did you spring from?" he asked striding forward. "Another prisoner to swell the company. What about Nipper and Mr. Lee?"

Before Sir Montie could reply Sir Crawford Grey appeared, followed by his son and Sir Edward Handforth and the chums of study D.

The prisoners were not ill-treated. There were eight or nine dungeons opening out of the passage, and Rance had provided thick mattresses and blankets. Food was provided in plenty - tinned stuff mostly, and there were numerous cases of mineral waters, etc.

Strangely enough, Pitt, at the moment Sir Montie was pushed into the passage was about to investigate a great stone slab which formed part of the dungeon wall. It looked absolutely solid - a part of the wall itself; but Pitt had obviously been scraping away at the rough plaster which surrounded the slab.

"This slab is a fake, Jack," he said to Grey who had now joined him. "I was just pushing it when Montie blew in! It's a way out I believe, and we're going to escape."

Both boys bent over the slab in the wall, Pitt pushed vigorously and the great square of stone slid backwards into the wall with a grinding noise.

Pitt picked up the lantern and they both passed through into a cold passage, the air of which felt very stuffy. They had moved forward about six feet when something thudded behind them. Jack Grey turned, then uttered a low exclamation. The heavy stone had closed in their rear. There was no visible method of opening the heavy stone door.

Jack Grey and Reginald Pitt were cut off from their friends.

The two boys walked forward, finding themselves in a low tunnel. The air was breathable, although dank and filled with the odour of earth and age. Unfortunately, Pitt's arm caught on a rough projection and caused the lantern to smash on the floor leaving the boys in pitch darkness.

Pitt thrust out his hand blindly, and after a moment or two Grey discovered it. In this manner the two boys crept along, step by step, Pitt literally feeling every inch of the way. The tunnel appeared to be straight and fairly level with niches cut in the rock-like walls.

Suddenly Pitt came to an abrupt halt. Right ahead, clear and distinct gleamed a point of brilliant light - which could only be emanating from an electric torch.

"Rance, I expect!" said Pitt grimly. "Rance and some of his precious helpers. Perhaps they've got Nipper - or even Mr. Lee. This is where we can do something Jack."

"How?" gasped Jack. "How!"

"We can dodge into one of these niches we just passed, and then spring out --"

Pitt broke off, and they both retraced their steps for about ten feet and crouched in the fairly deep niche.

The critical moment arrived.

Then, with a yell Pitt sprang out. He dashed right into the man with the light, and the next second the torch went flying and was extinguished.

Pitt's onslaught was so fierce that the man staggered back against the rough wall. Then Jack took a hand, and between them they succeeded in getting their opponent to the floor. Actually, a loose stone was responsible, and not the boys' effort.

They tried to hold him, and then discovered that their task was harder than they had anticipated.

"Hold him!" gasped Pitt. "Hold the rotter!"

Quite abruptly the captive ceased his efforts and laughed.

"Well, boys," he said genially. "If you have quite finished with me ---"

"Mr. Lee!" shouted Jack, springing up in alarm.

"It is very fortunate that you spoke when you did, Pitt," went on Nelson Lee, struggling up. "I thought you were enemies, and about to exert my full strength.

Nelson Lee's torch was found to be undamaged, and the light was switched on.

Between them, Pitt and Grey told Nelson Lee of how Rance had imprisoned them all. Lee, on his part told the boys how he and Nipper had seen Rance and two other men emerge from a secret panel in the great hall.

After the men had gone he had slipped through the panel with Nipper and Watson somewhere in the rear, waiting. The tunnel in which Lee had met Pitt and Grey was a branch of the main tunnel leading to the big oak door. Arriving at the fork Lee thought he heard voices and came that way.

Nipper and Watson, becoming impatient and anxious soon joined the group, and were surprised to find Pitt and Grey with Nelson Lee.

The whole party now went along the main tunnel until they arrived at the great iron-studded door. The key was in the lock, and Nelson Lee gave it a twist, the bolts were shot back and they all passed eagerly through.

The next moment Lee was busy shaking hands with Sir Crawford Grey and Sir Edward Handforth. Sir Crawford told Lee of how Rance had given nearly all the staff a holiday, and how he had woken up to find himself with his son and Pitt in the dungeon. The same story was told by Sir Edward. Sir Crawford's main worry was that Rance and his gang would by now have taken the alarm and fled.

The whole party soon found themselves in the great hall of Grey Towers, after passing through the tunnel.

Sir Crawford was most upset that the gang had escaped. Sir Edward Handforth was inclined to be critical of the laxity which Nelson Lee had shown in allowing the gang to escape. Nelson Lee, however, informed his host that if the gang did escape it would be due to the laxity of the County Police.

During his visit to the village he had taken the precaution to 'phone the Chief Constable of the County while in the post-office. Lee had arranged for a cordon of police to be thrown around Grey Towers so that anyone leaving the place would be stopped.

Nelson Lee opened the big hall door, and blew a short blast on his whistle. The reply came at once in the shape of two cold-looking police constables. They saluted, and were immediately joined by three others - who held between them one of the footmen. Very soon an inspector turned up with four more men. And they held Rance himself and one other man.

The last to enter were three other members of the Force - who held the final captive. One of Rance's accomplices, a groom, had vanished quite early in the evening, presumably to carry out some order of his chief.

Rance was quite ready to talk, and it seemed that the sudden arrival of Sir Crawford had upset his plans. Having given the other servants a holiday, Grey Towers was completely at his mercy. The gold and silver plate, together with a quantity of jewellery would have been his for the taking.

It appeared that Rance secured the position of butler by forged references - and obtained the positions of the rest of the gang. The continued arrivals had been like a nightmare to Rance. As soon as he got rid of one lot another arrived.

Ten minutes later the inspector and his men took their departure, triumphantly bearing away their discomfited prisoners.

It was Christmas Eve, and Sir Crawford had some difficulty in obtaining the servants he needed. The employees who had been given a holiday all returned and several others were obtained.

All the boys helped with the decorations and Grey Towers rang with shouts and laughter. Handforth and Co. stayed until after Boxing Day, when Sir Edward

carted them off. He had, of course, already telegraphed his wife, explaining a little of the affair.

The rest of Sir Crawford's guests had a tremendously gay time. One of their chief sources of delight was the great lake in the park, for the ice was thick upon it, and they had some glorious skating.

So, in spite of the grim opening of their visit, Sir Crawford's guests spent one of the happiest Yuletides at Grey Towers.

* * * * *

WANTED: S.O.L. Nos. 149, 151, 152, 156, 164, 166, 169/170, 171, 173/175, 177/181, 186, 189, 207, 215, 280. Other S.O.L's and Magnets for exchange.

P. TIERNEY, 6 ABBEY PARK ROAD, GRIMSBY.

WANTED: All issues School Cap (1953), also all issues 1950 edition Boys' World. Please state price required.

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HAPPY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE - FROM A "NEW BOY"

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THE SEASON'S GREETINGS TO ALL. HAPPY READING FOR 1971.

FROM:

WILLIAM LISTER, 137 CUNCLIFFE ROAD, BLACKPOOL.

A VERY HAPPY XMAS 1970, AND A MOST PROSPEROUS YEAR 1971 TO ALL -

LEO HYNES, NEWFOUNDLAND.

"A Seat in the Grandstand"

by C. H. CHURCHILL

THIS WEEK'S BAD BOY'S DIARY - "THE PARTY!"



ST. FRANK'S
FROM THE PLAYING FIELDS.

During the course of his writings in the Nelson Lee Library, Mr. E. S. Brooks became famous more for his mysterious and macabre stories and those of somewhat larger than life adventures, than for his efforts in writing of more normal events. He became master of the wierd and wonderful, the ace writer of things on the grand scale. Floods, Fire, Revolts, buildings crashing at home while abroad we had White Giants, lost cities, lost peoples, lost continents, gigantic aeroplanes, the lot. Many of the things he wrote about were not invented at the time, but have been since, such as the helicopter and the midget submarine. As for giant planes - well what about Concord?

In last year's annual I pointed out how good he was, too, at writing of school life generally, and gave several

instances of his descriptions of Form-room life at St. Frank's, both dramatic and comic. I would now like to draw attention to another aspect of his writings, namely sport. Over the years he gave us a good variety of sporting activities so well written that one could almost imagine oneself sitting in the Grandstand watching the various events taking place "Before our very eyes."

The first story in the old small series in this style was No. 44, "The Doctored Racehorse." This was pre-St. Frank's, of course, and was a Green Triangle story dealing with the "Sport of Kings." I will not go into the plot in detail but it contained a goodly amount of life in the stables and ended up with Nipper riding a winner - Blue Diamond and the wrecking of Zingrave's schemes.

For the next taste of sport we had to wait until the advent of St. Frank's. In the very early ones we had very good descriptions of football matches as Nipper gradually brought the Ancient House up to scratch in the field of sport. Bob Christine & Co. of the College House were supreme at the outset but as time went on had to play second fiddle as Nipper's plans came to fulfilment. All this football was only a part of the early stories of St. Frank's. It was not a football series of course. We had that later.

The next sporting event was a boat race in No. 171, one of the Reggie Pitt series. As most people know, when he first came he was known as "The Serpent." In this particular tale he plotted for the College House to win the race, which they did, as he "nobbled" the Ancient House boat. My point is that Brooks gave us a splendid account of the actual race itself.

In May and June 1919, Nipper was sacked and returned in disguise as Algernon Clarence D'albert. Some of these stories contained excellent accounts of the cricket. Most enthralling to read.

The ace year for sports, however, was 1921. First of all we had a boxing series followed by a cricket one and ending up in the autumn with football. All three were most exciting and excellent to read.

The boxing series was all about Ernest Lawrence of the College House and his troubles with Mr. Smale Foxe. Lawrence entered some boxing contests in order to help his father who was in low water financially. The temporary master of the College House discovered this and tried to blackmail the junior into handing over the prize money. In three or four of the stories Brooks gave us really tip-top accounts of the fights. Maybe it was "stretching it" to have a schoolboy defeating professional boxers in the ring, but what did we care when we read the stories at the time? We were thrilled to bits of course.

One of the above mentioned series gave us a good account of a paperchase. It was No. 299, "The Housemaster's Hate." It was quite a delightful change to have something like this in the middle of a boxing series.

After Easter we had the Jerry Dodd stories. What good ones they were, combining mysterious Burmese and some really exciting cricket matches. The series culminated in Jerry playing for England in a test match. The same remarks

could be applied here as mentioned above about Ernest Lawrence, but again who cared? We could imagine ourselves in Jerry's shoes of course.

The summer holiday stories were about a visit to the Roaring Z Ranch in America with Justin B. Farman. When the party returned it was to find trouble for Reggie Pitt. We then had a spate of well-written football. I think Brooks' descriptions of the various matches even better than those of the cricket.

One could say how could a boy of 15-odd do so well in league football, but of this I say - what about Cliff Bastin, the famous outside left of the Arsenal and England? Bastin came from Exeter and I well remember watching him as a school-boy player. He joined Exeter City and played for them in Division Three when about sixteen. He was transferred to the Arsenal and played for them fairly quickly and was in the England team when eighteen. I believe he was one of the youngest players ever to do so. In case anyone is interested, Cliff is now "Mine Host" in one of the local hostelries in Exeter. Customers can, or used to be able to, see his large array of cups and medals. How different is his story to that of Reginald Pitt? Not a great deal.

After this football series we had no sports series as such until 1925 when Brooks gave us a cricket one in the spring. Before this we had odd stories with a sporting theme such as No. 397, "The Boxing Unknown." This was all about Mr. Clifford, the Sports Master, competing in the professional ring. It, too, included first-class boxing sequences.

Another boxing story was No. 489, "The Schoolboy Boxer's Luck." This was one of the "St. Frank's with a bad name" series. It described how Lawrence helped out by his boxing prowess to raise the name of the old school again.

We had a rather humorous football story in No. 497, "The Mystery Goal-keeper." This described how the St. Frank's boys were fooled into believing they were playing against the River House team containing a girl in goal.

The first new series began with a story "Sports Mad at St. Frank's." I believe it started off a sports series, but as I have none of these in my collection I cannot make any comments. As far as I know, however, it was the last series to appear mainly featuring sports.

* * * * *

WANTED: Magnets, Gems, Film Funs, most issues, must be near mint condition. State price required. FOR SALE: New copies of all Howard Baker Facsimile Reprints of Magnets, Picture Show Annuals, and Sexton Blake Omnibus. New Bunter Books, Greyfriars Maps, Greyfriars Prospectus, etc. ALSO WANTED, a 1947 C.D. Annual, mint. Please send s.a.e. for sales list.

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THEY WERE ALREADY FAMOUS

by S. GORDON SWAN

APART FROM THE many characters that were created expressly for the Sexton Blake Saga, there were others who had already achieved fame for themselves before they became involved with the Baker Street detective. Foremost among these were the noted adventurers, Ferrers Lord, Ching Lung & Co.

The extent of their popularity may be gauged by the fact that stories of their exploits appeared in no less than eight different periodicals — The Boys' Friend, The Boys' Friend Library, The Jester, The Marvel, Pluck, The Magnet, The Union Jack and The Sexton Blake Library, and it is possible that they were to be found in other papers as well.

Readers whose memory goes back to the early years of the century will readily recall the mystery millionaire, Ferrers Lord, with his marvellous yacht and his equally marvellous submarine, Lord of the Deep; Rupert Thurston, his young associate; Prince Ching Lung, hereditary ruler of the Chinese province of Kwai-Hal; Gan-Waga, the egregious Eskimo; Hal Honour, the silent engineer, who frequently gestured with his pipe in lieu of speech, and the irrepressible trio of Prout, Maddock and O'Rooney.

Together these gallant adventurers journeyed to the far places of the earth and gave battle to powerful enemies, sometimes the peoples of a strange race, sometimes another millionaire with resources equal to those of Ferrers Lord; together they explored unknown lands and encountered dangers under sea and in the air.

Their association with Sexton Blake began during the Great War, when they united against a common foe, Germany. The famous detective and the mystery millionaire, alike in their enterprise and daring and their patriotism, made a great team. In one story Tinker impersonated Prince Ching Lung, who had been kidnapped as the result of a plot between his rascally cousin and a German intriguer.

There were only half-a-dozen stories all told in the Union Jack, but they made a landmark in the history of that periodical. Later a solitary story was to appear in The Sexton Blake Library, The Case of the Crimson Lizard, which featured Ferrers Lord & Co. Sidney Drew wrote a number of Blake yarns after this, but regrettably he did not re-introduce the famous band that he created at the turn of the century, though their enterprises were recorded in The Boys' Friend Library until the nineteen-thirties.

Another famous group of characters were Fane, Pye, Bindley and Manners of Calcroft School. As far back as 1902 these schoolboys were featured in The Boys'

Realm, and their later exploits were presented in a series of stories in The Marvel during 1918/19.

Sexton Blake became associated with Calcroft School in a Union Jack tale entitled A Dead Man's Hate; while in 1926 three stories were published in The Sexton Blake Library which introduced Calcroft. They were respectively The City of Masks, The Case of the Lone Plantation and The Calcroft Case. The first two began at the school, the last-named dealt entirely with that abode of learning. I believe two, or possibly all, of these stories were originally serials in The Nelson Lee Library.

Next on the list are Kit and Cora Twyford, the brother and sister detectives, created by Cedric Wolfe (E. W. Alais). Their cases are recorded in the early days of the Penny Pluck, and afterwards in The Boys' Friend and The Boys' Friend Library.

On only one occasion did Sexton Blake encounter Cora Twyford, at a time when her brother Kit was away at the war. This was in a Union Jack called The Man with Two Lives, and the honours of this adventure went to Cora, who emerged with flying colours. So far as I can trace, she never met the Man from Baker Street again.

During 1910 there appeared in The Penny Pictorial a series of stories about an aggressive seaman, Captain John Christmas, also known as Captain X. These were by Stacey Blake, and more adventures appeared from time to time. In the nineteen-twenties there was a revival of this character in a new series. No doubt the conception owed something to Captain Kettle, although the illustrations show no physical resemblance to the little red skipper. (An adventure of Captain Kettle was printed in The Penny Pictorial, by the way.)

Unexpectedly, in 1927, Captain Christmas turned up in a Union Jack, The Case of the Oil Pirates, and in 1928 the same paper presented him for two successive weeks in yarns entitled Rogues Afloat and The Case of the Kaffir King. The association did not go further than these three stories and I have found no further trace of Captain Christmas beyond this point.

Before I close this article I should mention two other characters who made their debut in The Thriller - Ladbrooke Black's Mr. Preed, and John Hunter's, Captain Dack. The former was a solicitor detective who was later to join forces with the Man from Baker Street in a number of cases. The latter was another seaman, of different calibre from Captain Christmas, the unscrupulous, sometimes brutal skipper of a tramp steamer called The Mary Ann Trinder, who was occasionally a dubious ally of Sexton Blake from expediency.

These are characters one remembers with affection as notable in their own right and also as an integral part of the Sexton Blake Saga.



DIXON HAWKE LIBRARY

by J. McMAHON

July 17th, 1919, saw the birth of the Dixon Hawke Library with the opening story "The Flying Major." To my regret I have not seen this elusive No. 1, the earliest that I have in my collection is No. 3, "The Stolen Seaplane," quite a good yarn, introducing Dixon Hawke and his assistant, Tommy Burke with 'Solomon' the bloodhound.

As most collectors know, the house of Thomson are very shy in announcing the names of any of their authors. But thanks to the C.D. I now know that among the contributors to the D.H.L. the illustrious names of Pierre Quiroule and John Creasey can be included.

The Dixon Hawke Library had a run of 576 issues commencing in 1919 and it became a casualty of the paper shortage on the 27th December, 1941. The final issue was entitled "The clue of the Chinese Puzzle."

It would be churlish to say that all the D.H.L. stories were good, far from it, there was some pretty awful chaff among the wheat. There are about three hundred issues of the D.H.L. that I have still to read, so obviously this precludes me from giving a complete picture.

Until the year 1935 the D.H.L. contained one complete story, usually about 120 pages long, then in issue No. 411, "The Phantom of the Cell" a second story was added; this also was a Dixon Hawke yarn "Lucky Lorraine's Losing Game." This policy was to be carried on until the end. So now we had two D.H. tales for the price of 4d, quite a bargain.

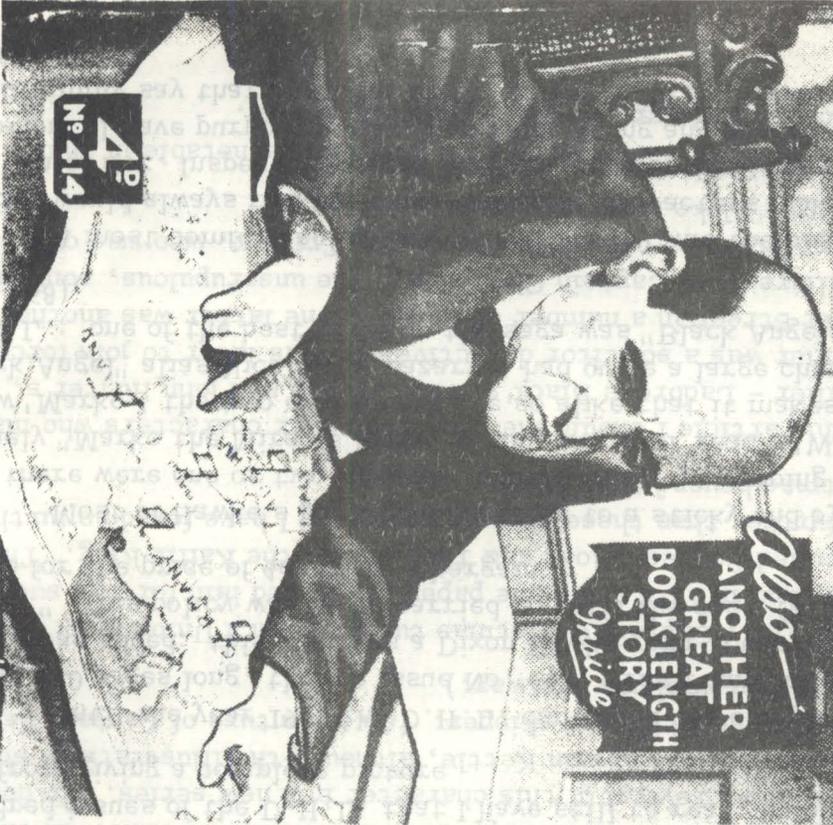
Most of Hawke's protagonists came to a sticky end by the final chapter, but there were one or two 'master' crooks who kept popping up from time to time, namely "Marko the Miracle Man;" if you have ever read a 'Waldo' story, then you know 'Marko;' the two characters are so alike that it makes no difference. "The Black Angel" alias Nicollette Lazarre, had quite a large chunk of the action in the D.H.L.; one of the best yarns in the saga was "Black Angels Last Bid" (D.H.L. No. 368).

A most comforting feature of the library was the assurance that the reader would always find the same favourite characters making their appearance i.e. Chief Det. Inspector Duncan McPhinney, Martha Benvie, Tommy Burke, and Solomon. I have purposely refrained from giving any description of Hawke himself, I will simply say that anything Sexton Blake could do, Hawke could do — much better.

THE IRON MASTER

Also —
ANOTHER
GREAT
BOOK-LENGTH
STORY
inside

4^p
No 414



SIX WOLVES OF DOOM



DIXON
HAWKE
LIBRARY
No 465
4^p

R. W. WILSON

Comic Artist Supreme

by W. O. G. LOFTS

Frank Richards never achieved fame until long after the Magnet and the Gem had finished. Indeed, much of such fame could be credited to the many thousands of old readers who gave him tremendous publicity in the Press, on radio and through the medium of television.

Unfortunately, most comic paper artists seem always to remain anonymous because their work is unsigned. But they entertained millions of readers of many generations; and in many articles throughout the years I have mentioned quite a few of them: Tom Browne, creator of Weary Willie and Tired Tim in CHIPS (although he did become famous); A. T. (Bert) Brown of Charlie Chaplin in FUNNY WONDER, Homeless Hector and Pa Perkins in CHIPS, Constable Cuddlecook in JESTER, and Dad Walker in LARKS; G. W. Wakefield of Laurel and Hardy in FILM FUN (and of course the Rookwood characters in BOYS' FRIEND); H. F. Foxwell of Tiger Tim and the Bruin Boys in various coloured comics; John L. Jukes of Alfie the Air-Tramp in the JOKER (although the creator was A. Pease); Basil Reynolds of Skit & Scat in MICKEY MOUSE WEEKLY - and Percy Cocking, who drew Weary Willie and Tired Tim in CHIPS for over 40 years.

A comic artist whose



work has not yet been recorded was R. W. Wilson. His art work has been acclaimed by fellow-artists and editors alike as brilliant, and he was a true craftsman. Readers who may have in their collections some of the A.P. Annuals cannot fail to find examples of his work, at times signed 'R. W. Wilson' and at other times just 'Wilson.' Probably his most famous strip was PITCH & TOSS in the FUNNY WONDER - and older readers who took the JESTER as far back as 1923 can remember his early illustrations depicting the escapades of that pair of wide-world adventurers, BASIL & BERT, who were his creations.

Royston Warner Wilson, to give his his full name, was born at Kettering, Northamptonshire, on the 9th July, 1900, where his father kept the local draper's shop. Unlike the Reynolds family, with their amazing background history of artists, he was the first of his line, except for a grandfather who had 'dabbled' in self-portraits as a passing hobby.

At an early age Royston moved to Norwich and on leaving school one of his jobs was as a designer of furniture. He eventually joined Norwich Art School, and then went to work for D. Newhouse - who was an artist on the early comics. His first work for the A.P. papers was the single comic joke, for which he was paid 5/- a time. In 1933 he moved to Brockham near Dorking and continued to illustrate for the A.P.

As already mentioned, his first important strip was BASIL & BERT (later taken over by L. R. Briault, also of Norwich, and later still by A. G. B. Parlett, until the end in 1940). His style vastly improved throughout the years and became more polished, his perspective especially was brilliant, and his comic characters looked more human than the caricatures usually portrayed by other fellow-artists. He was exceedingly painstaking in his work and would go over it again and again until it was perfect. Unlike other artists he was not content to leave a background blank but filled it with a 'situation within a situation' - or, to explain more fully, there would be small comical mice, fish, snails, rabbits, etc., making an amusing remark regarding the situation the hero had involved himself in.

Like the famous Leonard Shields of MAGNET fame - his boys and girls were beautifully drawn with young, merry, smiling faces and even if he had not been essentially a comic artist he could have earned his living as a children's book illustrator. Such was the demand by editors for his work that in the 30's, whenever a new comic was to be launched, his drawings would be found on the front page: GOLDEN COMIC (Lieutenant Daring & Jolly Roger, the Bold Sea Rovers), RADIO FUN (George, the Jolly Gee-Gee), HAPPY DAYS (Chimpo's Circus - an excellent example of his comic animal art), JOLLY COMIC (Jack Sprat and Tubby Tadpole), JINGLES (The Tiddlywink Family) and others. Almost every A.P. comic had examples of his work, including BUTTERFLY and MERRY & BRIGHT. The editor, Leonard Stroud (who died in 1942) was a great personal friend of his.

With the closing down of many of the old-style comics in 1940, and later still in the 50's, his output did not suffer as much as many of the other old-time artists, for it was still in demand by editors, especially in Stanley Gooch's department, where he drew at times Arthur Askey, Jimmy Edwards, Terry Thomas,

Harry Secombe, Bruce Forsyth, Wilfred Pickles, and Morcambe and Wise. In the late 50's and early 60's he was drawing in yet another field - a picture-strip of Cloris and Claire in JUNE and SCHOOL FRIEND.

He was married, with two daughters (one is a designer, and the other a sculptor) and, not surprisingly perhaps, Royston was skilful at sculpture and metal work. His wife, G. M. Wilson, is a writer of detective stories, and to date has had 20 novels published. She is also a member of the Crime Writers' Association and it is interesting to record that she also contributed to the comics, although this time in the field of writing. Her first contributions were the series of Roy Keen detective stories in the BUTTERFLY in 1932.

A heavy smoker, especially when working, Royston unhappily developed lung cancer and died suddenly in June 1965, at the age of 64.

On a recent visit to Fleetway House, where I was discussing with an editor the merits of R. W. Wilson's work, he paid him the highest possible compliment by saying: "We don't have artists of his ability these days - more's the pity." And countless thousands of old readers who admired his work and never knew the man behind the drawing-board, would, I am sure, echo those words and say: "And so say all of us!"

* * * * *

WANTED: Marvels 925, 926, 929, 930, 940, 942, 943; Mapleton Rovers B.F.L. by Randolph, also Department Z by Creasy; all Blue Crusader stories by Arthur S. Hardy; West of Pecos by Zane Grey; Flower of Gloster by Temple Thurston.

HARRY BROSTER, KINVER, STOURBRIDGE, WORCS.

=====

IT'S THE SAME OLD STORY! I'm still looking for that benevolent old collector who's going to let me have S.B.L. (3rd Series) Nos. 80, 100 & 182 by John Drummond for next to nothing, even though their condition is near mint. Well, not exactly 'next to nothing' - I'm quite willing to pay a good price for them. Also... has anyone got any of those wonderful "Adventures of Larry the Lamb" by S. G. Hulme Beaman (illustrations by Ernest Noble) for sale? They were slim volumes with the words "Toy Town Series" on the front cover, and published by George Lapworth & Co. Ltd. For the sheer delight of getting hold of more of these marvellous little books, I'd sell my soul. Well, not exactly 'my soul' - but you know the rest. All replies to - and the Compliments of the Season from:

CHRIS LOWDER, "EYETHERMES," CRADLEY, NEAR MALVERN,
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WANTED: Magnets, Gems, Populars, S.O.L's. Private collector.

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Startler versus the Thomson Papers

by LEN WORMULL

"Ask for THE STARTLER next Monday, chums - the great new paper, full of fine stories, grand free gifts, and big-prize competitions!"

These were the parting words of the short-lived BOYS' FAVOURITE, which failed to survive even with names like Edgar Wallace and Alfred Edgar on the bill; the usual publicity blurb when one paper was about to fall, with another to take its

The Winged Terror Declares War on Britain!

place. The following week, on March 1st, 1930, STARTLER duly appeared, and thus was born a new rival to the Thomson papers.



I suppose the fact that it was my first encounter with a new story paper that Startler gave me particular pleasure on its arrival. It seemed then to be as good as any other paper of its kind, and, of course, I was blissfully unaware that it was launched in opposition to the Thomson papers, then enjoying a big success in the name of ADVENTURE, ROVER and WIZARD. Did any of us in those days give a thought to the back-room boys, constantly striving and scheming to win our favours? I think not. Ours was not to reason why, but to pay up, read and enjoy. Seen now as part of a fascinating analytical hobby, I find that Startler compared very favourably with that winning threesome from over the border. It had all the makings - dare I say it, dear

Thomson-ites(?) - of another Rover-Wizard. Although the paper failed to win a place in my short list of favourites, and seemingly falls into the unwanted category today, it was, nevertheless, a brave experiment in its time, and one which I feel deserves a mention in our chronicles.

Startler had a modest run of two years - 105 issues in all - and sported a striking cover in red and white flecked with blue, slightly smaller than those of Thomson's. A liberal sprinkling of riddles, jokes and breezy chat invested it with a happy face, and soon it was to have its own Startler League, Pen Pals Column, and space for readers' letters and photos; innovations which I think were not seen in the Thomson papers. Other attractions were a cartoon-strip called Willie Keepit and the printing from time to time of two-page pull-outs known as Startler Books, with subject like How To Be A 'Tec, Aeroplanes, Cars, and Fun.

Opening stories were in the main frivolous trifles common with this type of paper. The mis-adventures of Messenger Mick, the lad who always delivered the goods, were little more than variations of Telegraph Tim in the early Rover. Simon Green - nicknamed GREEN AS GRASS - was a comic tubby youngster in the "Carry On" tradition, turning up at intervals in the Army, Navy, Foreign Legion, and the Wild West. TARGA - GIANT OF THE JUNGLE (no prizes for guessing origin) was in mortal combat with Human Apes. A robot story, NUMBER 3, saw a hooded terror controlling an army of Metal Men. Today's youngsters are familiar with T.V's Flipper series, about a boy who befriends and rides a dolphin. Another lad called RAY MON HAI used the idea first, but with a pet shark instead.

WIZARD fans will remember Bill Sampson of Wolf Of Kabul fame, the man who kept order in the Kuyber Pass. A similar character named John Rawlinson did much the same thing for Startler in HUSSOOR OF THE HILLS. Unlike Sampson, who had a native servant and assistant called Chung, Rawlinson worked single-handed, with equally thrilling results. Mighty Zulus had a part to play in our fiction, and what happy-go-lucky chaps they were - until put out! A rival to Wizard's BOMBA and Rover's MURK THE MAULER was SWAMBA OF THE SWAMPS, an amiable zulu whose gimmick was the deft wielding of an all-purpose hockey-stick as a means of survival; an idea probably taken from the lethal cricket bat of Chung in the Kabul stories. Tales of the Yukon and Indian Chiefs were a speciality of Rover, and these too, found their Startler counterparts in Gibson Gets His Man, Nipper Of The Frozen Wastes, Dynamite Danby, Mad Moran Of The Mounties, Lone Eagle - Pride Of The Prairies.

We come now to the master-criminals and arch-villains - and how can they be divorced from boys' fiction! There was no business like bad business, and some of the worst of their species were to be seen in Startler. I refer to that special breed of satanic creatures bent on destroying the world, and Britain in particular. Mostly they performed their devilish tricks from fantastic air-borne creations in true Jules-Verne fashion.

THE SPACE MACHINE was the first story to stir my imagination, and the one I enjoyed most. The real villain of the piece was an evil genius named Commander Steel, the most dangerous man in the world. He navigated, single-

handed, a giant airship two miles long, equipped with an enormous scoop capable of lifting whole cities. What he did to this poor old island was the business of heroes Bob Mason and Dave West, out to bring him to justice. In their own ingeniously-designed spacecraft, and using heat rays, they write finis to the airship over the ocean, but not before the monster had wiped Britian's air fleet from the skies. Like the serials of old, Steel survived for further episodes, performing his foul deeds anew from a highly-technical space machine. Melting an ocean liner, destroying the Monument, Tower Bridge and London Bridge, were mere hors d'oeuvres to Steel before taking on the Metal Men from Mars and the Vikings.

Others equally demonic quickly followed. THE SKY PHANTOM, a fiendish-looking devil, threatened the Navy with extinction if the Admiralty refused to cough up £1,000,000. Another was Captain Nighthawk, with talons of steel and hawk-eyes, a kind of man-bird. At sea, and long before the Beatles, THE YELLOW SUBMARINE concealed the diabolical Count Sturm seeking world conquest. It was perhaps too much of a good-bad thing, and with repetition came tedium.

In passing, may I quickly touch on the Thomson variety? Wizard went through a similar phase during the period 1934-36. A worthy successor to Steel was ZORAK - THE MAN WHO DOOMED THE WORLD. He commanded a Flying City as big as an Atlantic liner, armed with air torpedoes. Aboard were a tribe of red-skinned people from the mountains of South America. They were masters of science and in advance of the rest of humanity in electricity and aviation. WORMS OF DOOM had a Tibetan named DEVI terrorising Britain with worms capable of eating through iron. Believe it or not, they actually destroyed the Forth Bridge. Then there was DR. MATTO - THE MAN WHO KNOCKED OUT THE WORLD. He did it literally with knockout drops secreted in a certain type of centipede to be found in the Amazon Valley. His method was to let one or more loose from a glass phial, put his victim to sleep, and then send a ransom note to the next-of-kin for the antidote. On one occasion he even let loose his sleep-inducing lovelies in the House of Commons - of all places! Wizard had its own Martian story called Raiders From The Red World, with a General Vox in charge. My own Rover favourite was BLACK SAPPER, a subterranean pirate boring his way through earth, steel and stone in a mechanical mole. A story I have not forgotten is one in which the Sapper battles with an underground army of giant rats. The police often caught him in his dirty work, but always on hand to the rescue was his partner-in-crime, MAROT.

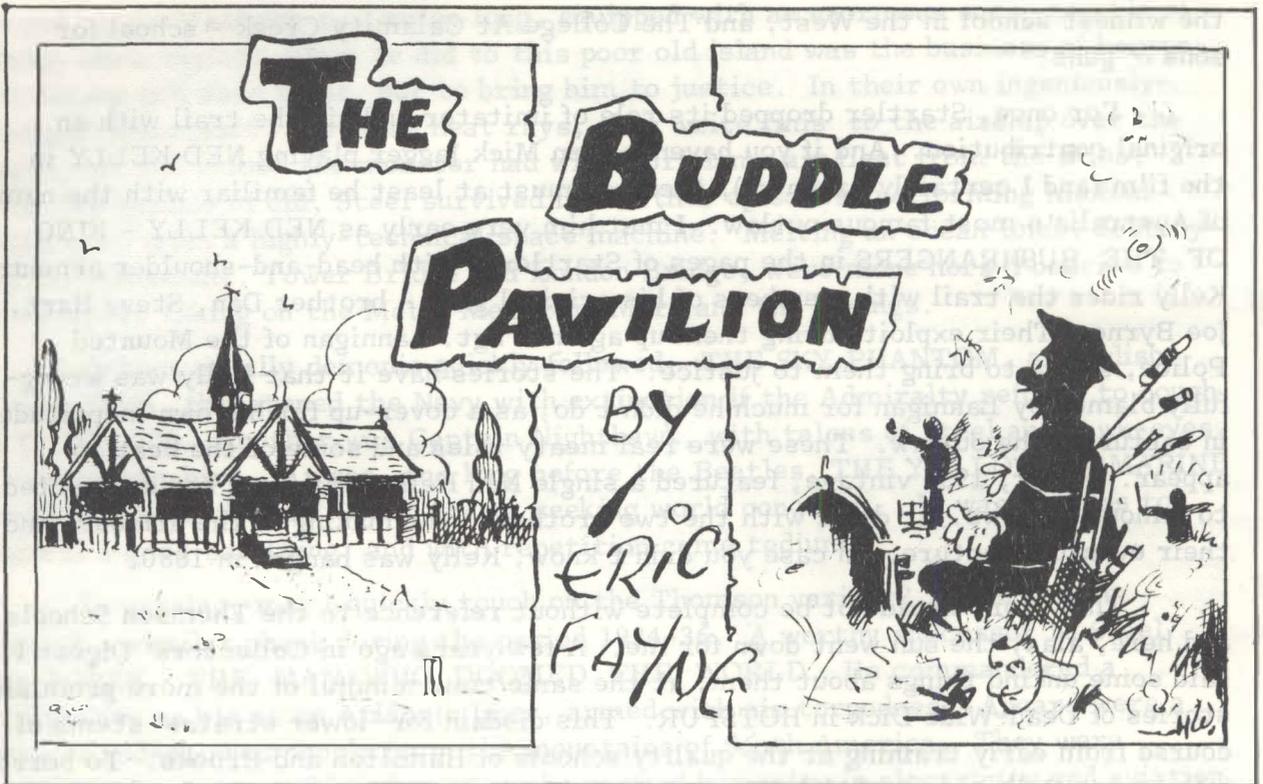
Thrilling tales of the Wild West were commonplace in boys' fiction long before Western novels became a 'dime-a-dozen.' Aldine's made them virtually their own, but running easily into second place came the Thomson papers, with some original twists on the theme. Riding the Thomson trail covered such vast territory that not even the A.P. giant could match it in terms of straight shootin'. To revive memories of old times out West, here are a few notable titles from the early and middle thirties: Lone-Wolf Larson, gun-fighter; The Colorado Kid, Buffalo Bill's Schooldays, Black Norton, Brasstack Barnett; The Last Of The Jackson's, Musgrave Rides By Night (Sheriff by day). As with films, the comedy element was well supplied, and two good examples were Thick-Ear Donovan, taming

the wildest school in the West, and The College At Calamity Creek - school for sons o' guns.

For once, Startler dropped its role of imitator and hit the trail with an original contribution. And if you haven't seen Mick Jagger playing NED KELLY in the film (and I certainly haven't!), then you must at least be familiar with the name of Australia's most famous outlaw. I met him very early as NED KELLY - KING OF THE BUSHRANGERS in the pages of Startler. With head-and-shoulder armour Kelly rides the trail with members of his original gang - brother Dan, Steve Hart, Joe Byrne. Their exploits bring them up against Sgt. Lannigan of the Mounted Police, sworn to bring them to justice. The stories have it that Kelly was wrongfully blamed by Lannigan for much he didn't do, as a cover-up for his own ineptitude in capturing the outlaw. These were real meaty tales and some of the best to appear. Rover, 1936 vintage, featured a single Ned Kelly story in a series devoted to famous outlaws. It dealt with the two brothers, the making of the armour, and their eventual capture. In case you didn't know, Kelly was hanged in 1880.

This story would not be complete without reference to the Thomson Schools, and here, alas, the sun went down for me. A few years ago in Collectors' Digest I said some unkind things about them, at the same time mindful of the more promising stories of Dead-Wide Dick in HOTSPUR. This disdain for 'lower stratas' stems of course from early training at the quality schools of Hamilton and Brooks. To borrow a line from Ballantyne's Ralph Rover, they were "my ruling passion, the joy of my heart, the very sunshine of my existence." Not for me the back-street banalities of the Wily Watkins-Dodger Wilson brigade of schoolboys, so beloved by Thomson's. Down-to-earth they may have been, but this Council schoolboy preferred fantasy to sordid reality. Still, I can appreciate that the little artful-dodgers (bless their moronic hearts!) and their malarkey must have appealed to a large number of readers who liked simple fun. They were the flies in the ointment for Startler, however. Amalgamated Press set such a high standard with their schools that it seemed unable to come to terms with the zany ones. There was a character called Crabby Crabpole in The Schoolboy Alderman, not unlike Skimpole of St. Jim's to look at. Bungo Bang - Boy Conjuror and Barney Google's Gang were others. After these it seems to have given up the ghost, and perhaps it was just as well. As they say, east is east and west is west

Startler had barely given birth to a new master of crime called MYSTEX when, on February 27th, 1932, it announced a take-over by SURPRISE, acknowledging in effect that the 'great new paper' had failed in its mission. History has shown that Startler, though lacking nothing in fighting spirit, was by nature a born loser. Not only was it competing against three popular giants of the game, but also an up-and-coming youngster called SKIPPER from the same family - launched by a curious coincidence only a few months after its own arrival. All's fair in love and war! Meanwhile, the indomitable ROVER strolls merrily on, albeit a shadow of its former glory, yet remaining for us the sole-surviving story-paper link with the past. After nearly fifty years of stardom, no doubt it has quite forgotten the occasion long ago when a would-be usurper named Startler had the temerity to rear its head in opposition. And on this note I say thanks and farewell to an old friend, and to one of the lesser-lights of our hobby.



An old piece of doggerel exhorts us to "Remember, remember, the Fifth of November."

Though Mr. Buddle did not know it yet, he was destined to remember this particular Fifth of November vividly for a very long time to come.

As soon as he entered the Lower Fourth formroom that morning, Mr. Buddle had sensed an atmosphere. He had been unable to determine the cause of it, and he was vaguely disturbed.

There had been a good deal of whispering. There seemed to be a suppressed excitement through the form. So far as Mr. Buddle knew, nothing had happened to excite his class out of its usual lethargy.

On the occasions when he faced his class from his dais, every boy had his eyes fixed on Mr. Buddle. Their eyes seemed to express something like

hero-worship. Mr. Buddle found it slightly embarrassing, and he was puzzled. When he turned his back, whispering broke out.

Several times, as the English lesson progressed, Mr. Buddle looked thoughtfully at Meredith. Meredith was a golden-haired youth who looked too good to be true. Nine times out of ten, when Mr. Buddle had trouble with the Lower Fourth, Meredith was the cause of it.

This time, however, it was clear to Mr. Buddle that, whatever was in the wind, Meredith was not part of it. The golden-haired youth looked uncomfortable. If ever he caught Mr. Buddle's eye, he looked away quickly. For the most part, Meredith sat and stared at his desk-lid. It added to Mr. Buddle's wonder.

Once or twice, when he turned round from writing on his blackboard,

Mr. Buddle felt sure that something was being passed round in the class. At last he spoke sharply:

"Shovel, are you passing a book to somebody?"

Shovel looked innocently indignant.

"Certainly not, sir."

Mr. Buddle gave him a penetrating stare, and turned again to the blackboard. He wrote thereon the word "Synthesis." As he turned again to face the class, he was saying: "The process of building sentences is known as synthesis --" He broke off, and then rapped out:

"Hunwick, bring that note up to my desk."

Hunwick, a plumpish youth who occupied a desk in the second row, sat bolt upright.

"I haven't got a note, sir."

Mr. Buddle was frowning with annoyance.

"Don't waste my time, Hunwick. I saw you passing a piece of paper to Brazenbean. Place it on my desk at once."

With the ghost of a smile on his face, Hunwick left his seat, and approached the master's platform. He placed a piece of paper on Mr. Buddle's desk.

"Return to your seat," snapped Mr. Buddle.

Hunwick returned to his seat.

Mr. Buddle's gaze roved over the class. He sensed tension. There was an eager expression on boyish faces. Every pair of eyes, with one exception, was on Mr. Buddle. The exception belonged to Meredith. That youth, red of face, rueful of expression, was staring through the form-room window.

Mr. Buddle looked down at the

slip of paper which Hunwick had placed on his desk. It was a clipping from a newspaper. Mr. Buddle compressed his lips as he read. A murmur passed through the form - a murmur growing louder.

ESCAPED PRISONER'S LINK WITH HEROIC SCHOOLMASTER

Victor Garth, the Dartmoor prisoner who escaped last week from a working-party near the prison, is still at large. Garth was sentenced, with two other men, to a term of imprisonment for his involvement in the passport forgery case. At the time of the trial it was not disclosed that the arrest of the gang was mainly due to the foresight and courage of a quiet and studious schoolmaster, Mr. Joseph Buddle, who holds a post at Slade College, the Devonshire school. Mr. Buddle was spending Christmas with Mr. and Mrs. Lionel Meredith, well-known and popular Taunton residents, when he was kidnapped by the gang. When approached by a Gazette reporter yesterday, Mr. Meredith refused to comment, but we understand that his schoolboy son, Cedric, who is a resident pupil at Slade, was also instrumental in putting the passport forgery gang into the hands of the police.

Mr. Buddle read the cutting through to the end, and then sat for a few moments staring at it. His feelings were deep.

He became conscious of an increasing murmur in the class. He looked up. Someone started to clap. Immediately, the rest joined in, and there was a fusillade of clapping.

Mr. Buddle stood nonplussed.

"Three cheers for Mr. Buddle," shouted Thornton. "Hip, pip --"

Mr. Buddle roused himself.

"Silence, boy!" he said fiercely.

"Hurrah!"

It came in a shout. The boys were enjoying themselves. All tension was released now.

"Hip, pip --"

"Silence!" roared Mr. Buddle.

He felt as ineffective as Canute. Nothing could stop the class now it had started. Not till the third cheer had died away did something like calm

descend over the formroom.

Mr. Buddle spoke jerkily.

"This is most unseemly. You must have taken leave of your senses. Be seated at once, and the lesson will proceed --"

"We wanted to show you that we're proud of our form-master," said Rainbow. "It was jolly plucky, sir."

"We think you're a hero, sir," called out someone.

There was a grim expression on Mr. Buddle's face.

"Say no more. It is quite absurd. This newspaper report is an exaggeration of what was a trifling affair --"

The form-room door opened. Mr. Fromo, the senior house-master, looked in. His large nose had taken on a grape bloom tinge as it always did when he was annoyed.

"What is the matter here, Mr. Buddle?" he demanded.

"Nothing is the matter, Mr. Fromo." Mr. Buddle spoke in a grinding voice. The members of his form, who were standing, relapsed on to their seats.

Mr. Fromo sniffed with indignation.

"My classics class has been seriously disturbed by the noise of this riot from your form-room," he said.

"Our form-master is a hero," called out Hunwick.

The colour rose in Mr. Buddle's cheeks.

"Be silent, Hunwick!" he snapped. He faced Mr. Fromo who was still standing in the doorway. "I regret that you have been disturbed, sir. It will not happen again. If there is any further noise from this class, every member of it will be forbidden to attend the fifth of November celebrations in

the Meadow this evening." There was a breathless hush over the Lower Fourth, and Mr. Buddle went on: "If you will kindly depart, Mr. Fromo, I can proceed with my English lesson."

"Most irregular! Most improper!" ejaculated Mr. Fromo. He scanned the room suspiciously and inquisitively. Then, with a remark under his breath, he withdrew, and the door closed.

"We will now return to the English lesson," said Mr. Buddle frostily.

"May I have my newspaper cutting, please, sir?" piped Hunwick.

"You may not," said Mr. Buddle curtly. "I advise you all to concentrate on your studies, if you wish to enjoy fireworks in the Meadow this evening. Any further digression, and you will all spend the evening in a special detention class."

Half an hour later, when the class dismissed, two boys remained behind after the rest had gone. They were Pilgrim, Mr. Buddle's head boy, and Meredith. They approached Mr. Buddle's platform.

The form-master looked up from the exercise he was marking.

"Well?"

Meredith shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

He said awkwardly: "We'd like you to know it wasn't us, sir. We never said anything."

Mr. Buddle regarded him steadily.

"You mean, Meredith, that you had nothing to do with that newspaper report being passed round the class. I feel quite sure that you did not. I should have preferred that the matter was not discussed in the school, but these newspaper reporters

ferret things out. It's not important."

"I'm sorry about it, sir," said Meredith miserably.

Pilgrim spoke for the first time.

"It's a cutting from the West Country Gazette, sir. They have a section devoted to Taunton news. I knew about what happened to you last Christmas, sir, as you know. I spent some time with Meredith while you were still at his home. But you asked us not to talk about it at school, sir, and we never said a word to anyone. We never even told Garmansway, and he's our pal."

Mr. Buddle nodded.

He said quietly: "I'm sure of it. I'm obliged to you, boys. It's so long since it happened, and I thought it was all forgotten. But one of the gang has apparently escaped from prison and the newspapers have dug up the old story." He shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly the matter may not become the talk of the school. I hope not. I suppose that cutting was sent to one of the boys by a friend or relative who noticed it --"

"A couple of fellows in our form had cuttings sent to them," said Meredith. "We couldn't do anything about it."

"Quite so. It is really of no consequence. You may both leave the form-room."

After the boys had left, Mr. Buddle sat in thought, his fingers drumming on his desk. The previous Christmas, he had been a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith at their Taunton home. In fact, a warm friendship had developed between the schoolmaster and the parents of Meredith of the Lower Fourth. Mr. Buddle had known full well that the Headmaster of Slade would disapprove strongly of any member of his staff accepting

hospitality from parents of a Slade boy.

At the time of the trial of the passport forgers, Mr. Buddle had congratulated himself that his own name had never featured in the court case or in any reports on the case. As month had succeeded month since the men were sentenced, the whole matter had receded into the background of Mr. Buddle's memory.

And now, just when Mr. Buddle had believed that all danger of publicity for himself had passed, one of the criminals had broken gaol, and some newshound had come upon the schoolmaster's connection with the original capture of the gang. And a brief reference to it had crept into a local newspaper. Mr. Buddle felt that Fate had been unkind.

At that moment, under a tree in the quadrangle, Meredith was standing with Pilgrim. Both boys looked concerned.

"The old Gump's worried," said Meredith.

"I don't see why he should be, do you?" commented Pilgrim. "He came pretty well out of that passport affair. If the school had known about it, everybody would have cheered him. The old boy was plucky, and it didn't seem right that all the men shouldn't know."

Meredith shook his fair head.

"He asked us to say nothing about it --"

"Goodness knows why," rejoined Pilgrim. "At any rate, we said nothing. Of course, it was always likely that it would come out."

"He wasn't scared of the forgers," said Meredith sagely, "but I fancy he's scared of the Big Beak."

As Mr. Buddle was strolling along the Mulberry Walk after lunch, he heard a patter of feet behind him.

"Sir --" panted a voice.

Mr. Buddle paused, and turned.

A tall senior, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, sped up to him. It was Peter-Roy Shannon of the Sixth form, the editor of the school magazine.

"What is it, Shannon?"

Shannon beamed.

"Would you let me have the story, sir? It would be a great scoop for the school mag."

Mr. Buddle knitted his brows.

"What story, Shannon?"

"The one about how you captured the passport forgers, sir. Written up by your own hands, sir, the story will be the mag's biggest scoop of all time. Tell us exactly what happened, sir, and take as much space as you like --"

Mr. Buddle raised a hand.

"There is no story to tell, and you are talking nonsense, Shannon," he said. "The last thing I would wish is that some sensational rubbish should be linked with me in the school magazine."

Shannon's mouth opened wide.

"But, sir --"

"And I forbid you absolutely and definitely to mention the matter in any way in the magazine," wound up Mr. Buddle.

He strode away, leaving Shannon staring after him.

That afternoon Mr. Buddle was taking the Fifth in English. He was soon left in no doubt that the seniors as well as the juniors had heard something of his adventure with the passport forgers.

As Mr. Buddle mounted his

platform, Carslake of the Fifth rose in his place.

"Congratulations, sir!" he said.

"Hear, hear!" came a murmur through the form.

Mr. Buddle said nothing. There seemed no point in saying anything. His feelings were too deep for words.

"We think the Head should announce a day's holiday in your honour, sir," said Lorch.

"Thank you," said Mr. Buddle.

"The Headmaster is unlikely to take notice of so trifling an affair. And, now, no further reference to the matter, please. We have much work to do."

After tea, Mr. Crayford, the sports master, put his head round the door of Mr. Buddle's study.

"Congratulations, Buddle," he said. "I shouldn't be surprised if you've put Slade on the map."

Mr. Buddle had been sitting at his table, writing. He eyed the sports master thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't take too much notice of gossip in the school, if I were you, Crayford," he said.

Mr. Crayford chuckled.

"You're too modest. I've seen a newspaper cutting. The chaps in the school seem to think it's one up for Slade. I see you were spending Christmas with young Meredith --"

"I was the guest of Meredith's parents, certainly."

"Did old Pink know?" asked Crayford.

Mr. Buddle rubbed his chin, and eyed the young man.

"I did not ask the Headmaster's permission concerning where I should spend Christmas, if that is what you

mean," he said calmly.

"Good for you!" Crayford rubbed his hands, and chuckled again. "You've struck a blow for liberty, old man. I'm with you all the way. Jolly good show!"

"Thank you," said Mr. Buddle.

Crayford departed, and the door closed. There was the trace of a rueful smile on Mr. Buddle's lips. Crayford had sounded sincere, and it was rare that Mr. Buddle had ever found the sports master on his side. Mr. Buddle was not sure that it was a good sign.

So the story of his adventure when he was spending last Christmas with the Merediths was sweeping through the school. In time it would reach the Headmaster. Someone would make sure that it did. Mr. Buddle resumed his writing, and waited for the summons to Mr. Scarlet's study which he felt sure would come.

And outside, in the darkness of the November evening, the first bang from a firework sounded.

The evening was dark and misty. Smoke from the bonfire which had just been lighted in the Meadow was helping to increase the mistiness of the November darkness.

The Meadow was a large field which adjoined the extensive playing fields of Slade College. It had been purchased a few years back by the school authorities with the intention that it should be used as an extension of the playing fields, but so far no work had been done on it. On occasions like Guy Fawkes Night it came in handy for boisterous activities which might have caused damage on the playing fields themselves, and it had the advantage of being close to the school yet

sufficiently distant to obviate fire risks when fireworks exploded and bonfires blazed.

Tonight a couple of hundred boys were enjoying themselves in the Meadow. Mr. Crayford, the sports master, was present, responsible for seeing that nothing got out of hand, and a dozen prefects were there to keep order and to assist with organisation.

Pilgrim ran down the steps from the main school building, carrying a great box of fireworks. As he crossed the quadrangle he could hear the sound of fun and games from the Meadow and see the reflection of the flames from the fire in the mist and low clouds. Ten minutes earlier, just as the fire was lighted, Pilgrim had dashed back to the school. Pilgrim had thought that Meredith or Garmansway had taken the fireworks, bought by means of their study's common fund, and Meredith and Garmansway had relied on Pilgrim to carry the box across to the Meadow. On pooling notes, they found that the fireworks had been left behind, and Pilgrim had rushed back alone to fetch them.

Carrying the fireworks, he hurried through the school gates. Two lights over the gates dispersed the gloom in the immediate radius. The entry to the playing fields was opposite the gates, but the Meadow, where tonight's fun and games were in progress, was several hundred yards along the lane.

As Pilgrim hurried down the lane, a slowly moving car passed him and drew up slightly ahead of him. The driver called to Pilgrim as the boy was passing.

"Hi, youngster!"

Pilgrim paused, and looked at the car driver who had hailed him. He

saw, in the darkness of the Devonshire lane, which was partially relieved by the flickering light from the huge bonfire beyond the trees and hedges, a man wearing a cap, horn-rimmed glasses, and a muffler which was drawn up round the lower part of his face.

"Can you help me, kid?" asked the man.

"What's the trouble?" asked Pilgrim.

The man drew his muffler slightly down from his mouth.

"Excuse this confounded scarf. I've had a tooth out today and I don't want to get cold in my face. Your name isn't Meredith, by any lucky chance?"

"Meredith? No. I'm Pilgrim."

"You know a boy Meredith?"

Pilgrim grinned in the gloom.

"I know him. He's my best pal, as a matter of fact. Do you want to see him?"

The stranger said, apologetically:

"It's a shame to bother you --"

Pilgrim interrupted.

"It's no bother. I shall be with him in a few minutes." He rattled the box he was carrying. "These are our fireworks. He's waiting for me to take them over to the field where the fellows are letting everything off."

The man spoke, in a relieved tone.

"That's good of you, and lucky for me. In the car here I've got a collection of fireworks which his father has sent over for him. I'm a relation, and promised to bring them over. I should be glad if you would find young Meredith and tell him that I am waiting here to give him his father's little gift."

"Can't I take them over to him?" asked Pilgrim. "It would save you waiting."

The stranger laughed.

"I'm afraid not. I've got a message for him from his father. So if you'll find Meredith and tell him --"

"I'll find him. He'll only be a few minutes," promised Pilgrim.

"Thanks a lot, kid," said the man gratefully.

Pilgrim sped away. In a moment he was in the Meadow where the crackers were cracking, the bangers were banging, the bonfire was blazing as all good bonfires should, and excitement reigned supreme. And in a few moments more, Pilgrim had found Meredith and was imparting to him the good news that a man in a car was waiting near the entrance to the Meadow with a gift of fireworks especially sent over to Slade by Mr. Meredith of Taunton.

It had turned half-past eight when Mr. Buddle's telephone rang. It was the summons to the Headmaster's study which Mr. Buddle had been expecting all the evening. From the distance, the sound of exploding fireworks and the shouts of boys had died away at last. In the quadrangle below his study window, he had heard the chatter and laughter of boys as they drifted back from the Meadow, in plenty of time for Call Over which would be held at nine, rather later than usual, this special evening of November the Fifth.

Mr. Buddle left his study and made his way up Masters' Corridor to the Headmaster's sanctum, the last room down the corridor before one came on the green baize door which separated the Headmaster's private quarters from the school.

Mr. Buddle tapped on the study door, and entered.

Mr. Scarlet, Head of Slade, sat at his desk. He indicated a chair, and Mr. Buddle seated himself.

"I am sorry to ask you to call on me in the evening," said Mr. Scarlet politely.

"Not at all, Headmaster. I am at your service."

"Quite so!" Mr. Scarlet tapped on his desk with his finger-tips. He went on: "A rather strange matter has been brought to my notice, Mr. Buddle. Some time ago Mr. Fromo handed me this newspaper cutting --" He lifted a slip of paper from his blotting-pad.

"I felt quite sure that Mr. Fromo would lose no time in bringing the matter to your notice, Headmaster," said Mr. Buddle coldly.

"It was his duty to do so, Mr. Buddle," said Mr. Scarlet mildly. "What surprises me is that you did not acquaint me yourself with what had happened. I am, in fact, astonished that you did not regard it as imperative that you should tell me of the matter yourself."

Mr. Buddle did not speak. There was a slightly obstinate expression on his face.

"It would seem," said Mr. Scarlet, diffidently, "that, during the last Christmas vacation, you were involved in some affair with which the police were concerned."

Mr. Buddle folded his arms, and leaned one elbow on the corner of the Headmaster's desk.

He said: "Through a certain chain of events I was the means by which the police arrested a small gang of criminals who were counterfeiting passports and circulating them."

"Is that so?" Mr. Scarlet glanced at the newspaper cutting. "According to this press report, you were kidnapped, Mr. Buddle."

Mr. Buddle shrugged his shoulders.

"That is something of an exaggeration, but I was certainly in the hands of the men for a short period of time. The police came very quickly."

Mr. Scarlet leaned back in his chair and fixed a keen stare on the little schoolmaster.

"This press report pays tribute to your courage and resource. Did you not think that I, as Head of Slade, should have been informed of the occurrence?"

Mr. Buddle did not reply for a moment. He did not, in fact, know quite what to say.

He said, at last: "I merely did my duty as a citizen. There was nothing courageous in it. Some people thought otherwise, and I found it embarrassing. I saw no reason to discuss it with anyone."

Mr. Scarlet nodded. He put the tips of his fingers together over the base of his broad waistcoat.

He said: "I recall reading of the trial of these passport forgers. How was it that I never noted your name mentioned in the reports of the trial, Mr. Buddle?"

"It was not necessary for me to be brought in as a witness. I particularly asked that I should not be called to give evidence unless it was quite essential. The police superintendent was most understanding. In fact it is even possible that he was not averse to taking all the credit himself, which suited me. He had the men under arrest, with ample evidence of their activities in the forging of pass-

ports. That is what they were charged with."

"Quite!" Mr. Scarlet gnawed his lower lip. He went on: "You discussed the matter with nobody, Mr. Buddle. I think you should certainly have informed me. May I ask whether it was entirely due to your natural modesty that you refrained from doing so?"

Mr. Buddle flushed.

"I have already stated, Headmaster, that I found the matter embarrassing. I have never mentioned it to anyone."

Mr. Scarlet tapped the newspaper cutting.

"This press snipping is, presumably, recent. One of the men concerned has escaped from prison. How is it that your connection with the case is now mentioned, so many months later?"

"Presumably, in the meantime, some newspaperman has heard of my remote connection with the affair. Last week I had a call from the editor of a paper. I refused to grant an interview," said Mr. Buddle.

Mr. Scarlet's head was nodding up and down. Suddenly he ceased nodding, and frowned on Mr. Buddle.

"I am additionally surprised - I may say, amazed - Mr. Buddle, to read in this press cutting that your little adventure occurred when you were spending Christmas with the Merediths. Is that part of the report an error, Mr. Buddle?"

Mr. Buddle met the Headmaster's accusing gaze.

"I was a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith, certainly, last Christmas."

"You were a guest of parents of this school?" said Mr. Scarlet incredulously. "Surely you were well

aware that I should seriously disapprove of any member of my staff accepting hospitality from relatives of any Slade boy."

Mr. Buddle hesitated, opened his mouth to speak, and then said nothing.

Mr. Scarlet went on: "It is not that I am being dictatorial, Mr. Buddle. It was unfortunate that you accepted hospitality from the Merediths, because the son might well expect something in return from you. It is a distortion of the relationship which should exist between a pupil and his schoolmaster. It would be disastrous if it were believed that you had cause to show favouritism to Meredith of this school."

Mr. Buddle frowned with annoyance.

"I have never favoured Meredith, Headmaster. Nor would his parents expect or, indeed, allow such a thing for a moment."

"The Merediths are beside the point, Mr. Buddle. They are, in all probability, most worthy people. But in staying with them you made a precedent. In future, if you receive an invitation from less worthy parents, you would find it difficult to refuse. The whole thing is most undesirable." Mr. Scarlet knitted his brows, drummed on the desk, and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He asked: "How long did you stay with the Merediths?"

"I was their guest for a fortnight in the Christmas vacation last year. I left in the second week in January."

"A fortnight!" echoed Mr. Scarlet aghast.

Mr. Buddle's lips twitched.

"I had only agreed to say with them for two nights. But after the

affair with the passport forgers, the police asked me to remain available in the neighbourhood in case my evidence should be needed at the initial hearing before the magistrates. The Merediths pressed me to stay on in their home, and would have been hurt had I refused."

"Most unfortunate!" said Mr. Scarlet crisply. "It is all very displeasing to me. However, it is some time since the matter happened, and I am prepared to forget it for this occasion. I must ask for your assurance, Mr. Buddle, that such an indiscretion will not be repeated."

Mr. Buddle breathed hard.

"I do not regard it as an indiscretion, Mr. Scarlet, and when Slade is on vacation I am my own master."

"You are in error, Mr. Buddle." Mr. Scarlet's tones were frigid. "While you are on my staff you are responsible to me, whether in term-time or on vacation. I must ask for your assurance that you will spend no further holidays as guest of the Merediths, or, indeed, of any Slade parents."

Mr. Buddle replied a little nervously, though he was determined.

"I cannot give you that assurance, Headmaster --"

He paused. Mr. Scarlet's face was like iron. His lips were set in a straight line, grim and inflexible.

Mr. Buddle went on: "If you wish me to resign from Slade ---"

"I do not wish you to resign from Slade, Mr. Buddle, but my rulings must be observed. Have you any further plans for visiting the Merediths?"

Mr. Buddle said slowly: "They have asked me to spend Christmas with them this year. I have not yet decided whether to accept their invitation."

"You will refuse that invitation, Mr. Buddle," said Mr. Scarlet with emphasis.

Mr. Buddle panted a little.

"I have not yet decided, Headmaster. I shall make my own decision in due course. I love Slade, and would be deeply saddened to be obliged to leave, but --"

Mr. Scarlet held up a large hand.

"Please say no more for the present, Mr. Buddle. You are making things very difficult." Mr. Scarlet proceeded to quote a long stream of Latin. He said, in English: "I think that remark by Homer is very apt to this occasion, don't you, Mr. Buddle?"

Mr. Buddle was not all that hot on Latin, and he had no idea what Homer might have meant.

"No doubt you are right, Headmaster," he said diplomatically.

Mr. Scarlet rose to his feet, and Mr. Buddle followed suit. The two men eyed one another. There was an embarrassing silence while Mr. Buddle strove to think of an exit line.

It was Mr. Scarlet who spoke:

"I have no intention of being hasty. There was, Mr. Buddle, an occasion when I was hasty with you. I admit it. No, do not attempt to deny it. I was hasty. I pride myself that if ever I am at fault, I am the first to admit it."

Mr. Buddle had no intention of denying it. He fully agreed that the Head of Slade had been hasty on one memorable occasion. He was also of the opinion that if Mr. Scarlet was ever at fault, he would be the last to admit it. The autocratic Head of Slade was not a man often to admit that he had ever been wrong.

Mr. Scarlet went on: "For the

time being we will leave the matter in abeyance. There are still several weeks before the end of term. During those weeks I hope you will decide that it is fitting and proper for you to refuse any invitation from parents connected with Slade. We will forget the past, and I feel sure that in the future you will do me the courtesy of observing my rules, made for the benefit of all members of the staff. I feel assured that you will not ignore my wishes, but we will converse again before the end of term. Let us say no more about it now."

Mr. Buddle inclined his head.

"As you wish, sir," he said stiffly. "I am my own master - but you are the Head of Slade. It is not for me to question your decisions. If I cannot see my way clear to acceding to your wishes, I must leave Slade."

Mr. Buddle had only just returned to his study when there was a tap on the door. Antrobus entered.

Mr. Buddle was weary, and he spoke irritably to the Captain of Slade.

"What is it, Antrobus?"

The prefect was looking serious.

"I have just taken Call Over, sir. Meredith, of your form, did not report at Roll."

Mr. Buddle's brows knitted.

"The stupid boy. He must have lingered in the Meadow."

"It seems unlikely that he could have stayed in the Meadow by himself, sir."

"Is it possible that he could be hurt during the excitement over there, and is unable to return?"

"I have sent some prefects over to search with flashlamps, sir, but there is something else. Pilgrim, of

your form, tells a rather odd story. It seems that Meredith left the Meadow to meet some man in the lane with a car - and the boy hasn't been seen since."

Mr. Buddle stared at the Captain of Slade.

"It sounds odd, as you say, though there may be a simple explanation. Send Pilgrim to me, Antrobus. In the meantime, take out a search party yourself, in the lanes and in the Meadow, and then report back to me."

Antrobus left the study, and five minutes later a pale and anxious Pilgrim was pouring out his story to Mr. Buddle.

Mr. Buddle's face grew sombre as he listened.

"You have no idea who the man was, Pilgrim?"

"No, sir. He said he came from Meredith's father. Meredith was thrilled to bits when I told him, and he went bolting off to the lane. I haven't seen him since. I was surprised. I know he wouldn't have missed the November the Fifth spree for anything. There must be something wrong, sir."

"Probably not, Pilgrim. Do not worry unduly. There might be several explanations for Meredith's absence. Leave me now."

Mr. Buddle stood in thought for a few moments after Pilgrim had gone. His brows were knitted in anxious lines.

At last he left his own study and made his way along the passage to the Headmaster's room. He was about to knock on the door when it opened. Mr. Scarlet stood staring at him, obviously surprised to see him there.

"Mr. Buddle! Back again? What is it? I am leaving for my own quarters."

"Yes, Headmaster. I know it

is getting late." Mr. Buddle cleared his throat a little nervously. "I thought you should know that Meredith of my form is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes, sir. He has not returned from the November the Fifth celebrations in the Meadow. In fact, he does not appear to have been seen by his friends since quite early in the evening."

Mr. Scarlet's eyebrows shot up.

"Extraordinary! The troublesome boy!"

"There is something further, sir --"

Mr. Scarlet made a sound under his breath.

"Come into my study, Mr. Buddle."

The two men entered the study, closed the door, and faced one another.

"What have you to tell me, Mr. Buddle?" demanded the Headmaster testily.

Without wasting time Mr. Buddle related the little tale he had heard from Pilgrim ten minutes earlier. Mr. Scarlet rubbed his chin, rocked on his heels, and scanned Mr. Buddle's face.

"You think that is significant, Mr. Buddle? It worries you?"

Mr. Buddle nodded.

"I confess that I am vaguely worried, Headmaster. Meredith is a troublesome boy, but this sort of thing is not like him at all."

"Could he have taken it into his head to go home without my permission?" ejaculated Mr. Scarlet.

"I think it is unlikely, sir. If the man in the car came from Meredith's father --"

"You said just now that he had come from Meredith's father. Where else could he have come from,

Mr. Buddle?"

Mr. Buddle shrugged his shoulders.

"We must presume that he came from Meredith's father unless we learn otherwise, Headmaster. It is possible that Meredith knew the man well, and has gone off with him, but I doubt that very much. The boy may have been hurt. Antrobus and the prefects are searching at present. If the boy has had an accident, in or near the Meadow, they will find him."

"Most annoying!" said Mr. Scarlet.

"I feel a little anxious, sir. You have not forgotten that a man has escaped from prison. Meredith was partly responsible for the imprisonment of that man, and for the break-up of the gang of passport forgers."

Mr. Scarlet looked startled.

"Mr. Buddle, you do not think ---?"

Mr. Buddle shook his head.

"I hope my fears are groundless, Headmaster, but I shall be glad if Antrobus returns soon to report that the boy is safe and sound."

"And if he does not, Mr. Buddle --"

"Then, sir, with your permission I will telephone the Merediths to find out whether they actually sent a messenger over here to see their son. If they did not --"

Mr. Scarlet interrupted.

"We won't anticipate, Mr. Buddle. This is real life, not a thriller book or film. The boy will undoubtedly turn up safe and sound."

"I hope so, Headmaster."

"If the boy cannot be found, then by all means telephone to the Merediths. They must obviously be informed."

"I will do that, sir," said Mr. Buddle. He turned to the door and opened it.

"I am going to my quarters now," said Mr. Scarlet. "Get me on the telephone as soon as you have something to report."

Mr. Buddle nodded, and hurried away. His face was sombre and anxious.

It was fifteen minutes later that Antrobus visited Mr. Buddle in his study.

"There's no sign of Meredith, sir," said the Captain of Slade. "We've been out with torches and scoured the Meadow and the lanes. He seems to have vanished. Nobody has seen him since the bonfire was lighted. The only solution is that he went off with that man who called with a message from his father."

Mr. Buddle shook his head gravely.

"Thank you, Antrobus. I'm sure you have searched diligently. I will contact the Headmaster. Good night."

"Is there nothing else I can do, sir?"

"I think not. If I should want your services again, I will let you know."

Antrobus took his departure. Mr. Buddle glanced at the clock on his mantelpiece. It was nearly ten. Mr. Buddle sat down at his table and drew the telephone towards him. He put a call through to Taunton, and within a minute or two he had Mr. Meredith on the line.

"This is Buddle, speaking from Slade, Mr. Meredith. I don't want to alarm you, but your boy seems to have been missing for the past couple of hours."

"Missing? What on earth do you mean, Mr. Buddle?"

The form-master related the events of the evening, while Mr. Meredith listened. When the latter spoke, his voice sounded worried.

"I know the boy, Pilgrim, Mr. Buddle. He would not jest on a topic like this. But I have sent no messenger over to Slade today. If some man called with a car, I have no knowledge of him. I take it Cedric is in no trouble at school, Mr. Buddle?"

"None at all, Mr. Meredith. I feel sure that we can erase from our minds any thought that the boy may have run away from school for any reason. You are aware that one of the men concerned with that passport fraud escaped some days ago from Dartmoor?"

"I read something about it." There was a tremor in the father's voice now. "Mr. Buddle, you do not think --"

"I think," said Mr. Buddle tersely, "that under the circumstances we should lose no time in informing the police."

Meredith had disappeared. Throughout the next day it was the talk of Slade. Boys of his own form, who knew Meredith well, were stunned. It seemed impossible that anything of the sort could have happened to one they had known so well. Masters and seniors discussed the mystery, and shook their heads at what had happened.

A police officer from Everslade had called at the school late on the night of November the Fifth, took a few notes, and departed. Early the next morning a Detective-Inspector from Plymouth called on the Headmaster, and Mr. Buddle was summoned to be present at the interview. Pilgrim was

sent for, and repeated his story.

Pilgrim looked pale and harassed. The disappearance of his closest friend at Slade had hit him hard. A little later the police officer went to the Lower Fourth Form-room, and questioned the entire class. The interrogation was fruitless. No boy recalled seeing Meredith after the bonfire was lighted, and none but Pilgrim had seen the car in the lane. And of the car and its occupant, Pilgrim was able to give but little information. He thought that the car might have been a Wolseley Hornet, but he was far from certain. It had been very dark, and the driver had had a scarf over the lower part of his face, and explained the covering scarf was due to the extraction of a tooth. When the man spoke he seemed to have a slight west country brogue. And that was as far as Pilgrim could help.

Mr. Buddle walked out of the main doors alone with the police officer.

"I think that Scotland Yard should be called in," said Mr. Buddle.

"Do you, sir?" The Detective-Inspector seemed unperturbed. "We can handle matters in our own territory. Scotland Yard isn't asked to take a hand when some boy runs away from school."

Mr. Buddle bristled with annoyance.

"This is not a case of a boy running away from school. This boy, Meredith, was concerned in the capture of those passport forgers, as I have told you. And one of those villains has escaped."

The police officer spoke soothingly.

"I have taken note of what you said, sir. Certainly, the man who escaped has not yet been caught - but what would a man on the run want with

a junior schoolboy? A man in his position wouldn't be bothering about revenging himself on a youngster. That sort of thing only happens in school stories. If the man bothered at all, he might take a pot-shot at you some time, though I can't see him wasting his time doing so."

Mr. Buddle spoke with quiet dignity.

"You may be right, Inspector. Probably you are. But I still think that Scotland Yard should be called in."

The officer entered his car, and the driver started the engine. Mr. Buddle stood back, biting his lip with vexation. The police officer poked his head through the window.

"I shall pass on all the available information to my colleagues. You may rest assured that we shall do everything we can to find the boy," he said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Buddle coldly. "I only hope you won't delay calling in the Yard until the trail is cold."

Later that morning Mr. and Mrs. Meredith arrived at Slade. Mr. Buddle was taking English with the Fifth Form when a servant looked in on the class to tell him that the visitors were awaiting him in the Visitors' Room. Leaving the senior form to carry on with their work for a time without him, Mr. Buddle hurried along to the Visitors' Room. He liked the Merediths immensely, and knew them well, but he was not looking forward to the interview.

Mr. Meredith looked strained. Mrs. Meredith, normally so vivacious, was pale and drooping with worry and sleeplessness. As Mr. Buddle entered the room, Mrs. Meredith came forward

with hands outstretched.

"Oh, Mr. Gump, what are we going to do? What has happened to Ceddie?"

Mr. Buddle took her hand and pressed it sympathetically. He shook hands with the harassed father.

"Try not to worry too much," he said. "The police have the matter in hand. Remember that the British police force is the finest in the world. They will find your son."

Mr. Meredith spoke restlessly.

"You believe, Mr. Buddle, that the man in the car who spoke to our boy was Garth, the passport forger who has escaped from prison."

"It seems the only solution. The man claimed to have come from you, according to the boy Pilgrim. That must have been a subterfuge to gain contact with your son."

"I must see Pilgrim and talk with him," said Mr. Meredith. "I know the lad. He has stayed with Ceddie during vacations. He always seemed a boy with sound common sense."

"Pilgrim is not to blame in any way," said Mr. Buddle gravely. "He had no reason to disbelieve what the man in the car told him. Pilgrim, himself, is terribly upset over what has happened. He blames himself."

"He mustn't do that, poor boy," sobbed Mrs. Meredith.

"The police seemed to think initially that it was merely a boyish prank," said Mr. Buddle. "I suppose it is natural that they wonder whether it is a case of a boy running away from school. I, myself, am sure that it is no such thing."

"Of course it isn't!" Mr. Meredith spoke heatedly. "Cedric would never do such a thing. He loves Slade, but, in any case, he would never

do anything to worry his mother and me. A Taunton police officer called on me this morning before we left home. They seem to be doing nothing."

"Depend upon it, they are doing all they can. The police are not fools!" said Mr. Buddle with assurance.

Mrs. Meredith sank on to a chair. She plucked nervously at a handkerchief, and stared up at the schoolmaster.

"Why should the man want to kidnap our Ceddie? she asked in a low voice.

Mr. Buddle drew a deep breath.

"I don't know, but I think you will hear from the man very soon." He went on with a confidence he was far from feeling! "Of one thing I am certain. He will not harm your son."

The door opened and Mr. Scarlet strode in. He looked grim. Suddenly Mr. Buddle felt very awkwardly placed.

"I have only just learned that you had called at the school," said the Headmaster of Slade. "I regret to see you under these worrying circumstances." He shook hands with Mr. Meredith and his wife. Then he turned to Mr. Buddle. "The servants should have shown Mr. and Mrs. Meredith to my study at once. I fail to see why you were called, Mr. Buddle."

"We asked the servant to fetch Mr. Buddle," said Mrs. Meredith. "He is our son's form-master."

"I am your son's Headmaster," said Mr. Scarlet coldly. "Mr. Buddle, no doubt you will wish to return at once to your duties with the Fifth Form."

Mr. Buddle flushed, and turned away.

Mrs. Meredith rose to her feet.

"You don't understand, Mr. Scarlet," she said breathlessly. "We rely on Mr. Buddle. If anyone can find Ceddie, Mr. Buddle can. I said to Lionel, what is needed in this matter is for Mr. Buddle to take a hand. We have had experience of Mr. Buddle's methods, Mr. Scarlet. He is better than Sherlock Blake and Sexton Somebody, and all those other great detectives. You don't know Mr. Buddle, Mr. Scarlet. He is a great schoolmaster, but he is an even greater detective."

"Doreen --" murmured Mr. Meredith.

Mr. Buddle moved across to Mrs. Meredith. He took her hand, and pressed it gently.

He said soothingly: "Rely on the police, Mrs. Meredith. They will find your son - and soon."

He left the study.

A week passed. During that time, nothing was heard of the missing boy. Every day the Merediths telephoned to Mr. Buddle, and he felt helpless. By the end of the week a report of the disappearance had crept into the west country newspapers. "Have you seen this boy?" asked the Plymouth Bugle in large, black type, accompanied by an indifferent photograph of Meredith of Slade. So far the police had not allowed any suggestion in the press of a possible link between the missing schoolboy and the escaped criminal, Garth.

Scotland Yard had been called in, and detectives paid several further visits to the school. Meredith's study, his dormitory, and all his belongings were searched to see whether any clue might be found to indicate that

Meredith might have left Slade of his own free will. Nothing had been found.

When more than a week had gone by since Meredith's disappearance, Mr. Buddle began to feel concern for Pilgrim. The head boy of the Lower Fourth was obviously blaming himself for what had happened, and the constant worry was affecting his health. At last Mr. Buddle suggested to the Headmaster that it might be wise if Pilgrim went home for the remainder of the term. A change of environment might help him to overcome his worries, suggested Mr. Buddle. Mr. Scarlet communicated with Pilgrim's father to place the state of affairs before him.

"I'm not going," said Pilgrim miserably, when Mr. Buddle broached the subject to him.

"Your parents leave the decision to you," said Mr. Buddle gently. "I think that, for your own sake, you should go home for the time being. I feel sure that Meredith will be found soon --"

"If I hadn't been such a fool," said Pilgrim in a low voice.

Mr. Buddle sighed.

"Nobody blames you, Pilgrim. You had no earthly reason to think that anything like this would happen, or that the man in the car was not exactly what he presented himself to be. You must stop worrying, or you will break down. Go home, at any rate for a while. In the atmosphere of your home --"

"I should worry more than ever if I went home. I want to stop here, on the spot. I shan't go home unless my parents make me."

And there the matter rested for the time being, but Mr. Buddle

watched his head boy with increasing anxiety as the days passed.

It was on a Saturday morning, just under two weeks since that memorable Guy Fawkes night, that news came at last. Mr. Buddle's telephone rang in his study just before he left to go to his breakfast.

It was Mr. Meredith and he sounded agitated.

"Mr. Buddle, I have heard from the man Garth."

"At last!" breathed Mr. Buddle.

"I have had two letters from the man - one posted in Bath, the other postmarked Basingstoke. He demands ransom money in return for our son's release," said Mr. Meredith.

"Are you sure the letters are from Garth?" demanded Mr. Buddle. "This matter has had some publicity in the press. Some vicious-minded person might be using the occasion to further his own ends. Can you be certain that the letters come from the man who is able to free your son?"

"I am certain. He makes no effort at all to disguise the fact that he is Garth. He sent a packet - this time postmarked Bristol - containing Ceddie's cap, scarf, and necktie, all clearly marked by the school with our son's name."

"That would seem to be proof," murmured Mr. Buddle.

"He asks five thousand pounds to enable him to leave the country, and he promises, if that sum is paid, that Cedric will be set free, unharmed. He says it was due to our boy that his livelihood was taken from him. His livelihood, Mr. Buddle - forging and distributing passports in the underworld. It is a large sum of money - I am not a wealthy man - but I can raise it. His mother and I would give our

last penny for Cedric."

Mr. Buddle gripped the telephone convulsively. He stood in silent thought for a few seconds.

"Are you there, Mr. Buddle?"

"I am here, Mr. Meredith. And, if you don't pay the man this large sum of money --?"

"Then, he says --" Mr. Meredith's voice sounded choked. "He says that unless I pay the money we shall never see Ceddie alive again. I must pay him, Mr. Buddle."

"How are you expected to get the money to him? Does he give an address?"

"Of course he doesn't give an address!" Just for a moment Mr. Meredith sounded impatient, and beside himself. "He has given me instructions what I am to do. They seem simple, but I suppose he is safeguarding himself in some way. Probably he has an accomplice."

"And when are you to do this?"

"It is to happen on Tuesday - he has given me three days to get the money in used currency. I cannot dare to tell even you anything more, Mr. Buddle."

Mr. Buddle spoke gently.

"I understand, Mr. Meredith. It is a grave problem for you. Do you intend to do what the man demands? It is monstrous --"

"I must do it, Mr. Buddle. If any harm came to Ceddie, it would kill his mother."

"What about the police?"

Mr. Meredith answered in a hard voice.

"He says that if a trap is set, he will know, and he will not appear. He claims that Ceddie is safe and imprisoned in London. Only Garth knows where he is. If Garth does not

get the money, or if he is taken by the police, he will deny any knowledge of the matter. He will say, if the police take him, that he read in the papers of our boy's disappearance, and thought he could make money out of it, though he had nothing to do with the kidnapping. And Cedric will be left to starve to death."

"I think that is an idle threat," said Mr. Buddle trying to sound confident. "He won't want to change a charge of passport forgery to one of murder."

"I hope not, Mr. Buddle, but you must see that I cannot risk it. Everything I have is small price to pay for our boy's safety."

"I agree. But what assurance have you that the man will keep his word - that he will release the lad when the money is in his hands?"

"None!" came the answer, almost in a whisper, over the line.

"I think you should put the letters into the hands of the police, Mr. Meredith. They have the means of testing such things --"

"No!" came the reply sharply.

Mr. Buddle fought for words.

"It is a matter that you alone can decide - but --"

"The police have been searching for nearly a fortnight. They have found neither the escaped convict nor our boy. Perhaps I should not blame them. They have no lead to follow. But if Garth can escape detection for two weeks he might do the same for two months or for two years, so far as I can see. And what could happen to Cedric in that time? One thing more, Mr. Buddle --"

"Yes?"

"What I have told you is confidential. I must carry out the man's orders so that I can save my son."

Mr. Buddle paused for a moment before replying. Then he said slowly: "I shall not mention the matter to anyone, but I think that, as you have told me, you should also tell Mr. Scarlet. After all, he is the Head of Slade."

"Nobody must be told."

Mr. Meredith's voice sounded almost shrill. "I have told you, not as our boy's form-master, but as a friend. I rely on you, Mr. Buddle."

"I see. I wish that I could do something to help. You will keep me informed, Mr. Meredith? I am very anxious."

"You shall be the first to know," said Mr. Meredith heavily.

A few more days passed.

On the Sunday, Mrs. Pilgrim called at the school, and her son was persuaded to go home with her. Mr. Buddle was glad to see him go. He hoped that, away from the environment where it had all happened, Pilgrim might worry less than he was doing at school.

On Monday and Tuesday Mr. Buddle found it difficult to concentrate on his teaching duties. On Wednesday, he was tempted to put a telephone call through to Mr. Meredith, but refrained from doing so.

On Thursday morning, before breakfast, Mr. Buddle received the telephone call which he had been expecting. It was Mr. Meredith at the other end of the line.

"You were right, Mr. Buddle." The voice was anguished. "I paid over the money. I kept my side of the bargain. The man hasn't set Cedric free. I've just had another letter from him, demanding another thousand pounds. He says if he is

paid, Cedric will be set free at once. What am I to do, Mr. Buddle?"

Mr. Buddle said evenly:

"You must do what you should have done in the first place. Inform the police at once, and put everything in their hands."

"But what of the boy? Perhaps, this time, the man would keep his word. He promises he would. I could raise the money --"

"If you pay him again, he will still come back for more," said Mr. Buddle. "Waste no more time. Let the police know at once."

"I just don't know what to do for the best," muttered Mr. Meredith. "My wife is frantic with worry --"

"Tell the police," said Mr. Buddle impatiently. "They have all the machinery, and they are the only ones who can help you."

During the next few days Mr. Buddle's thoughts were constantly with the agonised parents. He wondered whether his advice had been taken. He found it harder and harder to carry on with his duties under the anxieties which were besetting him that unfortunate term.

Once again, early in the morning, before breakfast, Mr. Buddle's telephone rang. Once again, it was Mr. Meredith at the other end of the line. His voice was trembling with scarcely suppressed emotion.

"Mr. Buddle, we have had a letter from Cedric."

"What?" Mr. Buddle almost shouted with surprise.

"The police, of course, know everything now. I have done nothing further, though there have been two more letters from Garth. Now the

early morning post has brought a letter from Cedric. At least, I am supposed to believe that it comes from my son. I'm not certain about it. There are several things about the letter --"

"What things?" demanded Mr. Buddle.

"It is a strange letter. It carries what seems to be a message for you, Mr. Buddle."

"A message for me!" ejaculated Mr. Buddle.

"Superintendent Dash is with me now. He wants you to see the letter without delay. We are bringing it over to you this morning. I hope you will make it convenient to see us. We will be with you at noon, Mr. Buddle."

"I shall expect you," said the schoolmaster curtly.

There was a rattling overhead, as somebody removed the outer covering from the skylight. Daylight streamed into the room.

The fair-haired boy slipped from his bunk bed, and moved across to the small toilet adjoining. He lowered the tip-up ablution bowl, and ran water into it. After washing and towelling himself, he lifted the bowl on its hinges, and there was a gurgle as water rushed down the waste pipe.

Nearly three weeks of imprisonment had left their mark on Meredith of Slade. His blue eyes were still alert, but his cheeks had hollowed and lost their normal healthy colour.

He went from the toilet back into the room which had been his prison for so many days, and sat down at the table. He waited.

For some time there had been

the sounds of activity outside the locked room. Now a key was turning in the lock, and the door opened. A man entered, bearing a tray.

He was a fairly powerfully built man. His hair was dark and long, and his bearded face made him look older than he was. At first glance he might have been middle-aged, but Meredith guessed that he was a good many years away from middle-age. Probably still on the sunny side of thirty.

"Here's your breakfast," said Victor Garth. "I don't know why I bother to keep you stuffing yourself."

He put the tray on the table. There was a pot of tea, some milk and sugar, a loaf of bread, and a chunk of corned beef.

Meredith cringed a little.

"When are you going to let me go?" he asked in a low voice.

"Shut up!" snapped Victor Garth.

"I shall die if you keep me shut up here."

"You whining little wretch, shut up. I give you plenty of grub, books to read, no work to do. What more do you want?"

"I want to go back to my mother and father. I want to play football with the boys again."

"Get on with your breakfast, and count yourself lucky that I've brought you some."

"Are you going out to-day?" asked the boy nervously.

The bearded man did not answer.

"I get terribly afraid when you tie me up, and put that gag in my mouth. If you happened to get run over while you were away, what would happen to me?"

"Well, I'm not away long. I've always come back, so far." It was

almost as though Victor Garth was glad to have somebody to talk to. "I have to make sure you can't yelp while I'm away. You might bring somebody here."

The boy poured out a cup of tea, and nibbled a piece of corned beef.

"You always say that it's no good my shouting, as there is nobody around to hear me."

"There isn't!"

"Then why tie me up and gag me when you go out?"

Garth shrugged his shoulders.

"It has to be done. Don't yelp before you're hurt. You may have something to yelp over later on."

The boy ate slowly, and the man stood watching him.

"You're their only kid, aren't you?" demanded Garth at last.

"Yes."

"Then you'd think they'd be glad to pay six thousand quid to get you back safely, wouldn't you?"

The boy looked up timidly.

"It's an awful lot of money. My dad isn't a rich man. All the same, I know my dad would pay to get me back.

"Then why doesn't he pay?"

"I don't know." The boy pushed his plate away. "I can't eat any more. Perhaps the police won't let my dad pay."

"He hasn't told the police. I ordered him not to," said Garth fiercely.

The boy stood up, brushed back his fair hair with his fingers, and moved over to the bunk bed.

He said: "Can't you take the boarding off that little window? Then I could see out."

"Don't be a little fool," said the man roughly. "Be thankful for small mercies. I take the trouble to

put a tarpaulin over the skylight after dark, just so that you can have the lamp on in the evenings. You're an ungrateful little rat."

Suddenly Meredith buried his face in his hands. His shoulders shook. With a grunt of anger, Garth turned to the door.

Meredith called out to him.

"Don't go yet. I get so lonely. Let me write to my father."

Garth looked back at him.

"Don't be a stupid twit!"

The boy spoke ingenuously.

"My mum and dad do anything I ask them. If I wrote to my father and asked him to hurry up and pay you the money, I know he would do it."

The man rubbed his hand thoughtfully round his bearded chin. He gave a short chuckle, and spoke almost confidentially.

"He's already paid a little bit. It was dead easy. He's got to pay a bit more, and then you can clear out - and good riddance to you. I'm off to the States to make a new life - when I've got all I can out of your old man. Just another thousand. That's all I'm asking. Do you reckon it's unreasonable? Just a thousand for a lousy kid like you. Doesn't he think you're worth it?"

"My dad would think I'm worth it. He'd pay if he was sure I was all right."

"I've told him you're all right," said Victor Garth.

"I expect he doesn't trust you," exclaimed the boy, innocently. "If I wrote to him, he'd know I was all right, and then he'd pay up. You'd see!"

Garth was turning away, but he paused. He fixed a shrewd stare on the schoolboy. Meredith was a lad who looked considerably younger than his

fifteen years. And when he put on his act of abject simplicity, he looked even younger still. Nobody was more of an expert at personifying innocence than Meredith of Slade. It would have seemed impossible to anyone who did not know him that his brain was keen and his outlook astute, and that his lightly-built frame was capable, on occasion, of lifting a ball over a boundary for six.

"You're a snivelling little slob, but it's just possible that there's something in what you say. A nice letter from you might ginger up your old man. It might work!" mused Victor Garth.

"I'm sure it would work," said Meredith. He knuckled one eye. "If you send my dad a letter from me, he'll pay you your money, and you can let me go."

"Shut your mouth!" snapped Garth. For a couple of minutes he paced the room, the boy watching him. At last Garth made up his mind. He moved over to the table.

"Come and sit down here, boy, and write to your old man. I've got nothing to lose. Tell him that unless he pays up at once, I'll cut your throat and drop you in the Bristol Channel."

Nervously, Meredith crossed to the table, and sat down.

Garth drew a notebook from his pocket, and tore out a lined sheet of paper. He put it before Meredith, and a pencil by its side.

"Get on with it, then. If you write something useful, I'll post it to your old man. If you try to put in too much, it will just be torn up."

"I only want to persuade my Dad to get me away from here," mumbled the boy, miserably.

"All right, then. Buck up.

And not too much."

Meredith gnawed the end of the pencil. He gazed up at the skylight, as though for inspiration. Then he drew the piece of ruled paper before him, and started to write. His pencil worked for a couple of minutes. He paused for a moment, looked up sadly at his captor, and then wrote again.

"Don't put in anything silly," warned Garth.

"If it doesn't read natural-like, my dad will think you made me do it," protested Meredith.

"All right, but buck up. I can't hang about here all day."

The boy wrote again. Finally he handed the sheet to Garth who read it suspiciously. Garth stared at the boy.

"What's Pumpkin?" he demanded.

"Pumpkin's my pussy-cat," said the boy. "Do you want me to address an envelope?"

"I'll do that!" said Victor Garth.

He turned and left the little room, and the key was turned in the lock.

Meredith of Slade remained sitting at the table, staring straight ahead, a sombre expression on his face but an alert gleam in his blue eyes.

When Mr. Buddle first saw Superintendent Dash, it occurred to the schoolmaster that the Scotland Yard man belied his name. He looked anything but a dashing individual, but, as Mr. Buddle well knew, appearances are often deceptive.

Immediately morning classes were over, Mr. Buddle hastened to the school gates. He did not have long to wait. Within a few minutes a car drove up, and stopped. Superintendent

Dash was driving, and Mr. Meredith, who was seated beside him, lowered his window. He looked questioningly at Mr. Buddle.

"You prefer that we do not drive up to the school house, Mr. Buddle?"

"I would prefer it. Mr. Scarlet would think it odd that you did not call upon him. If we could perhaps drive a little way into the country --- I must not be long, of course. My lunch does not matter, but I have a class just before two."

Mr. Meredith turned to the Superintendent, who nodded.

"Climb in, Mr. Buddle. Our business won't take long."

Mr. Buddle opened the rear door, climbed in as directed, and sank on to the cushions. The car slid into motion again, and picked up speed.

Mr. Buddle leaned forward to speak to the two men in the front seats.

"You have had a letter from your son, Mr. Meredith? It is most surprising news."

"It is, indeed. I don't know what to make of it, Mr. Buddle. We shall see what you think. The letter appears to have been written by Ceddie, though I am not sure of it. There seems to be something ---"

A couple of miles whizzed under the wheels, and then the police officer turned into a side lane, went on a few hundred yards, and braked to a standstill at a spot against a five-barred gate where the lane was a little wider than elsewhere.

He unbuttoned his overcoat, and drew a sheet of paper from the breast pocket of his jacket. He turned in his seat.

He said: "You know, sir, that Mr. Meredith has received a number of

letters and several telephone calls concerning ransom money for the release of his son? Mr. Meredith has already paid £5,000, but his boy has not been released. The kidnapper is demanding more. So far, on our advice, Mr. Meredith is intimating that he is unable to pay more. We are planning a trap."

Mr. Buddle nodded.

"It seems apparent that the boy is held prisoner somewhere in the west country, but so far we have no lead at all as to where he is hidden," continued Dash.

Mr. Buddle spoke.

"You are judging by the post-marking of the letters," he queried. "Could not those postmarks be a false trail?"

"They could, but we still think the man and his prisoner are somewhere in the west. To have got a kidnapped boy to London would have been risky, and when the man escaped from gaol we quickly had a watch and check on all roads into London. Undoubtedly he has an accomplice. Garth, himself, is not an intelligent fellow. The brains of the gang are still in gaol. Garth was merely the brawn of the outfit. We fancy he will give himself away. That, of course, does not mean that he is not a dangerous criminal."

Dash passed to Mr. Buddle the letter which he had been holding.

"Mr. Meredith received this letter this morning, by post. It was mailed in Plymouth. So far our experts have not examined it. We have rushed it to you, Mr. Buddle, in order that you can pass an opinion on it."

Mr. Buddle took the paper, and read the pencilled lines:

Dear Dad,

I want to come Home. It seems like I have been Here years. Please pay the Man what he wants. When I grow up I will get a good Job and

then I can pay you all of it Back. Please tell Mum that I am quite Well and that she Must not worry. The man is quite Kind to me and gives me Food, and also Books to read. As soon as he gets the Money, he will let me go, and I can Come Home.

I miss all my Pals at School very much, but I hope I will see them before the end of Term. Please ask my form-master to take care of the book I lent him on the Old school Bus. I want to give it for a Christmas present to the St. Jim's chap in the post office. Please cuddle Pumpkin for me and tell him I will Soon be home. Dear Dad, please hurry up and pay the Man somehow.

Your loving Son,
Ceddie

Mr. Buddle read through that strange letter twice. Then he rested the paper on his knees, and leaned back. There was a deep wrinkle of thought in his brow.

The men, slewed round in their front seats of the car, were watching Mr. Buddle anxiously.

"Do you believe that letter was written by my son?" asked Mr. Meredith huskily.

"I think there is not much doubt that it was," said Mr. Buddle.

"Somehow --" There was an agonised tone in the father's voice. "Somehow it doesn't read like Ceddie. I can't imagine him asking me to pay a kidnapper. His mother and I wanted to pay the man, but I didn't think that Ceddie would have wanted it. The writing, too, is so childish. It might have been written by a boy of ten. Ceddie is fifteen --"

"He might have been compelled to write what he did," said Dash. "You have the advantage of me, as you both know the boy, and I do not. Mr. Buddle, can you see any reason to doubt that the boy wrote that letter?"

"I think he wrote it," said Mr. Buddle. "His mention of the cat, Pumpkin, is a pointer. Nobody else would know so intimate a detail of Mr. Meredith's household."

"It is a round, very youthful hand," argued Superintendent Dash. "Very immature indeed. The scattering of capital letters throughout the whole thing adds to the sense of immaturity. I wondered whether those capitals, put together, might spell out a message, but they do not. It would be absurd to suppose that a child would have had the time or the brain to invent a code of any sort."

"The capitals are all consonants. They could hardly provide a message," murmured Mr. Buddle restlessly.

Once again he read it through. He sat in silence for a while, his gaze fixed on the paper.

Dash broke the silence.

"The mention of a St. Jim's chap is a strange factor. Mr. Meredith tells me that St. Jim's is a fictional school in a paper which his son reads. So a book as a present for a St. Jim's chap does not make sense. We cannot disguise from ourselves the possibility that the boy may be beside himself with fear. He may even have been badly treated."

Mr. Meredith dropped his head in his hands, but Dash went on:

"He sends a message for his form-master. Is that message intended for you, Mr. Buddle? We have rushed the letter to you in case something might be clear to you which is not clear to us."

Mr. Buddle sat staring at the letter. He said slowly:

"I think it must contain a message for me. It must. There must be something there which Meredith believes that I, and I alone, will have the intelligence to see."

Superintendent Dash looked sceptical, while Mr. Meredith stared hopefully at the schoolmaster.

"It seems unlikely that the letter

can contain anything which has escaped the trained eye of a detective, yet may be obvious to a school teacher," said Dash, a trifle sourly. "However --"

Mr. Buddle interrupted him.

He spoke as though giving orders to a boy in his class.

"Will you please drive round for fifteen minutes or so, Mr. Dash. Just drive - and keep silent, and let me think. I must think."

Superintendent Dash gave a mild shrug.

"As you wish," he said.

He slipped into gear, and the car moved away along the narrow lane bordered with the leafless trees of late autumn.

Mr. Buddle put his head back and closed his eyes. He lay thus for a while. Then he sat up, adjusted his glasses, and gazed again at the letter.

The minutes ticked by. Miles passed under the wheels.

Suddenly Mr. Buddle spoke, quite softly.

"Stop, please!"

Mr. Meredith turned his head. The Superintendent found a suitable place on the road, and braked the car to a standstill.

There was the trace of a hard smile on Mr. Buddle's lips. His eyes were glinting. He sat silent for a few moments, while the two men waited. Then Mr. Buddle spoke:

"Your boy has a remarkable brain, Mr. Meredith. He was not compelled to write this letter, in my opinion. He persuaded that criminal to let him write it. It is written by Meredith of my form, but in a round, childish hand, unlike the boy's normal neat writing. He wanted to give the impression of being far less intelligent than he is. He mentions your cat,

Pumpkin, so that you will be assured the message is genuine."

"Is there a message - a helpful message?" muttered Mr. Meredith.

"There is a message," said Mr. Buddle. "In fact, the boy tells us where he is."

"What?" barked Superintendent Dash.

"The scattering of capital letters through this missive is for two purposes. It makes it look like the work of a simple, undeveloped lad, which is Meredith's intention - to fool

the man who kidnapped him. It also makes the message stand out."

"What message?" demanded Dash. "Is it something to do with the Slade School Bus?"

"Slade has no school bus," said Mr. Buddle.

"Something to do with the book he lent you?" suggested Mr. Meredith.

"He lent me no book!" said Mr. Buddle.

Superintendent Dash breathed hard.

"Mr. Buddle, if you think you have discovered anything, will you kindly tell me what it is, in order that I can decide whether it is in any way helpful?"

"I agree that there is no time to waste," said Mr. Buddle calmly. "We are at one that there is a message in this letter, otherwise it would not make sense, though the kidnapper saw no reason to be suspicious of it. The boy draws attention to an old school bus. There is nothing suspicious in that. Plenty of schools have their own school bus, though Slade does not. Therefore the old school bus must have significance. The boy, scattering capitals throughout the letter, avoids making it evident that he has given a capital letter to Old, a small letter to school, and a capital letter to Bus. By this means he conveys to us the thought that school is unimportant, but old is important and bus is important. Therefore we get the Old Bus."

THE LEADING HOLIDAY AND SCHOOL-STORY PAPER!



DAMPING THE ARDOUR OF TOM MERRY & CO.!

It is a magnificent story... written by the author of 'The Old Bus'... a magnificent story... written by the author of 'The Old Bus'...

"The Old Bus!" echoed Mr. Meredith. "The Old Bus!" His mouth fell open, and colour flooded into his haggard face. "Good heavens, Mr. Buddle, is it possible --?"

"In the Gem, your boy's favourite paper, which he knows I also favour, the Old Bus is famous as a boat. Surely the message is clear? Your boy, Mr. Meredith, is held captive on a boat."

"A boat!" almost hooted Superintendent Dash. "Good lord, is it possible? We have searched hundreds of houses and buildings where the boy might have been hidden, but nobody thought of a boat."

"But, Mr. Buddle --" Mr. Meredith wrinkled his brows, as he spoke with anguish. "The Old Bus was a rowing-boat. Nobody could be kept prisoner, at this time of year, on a rowing-boat."

"Certainly not a rowing-boat," said Mr. Buddle tranquilly. "But, to me, the message is obvious. He is on a boat. A houseboat, a small cabin cruiser - something of the sort - but definitely on a boat of some kind."

"It is possible!" muttered Dash. "But what boat? And where?"

"Somewhere in the West Country," said Mr. Buddle. "Within fairly easy reach of each of the places figuring in the postmarks of the various letters the man sent. We know he had a car, but, even so, he would not wish to have to travel too far. I assume it would be a help if you knew the name of the boat."

Dash glared at the little schoolmaster.

"If the boy is in some river cruiser, moored or anchored somewhere, and I knew the name of the boat, then I could contact the various harbour

masters, the river police, the yachting boards, and have hundreds of our men scouring the rivers and harbours of the west."

"I can give you the name of the boat," murmured Mr. Buddle.

"What?" hooted Dash, while Mr. Meredith sat thunderstruck.

"How can you possibly know the name of the boat?" gasped Mr. Meredith at last.

"Your son has told me," said Mr. Buddle.

"Told you? Oh, you mean the capital letters --?"

Mr. Buddle leaned forward and gripped his shoulder.

"The St. Jim's boy in the post office," he said, stressing each word with staccato effect.

Dash shook his head as though despairing of the stability of the schoolmaster's mind.

"The St. Jim's boy in the post office," echoed Mr. Meredith. "Who is he? What boy? What post office?"

"I think I must be right," said Mr. Buddle softly. "The St. Jim's boy, right in the middle of the post office." He pushed the pencilled letter into Mr. Meredith's hands. "Look at it, sir. The St. Jim's boy -- in the post office."

Mr. Meredith's hands were trembling as he held the paper.

"I can't see what you mean, Mr. Buddle. Please tell me."

Mr. Buddle pointed to the words "post office" on the paper.

"Take the last letter of 'post' - the letter T. Take the first three letters of 'office' - the letters OFF. Put them together. TOFF!"

Mr. Meredith said helplessly:

"Is there a boy named 'Toff' at St. Jim's?"

"For shame, Mr. Meredith! Have you never read of the Toff of St. Jim's? Of course there is a Toff, and that must be the message. It must be the name of the boat - it must be." Mr. Buddle tapped the amazed Superintendent Dash on the shoulder. "Don't lose any time, Mr. Dash. Meredith of my form is a prisoner on a boat, and that boat is named either the 'Toff' or the 'Talbot.' Please dash, my dear sir!"

Throughout that afternoon and evening Mr. Buddle heard nothing further. The hours seemed to drag by. When he went to bed, just before midnight, it was long before he slept. He had told himself, for hour after hour, that his reading of the letter must have been wrong - that he had sent the police of the west country out on a wild goose chase. Well, he was confident that the police would not blame him. They would explore every avenue, however unlikely and hopeless.

It seemed to Mr. Buddle that he had only been asleep a few minutes when he started up as the telephone rang in his adjoining study. Apprehensive, and still heavy with sleep, he switched on his bedside light, scrambled out of bed, and staggered to the phone in the next room.

It was a woman's voice - a wildly excited voice - that came to him.

"Oh, Mr. Gump, Mr. Gump - you've done it - I knew that you would - oh, God bless you, Mr. Gump --"

"Mrs. Meredith," muttered Mr. Buddle. "What has happened?"

He gripped the telephone with one hand, and rubbed his tired eyes with the other.

Someone else had taken over

the telephone at the other end. A man's voice came through - the voice of Mr. Meredith.

"Mr. Buddle, they've found him - the police have found our boy. They brought him back only fifteen minutes ago. I know it's about five o'clock in the morning, but I felt I had to let you know."

"I'm glad you did," muttered Mr. Buddle.

"We shall always be in your debt. Every bit of the credit goes to you for the boy's safe return," said Mr. Meredith huskily.

"No, no --," expostulated Mr. Buddle. "I did nothing. I merely thought a little. Nothing more."

Once again the telephone at the other end changed hands.

"Sir," came an excited boyish voice. "I'm home."

Somehow Mr. Buddle felt deeply moved.

"Meredith, my dear boy, I'm so glad - so very glad --"

The boyish voice went on.

"You guessed, sir. I knew you would. There was a man there -- the man who escaped from prison - the one who nabbed me on bonfire night - he got me in the car - got me to bend down to pick up something in the car, and then bunged something over my mouth. I went out like a candle, and woke up on that boat. Sometimes there was somebody else with him on the boat. I never saw the other one, but the police have got them both. The police came in the middle of the night - it was a small houseboat, moored in the river, somewhere near Totnes. They never guessed I knew the name of the boat. The cabin, where I was, had its porthole boarded up on the outside, and they used to put a tarpaulin over

the skylight before it got dark." The boyish voice trailed away for a moment as the speaker coughed. He went on again: "They didn't take the tarpaulin away in the morning until it was broad daylight, and there was a name stencilled on it in black. I saw it once or twice. M.V. TALBOT! That must have meant Motor Vessel 'TALBOT.' I wasn't sure, of course, but I thought I was right. I persuaded that chap to let me write a letter. I was afraid he might not send it after all. But I got the message to you - and you guessed what I meant. Sir, you're wonderful!"

Mr. Buddle stood in silence, his feelings too deep for words. There were tears in his eyes.

Mr. Meredith's voice came over the wires again.

"We're going to get this boy to bed now, Mr. Buddle. The doctor is coming to give him a check over, but I think he will be all right after we have built him up again. Good-bye for now, Mr. Buddle. My wife and I will be seeing you soon, you may be sure. We owe you so much, which we shall never be able to repay."

After breakfast, an hour or two later, Mr. Buddle went to the Headmaster's study.

Mr. Scarlet was pleasant, if a little distant. He said:

"You will have heard the news before this, Mr. Buddle, I'm sure." Mr. Buddle wondered whether he was imagining just a trace of sarcasm in the Headmaster's tone. "The police have notified me that Meredith of your form has been found, safe and well, and returned to his parents."

"It is excellent news, Headmaster," murmured Mr. Buddle.

"I gather that you were able to give assistance to the official police, Mr. Buddle." Once again, Mr. Buddle might have been imagining a hint of irony. "I congratulate you, Mr. Buddle."

"Thank you, sir, but I did little enough," said Mr. Buddle.

"I shall place an announcement on the board immediately, to notify the school that Meredith is safe," said Mr. Scarlet. He peered thoughtfully at Mr. Buddle. "No doubt this event may make the Merediths feel that they must extend an invitation to you to visit them again, Mr. Buddle. I feel sure you will decide rightly where your duty lies."

"Headmaster," said Mr. Buddle stiffly, "I always try to do my duty as I see it."

Meredith did not return to school that term. Tough though he was, his period of imprisonment had told on him, so his parents decided that a lengthy holiday from the rough and tumble of school life was essential. A delighted Pilgrim, however, returned for the last weeks of the term, and his parents sought out Mr. Buddle to express their appreciation of what he had done towards the rescue of their son's friend.

On the last evening of term, Mr. Fromo, the senior house-master, looked in on Mr. Buddle in his room. After a few exchanges of remarks concerning the term which was ending, Mr. Fromo said, with artificial heartiness:

"We shall all be glad of a rest, my dear Buddle. Will you be travelling far this vacation?"

Mr. Buddle's lips twitched.

"I shall be spending a couple of

weeks in London," he said pleasantly. He added: "My Christmas I am spending with the parents of a Slade boy at Taunton."

"Indeed?" Mr. Fromo looked disapproving. "Do you think that wise, my dear Buddle?"

"I am not unduly concerned about the wisdom of the matter, my dear Fromo," said Mr. Buddle.

"Our Chief will hardly approve," observed Mr. Fromo.

"Probably not," said Mr. Buddle. "If our Chief disapproves, my resignation is at his disposal."

Mr. Fromo shook his head ponderously.

"I can only hope it will not come to that," he said. He added slowly: "I would advise you not to act hastily, Mr. Buddle. A post at Slade is not to be despised."

Mr. Buddle nodded.

"I should be sorry to leave Slade, Mr. Fromo. I am the first to admit that our Chief has right on his side. It is not desirable that schoolmasters should accept hospitality from the parents of the boys they teach. I cannot expect Mr. Scarlet to make an exception, in my case, to what is a reasonable ruling."

"Then --?" said Mr. Fromo, a little helplessly.

Mr. Buddle smiled faintly.

He said, softly: "It is something of an impasse, is it not, Mr. Fromo?"

The last day of term. The spirit of Christmas was well and truly in the air. Outside, snow was drifting on the bitter wind.

It was the last assembly of the term. Slade's several hundred boys were gathered in Big Hall to receive

their final address of the year from their Headmaster.

Several minutes had passed since nine o'clock boomed out from the clock tower. The school was waiting. All the seats were occupied, while some of the prefects and other seniors were standing sedately at the back of the hall. The masters were seated in the front row.

On the stage had been placed the lectern, behind which the Headmaster stood to speak on such occasions. Sprigs of holly were pinned on the deep red curtains. To relieve the nakedness of the stage there was, in addition to the lectern, a table on which stood a carafe, a couple of glasses, and a mass of berried holly in a bowl. There were a couple of upholstered chairs.

The chattering died away in the hall as a door at the rear of the stage opened, and Mr. Scarlet, Headmaster of Slade, appeared. He crossed the stage to the lectern with the slightest rustling of his academic gown.

He commenced to talk. For fifteen minutes he talked of the past term, of the next term, and of the vacation which lay between.

Mr. Buddle sat watching him, and listening. He had heard the same sort of thing so many times before. He wondered whether he was ever likely to sit in the Big Hall at Slade again, listening to the same sort of thing. It seemed unlikely. Only the previous evening he had informed Mr. Scarlet that he would be joining the Merediths for Christmas. Mr. Scarlet had been cold and distant, and had merely remarked that he regretted it. Mr. Buddle had little doubt that this was his swan-song at Slade.

Mr. Scarlet had paused in his speech. As he looked out over the sea

of faces before him, he drew an envelope from his breast pocket.

"It is Christmas time, and I do not wish to dwell on the distressing circumstances this term, when a Slade boy was kidnapped and held to ransom by a criminal who had escaped from prison." Mr. Scarlet's eyes roved over the assembled school. He went on:

"Probably most of you know that the boy was eventually returned to the safety of his home as a result of the assistance which a Slade master was able to give to the official police. Mr. Buddle was that master. He is a modest man, and will not have told you of it himself. I hope that you have learned of it from other sources."

There was a ripple of hand-clapping, several throaty cheers, and someone in the centre of the hall called out "Good old Gump."

It all came as a surprise to Mr. Buddle. He watched Mr. Scarlet thoughtfully.

The Headmaster drew a letter from the envelope, and unfolded it.

"I have here a letter from Mr. Meredith, which I propose to read to you." He cleared his throat, and read: "You are aware of the great debt which my wife and I owe to Mr. Buddle. Mr. Pilgrim, the father of another of your boys, feels that he, too, shares this debt with us. We doubt whether any other college in this kingdom has on its staff a master of equal gifts and strength of character."

There was a murmur of appreciation through the hall. Mr. Buddle sat motionless - embarrassed and astonished.

Mr. Scarlet waited for silence. Then he went on, tapping the letter as he did so:

"Mr. Meredith and Mr. Pilgrim,

the parents of the boys who were both victims, directly and indirectly, in the kidnapping affair, make a proposal which is remarkable in its generosity. In short, they wish to present Slade with a new sports pavilion for the use of junior school. Mr. Pilgrim is the director of a construction company. His firm will build the pavilion beside the junior playing fields. Mr. Meredith, who tells me he was saved great financial loss through Mr. Buddle's foresight, will contribute part of the cost of the pavilion. Mr. Meredith has sent me the architect's plans for the new building, and if the school governors and I give our consent, the work will start next term so that the pavilion will be ready for use by the summer. I need hardly say that our consent will be given most happily. The new pavilion will be a great asset to Slade boys of today and tomorrow and far into the future."

There was a great roar of applause and chattering. Masters and seniors were clapping, juniors were shouting and stamping. The din was terrific. "We want the Gump," called out someone, and the whole of junior school took up the chant: "We want the Gump."

Mr. Scarlet raised his hand for silence, and secured it after a short while.

"Now," said Mr. Scarlet, "I will ask Mr. Buddle to step up on the stage."

The cheering broke out afresh. The boys were enjoying themselves. Dazedly, Mr. Buddle rose from his seat. As in a dream he moved unsteadily towards the steps at the side of the stage, and mounted. In a moment he was standing a few feet from the Headmaster.

Mr. Scarlet raised his hand for silence once again, and the cheering faded away.

"I think it appropriate to read to the school the final lines of Mr. Meredith's letter." He lifted the letter, and read, slowly and clearly: "If you, Headmaster, and the school authorities, are willing, and if, of course, Mr. Buddle gives his permission, both Mr. Pilgrim and I suggest that the new building should be named, and known for all time as, the Buddle Pavilion!"

Once more there was a wait while prolonged cheering took its course. Then the Headmaster spoke again:

"You will all wish to hear a few words from Mr. Buddle, who, obviously, is as surprised and gratified as I was by this splendid gift to Slade. Mr. Buddle will be spending Christmas with Mr. and Mrs. Meredith at their Taunton home. He will be able to tell these generous people of our delight with the permanent tribute which they, with Mr. Pilgrim,

intend to bestow on their son's school."

He turned to Mr. Buddle, and held out his hand. Mr. Buddle gripped it. Then, as the school called for him to make a speech, and Mr. Scarlet graciously indicated that he should do so, Mr. Buddle faced the assembly.

Afterwards, he could never remember exactly what he said - but he was quite certain that he made a fool of himself.

So Mr. Buddle spent Christmas with the Merediths, though he was not quite sure that it was with the blessing of the Head of Slade. Mr. Buddle had never enjoyed a Christmas more. It was wonderful - and not the least wonderful part of it was the knowledge that, when the new term came along, he would be going back to Slade.



* * * * *

WANTED: Young Folks Tales, early Comic Papers, "Old Bloods." Have plenty of exchanges in Magnets, Gems, S.O.L's, Comic Papers. Require also early cigarette cards. Xmas wishes to all.

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The Rover 1939-40

by J. R. SWAN

Having a few hours to spare I took down from the shelf a volume of 'Rovers' to have a browse through. Many collectors will be interested in the following stories - and will no doubt awaken a few nostalgic memories!

In the beginning of the volume (February 1939) the first stories were:- "Happy and Hopalong," "Alaska Dan," "The Tricky Triplets," "Blue Blaze - Demon of the Air," "Bomba the Fierce," "The Roughnecks to the Rescue," and a very old favourite from earlier days - "Cast-Iron Bill" - still unbeaten! Not forgetting on the back page:- cartoons of "The Cheery Chinks," and "Nosey Parker."

Further on there was one of 'Thomson's' "out of the ordinary western yarns," "The Last Horse in the West" - as the heading put it: The Dread Scourge that destroyed the Horse Herds of America!

In the same issue was "Tiger Wallace" as "Master Spy," Ace British Secret Service Man. "Hucky Duncan's Desperate Trail" was another series of the Frozen North - into unexplored territory in search of the "nesting-place of the Blue Geese."

After the conclusion of the story, "Blue Blaze" Demon of the Air - and the departure of his friend Eagle Eye - the next issue featured "HAWKEYE THE REDSKIN DETECTIVE" - in the first of a bunch of dandy mystery yarns - as it was put! No racial discrimination here! You've had your white detectives, air pilots - why not Redskin?

In No. 900, July 15th, 1939, started a new story - "PALS OF THE ROARING ROAD." (Fun and thrills on a Canadian Railway with Larry Benson and Steeljaw his mighty mastiff.)

"DEATH OR GLORY FOR THE RED HUSSARS." (Whatever Hitler was planning at the moment - there was still time for a story of old India occupied by the British.)

"BLACK JOHN" The Man they Fear! (Stories of a one-eared pirate for a change!)

"MIDDLE-WICKET MULLIGAN," by the author of 'Cast-Iron Bill.' Must have been a bit of an all-rounder this writer!

"THE SHERIFF WITHOUT A STAR." Another one taming the Wild West! Calls himself "The Raven" (real name Buck Sangster).

"THUNDERHOOF." (The Giant Bull, Leader of the Buffalo Herd.)

"THE HIGHWAY BOYS." Two boy hikers - walking from Lands End to John O'Groats.

We go along a bit further and come across:-

"NO GUNS FOR TRIGGER GRANT." (The West's Finest Leadslinger) - there's been quite a few of them over the years - check with John Wayne!

Another story started the same time as the Western Yarn:- "THE BIG PALOOKA" (the soft guy with the hard punch). A character on very similar lines to "Joe Palooka" the famous American cartoon strip. As a matter of fact this story starts in one of America's cow towns. Two brothers - one with the brains - the other with the brawn. They start a travelling boxing booth - need I say that the story was a "hit all the way?"

"HUSH-HUSH MAN OF THE HINDU KUSH." Bart Shane of the British Secret Service dodging the Afghans - heavily disguised of course! (Bill Samson in the 'Wizard' did the same kind of tricks - they should have put those two together!)

I've reached to April 6th, 1940, in this volume. As the numbers are not consecutive - there are gaps. Why it was bound this way - I do not know. However in this number a new story commenced:- "THE MOUNTIE WITH THE INVISIBLE BOOMERANG." Trooper Buck Taylor left Australia to join the R.C.M.P. He has been given this boomerang as a present which only becomes visible when the light shines on it at certain angles. It was made of transparent quartz. They nicknamed him "The No-Gun Terror."

"BRITAIN'S SECRET WEAPON." Of course we've got to have stories of secret weapons and Thomson's were not slow in getting off the mark. In this one we have "The Crusher." A mighty steel ball thirty feet high, with spikes on the outside. This contraption crushed everything in its path - had a crew of three, and the inner chamber was kept upright by a powerful gyroscope. In one of the illustrations it shows the Crusher carving its way through half-a-dozen German fighter planes before they could take off!

"TOUGH CALLAGHAN." ("The Copper with the Heart of Gold.") A series of stories concerning one of the "old time coppers" looking after some back street kids while their fathers went off to war.

"WHITE FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM AND FINLAND." Topical and up-to-date as usual, Thomsons come up with a graphic story of Finland's desperate fight against the Russian Invaders. Two men, Tom Payne and Pekka Lapin a Finnish ski-champion, are leading a "ghost army" of white fighters in defence of Finland.

"CATERPILLAR CASSIDY," steam tractor driver and his pal Fluke Collins - doing all manner of things with a tractor that would turn the makers' hair grey - like joining in speed-car racing!!

"CAST-IRON BILL." An old Rover favourite - the unbeaten goalie of Ironmoor United. With a man like this in goal - I shouldn't think it was worth while for the other team to turn up - unless it was sheer bravado! It didn't matter

what Cast-Iron was doing in the goal-mouth - he was sound asleep leaning up against the post in one story - in another his hands were handcuffed behind him. So all Bill could do was use his head to keep out the ball! Yes, a great lad was Bill.

"NELSON'S GUNS MUST BE FED." In No. 943, May 11th, 1940, the above story started about the daring exploits of a Lad Who Carried Powder for the Guns of a Man-O-War! There was still room in the Thomson Papers for historic stories such as this, while Hitler's U-Boats lay in waiting for our Merchant Ships!

"THE BRANDED BATTLER." A boxing story concerning Dick Benson at "Wingfield College" - he wins the Heavyweight Contest. But hardly had the cheers died down when next day he had to leave - owing to his father not paying the School fees for the last year - he had in fact disappeared. It turns out he's a prisoner of a Chinese Tong - who claim that Dick Benson is the leader of this Tong - proof of this being a scar on the back of the boy's neck! The scar being a tattoo mark of a Dragons Claw.

Well, that completes the stories running in this volume, and if I've awakened a few nostalgic memories in the age groups of forty-plus - I am happy to have done so! Before signing off I should like to mention the Multi-Coloured Covers - always seemed to have some kind of fascination for me in all Thomson Boys' Papers. And of course the ads. Milky Ways at a 1d each, Quarter Size Billiard Tables at 59/6 or 67/6. The latest numbers of the Dixon Hawke Libs., Wizard and the Magic Comic!

I must apologise to those whose favourite Thomson paper was either 'Adventure,' 'Wizard,' 'Hotspur' or 'Skipper.' They are not forgotten - I shall endeavour to write a few articles on these in time!

* * * * *

WANTED: Champion Annual 1937, Puck Annuals, Puck Comics 1933, 1936, Butterflies, Sunbeams, Tip Tops 1933-38. Will exchange or pay cash.

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CHRISTMAS GREETINGS to our editor and contributors. Thank you all for pleasure provided during 1970. - JOHN TROVELL

RUM BLOKE

by MACKENZIE DAVIDSON

When Johnny was about eight his sister brought home a brand new book from the Public Library. It was called "William" and was about a naughty little boy of that name. Silently he watched the fleeting expressions of excited emotion transform her face until she, with a heavy sigh, was forced to lay the book aside in response to her mother's shout to "kim on an' do the dishes, you lazy slut!"

Jessie did not have much sisterly affection for her brother and when he timidly stretched out his grubby hand towards the book she dared him to touch it or she would bash his face in. And as Johnny had much cause to fear his sister he drew back his hand hurriedly as his eyes filled with salty water which ran down into the corners of his jammy mouth.

However, he thought and thought until the simple question arose - why couldn't he get a book all to himself from the Library? He looked at the clock and realised that the place would now be closed. Oh, well -- perhaps to-morrow... Alas, to-morrow brought disappointment - Johnny was too young and would have to wait until he was nine. Also, a parent would have to be guarantor.

Outside the Library, Johnny ran into his bosom pal, Maxie, to whom he unburdened himself. Maxie roared with contemptuous laughter and whispered into Johnny's ear - like they did in the flicks. And Johnny slowly smiled

Next day he treked to another branch of the Library and obtained an application form, and, a few minutes before closing time, he presented it signed by his father, who, justly proud of his penmanship, would have been dreadfully ashamed of his 'signature.' But Maxie's brother Joe was not very good with the pen.

Well, well. Johnny got his books all right, and he became such a favourite with the Librarian that he was sometimes allowed to stamp his own books. And, it was perhaps then that he determined to become a real librarian when he grew up. But, alas, almost immediately after his last day at school, poor Johnny was sent to the fish yards with bitterness in his heart.

The smell sickened him. He couldn't get rid of it even when thoroughly washed and pomaded for an evening out with the girls. Indeed, life had become such a perpetual stink that when the day came for him to do his National Service stint and be 'made a man' it was a great relief. Also, he was sure that there would be some kind of a Services Library in need of an assistant.

It is most regrettable to have to relate that although the Army did make a man of our Johnny, it didn't make him much of a man. Perhaps he chose the wrong kind of pal.. The fact remains that when he was discharged there was little

in life that he had not seen and done. The Library castle in the air remained just that

Well, did Johnny just go back to the fish? Yes, he did - for exactly one week, after which he announced to his dumbfounded father that never more would he work amidst that filthy slime, and strode off to the nearest pub. And there he met old Maxie to whom he reeled off his sorrows while they had a succession of life-giving, heart-warming, and very expensive drinks. And dear Maxie stood the lot - simply wouldn't hear of Johnny paying one cent. Maxie's apparent prosperity intrigued Johnny - very much more so when he learned that Maxie didn't do any work to speak of. Yet, he dressed like a real toff and could produce a real leather pocket book crammed with real money with the utmost nonchalance, indeed almost with boredom. And, he was secretly amused at his rather simple old pal's obvious amazement.

By the end of the evening Maxie had sized up Johnny to a millimetre and asked if he would care to help him in a rather profitable job next week-end which would enable them both to possess real leather wallets and contents. And Johnny, full of pride in being asked by such a worldly-wise pal, said yes, yes indeed - for of course, he had almost completely given up the hope of becoming a Librarian.

The very next day he announced to his old folks that he had landed a commercial traveller's job which would keep him away from home quite a lot in the future, adding a reasonable yarn of guff in which he had been well coached by you-know-who. And, meantime, would they please not lend the only collection of books he had gathered over the years to anybody whatever. For, in an orange box, in the attic that was Johnny's bedroom, there were over two hundred penny dreadfuls - that is what his sister Jessie called them - consisting of beautifully kept copies of the "Sexton Blake Library," the "Boy's Friend Library," the "Schoolboy's Own Library," a bound volume of "The Marvel," "The Adventures of Jack, Sam and Pete," and well preserved Magnets and Gems. You must agree that Johnny had been quite a reader.

Well, Johnny kept his new job for quite a time and then Maxie began to think that a trip to the beautiful city of Buenos Aires would prove most beneficial to his health. Naturally, being such a kind-hearted chap, he did not tell Johnny of his impending, sad departure - for he didn't want to burden his good old pal with a sick man's woes; no decent chap would.

Johnny, who was not really a commercial traveller - though he did live around hotels - submitted without a murmur to the two very pleasant, but large men, who spoke softly to him in the posh cocktail bar one delightful summer evening just as he was beginning to wonder what on earth was detaining dear old Maxie.

Five years seemed rather a smack in the eye and the first few months were awful. But, bit by bit, life became more bearable, and after the first year

Johnny almost began to feel quite at home .

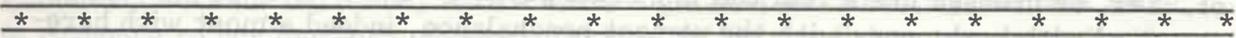
Then one day the Governor sent for him.

A few words sufficed and Johnny was dismissed.

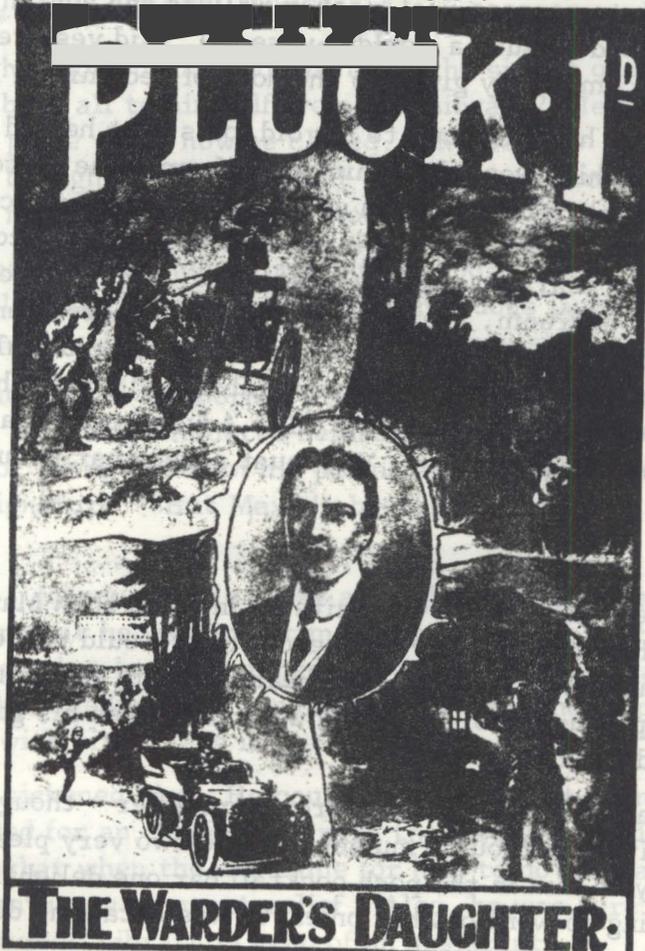
The Governor sat looking into space .

He lit a cigarette ...

"Rum bloke," he said almost aloud. "Rum bloke to burst into tears just because I made him Prison Librarian!"



VICTOR WILD—THE BOY JOCKEY (See inside.)



I see that ye Mist is rising again -

by R. HIBBERT

Every Saturday Tom Hallas used to say to me, "By gum, 'e's a lad."

He was talking about our favourite character in fiction.

The one - and I quote at length -

WITH

"the misshapen, spectral, impalpable, wraithlike form," that he had the decency to cover up with "a filmy, flowing, sable cloak that appeared to merge with the blackness of the night"

AND

"the evilly grinning face - colourless (but seeming to shine with a blue tinged glow) - with glaring, black and terrible eyes and flaccid, lean lips"

AND

"the bent, crooked and dragging limbs" on which he managed to "float, glide, trail, swoop, slide and shamble with incredible swiftness" when pushed

AND

"the hands which were icy, bony, gnarled, gaunt, pallid, bloodless, hazed by faint blue fire and strong as tensed steel"

AND

"the laugh which was jeering, quivering, uncanny, evil, cackling and cold-blooded"

AND

"the speech that was a wordless mumbling, a babbling, jabbering of sounds that were not words, but ghosts of words"

AND

"the acrid smell of brimstone" he always left behind him.

The one who was in the blue jacketed "Bullseye" (price 2d) every Saturday.

In short - "THE PHANTOM OF CURSITOR FIELDS:"

Somewhere in every instalment of this serial there was a bit of doggerel that went

"When ye Mist rises from ye river
Ye Phantom of Cursitor Fields - "

gives everybody concerned quite a putting up - or words to that effect.

He was a lad. There's no doubt about that.

And all this was nearly forty years ago and I was eleven or twelve. I never thought I'd meet him again, but he turned up last week in W. H. Smith's, Crewe.

Amongst the children's books I noticed "Supernatural Stories for Boys" published in 1968 by Paul Hamlyn, illustrated by Reg Gray, 360 pages and hardbound for 8/6d. I didn't really notice all that at first. What took my eye was the jacket. This showed a mid-18th century gent, face the colour of skimmed milk and ... blind eyes; no pupils, no irises. He was carrying a 20th century policeman under one arm. An uncommon sight.

I opened the book, glanced down the contents page - eleven stories, including one by a certain E. A. Poe - and there, jumping out at me, was

"The Phantom of Cursitor Fields" by Henry Pope, page 213.

It couldn't be.

I fumbled my way to page 213.

It could be, and it was.

It must be an abridged version because the "Bullseye" serial, as I remember it, seemed to go on for ever, but most of it's there in 30,000 of Mr. Pope's own words and, as he didn't believe in writing down to eleven year olds, there's nothing basic about his vocabulary. He's the man who taught me "flaccid," not a word that gets bandied about much these days. Perhaps it would substitute for that word "viable" politicians and T.V. interviewers and interviewees use such a lot.

"The Jumbo Jet is definitely a flaccid proposition."

A real word spinner - not to mention phrase coiner - was Mr. Pope and a dab hand at setting the right atmosphere. By the time you'd read five lines ye mist was finding its way through ye keyhole and under ye door and a blue tinged bloodless face was leering at you through ye fanlight.

The last chapter's been brought up-to-date. It takes place in a T.V. studio, but, apart from that, we're back in the early 30's or 20's with the City of London police pounding their foggy beats and the Phantom appearing wherever he's least wanted and worrying the good and the bad alike.

It was nice meeting him again. He was the one on the book jacket; the one carrying the policeman. The policeman turned out to be the hero's dad. The hero was a policeman too - "a blue clad guardian of the law" in Mr. Pope's words. But I didn't recognise the Phantom from Mr. Gray's illustration. In the "Bullseye" the Phantom was always shown perfectly bald - much like Uncle Fester in "The Munsters" about the head - but, from the neck down pretty indefinable, "or spectral,

impalpable and wraithlike" as Mr. Pope puts it.

Tom Hallas was right about the Phantom of Cursitor Fields.

He was a lad.

They don't make them like that any more.

GREETINGS to all hobbyists. Wanted eleven early C.D. monthlies.

M. E. KING, 18 BARTON ROAD, SLOUGH.

=====

WANTED: Nelson Lees, Old Series Nos. 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 144, 145 and most before 111. 2nd New Series 151. Also Dick Turpins, Newnes and Aldine.

FOR EXCHANGE: O/S Lees, Magnets and Turpins.

McPHERSON, 1 ST. JOHN STREET, WELLS.

=====

KINDEST REGARDS and **XMAS WISHES** to Librarian Roger Jenkins. His 'Parcels' give me a great deal of nostalgic pleasure.

BOB MILNE, 12 CARLTON MNS., RANDOLPH AVENUE,
 MAIDA VALE, W9. 624/1696.

=====

WANTED: Early Magnets, Red; early Blue Gems, Jester, Funny Wonder of the 1930's.

MERRY XMAS to all fellow-collectors and hobby friends, and **BEST WISHES** for 1971. All the best — STUART WHITEHEAD, 12 WELLS ROAD, FAKENHAM, NORFOLK.

=====

WANTED: B.F.L. 199, 216, 222, 261, 263, 281, 283, 286, 295, 325, 425, 451, 624, 625. Second 6, 27, 60, 64, 115.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS Bob, Gerry, Stan, Vernon, Norman, etc.

ROWE LINDENS, HORSFORD, NORWICH.

=====

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS to all O.B.B.C. friends — especially to Midland Club members from their Chairman — IAN BENNETT, 20 FREWEN DRIVE, SAPCOTE, LEICESTER.

WANTED: B.F.L. 457 — "Soldiers of Fortune."

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From the E. S. Brooks' Archives

A STORY FROM THE 'MAGAZINE PROGRAMME' OF THE GRAND THEATRE, SWANSEA

Two years ago I was able to let you read Brooks' first published story, "Mr. Dorrans' Missing £2,000." Last year excerpts were given from the first story he ever wrote. This time, although I cannot establish another record - the first this, or the first that - I feel that the story reproduced here is of sufficient interest and rarity to be worthy of seeing the light of day again after 61 years.

I have written elsewhere (see C.D. for April 1968 for article concerning the Magazine Programme, also C.D. Annual for 1968, page 60, for a reproduction of a page from this paper showing the beginning of E.S.B's story) of E.S.B. and his family connections with the Grand Theatre, Swansea, and the stories he wrote for his brother Arthur, who was editor of the Theatre's "Magazine Programme." The following story then, is the first of many short items that Edwy contributed to this magazine during 1909 to 1911 (which could only have been sold to the Theatre's patrons).

E.S.B's fortunes, at this time, were at a particularly low ebb. He had had one or two successes with "Yes and No," but nothing more, so that this opportunity must have been gratefully received.

This story first appeared in 1909, in four weekly parts, but as soon as it was finished it was repeated the following week in its entirety. The reason, I should think, that this type of fantasy cum science fiction must have been very unusual in 1909.

The story, although rather juvenile in its telling (after all the author was still in his teens) shows a very lively imagination, and is, I think, very readable.

One small point. I have transcribed this story from E.S.B's hand-written MS. At some points it was impossible to make out what was written, and so I have indicated these by blanks or question marks.

And so - as they used to say in the old books - "Now read on."

BOB BLYTHE



THE PLAGUE OF WEED by Edwy Searles Brooks

Chapter I

Crash!

"Good Heavens!" Professor Raikes leaped to his feet, his face working excitedly.

The big quart bottle, securely corked and sealed, which a moment ago had been on the bench beside him, now lay on the tiled floor of the laboratory in a thousand pieces.

The professor never could tell how he did it, but accidentally - he was a clumsy man - he had swept it off, and the valuable, and terrible, contents were now evaporating into the atmosphere, causing a most unpleasant and pungent odour.

In that bottle had been the result of months of work. At last Professor Raikes had solved the problem which had been troubling him for so long.

He had discovered a liquid which, when applied to a flower or plant, would cause that flower or plant to grow to immense proportions, and very swiftly.

He had intended to startle the world with his marvellous discovery, and now, as it was, the world would be startled in a very different manner!

For this liquid was of such a strength that one drop - only a tiny drop - placed in a gallon of water would be enough to make a whole bed of flowers grow as big as trees in a month's time. In addition to that, if some of the water be placed on clear ground, or even on bricks, in a very short time the empty space would be covered with thick and rank weeds.

But the most terrible thing of all was that the stuff evaporated in no time, and when in the air it had the same effect as if poured on the ground.

Half an hour after the breaking of the bottle the vapour from the fluid was hovering all over the town of Swansea. Then, to make matters ten times worse, it commenced to rain, and with it the rain took the deadly vapour and worked it into the ground and roads, and pavements and house-roofs.

Professor Raikes, still in his laboratory in B.....-y-..... Road, was seated in his big armchair staring blankly before him. He knew what the stuff was. He knew that in a very short space of time the large town of Swansea would be deserted - a place of dank and dreadful weeds.

The Professor knew of a remedy, and he even had a tiny phial of it with him, but such a little drop would be useless. If he set about making the stuff which would kill the other, it would take him all of a week.

But with a groan he realised that he had not the ingredients to make the stuff from. It would necessitate a journey to London immediately.

He rose from his chair and gazed out on the rain-soaked street and sighed. Nobody would ever know the cause of the phenomenon, and then suddenly it would all begin to die, and in time the place would get as it was before. But then as the Professor looked at the trees on the pavement, he started - if it made flowers grow to such an immense size, what height would the trees attain?

Raikes didn't dare to think of it, and hastily packing his bag he told his aged

housekeeper that he would be back on the morrow, and hurried through the streets to the station.

○○○○

Chapter II

Professor Raikes had been away for 3 days and nothing had been heard from him. His housekeeper was in a terrible way and wondered what could possibly have happened to him. He had never done such a thing before - if he said he'd be a day, he'd be in Swansea again at the exact moment specified.

And in his absence a strange thing was happening in the large Welsh seaport. In B.....-y-..... Road in which the Professor's house was situated strange weeds were to be seen growing up in the roadway and pavements.

People stopped and looked at these curiously, then passed on wondering. In such a road where the traffic was consistent it was very strange.

At the corner, by the hospital, and where the trams branched off, the peculiar weed was coming up even between the rails.

And in the hospital gardens the flowers seemed to be growing with great rapidity, and also to an unnatural size. At this time when they were only just appearing not much notice was taken, and the subject was spoken of for a few moments and then forgotten.

But on the sixth day - still Professor Raikes had not appeared - things began to look serious.

For one thing, St. Helens Road, Lower Oxford Street and Byrone Road, were now absolutely covered from house to house with the dank and slimy weed. The trams were still running, but with difficulty, and the flowers in people's front and back gardens had assumed terrific proportions.

In one gentleman's garden some groups of wallflowers had reached almost to the bedroom windows and the flowers themselves were of huge size and delightful perfume.

In another, on the lawn, the daisies and the grass had risen to a foot in height, and the daisies themselves were quite 3 inches across.

The local papers were full of news concerning the growth and even the London dailies were filling their most important columns with the subject.

"The South Wales Daily News" on the sixth day of the plague said:-

"It is now quite evident that a strange and remarkable phenomenon has visited us. In an amazingly short space of time the least busy roads have assumed the appearance of fields, being smothered from side to side with the peculiar wood growth. The trees themselves have grown considerably within the last few days. In many instances it has been found necessary

to remove large branches to prevent them from forcing their way through windows.

"On nearly every roof in Swansea - and the growth of weeds has penetrated even to S..... and Mumbles - and this same weed has smothered the tiles. Looking down on the town it appears as a city of the dead, a place of overgrown vegetation and ruin.

"It is impossible to say what the stuff is and what has caused it, but it is here - all amongst us and that is, we venture to think, quite sufficient!

"Whether it will die down, or continue to grow, we cannot pretend to state, but if the dreadful growth does continue, the town of Swansea will soon be uninhabitable."

The paper went on further to discuss the subject, and filled up 3 columns altogether.

The Great Western train service had not been altered, for the weeds would have to be of extraordinary thickness to stop a train.

On the beach the weed was growing right down to the sea, and the line of the Mumbles railway, close to it - which runs along the roadway the whole way to the seaside resort, a distance of 5 miles - was smothered, the rails being unusable.

The trees in the park were of truly an enormous size, reaching up to twice their usual height and being as thick again. The ground all around them was..... but this could hardly be seen as it was buried in weed.



Chapter III

So the stuff kept growing until the fourteenth day was reached. Professor Raikes was still absent, though for what reason it was impossible to guess. It was a mystery altogether, his keeping away, knowing as he did what was happening in his absence.

Things had now assumed a grave and serious crisis. Traffic in the streets was now impossible, and the only way to get along was by cutting a way for oneself. For the weed had never paused in its growth for an instant, and now it stood all over the roads and pavements and gardens and roofs, to a height of over four feet.

From the roofs it was trailing down, covering the bedroom windows. It was almost impossible to have a fire as the chimneys were choked up. But fortunately it was summertime and so fires were not absolutely imperative.

Everybody who could fled from the town. It was amazing - stupendous! Nothing had ever been seen like it before.

Every shop in Swansea was closed - except a few provision dealers and bakers, who were forced to supply the whole town. The trains, of course, were all stopped,

but the electric light was still there, and at night it showed up the weed green and slimy.

People came from all parts of the kingdom and even from America and the continent, to view the stricken town. Seen from the top of the hill over Swansea, nothing could be distinguished but weed - weed - weed!

Over at Morristown(?), on the outskirts, the growth was not half as thick, and a mile further on, the ground was free altogether from it.

The Grand Theatre, in Singleton Street, was smothered in the stuff, and the company that had been performing had fled to the next town. So, with the Empire, the theatre was closed and at night hardly a soul went about. And in the morning it could be seen that the weed had grown a foot or more, during the absence of daylight.

Chapter IV

At last, the town of Swansea became untenable, and everybody left to go to their relatives, or friends, most of them close round about.

Every house was now absolutely covered, and the weed grew in profusion over everything. And standing right out of it, were the trees. Some of them were over feet in height, and the leaves had grown in proportion.

A couple of men - one a well-known scientist - made up their minds to cut a way into the town.

The quickest way was, of course, by water. So they started out from Mumbles - which was only slightly affected - in a little boat, and arrived at Swansea docks.

The weed was growing even at the very edge and trailing into the water. Not a building could they see. On the dock, they set to work with spades and scythes and gradually cut a way for themselves until they found that they were in a roadway. Here they made a remarkable discovery. The way was clear!

The weeds which had started growing on the first day were the same as the ones which could now be seen from above.

These had grown and grown until they had reached immense proportions. And down below, on the ground, was nothing but the stalks. All the leaves were high above, like being in a forest.

But the trunks were greenish and slimy to the touch, also they were of a jelly kind of substance and when touched gave in, like india rubber.

Down there everything was silence, the silence of death. Not a single sound could be heard, and it was practically dark, the only light being a green unnatural twilight, not unlike being on the sea-bottom. For overhead the July sun blazed in a

cloudless sky, but none of that sunlight was for Swansea.

The two men went on, finding no difficulty in making their way about, for even if they got lost in the weed, the streets told them where they were.

Up Wind(?) Street they trudged and so onto the High Street. Here all the shops looked weird and unreal, some of them with smashed windows. This was the case with the automatic (.). The men turned in and sat down and looked about them.

The last time they had been in there it was on a May morning, pouring with rain, and with the hum and buzz of the traffic in their ears.

Now everything was changed. Inside the cafe was precisely the same, except that the cushions, etc., were a trifle damp. The machines worked properly and the two explorers drank each others health under the dreadful pall of the weed.

They entered High Street again and made their way to the station. Here everything was desolation. Up one siding stood an engine - a fast express engine, but looking dirty(?) and unclean. Its brasswork was dull and its polished steel had commenced to rust.

After that the scientist and his friend thought of getting home.



Chapter V

Then, of a sudden, a man who said he was named Professor Raikes, declared that he could clear away all the weed. The Government offered him a reward if he succeeded, but this he refused, saying that Swansea was his own home and he would do it for himself as well as other people.

It was Professor Raikes - come at last. But where had he been all the time? Why had he allowed the growth to get such a hold?

It happened this way: When he arrived in London he made all haste to procure the various things wanted to make the "antidote." But, unfortunately, when in a metropolitan train there had been a slight accident, and he had been one of the worst sufferers - concussion of the brain.

He had lain in the hospital unconscious for 12 days, then when he regained his senses he was unable to move. At last after seven days of terrible anxiety he had been allowed to go.

He went straight to a friend - a fellow scientist - and made the stuff which would kill and destroy the other.

But of this he made up ten gallons - although it was equal in strength and effect as the other - and then journeyed down to Wales.

Everybody was curious to see what he was going to do, and when they saw

him pour the stuff into a huge tank, on one side of the town, so that the wind blew over it, they laughed and jeered. As if that would take it away!

Very soon it all evaporated, and the Professor was anxious the next day or two to see the effect. It had rained a great deal since he had put the antidote into the atmosphere and had therefore soaked it into the ground.

Then, one day, there was a change. The leaves seemed and yellower than usual, although the huge trees remained the same - as a matter of fact, they wouldn't alter at all, and would have to be cut down.

A week passed and it was seen the wonderful remedy of Professor Raikes was taking effect and good effect at that. For the weed had drooped and died down and now the houses were beginning to become visible again.

So it went on, day after day, until men could enter the town and clear the streets of the rotting vegetation.

Clear at last. Once again the bay seaport of Swansea was inhabited. The shops were all open, the docks busy, the theatre open and everything going on as usual.

But some things would not be the same. Most of the huge trees were cut down, but one or two, where it did not matter, were allowed to grow. And there they stood, huge, high and the wonder of every stranger who comes.

Professor Raikes won fame over his great triumph and his name was known over all the continents.

But would the public have praised him as much, had they known that he was, in the first place, the cause of it all?

21.1.09.

* * * * *

WANTED: Lot O' Funs 1925-26, also copies with Tuckaway Jack. Can offer good copy 1924 in exchange for any one if preferred.

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