

The Brotherhood of Happy Hours

RALLY ROUND! RALLY ROUND! Wanted, any Union Jacks for the year 1922. Your price paid. Any Help greatly appreciated. Leonard and Josephine Packman, 27 Archdale Road, East Dulwich, London, S.E.22.
WANTED: St. Jim "Plucks," 10/6 each offered.
FOR SALE OR EXCHANGE for S.O.L. (not St. Frank's): 40 Union Jacks (between 995-1075); 90 Gems (804-1539); 15 Modern Boys (2-161); 24 Boys' Cinemas (146-843); 29 Boys' Magazines (31-60); 20 Triumphs (172-578); 12 S.O.L. Offers. T. Hopperton, Courtlands, Fulford Road, Scarborough.

IN America, with their love of exotic-sounding names, they call themselves the Happy Hours Brotherhood of Dime and Nickel Novel Collectors; in England it is simply the Old Boys' Book Club. Every adult has nostalgic memories of the Penny Dreadfuls he read as a schoolboy, whose highly-coloured pages opened up a new world of imagination. But few realise that there are scattered around the world today ardent collectors who will pay anything from ten shillings to a pound for a copy of the original brown-covered *Magnet*, or a tattered *Chums* or *Boy's Friend*—and consider them a bargain at fifty times their original price.

They are enthusiastic young-old men and women who have never been able to shake off the magic appeal of names like Sexton Blake and Deadwood Dick, Billy Bunter and Harry Wharton, Nelson Lee and Buffalo Bill, Claude Duval, Dick Turpin and Jack Harkaway. They have their own periodical, *The Collector's Digest*, which is published in England and circulates as far afield as the United States, South Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. *The Collector's Digest Annual*, or "The Story Paper Collector's Wisden," is published every Christmas and runs to nearly 150 pages of closely-printed articles, with competitions, letters to the editor, crossword puzzles, classified advertisements, and reviews of new numbers of those papers which are still being published. The American equivalent to the *Digest* is called *Reckless Ralph's Dime Novel Round-Up*, and like the *Digest* it is published every month.

An International Trade

In his book *Boys Will Be Boys*, a serio-comic investigation of the literary half-world of Penny Dreadfuls, E. S. Turner makes a passing reference to the contemporary international trade in back numbers of these magazines, most of which went out of print at the turn of the century. Apart from enthusiasts who subscribe to such periodicals as *The Collector's Digest* there are, he says, groups who meet to discuss the journals of their boyhood, and pen acquaintances

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Colonel Lachlan Macquarie arrived he brought a regiment of soldiers to enforce his commands. Bligh was cleared of all blame and promoted to vice-admiral. He retired soon afterwards.

Bligh of the Bounty is now being heard from 4ZB at 7.45 p.m. on Sundays, and 1XN at 8.15 p.m. on Sundays. It will start from 3ZB at 7.45 p.m. this Sunday (August 12); 2XA at 10.0 p.m. on Thursday, August 16; 4YZ on August 26, and 2ZA on September 9. Later it will be broadcast from other stations, both National and Commercial.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 10, 1951.

who correspond with each other exchanging newly discovered lore. "Some of them bring a keen business sense to the collecting of old 'bloods'; in the past there have even been accusations of sharp practice in this innocent-seeming hobby, certain dealers allegedly introducing into their lists fictitious titles of Penny Dreadfuls as a come-on device." It is unlikely, however, that real collectors would be fooled by false titles. They are experts who know more about the history of Greyfriars or the adventures of Sexton Blake than the average film fan does about his favourite star. And several of them live in New Zealand. One of them, G. W. Hockley, of New Brighton, supplied *The Listener* with much of the information on which this



SEXTON BLAKE

"By far the most popular of all the heroes"

article is based, and some samples from his collection appear on this week's cover.

By far the most popular of all the heroes of schoolboy papers is Sexton Blake, the ageless detective whose exploits have run through the pages of the *Union Jack* for over 50 years. Charles Hamilton, author of the Greyfriars series, comes a close second in popular interest, and Nelson Lee, another detective, third. Many hours are put into the study of these forgotten byways of literature, and scholarly articles, equipped with footnotes and written in the special jargon of the enthusiast, appear in the collector's magazines. According to E. S. Turner one researcher described in an article how he had spent many months during the early part of the late war in examining the school stories in *The Magnet* and *The Gem*, and determining which were written by Charles Hamilton and which were not—"a feat of literary research which may yet receive wider recognition."

Hamiltoniana

The *Collector's Digest* contains a regular column of "Blakiana" and "Hamiltoniana" (after Charles Hamilton, alias Frank Richards, alias Martin Clifford, alias Owen Conquest, alias Ralph Redway, alias Hilda Richards), the author of the Billy Bunter series and countless other school stories. There is also a "Nelson Lee Column," and special articles on such less well-known papers

as *The Captain*, the *Bad Boys' Paper*, or *Boys of the Empire*, with learned discussions of why these proved less popular or less long-lived than their more famous rivals. To quote E. S. Turner again, "New discoveries about the origins of Sweeney Todd and Sexton Blake are eagerly passed on from reader to reader. Long-concealed identities hidden behind pen-names are triumphantly revealed. Occasionally there is a quiz containing questions like: 'What was the title of the first school story in *Boys' Realm*, and who wrote it?' and 'Name the Eskimo who was a prominent character in several *Boys' Friend* serials.'"

Who is the famous Sexton Blake about whom so much is written? In an article in the *Collector's Digest* entitled "An Amazing Ageless Man," an enthusiast named Charles Wright says, "Could the creator of Sexton Blake return to life and read the saga of his creation, he would be amazed at the complex Sexton Blake of today. He has become, in the hands of his one hundred-odd authors, a brilliant detective with a world-wide reputation, a doctor, a pathologist, analytical chemist, a brilliant linguist and a superb character actor, and, of course, a fine boxer, a deadly revolver shot and other accomplishments too numerous to mention in one article. He has been everywhere in practically every guise, from China as a coolie to Saffron Hill in Clerkenwell as an ice cream man. . . He has already lived through three wars. . . Quite a good number of his authors have passed, but Blake is still with us to give pleasure, and in a lot of cases an education."

When Sexton Blake first appeared on the scene, hansom cabs were the order of the day, but today he follows that car in his sleek streamlined Rolls, the Grey Panther. "Dozens of his famous and oft-times ruthless opponents have passed on, but this ageless man goes on from success to success, still solving knotty problems for us. Forgery, robbery, murder, he takes them all in his stride, always finding the one slender clue overlooked by the much maligned but hard-working Scotland Yard officials. Although married, so little is known of his wife that he can be considered a celibate, but that doesn't mean he is a woman hater. He is always courteous and helpful to the opposite sex. He did have a great fondness for the famous Mademoiselle Yvonne Cartier, but as he steadfastly refused to let love interfere with his chosen vocation, he ruthlessly set it aside. . ."

Criminals' Confederation

In a special article in the *Collectors' Annual*, one Harry Homer gives a long account of Blake's twelve-year duel with the notorious Criminals' Confederation, which began with "The Case of the Missing Crooks," in the *Union Jack* No. 806, of March 22, 1919, to "Sexton

Blake Wins," which appeared in 1933. Here, in such stories as "Tracked by Wireless," "Dirk Dolland's Ordeal," "The Diamond of Disaster," Blake fought long but successfully against Dr. Deeming Stain, Blac! Michael Breedon, Hoang Ho, Fan Too, Colonel Elias B. Quartz, Mademoiselle Yvonne Cartier, and Ysabel de Ferre, Duchess of Jorsica.

The head of the Confederation was the mysterious Mr. Reece, and there was also Sir Phillip Champion, renegade baronet and master of crime, and The Shadow, "a cold and callous wraith of many murders whose identity is revealed in No. 887 to be that of a diabolic son to the fiendish Mr. Reece." Fan Too was the son of Hoang Ho, leader of the Brotherhood of the Red Spider, and Dr. Deeming Stain was the Hunchback of St. Madros, "a self-styled Dream-Doctor and Mind-Stealer." There was also Ryal Saul, an "American millionaire diamond fanatic," and Dirk Dolland, "a crook but a gentleman." Surely no more villainous set of characters has appeared in the history of fiction.

The author of the series was a writer named Robert Murray, whose literary style became so well known that collectors can today distinguish his work from that of substitutes. The Editor of the *Annual*, Herbert Leckenby, notes at the end of the article on the Criminals' Confederation: "I cordially endorse Harry Homer's pungent comment concerning the last Confederation story, original series. Murray certainly never wrote it. And surely the editor should have flung the manuscript back at the author who did, saying, 'Why the deuce have you left Coult's out? Get it rewritten.' As it was, what should have been a great finish was a pitiful fiasco."

The Perfect Britisher

What do collectors get out of their hobby? This comment from another Blake enthusiast, H. Maurice Bond, supplies one answer. "I was twelve years of age when Blake first beckoned me to follow his path of adventure. Twenty-odd years have passed since that momentous time, and here I am, as keen as ever. . . By the time I met him Sexton Blake had become more than just a fictional detective. He became to me a real, human, kind and genuine person—in short, the perfect example of the Britisher one would expect to be representative of our race. . . It might be said that Blake is the true Socialist, he certainly has acted as such in the past."

Among the hundreds of collectors of Penny Dreadfuls there are the headmaster of a famous school, an actor "whose name is a household word," many well-known writers and artists, members of the clergy, and dozens of others "from clerks to coal-heavers, soldiers to shopkeepers, manufacturers to musicians." What do they think of themselves? This is what the editor of the *Collector's Annual* said in the latest issue:

Dear Fellow Collectors,

Another year has sped on and once again we are looking forward to dispatching our *Annual* to all corners of the earth. Once again a loyal band have contributed fascinating articles and admirable sketches, so much so that this year's edition is bigger than ever. One of our new chums says that he considers the collectors of boys' papers a grand lot of fellows and the hobby the best of all. We who are at the heart of things could not agree more. . .

They are indeed a brotherhood of happy hours.