

Poet's Corner--THE MASTER OF THE PEN--p.135



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# THE STORY

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APRIL - JUNE

1943

## PAPER

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No. 12.

Vol. 1.

## COLLECTOR

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Printed and published by Wm. H. Gander,  
P. O. Box 60, Transcona, Manitoba, Canada.

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# Sexton Blake The Eternal

By H. LECKENBY

SOME YEARS AGO there was a discussion in "Detective Weekly" concerning the identity of the author of the very first Sexton Blake story. That story, entitled simply "Sexton Blake, Detective," appeared in the second number of the halfpenny "Union Jack" in 1894—forty-nine years ago! It was not a great story as Sexton Blake stories go, there have been hundreds of better ones since, nevertheless it deserves a place in history. Incidentally this story was republished in the "Sexton Blake Annual" for 1941.

The name was eventually revealed as Harry Blyth. He did, I believe, write a number of complete stories for the "U. J." and its companion papers, but he was never in the front rank. A short time ago I obtained a few halfpenny "Union Jacks" and in one of them there was a page of sketches of "U. J." authors, including Henry St. John, Reginald Wray—and Harry Blyth. He appeared to be a

thick-set looking gentleman, not in his first youth and reminding one a little of Arnold Bennett. I have learned since on the authority of Fleetway House that Mr. Blyth died not long after he gave Sexton Blake to the world, and I am afraid his name was long ago forgotten.

I think that is a pity. In my opinion somewhere in Fleetway House or some other home of the Amalgamated Press there should be on view a memorial to that modest author of nearly half a century ago. For did he not create the name around which in the years that have passed since more words have been written than about any other character of fiction? Many fascinating thoughts arise thinking back through the years to that day in the 'nineties when Harry Blyth first penned the words "Sexton Blake." He would pen them, I suppose, for the chances are he would not possess a typewriter. Why did he choose the name?

This article is an extract from Chapter Five of "Memories Of Old Boys' Papers," upon the writing of which the author is now engaged.

Blake is a fairly common one, but Sexton? Uncommon enough in very truth for a Christian name, and probably never used elsewhere either before or since.

When he evolved the plot he would little dream that in the years to come dozens of authors, some of them not born, would write stories round the same name. Neither would he think there would come a time when an actor would use the name on the stage, or that a Sexton Blake would appear in a mysterious invention called a film. And what is still more certain is the fact that he would never dream that at a still later day millions of people would be able to hear the voice of Sexton Blake at one and the same time. No, he would certainly have never thought of that.

And, in naming the hero for his little story has it ever occurred to you devotees of the detective story that he set a fashion in names which has been copied many times since? Think of some of the sleuths who have at times been popular since that day in 1894—Nelson Lee, Kenyon Ford, Abel Link, Vernon Read, Gordon Fox, Dixon Brett, Stanley Dare, Ferrers Locke, Derek Clyde, and, oh, many more. All with two syllables for the Christian name, one for the second.

Ah, but, some sceptic may say, why give the credit to humble Harry Blyth? What about Conan Doyle? He had produced Sherlock Holmes before even Sexton Blake came on the scene. Well, perhaps so, but I prefer to believe that when other authors were choosing a name for their new detective they instinctively thought of Sexton Blake rather than Sherlock Holmes.

Did that writer of the long ago write that just one solitary story of Sexton Blake and then leave someone else to carry him on the road to fame? Of that I cannot say, though a few other stories did appear in the half-penny series "U. J.," including a serial, and as I have said Harry Blyth died before he could see the fruits of his labours.

To pass on to the new century. In 1903 the "Union Jack" rose to the dignity of a penny paper, publishing a 3/6 novel for that price, or so the advertisements claimed. At first the stories were of a varied nature, but it was not long before stories of Sexton Blake appeared regularly, and he was destined to put up an amazing record. From 1905 to the present day his name has been a household word. The war has caused the death of many periodicals—far more than the last one—and killed many popular characters of



fiction. The "Detective Weekly" (successor to the "Union Jack") itself has gone, but Sexton Blake still lives on in the Library which bears his name, even though the number has been reduced to two a month instead of four, as in happier days.

How many stories of Sexton Blake have been written? I am afraid it would take a great deal of research to find that out. Can we get a rough idea? Well, over 1000 "Sexton Blake Libraries" have been published, and possibly just over 2000 stories in the "Union Jack" and "Detective Weekly" combined. Then there were serials in the "Boys' Friend," "Boys' Herald" and "Boys' Realm," short stories in the "Penny Pictorial," and odd stories in various other papers. Over 3000 altogether!

How many words? Ye gods! How many find that out? Suppose we say an average of 40,000 per story. That would give us 120,000,000. That, I honestly believe, would be an underestimate. The brain reels at the thought. It is said there are something over three million words in the Bible. I am not going to work out how many books the size of the Bible it would take to equal the history of Sexton Blake!

And throughout almost all

these years there has worked by his side that faithful Peter Pan of assistants, Tinker. This still-young man has been through almost as many adventures as his master, and been near to death hundreds of times. When did Tinker first appear, and who created him? That, so far, I have been unable to discover.

Talking of assistants, here is an item of interest. Turning over the pages of No. 203 of the half-penny series "U. J." I came across the announcement for the following week's story, "The Truman Mystery, a story of Sexton Blake and his assistant We-wee." Now who was this predecessor to dear old Tinker? Was he a Chinese boy? And how often did he appear? I certainly don't remember hearing of him before.

Pedro appears to have first come on the scene in No. 100 of the new series, in a story entitled "The Dog Detective." It is said that Beverley Kent was the author of that story. That would be in 1905, so Pedro is a pretty faithful old animal.

How many authors have written stories about Sexton Blake? A complete list would be interesting. I have managed to compile a list of about forty, but there must be many more, I should think. Some of those

I know are Harry Blyth, W. Shaw Rae, W. Murray Graydon, Maxwell Scott, Mark Darran, Herbert Maxwell, Beverley Kent, Cecil Hayter, Sidney Drew, Alan Blair, Edwy Searles Brooks, Robert Murray, Anthony Skene, G. Hamilton Teed, Gwyn Evans, Gilbert Chester, Donald Stuart, Rex Hardinge and Lewis Jackson.

Who of the talented company wrote most Sexton Blake stories? That would be a very difficult question to answer, but I would place W. Murray Graydon very high in the list. He wrote several serials of considerable length, a great number of "U.J." stories and quite a number for the "Sexton Blake Library." One could always recognize Murray Graydon with his favourite expressions like "a lump rose in his throat," "his voice shook with emotion," "vowed Sexton Blake." He also had his own Scotland Yard man, Inspector Widegon.

Who was the best of the bunch? In my opinion, Robert Murray. I consider his long Confederation series the finest Blake stories ever written. Robert Murray was the son of W. Murray Graydon, and the mantle of a father never fell more worthily on a son.

Gwyn Evans, who died a few years ago at an early age, turned

out some good stories, as did Gilbert Chester, especially with his Gilbert and Eileen Hale yarns.

Many of these authors had their own special characters: Edwy Searles Brooks, Waldo; Anthony Skene, Zenith the Albino; G. H. Teed, Huxton Rymmer, Yvonne, Wu Ling, and G. M. Plummer (though he did not originate the latter); Lewis Jackson, Leon Kestrel, and so on.

With so many men penning Blake stories it was inevitable that some of them drew him differently from others. Some attempted to make him a copy of Sherlock Holmes. That other mythical dweller of Baker Street seemed to solve most of his problems by his own fireside, clad in his stained dressing gown, to the awe of the somewhat dense Doctor Watson. Some of the Blake staff followed the Holmes tradition, but others like Murray Graydon, Cecil Hayter and Robert Murray kept him on the move far from the comfort of Baker St.

I could go on writing of Blake and his many adventures and triumphs but space is limited. In closing I will express a wish that when peace does come there will rise from the ashes a new "Detective Weekly" or better still a "Union Jack" containing the adventures of Sexton Blake, Tinker and Pedro.

# STORIES TO REMEMBER

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AMONG the many stories that appeared in the various boys' papers of past years that the writer had the pleasure of perusing there are some that stand out vividly. One was "The Gypsy of St. Simeon's," which ran in the "Boys' Friend." This story told of the adventures of a Gypsy boy who made his debut at a large public school, and afterwards turned out to be the real heir to an estate which was held by a self-imposed guardian. One incident which I will always remember was a boxing match between Jim Wyvern, as he was then known, and a professional pugilist styled "The Kid." This was one of the best descriptions of a fight I have ever read and rivalled the same kind of incident penned in Conan Doyle's "Croxley Master." After a thrilling encounter Jim Wyvern triumphed. This story, in my opinion, was one of David Goodwin's best, and though he wrote other school stories, this one, as far as I am concerned, tops the bill.

Another good writer of school stories was Ross Harvey, who wrote for "Chums" when that paper was in its hey-day, and it is interesting to compare the

styles of the two authors. In comparison with Goodwin's fast vigorous style, Harvey wrote in a cheerful satirical vein which in its way was irresistible. His best effort was "Mayo's Term." Jack Mayo, a devil-may-care type of British schoolboy, is relegated to the "worst house" as a punishment for some breach of discipline. The author then describes how the "black sheep" raises "Goble's House" to the top of the tree by his prowess in the athletic line. Jack distinguishes himself in the usual way, football, running, and so on, almost a one-man show. Nevertheless the interest never flags and the hero never becomes impossible like so many schoolboy heroes.

Ross Harvey also wrote a series of short stories entitled "Walker's Weekly." This was a paper run by some schoolboys and the scrapes they got into as a result of its publication gave full scope to the author's ingenuity. I can well remember reading how "Walker" gave a cup as a prize for some competition. Finding he had not the necessary funds to buy the real article Walker promptly enters the race, wins his own cup (a tin one) and then sends it off to Ireland.

All of Ross Harvey's stories were characterized by a witty satire and a cheerful bonhomie that was altogether different from the dramatic style affected by other authors. In his own way he was unique. He wrote for "Chums" when that paper had not a poor feature in it.

Among Harvey's contemporaries were Frank H. Shaw, Andrew Soutar, Greville Hamerton and Stephen Agnew. The first three wrote a good deal of adult matter for the Cassells publications; on the other hand Agnew wrote, as far as I can remember, for boys only, and his metier was adventure. "Skeleton's Gold," a treasure-hunting yarn, was one of his best efforts and it appeared in "Chums" some time before the last war, probably about 1912. The author was at his happiest in short stories, where his brisk, keen style seemed to show up best. Agnew's heroes roamed all over the world, but wherever they appeared the author was never at fault. Unlike some writers he knew the environments of every country, and his knowledge of local colour was complete and owed nothing to the imagination. "Tracked Through Togoland," "Bandits of the Old Guard," "A Life for Ransom," and many others which I cannot remember were part of his reper-

toire. I believe the same author also wrote for the Newnes publications

Another author, whose name has so far not been mentioned, is Cecil Hayter. This writer concentrated on adventure and ranged from north to south. His style was reminiscent of David Goodwin, brisk and fast moving, and his work generally appeared in the "Boys' Herald." His best story was "Hidden Millions," an adventure tale placed in "Tierra del Fuego" or Island of Fire. Another story of similar nature was "Sunken Millions." Cecil Hayter also wrote a good deal of the polar regions, and one of his best efforts was "The Rival Explorers," telling of a dash to the North Pole. Cecil Hayter also contributed to the "Union Jack Library" and followers of Sexton Blake will remember how the famous detective sometimes went as far afield as Africa in company with Sir Richard Losely and Lobangu the Zulu Chieftain. There was a lot of fighting in these stories and not much detective work, and there was no mistaking who wrote the stories. Cecil Hayter kept up a high level of literary consistency and his stories were always a pleasure to read.

Another writer of outstanding merit was Morton Pike, author of stories of an historical



nature and who wrote the only Robin Hood serial in the "Big Three" of boys' papers—the "Boys' Friend," "Boys' Realm," and "Boys' Herald." It was a splendid story and the only thing I cannot remember is the title. The same author also wrote "Gilbert Nameless," a story of the apprentices of London Town. With a similar style wrote D. H. Parry,\* who contributed to "Chums" for many years.

Among the many war stories that appeared in the boys' papers of thirty to thirty-five years ago two stand out: "A World at War," by Andrew Gray, and "Britain Invaded," by John Tregellis. The first was a remarkable piece of war prophecy in that it named Germany and Japan as the principal enemies. The second was more orthodox but first-class in every way.

Such are a few of the many stories that I read in my earlier days. With an effort of the memory one could doubtless recall more. But enough has been said. One can only close

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\* The similarity is accounted for by Morton Pike and D. H. Parry being the same person—so I am told. The Robin Hood serial would be "Guy of the Greenwood" in the "B. F." in the year 1904.—W. H. G.

with a well-known quotation: "Take them all in all, we shall ne'er see their like again."

—T. W. PUCKRIN.

17th December, 1942.

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**Wanted**—Nelson Lee Library; early issues, loose copies or bound. H. R. Cox, 73 Chelston Road, Ruislip, Middx., England.

**"The Collector's Miscellany"**

—The paper for anyone interested in Old Boys' Books, Type Specimens, Juvenile Theatre, etc. Write J. A. Birkbeck, 52 Craigie Avenue, Dundee, Scotland.

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**Wanted**—Magnets and Gems, 1907-33; also Boys' Friend Libraries with stories by Frank Richards and Martin Clifford. Shaw, 6 Colney Hatch Lane, London, N. 10, England.

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POET'S CORNER

# The Master Of The Pen

—○—  
By HENRY STEELE

**I**N days of Fox and E. J. Brett  
We read some tales we  
sha'n't forget;  
We read of 18th century folks  
And men with swords be-  
neath their cloaks.

With one tale I was never bored,  
It was "The Master Of The  
Sword"—  
Edward Ashcroft, hero bold,  
At fencing, left all others  
cold.

His sword was always keen  
and bright,  
Always ready for the fight.  
He stood up to his foes, so  
cruel,  
But "pinked" his man in  
every duel.

The pen is mightier than  
the sword,  
Of that we've often been  
assured.  
Some boys today, as well as men,  
Get on better with the pen.

A lad was caught the other day,  
"While the sun shone he  
made hay."  
He forged some P. O. savings  
books,  
And made some cash, that's  
how it looks.

No master of the sword was he,  
Far more 'cute he sought  
to be—  
He tried to swindle grown-up  
men—  
He was the Master of the Pen!

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## The Oldest Comic Paper Characters?

A glance at a recent copy of "Chips" reveals that there are other comic paper characters that date back further than Charlie Chaplin in the "Funny Wonder," besides Weary Willie and Tired Tim. They are the Casey Court Kids and Homeless

Hector, the latter being a non-descript dog of doubtful ancestry. So Mr. Chaplin is deprived of the honour accorded him in the last issue of being the second-oldest character in the British comic papers.

—W. H. G.

# BOYHOOD MEMORIES

—○—  
By J. MEDCRAFT

OF MY EARLY boyhood in the far-off days of 1900 my fondest memories are of weekly jaunts to the wonderland of Hoxton Market. I lived at Dalston at the time, a district which had seen better days, and every Saturday evening, wet or fine, my Mother and I departed on our pilgrimage to the Mecca of naphtha and noise. My chief target for the evening was a small stall near the old Britannia Theatre presided over by an old dame in bonnet and shawl with an ever present tankard in varying stages of partial emptiness at her elbow. She did a thriving trade in back numbers of all the popular periodicals, and comic papers were five for a penny.

Not for me were copies of "Yes or No," "Sketchy Bits," "Photo Bits" or the "Police Budget" skilfully inserted between three comics for the unwary purchaser. I invariably got my five comics after a careful scrutiny of the old lady's stock. Then with my precious papers safely stowed away, I ambled contentedly beside my Mother while she attended to equally important but more prosaic pur-

chases. Fruit in season was ridiculously cheap, apples were two and sometimes three pounds for a penny, as many as ten oranges for the same modest sum and other stuff pro rata. Sweets, plain but wholesome and without the fancy paper wrappings of today, were as low as twopence a pound. Seems a fantastic dream compared with the stratospheric prices of the present day.

At the upper end of Hoxton Street, once known as Hoxton Old Town, stood the quaint old shop of the late Benjamin Pollock, and, while my Mother was otherwise engaged I spent a blissful quarter of an hour gazing at the wonders in the window, the stages hanging from the ceiling and other paraphernalia of the Juvenile Drama, until dragged away by my Mother on the first stage of our homeward journey. Yet I was never personally interested in the Juvenile Drama although my elder brother was an enthusiast and performed several plays with enjoyable confusion. But whenever in the vicinity in after years I felt irresistably drawn to the old shop

and its anachronistic wares. I purchased several complete plays but Juvenile Drama was not in my blood and there it ended.

Comic papers of that day contained many good serials and many not so good. The one I remember best was "The House on the Heath" by Hubert Trelawney, a scientific-cum-magical yarn about the rivalry of two super scientists which thrilled me to the core at the time and even now tickles me to death in more ways than one. "The Cruise of the Octopus," also by Hubert Trelawney, and "Beyond the Golden Mist" were other outstanding yarns. As I grew older I turned to the halfpenny series of the "Boys' Friend," "Marvel," "Pluck," "Union Jack" and "Surprise." Brett's "Boys of the Empire" left me cold but I was delighted with "Nuggets" and the "Boys' Champion Story Paper." I also read many Aldines but had to go warily for my Mother disapproved of Dick Turpin and other highwayman and pirate yarns but saw no harm in Buffalo Bill and Robin Hood.

Then I discovered treasure in the form of a boxful of papers purchased years before by my elder brother, carefully preserved and subsequently forgotten; early "Nuggets" with Silverspear, Tim Pippin and Jack the Valiant,

"Varieties" and "The Garland," early numbers of "Invention," "First Rate" and "O'er Land and Sea" Libraries in their weird and wonderful coloured covers, and, best of all, a tattered pile of "Ching Ching's Own" which had been partially read to rags. I finished the process.

Yet another advantage I enjoyed which counterbalanced any restrictions imposed by pocket money limitations. During school holidays I frequently visited an uncle who kept a newsagents' shop at Camberwell and in return for taking nominal charge of the shop during slack periods I was allowed to read whatever books and papers I fancied on condition that I did not soil them. But on Sundays, when my Mother and I were occasional visitors, austerity was the keynote and my favourite reading was forbidden. Usually I had to content myself with a volume of the "Boy's Own Paper," and once, during a particularly restless spell, my aunt handed me a volume of "Harper's Young People," saying that I would find Jack, Sam and Pete therein. Eagerly, I searched the book from beginning to end before it dawned on me that I had been hoaxed, and it was a very quiet youth that finished the evening. But, when leaving, a bundle of my favourite papers

was placed in my hand with a warning that they were not to be read until the next day, and all was well again. As the old horse-drawn bus rumbled over London Bridge I watched the illuminated Bovril sign on the South side, one of the first of its kind in London, until it was lost to view.

When the "Marvel" new series commenced and the Jack, Sam and Pete stories appeared regularly I was delighted, for they were my favourite characters, and it was not until Clarke Hook mistakenly introduced Algy around No. 350 that I dropped the paper. Of the many fine serials which appeared in the "Boys' Friend," "Boys' Herald" and "Boys' Realm" between 1902 and 1912 I cherish happy memories. Discrimination is difficult but the two that appealed most profoundly—I do not claim they were the best—were "Wings of Gold," by Sidney Drew, and "Circus Ned," by Henry St. John; both "Boys' Herald" yarns, by the way.

The new series of "Pluck" also contained several fine series but none were persevered with. First came stories of the Five Comrades, an unsuccessful attempt by Clarke Hook to cash in on the popularity of Jack, Sam and Pete. Next the Captain, Cook and

Engineer series by Harry Belbin, and later, the fine Wycliffe school series by Jack North, whose real name was J. N. Pentelow.

The St. Jim's School stories by Charles Hamilton, who also wrote under the names of Martin Clifford and Clifford Owen, commenced in "Pluck" but were transferred to the "Gem" and then enjoyed a run of thirty-three years. I had just started work when the "Gem" commenced and was rather disappointed with Nos. 1 and 2, but this vanished when "Tom Merry's Schooldays" began in No. 3. The "Magnet" started a year later and I carried on with these two for several years.

Henderson's "Wild West Library" and "Nugget Library," both of which started in 1904/5, were great favourites of mine. "Lot-o-fun," which appeared about the same time, carried on the unfinished serials from "Nuggets" and, although I had grown out of the comic paper stage, I could not resist the amusing pictorial adventures of a somnolent character named Dreamy Daniel or the fine school serials by Derwent Miall and R. A. H. Goodyear. "Lot-o-fun" is one of the few papers for which I have searched in vain and I would give a good deal to ob-

(Concluded at foot of next page)



## A 48-Year-Old Mystery

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### Exhibit "A"—

"Boys' Friend" No. 1, January 29th, 1895, page 8: There is a large picture of a gentleman with an attractive beard. Beneath it are the words "Your Editor."

### Exhibit "B"—

"Boys' Friend" No. 47, December 17th, 1895. On the Editor's Chat page there is a picture of "Your Editor," different from the first—a picture of a gentleman with a moustache but no beard, and who is later revealed to be Mr. Hamilton Edwards.

### Exhibit "C"—

"Boys' Friend" No. 50, January 7th, 1896. Quotation from Editor's Chat: "A number of read-

### BOYHOOD MEMORIES

(Conclusion)

tain the first hundred numbers.

Now, by patience, perseverance and good luck I have garnered most of the books which brightened my boyhood days and can peruse at will whatsoever I fancy. Though stories may have lost their old grip yet the illustrations retain their charm and association grows stronger with the years. Verily, those were the days.

ers of the 'Boys' Friend' who still keep fresh in their memories the first issue of this paper write to point out that the portrait of Your Editor in the Christmas Number differs from that printed in No. 1. The explanation is that the gentleman who produced No. 1 of the 'Boys' Friend' gave up his post shortly after, having been appointed to the control of another and more important paper. Since then the 'Boys' Friend' has been under the management of the writer of these lines, and whose photograph was reproduced in No. 47."

### Exhibit "D"—

"Boys' Friend" No. 98, December 8th, 1896. Quotation from Editor's Chat: "I remember one of the paragraphs which I wrote in the very first number of the 'Boys' Friend.'"

### Exhibit "E"—

"Boys' Friend" No. 104, January 19th, 1897. Quotation from Editor's Chat: "'R. H.' is evidently not a very diligent reader of the 'Boys' Friend,' or otherwise he would not ask me the question he does. He says I told my readers some time ago that the old Editor had given up his place, and a little later on I

refer to what I said in the first number. What I said is perfectly correct; but the editor whose portrait first appeared in the "Boys' Friend" was a gentleman who was connected with the paper before it was published. Your Editor—that is myself—who addresses you this week wrote the opening address which appeared in No. 1, and I have been the Editor of the 'Boys' Friend' ever since it started."

But in spite of that clear-cut statement the mystery does not seem to be quite solved, as a comparison of the last two quotations will disclose.—W. H. G.

### A Sexton Blake "Fan"

"I remember my very serious-minded friend, the late Sir William Ramsay, famous for his archaeological work in Asia Minor and his learned books on Pauline topography, telling me that he had read every one of the Sexton Blake stories that had been published, at a time when their total number amounted to about 1500!"—Sir John Hamerton in "World Digest" for February, 1943.

**Wanted**—English Comics, years 1892-1906. Harris, Caynton, Llanrhos Road, Penrhyn Bay, Llandudno.

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### John Medcraft,

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**Holiday Annual**—Years 1920 to 1924.

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**WANTED**

The Following Story Papers

**"Magnet Library"**—See Want List, "S.P.C." No. 7, page 76.

**"Boys' Friend"** (New Series)—See Want List, "S.P.C." No. 8, page 90.

**"Greyfriars Herald"** (New Series, 1919-22) later "Boys' Herald"—Nos. 9, 15, 30, to end.

**"Boys' Friend 3d. Library"**  
—No. 288, Jan., 1915: "The Boy Without a Name," by Frank Richards.

**WM. H. GANDER**

Transcona, Manitoba, Canada

**Magnets**—pre-1930, wanted, any numbers. Corbett, 49 Glyn Farm Road, Quinton, Birmingham, England.

**Wanted**—1d. Boys' Friend, Realm, Big Budget, Boys' Leaders, ½d. Sports Library, early 1d. Nelson Lee Library.—H. Dowler, 86 Hamilton Road, Manchester, 13, England.

**Wanted**—Nelson Lee Lib'ys, year 1917, Nos. 112 to 118; year 1921, Nos. 305 to 311. F. Keeling, 93 Aldridge Avenue, Stanmore, Middlesex, England.

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