

The Boys' Friend Library

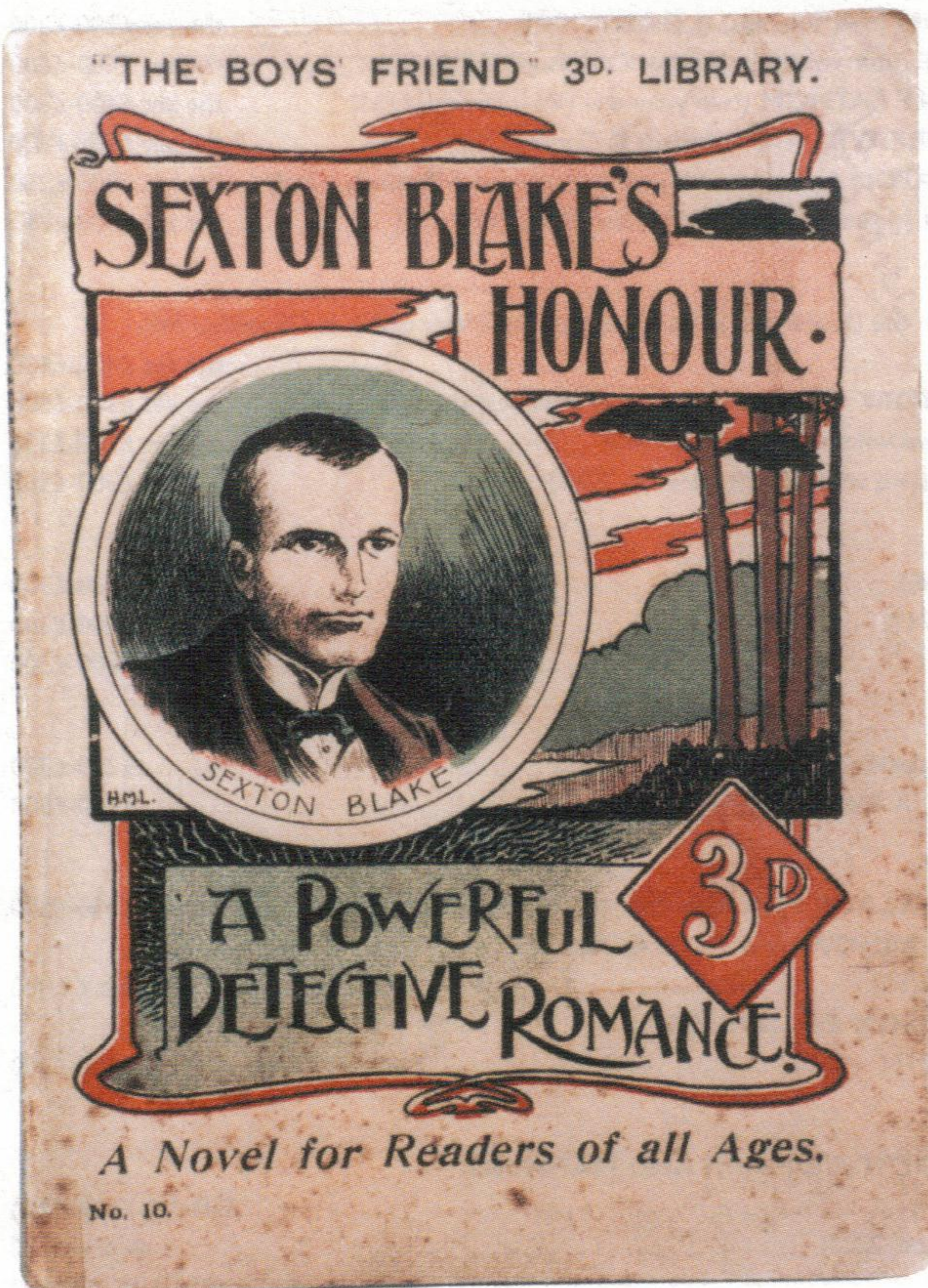
by Norman Wright

One of the more neglected of pre-war story papers is *The Boys' Friend Library* published monthly for over thirty years by the Amalgamated Press. The scope of the Library was vast, encompassing almost every genre of popular fiction likely to appeal to adventure-loving boys. Amongst the 1,400+ issues that appeared, some real collectors gems are to be found.

Before the war, the Amalgamated Press was one of the two major publishers of boys' periodicals in the U.K. Each week their presses poured out a seemingly endless stream of fiction written by a large number of writers in several dozen tuppenny story-papers. Week in, month out serials and series of stories thrilled young readers. Much of this material was hack-work and is now almost

unreadable, but within the ranks of the Amalgamated Press' contributors were a number of excellent writers whose work remained memorable long after the weeklies in which it appeared were consigned to the dustbin.

With such a 'back catalogue' of material at their disposal, it was inevitable that the Amalgamated Press should look for a way to make more profitable use of it. The result was the introduction of a series of monthly 'libraries' that almost exclusively reprinted serials and stories that had previously appeared in one or other of the AP's weekly story-papers. One of the first of these publications — and certainly one of the most successful — was *The Boys' Friend Library*, the inaugural issue of which appeared in September 1906. The first story was 'Jack, Sam and Pete's



Sexton Blake's first appearance in the Library was in the January 1907 issue, with 'Sexton Blake's Honour'.

Adventure In Africa', 120 pages of very un-politically correct storyline reprinted from *The Marvel*, featuring a trio of popular characters created by S. Clarke Hook. Researchers have stated that it was initially intended to devote the library entirely to the exploits of these characters and that some copies of the first two issues were printed bearing the title *The Jack, Sam and Peter Library*. Some credence is given to this suggestion by the fact that the first three issues of the publication did chronicle the exploits of Jack, Sam and Peter, but this policy soon changed and the 'library' became the versatile publication that it was to remain for over three decades.

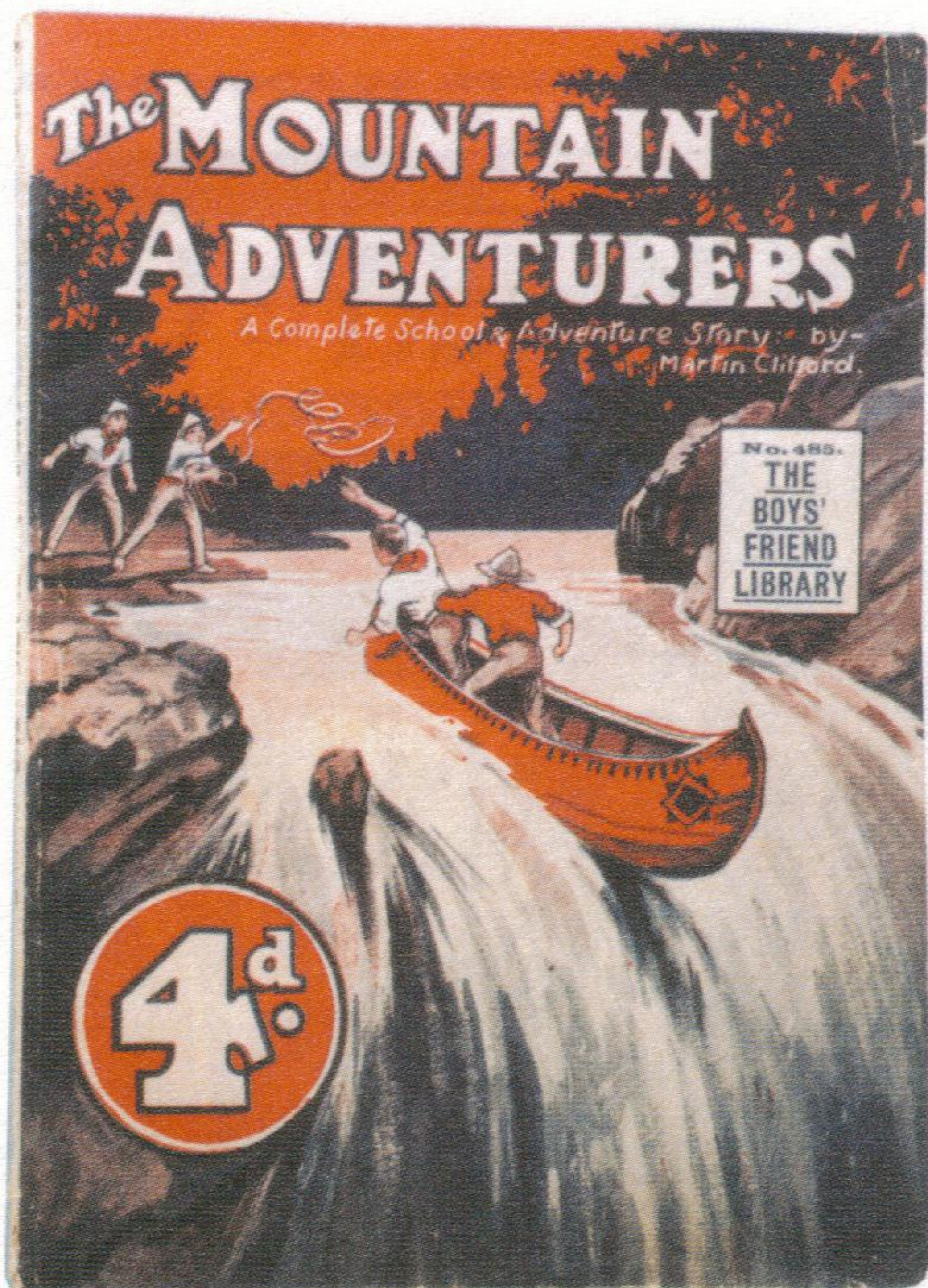
“The Library’s scope was vast, encompassing almost every genre of popular fiction.”

Initially, two issues a month of the library were published, each costing 3d. This number fluctuated in the publication’s formative years, going to three then four, then back to two and so on. For a fifteen-month period, from September 1921, there were even five monthly issues before it settled down to a regular four in December 1922 and remained thus for the rest of its run. One of the great joys of *The Boys’ Friend Library*, both for readers then and for the collector now was the sheer diversity of stories that appeared within its pages. There were adventure tales, detective stories, school yarns and even the odd science fiction adventure — in fact, anything that had proved popular as a serial or series in a weekly paper was grist for the *Boys’ Friend Library* mill.



This very scarce issue from November 1907 was the first to feature 'Tom Merry & Co' and is worth £15-£20 in Very Good condition.

The fourth issue of the library, entitled 'Birds of Prey', featured Nelson Lee, a popular detective character created in 1894 by John Staniforth under his Maxwell Scott byline. It was reprinted from *The Boys’ Friend Weekly*, a long-running paper that provided many of the serials that would appear in the *Boys’ Friend Library*. The Maxwell Scott Lee stories were popular at the time and half-a-dozen of them featured in the *Boys’ Friend Library* during its first year. They were well-written tales, but read today are over melodramatic and appeal only to aficionados of the Edwardian detective story.



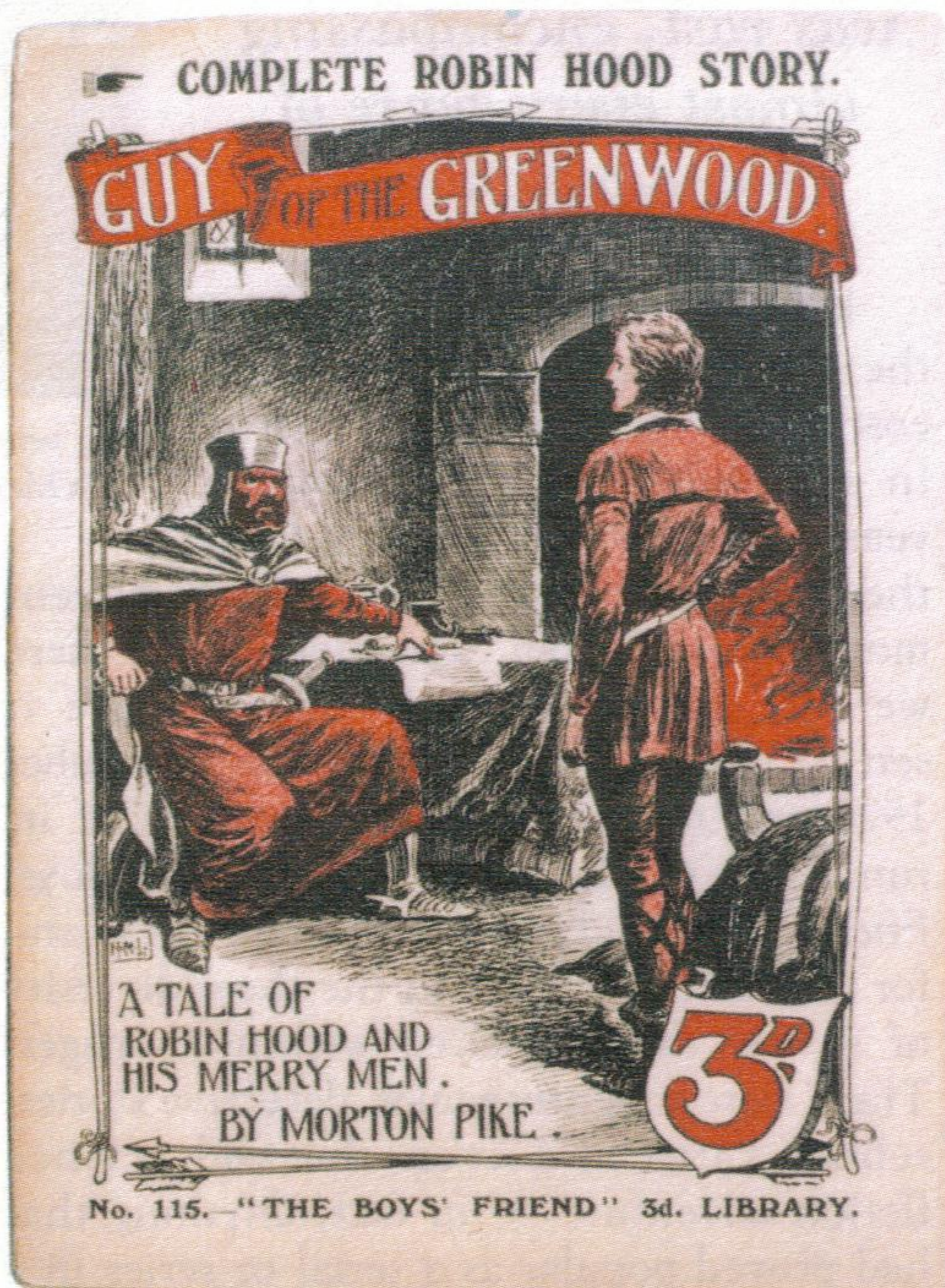
One of Charles Hamilton's 'Cedar Creek' stories written under his 'Martin Clifford' pen-name.

Particularly sought-after amongst the early issues are those featuring another Amalgamated Press detective, Sexton Blake (see BMC 15 & 105). Blake had been created just prior to Nelson Lee and went on to become one of the Amalgamated Press' most popular and bankable characters, featuring in many publications, including a regular monthly library of his own that ran from 1915 until 1968. The earliest 'Blake' story in the *Boys' Friend Library* was 'Sexton Blake's Honour', in issue number 10, an original novel that had not previously been serialised in any other paper. It is an important story as it features Blake's hitherto unknown brother, Harry. Harry Blake was a 'bad lot' who causes his crime-solving sibling a great deal of anguish before doing the right thing and swimming off into the sunset — and certain death — after leaving a note that read: "So far I have been a failure as a brother, but I can do one thing to save

your honour. That I shall do as soon as I have written this. Good-bye, Henry . . ."

Sexton Blake featured fairly regularly in the *Boys' Friend Library* right up until 1939, but it is the early issues, many of which were written especially for the library and appeared at a time when the publication boasted 120 pages, that are most eagerly sought by collectors today, with copies in Very Good condition worth around £12 to £15 each.

One of the most popular writers working for the AP was Charles Hamilton, better known as Frank Richards, the creator of Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School. His work had the golden touch and it was not long before his stories began appearing in the library. Early on he contributed a pair of original tales entitled 'Tom Merry & Co' (No 30) and 'Tom Merry's Conquest' (No 37). These elusive issues and are worth £15 to £20 each.



'Guy of the Greenwood', Morton Pike's great tale of Robin Hood, was published in the Library in April 1910.

Another pair of original stories from Hamilton's pen that are even more desirable were published in the library during the First World War. Despite being written under the Frank Richards byline, 'The Boy Without a Name' (No 288) and 'Rivals and Chums' (No 328) featured Greyfriars School in only a minor role. These two issues of the library are very scarce and sell for around £25 each in Very Good condition.

A series by Hamilton, written for *The Boys' Friend Weekly* under his 'Martin Clifford' pen-name, featured the fictional schooldays of Frank Richards at Cedar Creek in Canada. The 'Cedar Creek' stories were immensely popular and eight collections of them were reprinted in the *Boys' Friend Library* between 1918 and 1920. (For a more in-depth look at Hamilton's work for the library, see BMC 193.)

"The Library kepts its readers well supplied with adventures of knights and outlaws."

A popular genre of stories throughout the first half of the twentieth century was the swashbuckler, and the *Boys' Friend Library* kept its readers well supplied with dashing adventures of knights, highwaymen and outlaws. The most accomplished writer in this field was D.H. Parry, who under his own name wrote many serials for the more upmarket periodicals such as *Little Folk*, *Chums* and *Captain*, while turning out a huge number of stories and serials for numerous AP weeklies under the name of 'Morton Pike'.

Many of these serials were later reprinted in the *Boys' Friend Library*. The first of these was 'Gilbert Nameless' (No 47), a well-told tale set in medieval London, but one of his best adventures was a 'Robin Hood' novel entitled 'Guy of the Greenwood' (No 115), published in April 1910. Over the course of its long run, a number of authors had 'Robin Hood' series and serials reprinted in the



Bug-eyed monsters figured in Robert W. Comrade's SF adventure, 'In Trackless Space', published in April 1920.

Boys' Friend Library, but Morton Pike's were the best. His stories were masterfully told with an unerring feel of authenticity for the period, and like the best Hollywood epics they seemed to feature a cast of thousands.

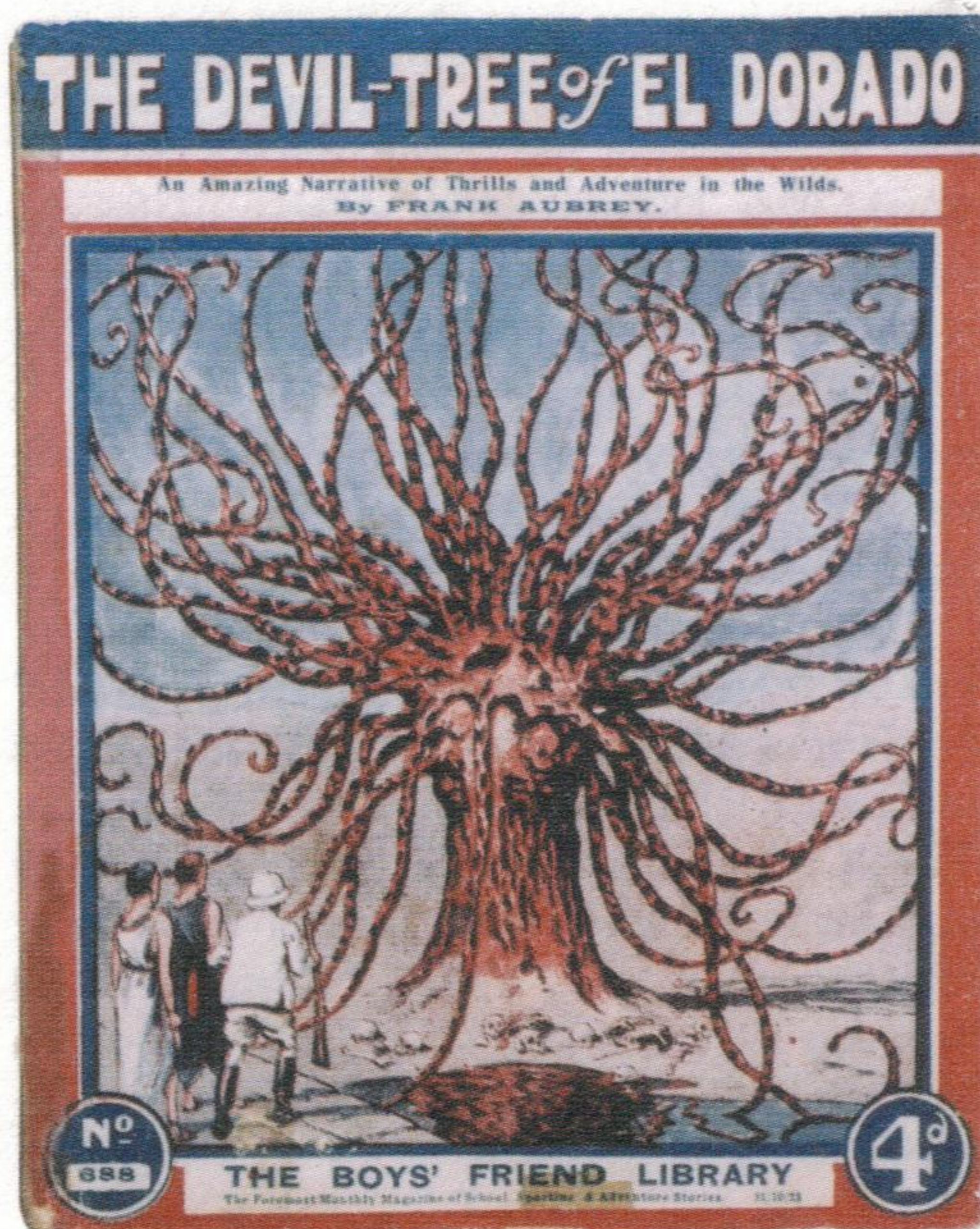
Pike's second 'Robin Hood' contribution to the *Boys' Friend Library* was an equally memorable story in issue 259 entitled 'The Longbows of England'. His third foray into Sherwood Forest came in May 1919 in a collection of short stories entitled 'Robin Hood and His Merry Men' (No 458).

Despite the usual high standard of the writing, this is not an easy volume to read. The First World War had resulted in paper shortages and the *Boys' Friend Library* was no longer a chunky, 120-page book with large, clear type. The page count had been reduced to 64 and the price had been increased to 4d, and in 1917 its layout was re-designed to landscape format with three columns of type

down each page. This latter change was made with the intention of cramming more words to the page and thus giving the reader better value for money — a move probably welcomed by sharp eyed boys of the time eager to get as much as they could for their cash, but one which takes its toll on more mature eyes. Because of this, 'Robin Hood and His Merry Men', together with most issues published between 1917 and 1919, are generally less popular with collectors.

Another prolific author whose work regularly appeared in the *Boys' Friend Library* was Edwy Searles Brooks (see BMC 175), best remembered for his tales of St Franks school that ran for almost two decades in *The Nelson Lee Library*. Brooks' first contribution to the library was an original story entitled 'Canvas and Caravan', published in August 1912 under his 'R.W. Comrade' byline. Other works in the *Boys' Friend Library* by Brooks included a number of original stories featuring St Franks, the most collectable of which are 'Nipper at St Franks' (No 514) and 'Pots of Money' (No 704). He frequently turned his pen to stories of fantasy and science fiction and several of these found their way into the *Boys' Friend Library*. Probably the most difficult to find is 'In Trackless Space' (No 504), a copy of which will now cost about £20 to £25.

One of the most interesting and elusive fantasy issues of the *Boys' Friend Library* is Frank Aubrey's 'The Devil-Tree of Eldorado', published as number 688 of the library in October 1923. 'The Devil-Tree of Eldorado' had originally been published as a hardback in 1896 and is a very difficult book to find. How it came to be reprinted in a boys' monthly a quarter of a century later is something of a mystery. The *Boys' Friend Library* edition of the story is, if anything, even scarcer than the hardback, and a copy in Very Good condition would probably sell for in excess of £100. Frank Audrey (real name Frank A. Atkins) also wrote as 'Fenton Ash', and half-a-dozen stories under this



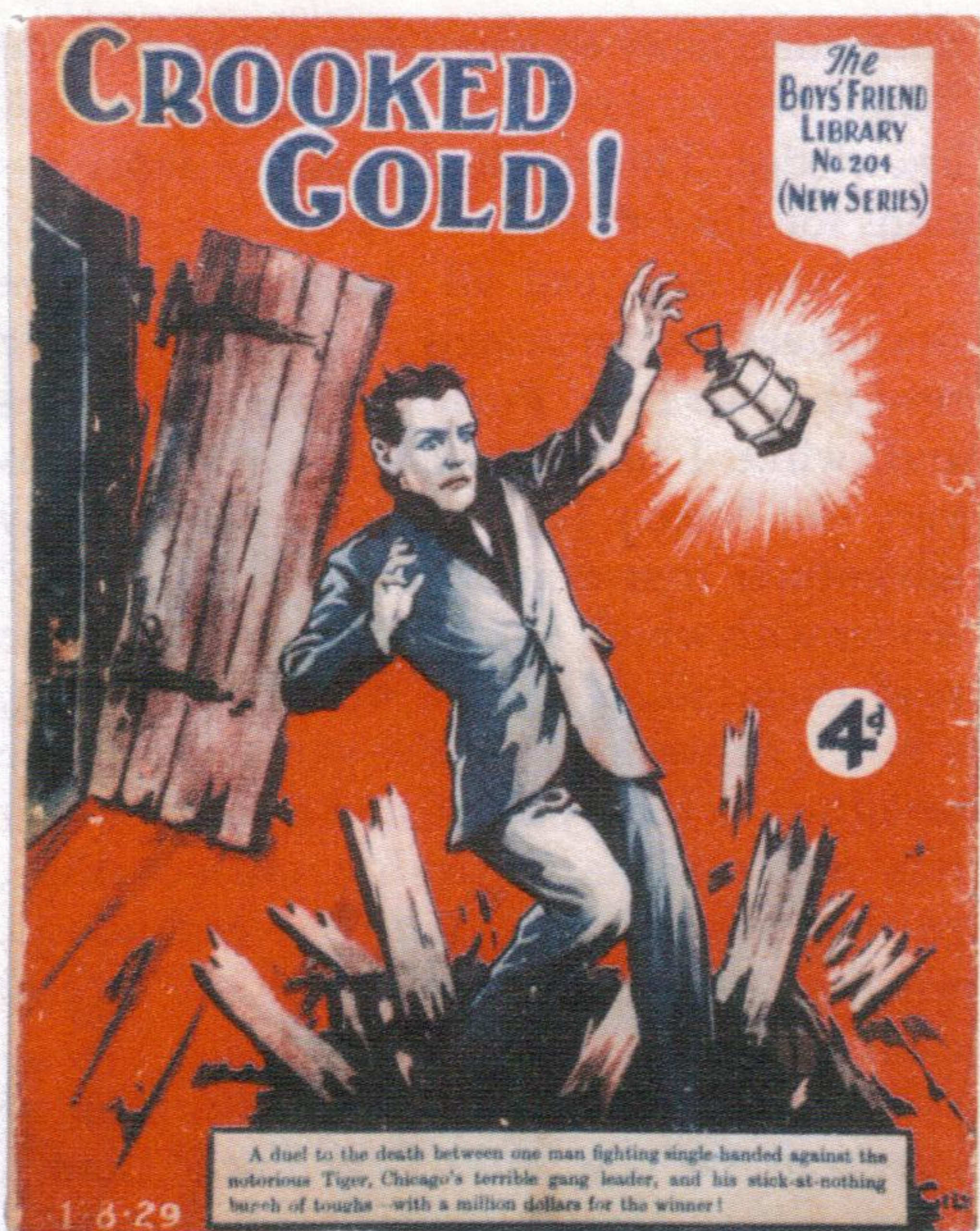
'The Devil-Tree of El Dorado' is one of the scarcest issues in the entire series and can sell for as much as £100.

pen-name were also reprinted in the *Boys' Friend Library*, the most desirable of which is 'A Trip to Mars' (No 681), a decent copy of which is worth around £25.

"Sir Anthony always informed his victims when and where he would be relieving them of their valuables."

At the end of 1919, the *Boys' Friend Library* had returned to the more traditional portrait format and, despite the typeface remaining small, it seemed easier on the eye with the two columns to the page layout. The 'first series' of the Library ran until May 1925. During a run of almost nineteen years, the library had published 764 issues.

But this was not the end of the *Boys' Friend Library*. Far from it, for the following month saw the launch of the 'new series' with a rousing circus adventure by Sidney Drew

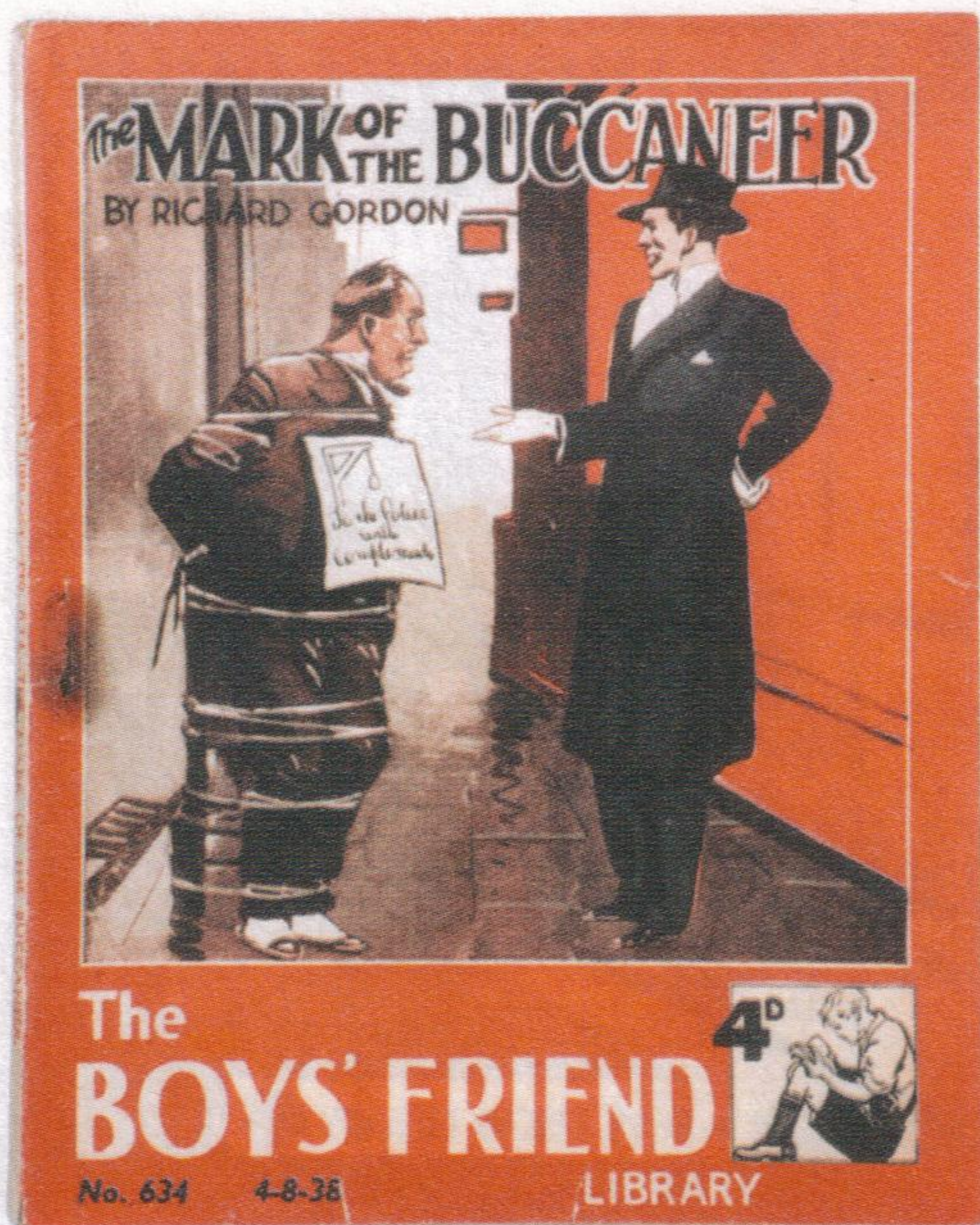


'Crooked Gold' was an edited version of Leslie Charteris' first 'Saint' novel, *Meet the Tiger*.

entitled 'The King of the Caravans'. As far as collectors are concerned the greatest riches to be published in the library appeared in the new series. Initially, the new series continued at 64 pages, but in 1932 the page count was increased to 96 and the typeface enlarged.

Without a doubt the most desirable of all the 64-page issues of the Boys' Friend Library is 'new series' number 204 entitled 'Crooked Gold', published in August 1929. No author credit is given on either the cover or the title-page, but this volume is, in fact, a reprint of Leslie Charteris' first 'Saint' novel, *Meet the Tiger*.

This was Charteris' third novel and was first published by Ward Lock in September 1928. Years later, when Charteris was shown the Boys' Friend Library edition, he claimed to have had no knowledge of its publication. As he had sold the copyright of the novel outright to Ward Lock, it is just possible that they in turn had sold on the



One of two issues featuring *The Buccaneer*, a character who is suspiciously like Charteris' famous crime-fighter.

rights for the library publication without the author's knowledge. However, at the time Charteris was writing for *The Thriller*, a popular AP weekly and it seems unlikely that someone on the staff would not have pointed out the Boys' Friend Library edition of his story to him. A comparison of the texts used in the Ward Lock edition and the Boys' Friend Library edition reveals that considerable editing was done, with chunks of text from almost every page of the original excised from the Boys' Friend Library version. Despite this, 'Crooked Gold' is a very desirable item and, with only a handful of copies known to exist, a copy in Very Good condition would probably sell today for over £100.

Two numbers of the Boys' Friend Library with a Charteris connection that are well worth looking out for are 'The Mark of the Buccaneer' (No 634) and 'The Laughing Buccaneer' (No 654), published in August 1938 and January 1939 respectively. These issues come from a period in the library's



'Sir Anthony - Crook' bore a strong resemblance to another famous character: gentleman burglar, Raffles.

history when the page count had risen to 96 and the covers were printed in black-and-orange.

The Buccaneer — or, to give him his full name, Crispin Buchan — was a very Saint-like character. He had the same Robin Hood-like tendencies, a trademark sign (a gallows) and often pitted his wits against Detective-Inspector Bugle of Scotland Yard, a dead ringer for Charteris' own Scotland Yard man, Inspector Teal. Add to this a neat line in patter, similar to that employed by Simon Templar, and it does not take a genius to guess where the author, 'Richard Gordon' (real name Adrian Murray), got his inspiration.

The 'Buccaneer' stories originally appeared in the weekly story paper, *Pilot*, where they were very popular, and these two collections quickly found their way into the *Boys' Friend Library*. In 'The Saint and Leslie Charteris' (1970), Lofts and Adley mention these stories and Charteris' reaction to them: "To say that he [The Buccaneer] was the Saint's exact counterpart would have been no

misnomer; more so when extracts of original 'Saint' stories were used without Charteris's knowledge. This resulted in severe repercussions for the culprit."

I have not read all the stories of The Buccaneer that appeared in *Pilot*, but I have read the two *Boys' Friend Library* collections and, while I have to agree that Buchan is very like Simon Templar, I did not find any adventures that exactly mirrored any 'Saint' stories with which I am familiar — and I have read them all. They are well-written tales, a notch above many of the stories that were serialised in boys' papers, and their notoriety has made them desirable collectables, particularly amongst Charteris enthusiasts, who can expect to pay around £60 to £70 each for them.

While Sexton Blake did continue to appear in the 'new series' *Boys' Friend Library*, other crime stories began to figure quite frequently and many of these are now sought after, titles by Gerald Verner, 'Barry Weston' (Gwyn Evans) and Richard Essex being amongst the most collectable. Two of my own favourite crime issues are No 482, 'The Mystery man of Mayfair', and No 491, 'Sir Anthony - Crook'.

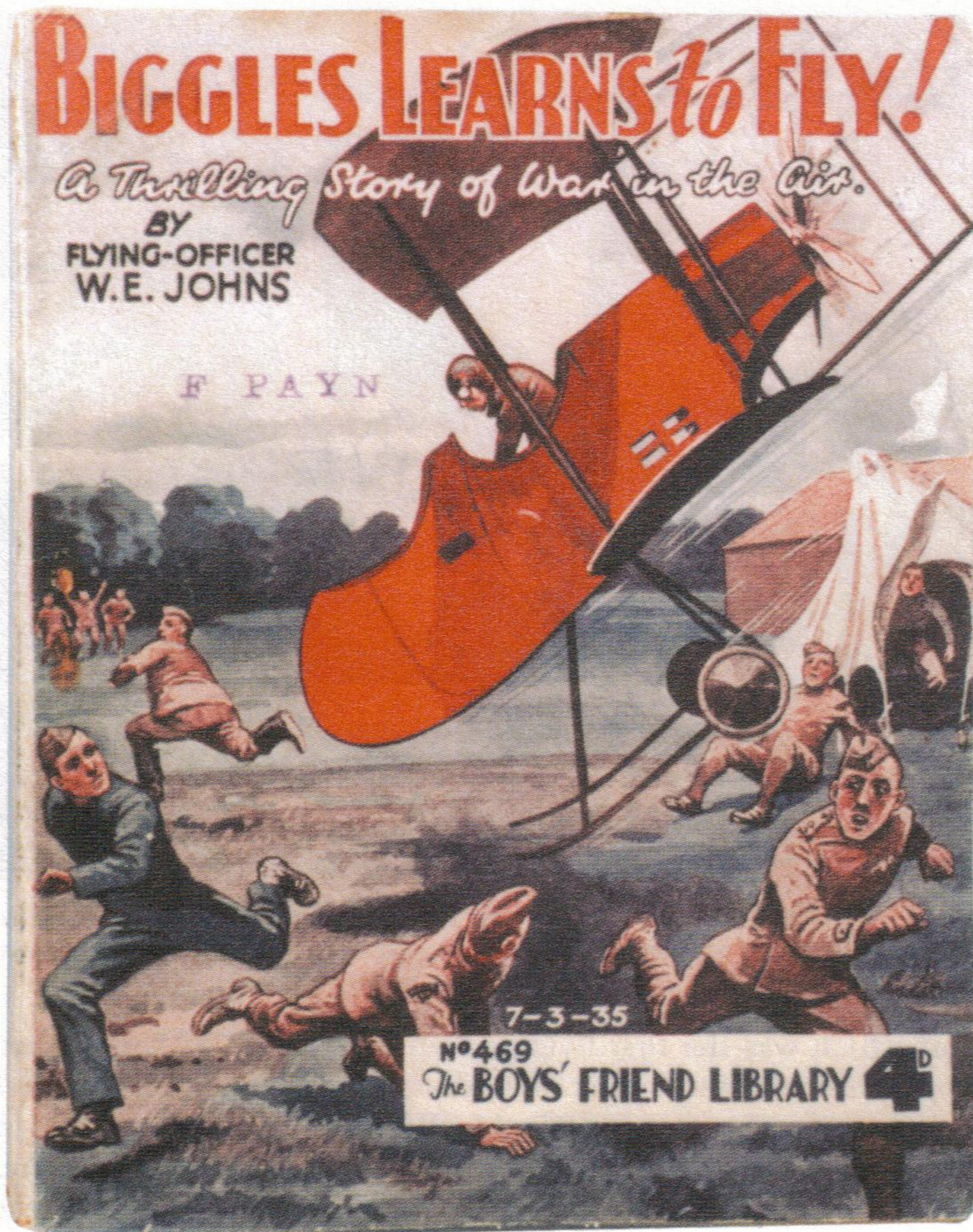
"Despite being written in a phoney western dialogue, the 'Rio Kid' tales have a great charm."

Both feature Sir Anthony Charters, a Raffles-like character, and his Japanese manservant, Yogi. Unlike conventional crooks, Sir Anthony always informed his victims when and where he would be relieving them of their valuables. This feature makes the stories immensely readable and involved the author in concocting some ingenious plots. The stories were written under the byline 'Warder Lynk', and originally appeared in *Ranger*. These two issues can still be bought for around a tenner each.

While school stories did not figure as prominently in the 'new series' as they had in the original series of the library, the work of Charles Hamilton still featured quite significantly. As well as 'one-off' reprints, the *Boys' Friend Library* regularly reprinted his 'Rio Kid' and 'Ken King' stories. The former were westerns that had originally appeared in *The Popular* under his 'Ralph Redway' pen-name, while the latter were South Seas adventures culled from *Modern Boy*.

Despite being written in a phoney western dialogue that seems to grate with many true western aficionados, I find the 'Rio Kid' tales have a great charm. The first *Boys' Friend Library* featuring the Kid was No 266, 'The Rio Kid', published in 1930. The first 'Ken King' issue of the library was No 331, 'King of the Islands', published in 1932. These two characters proved to be so popular that in 1937 the *Boys' Friend Library* started to reprint them all again from the beginning.

A popular character featuring regularly in the library was Captain Justice, a science fictional adventurer who, with his trusty team, regularly set off from Justice Island on all manner of quests. Weed-men, robots and the like were all grist to Justice's mill. The stories originated in *Modern Boy* in 1930. There were 24 'Captain Justice' issues of the



'Biggles Learns to Fly' (No 469) is one of the most desirable and valuable issues, with collectors paying up to £1,100 for copies in Very Good condition.

library, the first, 'Captain Justice' (No 405), appearing in 1933 and the last in 1939. All are now quite collectable and worth around £12 to £14 each.

The first series of the *Boys' Friend Library* had been sadly lacking in aviation stories — hardly surprising considering that it began publication only a few years after the Wright brothers' inaugural flight. But flying adventures came very much into vogue during the 1920s and '30s and, as the AP weekly story-papers catered for this interest with serials and series, so the 'new series' *Boys' Friend Library* were quick to reprint them.



These two issues from January 1940 were the first to bear the title, *Boys' Friend Bullseye Library*. They contained a thriller by Gerald Verner, 'The Hooded Stranger' (left), and an interesting George E. Rochester/Edward Holmes hybrid (right).

Just which was the first flying adventure to appear in the Library I can't say with complete certainty, but 'new series' No 44, 'Wings of Adventure', published in April 1926, is certainly a contender for the title. The cover depicts a 'flying machine' crashed in the midst of a lost city peopled by ancient Romans. The inhabitants are waving their spears at the craft while the intrepid aviators are picking them off with rifles. Such a title has double appeal for the collector, catering for aviation aficionados as well as fantasy freaks!

Flying stories of a more conventional type were published in *The Boys' Friend Library* a couple of years later when, in November 1928, George E. Rochester's 'The Flying Beetle' appeared as No 167, and was followed a month later by his 'The Scarlet Squadron'. Both adventures had originally been serialised in *Boys' Own Paper*, and both were eventually published in hardback form by John Hamilton Ltd.

The flying adventures of George E. Rochester have gained greatly in popularity over the last decade, with jacketed copies of his hardback flying stories being eagerly sought. A quick tally reveals that around thirty *Boys' Friend Library* issues contained Rochester stories, with about three-quarters of these being flying adventures. As John Hamilton did not begin publishing Rochester's novels in hardback form until 1935, all of those appearing in the *Boys' Friend Library* prior to that date are first editions. Despite this, they still sell for a modest £10 to £15 each in Very Good condition.

Another popular aviation series in the *Boys' Friend Library* featured 'Baldy's Angels', a fighter squadron based on the Western Front commanded by Major 'Baldy' Atlee. The stories had originally appeared in *Ranger* from 1931, when they had followed that paper's serialisation of the film 'Hell's Angels', in which Atlee features. Technically,

I suppose they could be considered 'spin-offs' from the film. Half-a-dozen or more issues of the *Boys' Friend Library* featured Baldy and his squadron, the first being 'Baldy's Angels' (No 369), published in February 1933.

Without a doubt, the most sought-after and valuable issues in the *Boys' Friend Library* are the eight written by W.E. Johns, two of which are true first editions. They have achieved almost mythical status amongst collectors and now command very high prices.

"The cover depicts a flying machine crashed in the midst of a lost city peopled by ancient Romans."

The first of these was 'Biggles Learns to Fly' (No 469), published in March 1935. This volume consisted of twelve stories that had previously appeared in *Modern Boy*. In November 1935, a further dozen stories were collected and published as 'Biggles in France' (No 501). These two titles are both true first book editions and the most sought-after in the entire *Boys' Friend Library*. In Very Good condition, they each command a four-figure sum.

In 1938, Biggles featured in five further numbers of the library: 'Biggles Goes to War' (No 610), 'The Camels are Coming' (No 614), 'The Cruise of the Condor' (No 617), 'Biggles Flies East' (No 621) and 'Biggles Flies Again' (No 630). A non-'Biggles' W.E. Johns novel, 'The Spyflyers', was published as No 625 of the library. While not first editions — they had all previously been published in hardback form — they are very desirable issues, each commanding a price of around £250. (For full details of the 'Biggles' issues of the *Boys' Friend Library*, see BMC 208.)

In January 1940, paper rationing was beginning to bite and this was reflected in

a number of changes that the *Boys' Friend Library* underwent. The price was raised to fourpence halfpenny, the page count was reduced to 64 and the name was changed. Two of the monthly issues were now titled *The Boys' Friend Bullseye Library*, and the other two were titled *The Boys' Friend Knock-Out Library*.

Despite these shortcomings, the library still maintained a high standard during its last six months of publication. Indeed, the first two issues published in the new format are of interest to collectors. No 701, 'The Trail of the Flying Bomb' was a 'Phantom Sheriff' story reprinted from *Wild West Weekly*.

The author credit is given as 'George E. Holmes', a byline that some collectors believe indicates that the story was a collaboration between George E. Rochester and Edward Holmes, an AP editor. No 702 was 'The Hooded Stranger', an atmospheric thriller by Gerald Verner.

The end came suddenly in June 1940, with the 'Editor's Chat' giving no indication that publication was to cease that month. At least the library went out on a high note, including in its final month of publication two excellent crime stories: 'The Grim Joker' (No 721) by Gerald Verner, and 'The Phantom of Scotland Yard' (No 722) by 'Barry Weston' (Gwyn Evans).

The two series of the *Boys' Friend Library* comprise 1,488 issues, and this short article can only give a taster of the type of stories that were published within its pages. It is a publication that in its content and cover art reflects the changing fashions and fads of boys' fiction over a period of 34 years. Within its pages can be found an almost infinite variety of stories, and the list of characters featured — Sexton Blake, Biggles, Robin Hood, Captain Justice, The Saint — is a formidable line-up of British pluck. Some issues are now greatly prized and command high prices, but many can still be bought for under ten pounds each and amongst these are treasures still to be found.

Some Collectable Issues of 'Boys' Friend Library'

A guide to current values of issues in Very Good condition.

ORIGINAL SERIES

No 1 'Jack, Sam and Pete's Adventure in Africa' by S. Clarke Hook (September 1906)	£15-£20
No 4 'Birds of Prey' by Maxwell Scott (October 1906)	£10-£12
No 10 'Sexton Blake's Honour' (January 1907)	£12-£15
No 30 'Tom Merry & Co' by Martin Clifford (November 1907)	£15-£20
No 37 'Tom Merry's Conquest' by Martin Clifford (January 1908)	£15-£20
No 47 'Gilbert Nameless' by Morton Pike (April 1908)	£8-£10
No 115 'Guy of the Greenwood' by Morton Pike (April 1910)	£10-£12
No 200 'Canvas and Caravan' by R.W. Comrade (August 1912)	£10-£15
No 259 'The Longbows of England' by Morton Pike (April 1914)	£10-£12
No 288 'The Boy Without a Name' by Frank Richard (January 1915)	£22-£25
No 328 'Rivals and Chums' by Frank Richards (March 1916)	£22-£25
No 458 'Robin Hood and His Merry Men' by Morton Pike (May 1919)	£8-£10
No 504 'In Trackless Space' by R.W. Comrade (April 1920)	£20-£25
No 514 'Nipper at St Franks' by R.W. Comrade (July 1920)	£12-£15
No 681 'A Trip to Mars' by Fenton Ash (September 1923)	£20-£25
No 688 'The Devil-Tree of Eldorado' by Frank Aubrey (October 1923)	£100-£125
No 704 'Pots of Money' (anonymous [E.S. Brooks]) (February 1924)	£12-£15

NEW SERIES

No 44 'Wings of Adventure' by Paul Quinton (April 1926)	£10-£12
No 167 'The Flying Beetle' by George E. Rochester (November 1928)	£10-£15
No 171 'The Scarlet Squadron' by George E. Rochester (December 1928)	£10-£15
No 204 'Crooked Gold' (anonymous [Leslie Charteris]) (August 1929)	£200-£250
No 266 'The Rio Kid' by Ralph Redway (December 1930)	£10-£12
No 331 'King of the Islands' by Charles Hamilton (April 1932)	£10-£12
No 369 'Baldy's Angels' by Captain Robert Hawke (February 1933)	£10-£15
No 405 'Captain Justice' by Murray Roberts (November 1933)	£12-£14
No 469 'Biggles Learns to Fly' by W.E. Johns (March 1935)	£900-£1,100
No 482 'The Mystery man of Mayfair' by Warder Lynk (June 1935)	£10-£12
No 491 'Sir Anthony - Crook' by Warder Lynk (August 1935)	£10-£12
No 501 'Biggles in France' by W.E. Johns (November 1935)	£1,000-£1,200
No 610 'Biggles Goes to War' by W.E. Johns (February 1938)	£200-£250
No 614 'The Camels are Coming' by W.E. Johns (March 1938)	£200-£250
No 617 'The Cruise of the Condor' by W.E. Johns (April 1938)	£200-£250
No 621 'Biggles Flies East' by W.E. Johns (May 1938)	£200-£250
No 625 'The Spyflyers' by W.E. Johns (June 1938)	£200-£250
No 630 'Biggles Flies Again' by W.E. Johns (July 1938)	£200-£250
No 634 'The Mark of the Buccaneer' by R. Gordon (August 1938)	£60-£70
No 654 'The Laughing Buccaneer' by R. Gordon (January 1939)	£60-£70
No 701 'The Trail of the Flying Bomb' by George E. Holmes (January 1940)	£10-£15
No 702 'The Hooded Stranger' by Gerald Verner (January 1940)	£10-£15
No 721 'The Grim Joker' by Gerald Verner (June 1940)	£10-£15
No 722 'The Phantom of Scotland Yard' by 'Barry Weston' [Gwyn Evans] (June 1940)	£10-£15

ADVERTISING COPY DEADLINES

23rd SEPTEMBER for NOVEMBER issue, on sale 16th OCTOBER
28th OCTOBER for DECEMBER issue, on sale 20th NOVEMBER