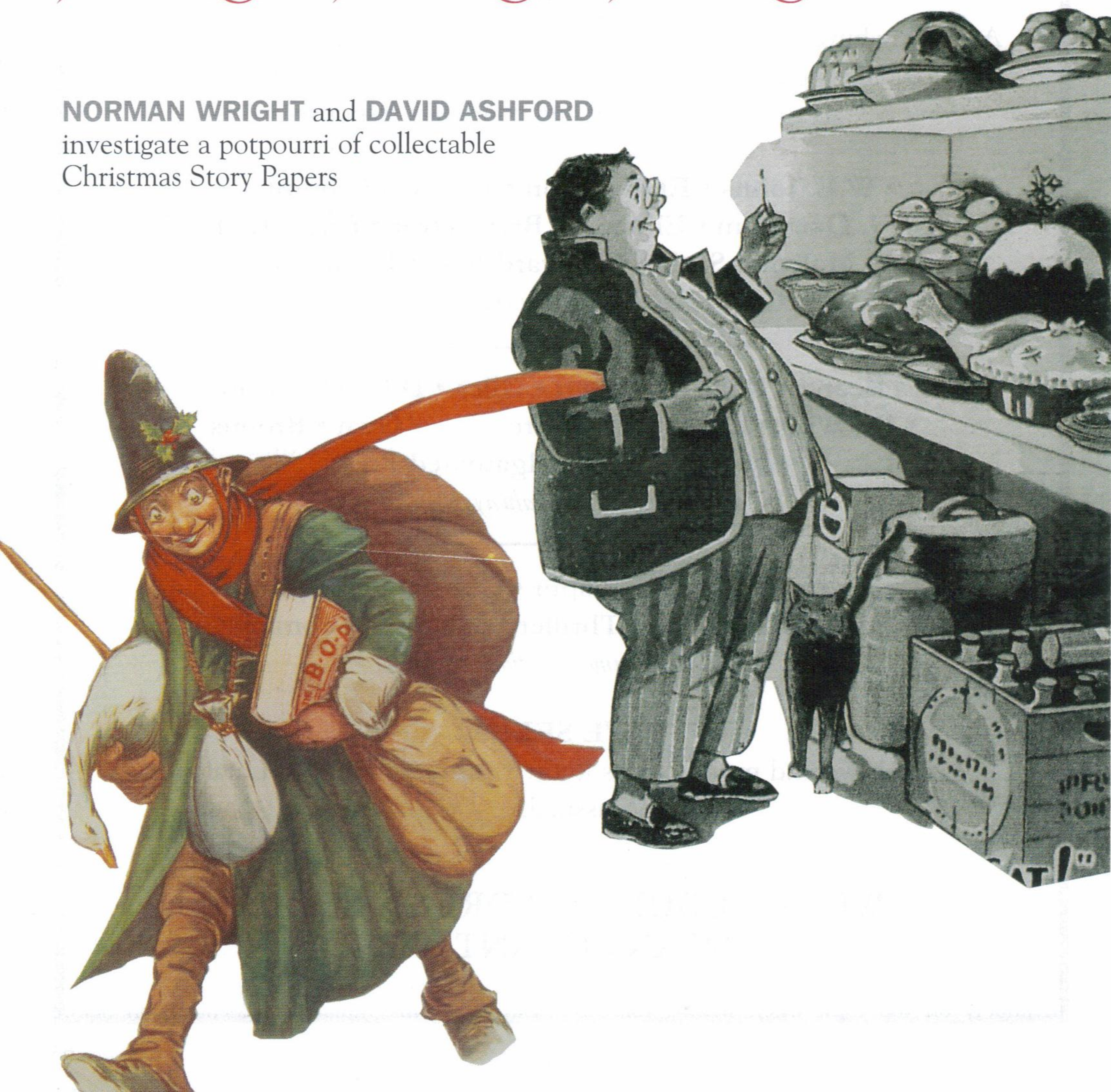
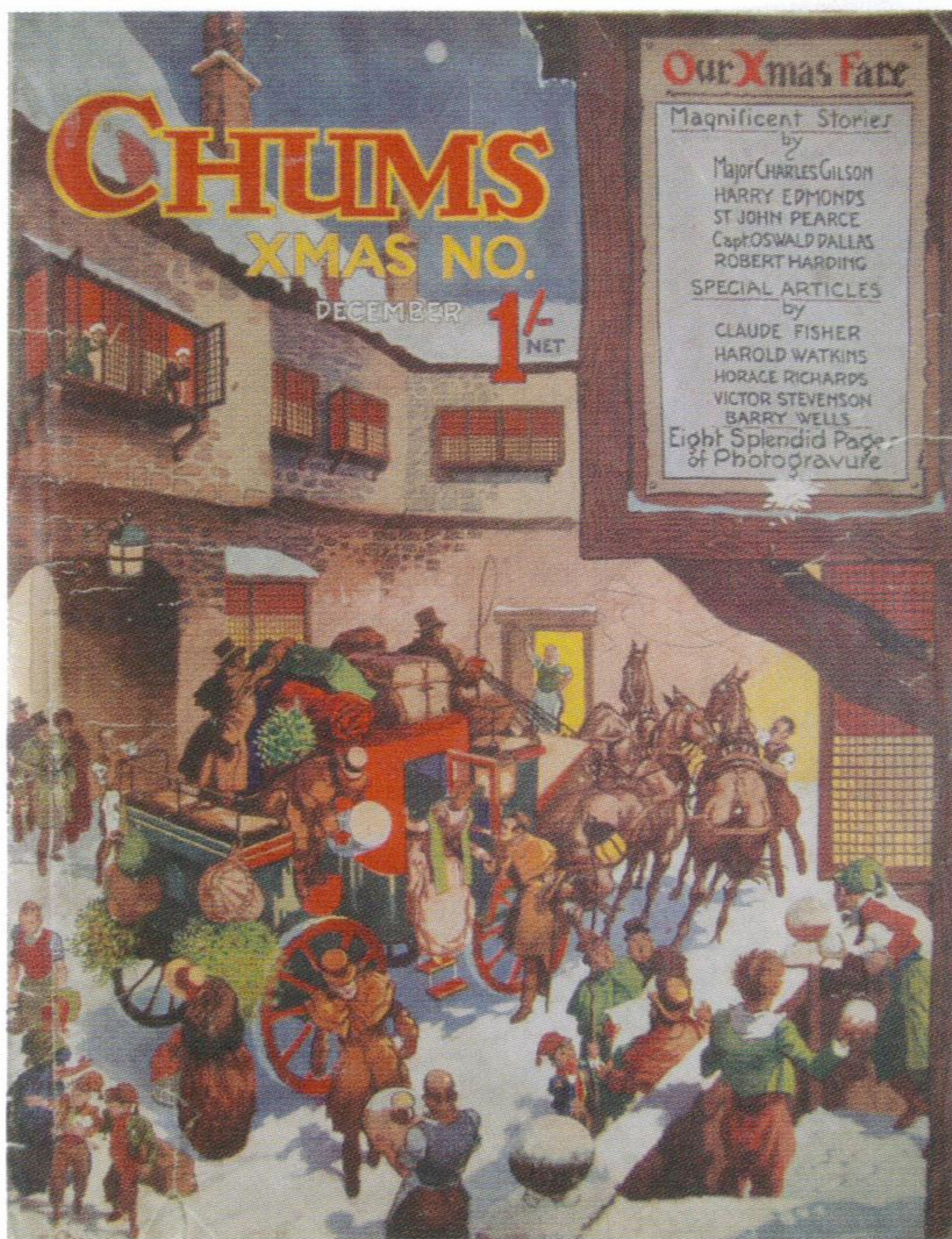


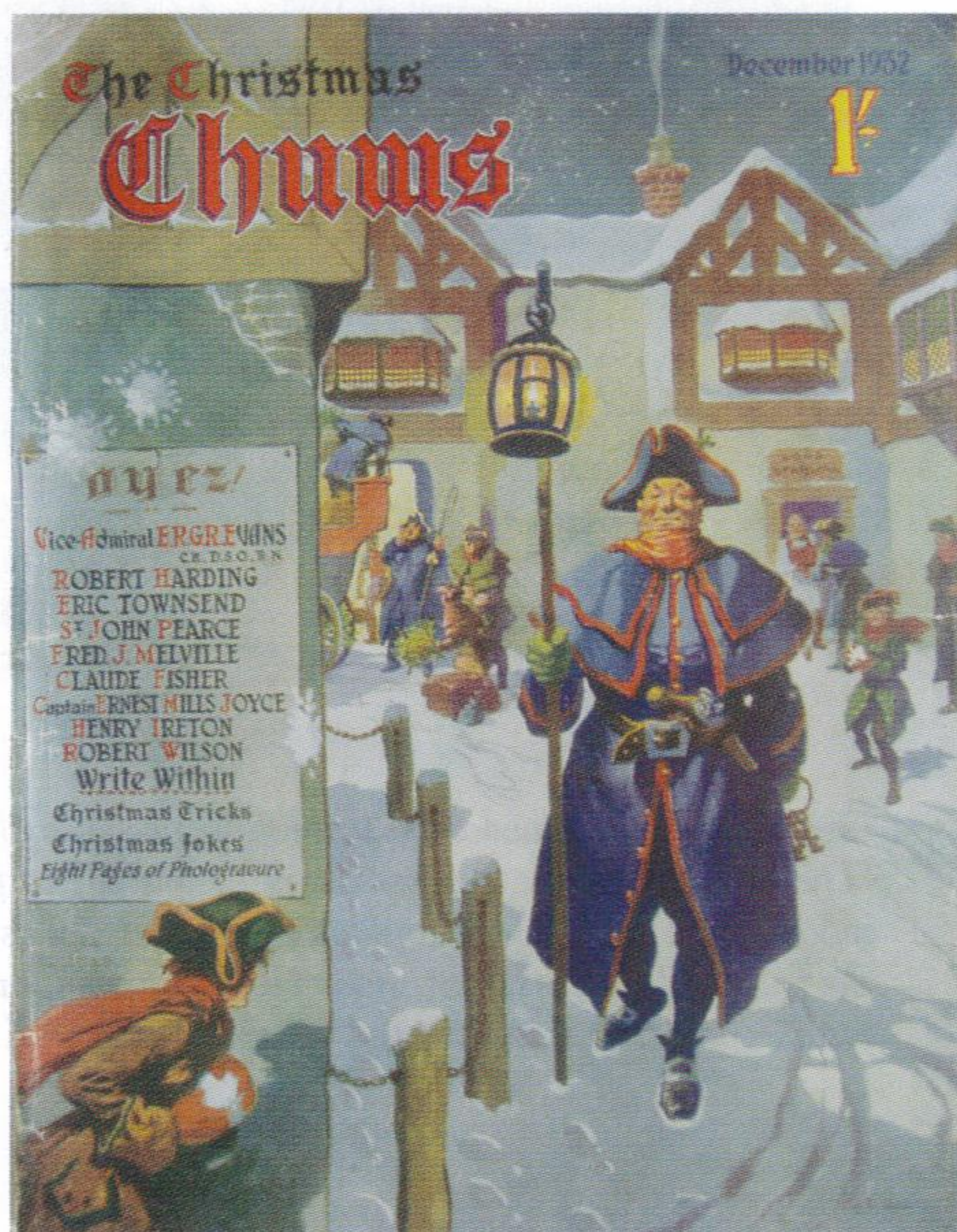
GHOSTS, SNOW & HO-HO-HO!

NORMAN WRIGHT and **DAVID ASHFORD**
investigate a potpourri of collectable
Christmas Story Papers





Chums 1932 and 1933: The Christmas cover at its very best as depicted by Cecil Glossop in these busy, bustling coaching-inn scenes.



Despite the fact that a White Christmas is a singularly rare event in this country, its depiction on seasonable greetings cards and on magazine covers has always been mandatory. The pre-war story papers were certainly no exception to this rule and there was always an over-abundance of the glorious white stuff. Combined with old-fashioned mail coaches, lavish parties, houses festooned with holly, as well as the odd phantom or two to spice up the festive activities, the pre-war story papers certainly knew how to celebrate the 'Jolliest Season of the Year' in style.

Charles Dickens has often been described as the greatest portrayer of Christmas but, for generations of young people, there was one writer who, in his ability to conjure up the spirit of Christmas, managed to outshine even that luminary. Charles Hamilton, under his best-known pen names of Martin Clifford and Frank Richards, was a master storyteller who was invariably on top form when writing for the

Christmas issues of the *Gem* and the *Magnet*. For over thirty years he chronicled the exploits of Tom Merry & Co. in the *Gem* and Harry Wharton and the boys of Greyfriars in the *Magnet*.

'Tom Merry's Christmas' was the Yuletide offering in the very first Christmas issue of the *Gem* in 1907 but at that time Martin Clifford had hardly got into his stride and far better things were to come. In the following December, when the weekly had doubled in size, there came 'The Ghost of St. Jims' (a title that Hamilton used on several occasions). This scarce story was reprinted in December 1928 in *The Schoolboys Own Library* when the unknown cover artist depicted 'Binks', one of the pageboys at St. Jims and a main character in the story, encountering a spectral highwayman. After reading a surfeit of American pulp fiction, Binks had become obsessed with ghosts and apparitions and acted out the part of a phantom in a secret passage he had discovered. Fortunately Tom Merry and Co. intervened in the nick of time and made Binks burn his 'valuable works of fiction' before



Gem 302: R.J. Macdonald's atmospheric cover illustration for 'The Mystery of the Painted Room' captured to perfection the mood of one of Charles Hamilton's finest Christmas stories. After the frugal War Years, Christmas 1921 saw the **Gem** back in full festive spirit with this delightful cover painting by E.E. Briscoe.

they 'turned his mind' any further – a salutary lesson for all of us perhaps!

By the time Hamilton used the title 'The Ghost of St. Jims' again, in the *Gem* Christmas Double Number for 1911, the weekly had acquired its definitive illustrator, R.J. Macdonald, whose cover illustration for the issue depicted a cowed phantom prowling the corridors of St. Jims.

Few aficionados would argue that the finest *Gem* Christmas story was 'The Mystery of the Painted Room' in the Grand Winter Number for 1913. Its banner headline boasted a '50,000 Word School Tale' and the extra space gave Hamilton plenty of room to develop an imaginative and well constructed story. Macdonald's cover illustration, a brooding study in black, white and red, captured perfectly the mood of the story. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is alone in the Painted Room. The fire casts flickering shadows along the panelled walls and, as the schoolboy's gaze shifts upwards towards the



**Most authorities agree that
The Magnet was at its peak
between 1924 and 1935**

ceiling painting of Bacchus and his nymphs, he imagines that he sees the eyes move: 'could an eye painted by human hand gleam at him in that manner – watching him!' The vibrant cover image promised a rare Christmas treat and the reader was not disappointed.

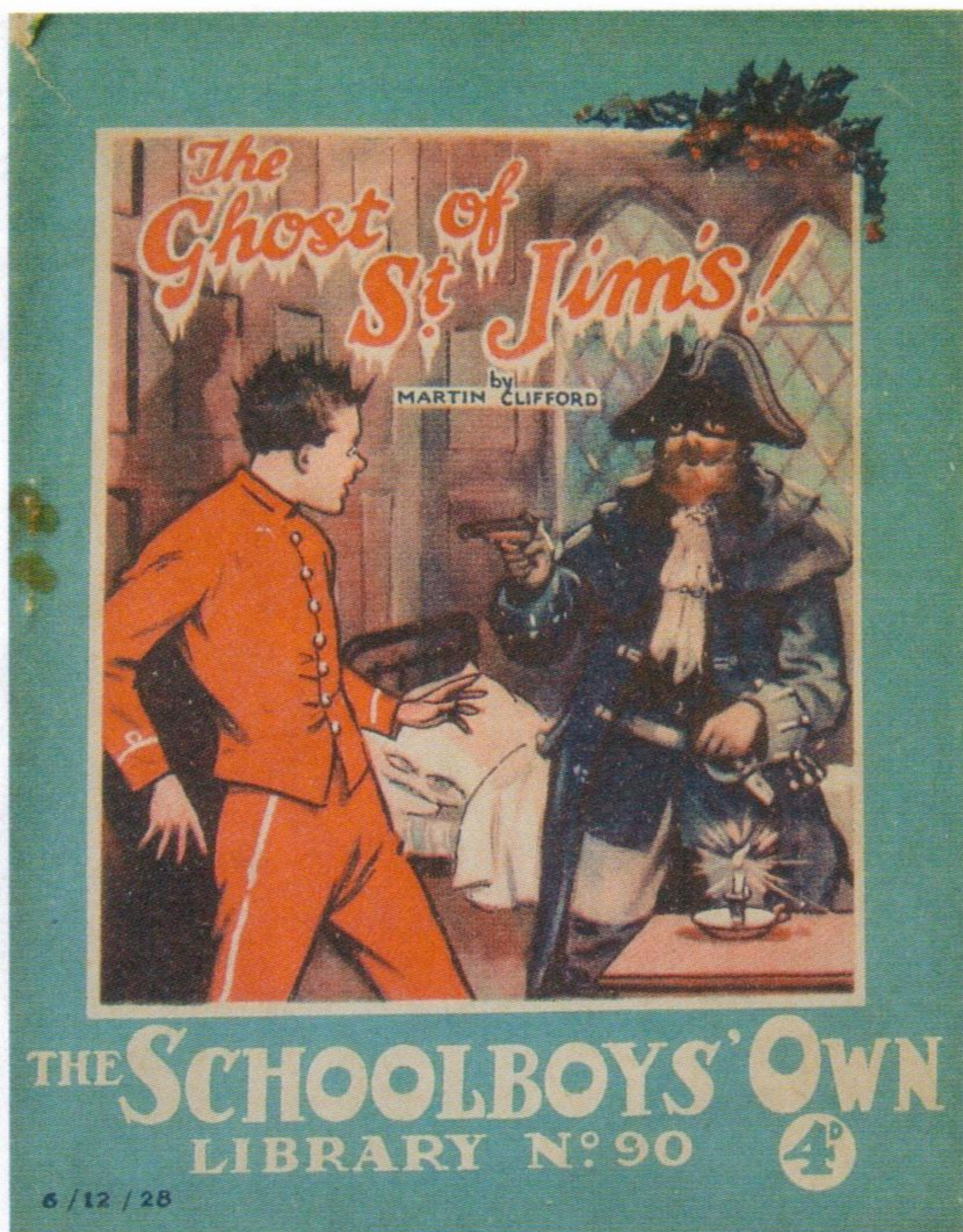
Throughout the years of the Great War the *Gem* Christmas covers were more sombre, lacking their pre-war festive sparkle. When hostilities ceased, however, the weekly quickly got back into its stride and the Christmas Number for 1921 was particularly memorable. While the internal illustrations for 'Lord Eastwood's Christmas Party' were by regular artist R.J. Macdonald, the cover was painted by Ernest Briscoe, a prolific artist best remembered for his finely drawn architectural studies in *The Nelson Lee Library*. His cover depicted the St. Jims' juniors enjoying the delights of a traditional Christmas party, complete with fancy hats, crackers and a table

groaning with good things to eat. The mast-head too dripped with snow and ice in the customary fashion.

If the *Gem* was Charles Hamilton's first love, it was the *Magnet* and its cast of memorable characters that became most popular with readers and for which the writer provided some of his very best Christmas stories. An early seasonal offering worthy of note was No. 200, 'Wingate's Folly', the Christmas Double Number for 1911. The story, most unusual for a boys' weekly, concerned George Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars, falling in love with a pantomime girl. Handled with masterly skill, Frank Richard produced a subtle character study of the leading characters, yet at the same time lightened the story with the usual seasonal romps. The cover illustration, almost certainly the work



The first Christmas issue of the *Nelson Lee Library* in 1916 resembled an illuminated manuscript with its decoration by Arthur Jones. For 152: Always looking for the more bizarre angle in his stories, Edwy Searles Brooks was not above introducing witches and elves into his Christmas yarn.



The 1908 *Gem* story, 'The Ghost of St. Jims' was reprinted in the *Schoolboys Own Library* No. 90 in 1928. Here Binks the page is confronted by a phantom highwayman induced by his reading of lurid American pulp magazines.

of Arthur Clarke, was an excellent study capturing the tensions of the text yet retaining the traditional pantomime feel.

Despite wartime shortages the *Magnet's* Grand Christmas Number for 1916 boasted 42 pages and a coloured front cover. Readers were probably perplexed as to why the regular *Magnet* illustrator, C.H. Chapman, drew only the internal illustrations for 'The House on the Heath'. The cover was the work of Philip Hayward and, while suitably seasonal, his unpractised depiction of the Greyfriars' persona made it hard



A jolly festive cover from the *Captain* of 1913.

for even aficionados to identify the various characters depicted in his illustration.

There was no doubting the identity of the artist or the characters on the cover of the Christmas Number of the *Magnet* for 1920. Chapman has signed the work and the unmistakable form of William George Bunter struggling in a snowdrift, much to the amusement of Harry Wharton and Co., could not have failed to raise a chuckle from readers. In 1921 the *Magnet* Enlarged Christmas Number featured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh and the Greyfriars' juniors solving 'The Mystery of the Christmas Candles'. This issue was another artistic oddity with the coloured cover painted by Gem artist, R.J. Macdonald, while

the internals were the work of Chapman.

Most authorities agree that the *Magnet* was at its peak between about 1924 and 1935 and this was reflected in the seasonal fare on offer during this period. The Christmas issues for 1924 and 1925 both bore typically festive covers by Chapman that emphasised the fun and frolics of the festive season. 1927 was an especially memorable *Magnet* Christmas relating the transformation in Billy Bunter after reading a copy of 'A Christmas Carol'. The story is beautifully constructed by Frank Richards allowing the reader to fully believe in Bunter's reformation to benevolence before he gradually declines back to his old selfish ways. Leonard Shields provided the artwork for this pair of Christmas stories. Shields had been assigned to help out with the *Magnet* in 1926 and his artwork complimented well that of regular artist C.H. Chapman. While the latter was ideal for the humorous illustrations that depicted the lighter side of the tales, Shields' forte was the mystery story and his drawings

could exude an atmosphere of unseen danger and the hidden unknown, so essential to many *Magnet* plots.

Christmas 1929 found Bunter and the Greyfriars' boys on the track of the notorious safe-breaker known as 'The Courtfield Cracksman'. Shields provided the illustrations for all fourteen issues of the weekly containing this long series and, while many of the internal illustrations demonstrated his mastery of mystery, his cover for the Grand Enlarged Xmas Number was suitably festive, depicting Mr Quelch, the boys' form-master, receiving a Christmas present that was certainly not intended for him. This series contained some of Frank Richards' best writing, demonstrating his consummate skill at con-



Arthur Jones' brooding art gave a great air of mystery to this 'Grand Xmas Number' of the *Union Jack* in 1917. By 1929, the magic combination of Gwyn Evans' story and Eric Parker artwork made for some terrific Christmas crime, none better than in the 1929 story 'The Mistletoe-Milk Mystery'

structuring both dramatic and comedy narrative. Here the reader encounters everything from the brooding and atmospheric descriptions of the cracksman at work to a rib-tickling Christmas episode in which Bunter unwraps his Xmas gift from his form-mates. They have informed him that his present is something he really needs and his mind drools over visions of enormous cakes and jars of potted meat. As he gradually unwraps the package, removing layer after layer (in the manner of 'pass the parcel'), he begins to doubt the substance of the gift. All is eventually revealed when he comes upon a large cake of soap.

Throughout the early 1930s the *Magnet* Christmas issues bore covers dominated by ghosts and phantoms. In 1931 it was a ghostly knight scaring Bunter out of his wits, while in 1933, it was a white shrouded ghost having the same effect on the 'Owl of the Remove'. In 1935 the phantom was the 'Spectre of Polpelly', a ghostly Elizabethan nobleman who dominated



At this time *Magnet* and *Gem* dominated the school story weekly market

the cover of the Grand Christmas Number. Far more appealing, however, was the superb cover illustration for the regular Christmas week issue for that year. Drawn by Leonard Shields (who drew all of the 1930s Christmas covers thus far mentioned), it depicted Bunter, clad in pyjamas and blazer, in the pantry at Polpelly. Laid out before him, revealed in the light of a match he holds, are shelves upon shelves heaped with mouth-watering Christmas comestibles. As he contemplates his chances of escaping discovery should he sample the good things on display, his thoughts are revealed by the caption: 'They'll Think It Was The Cat!'

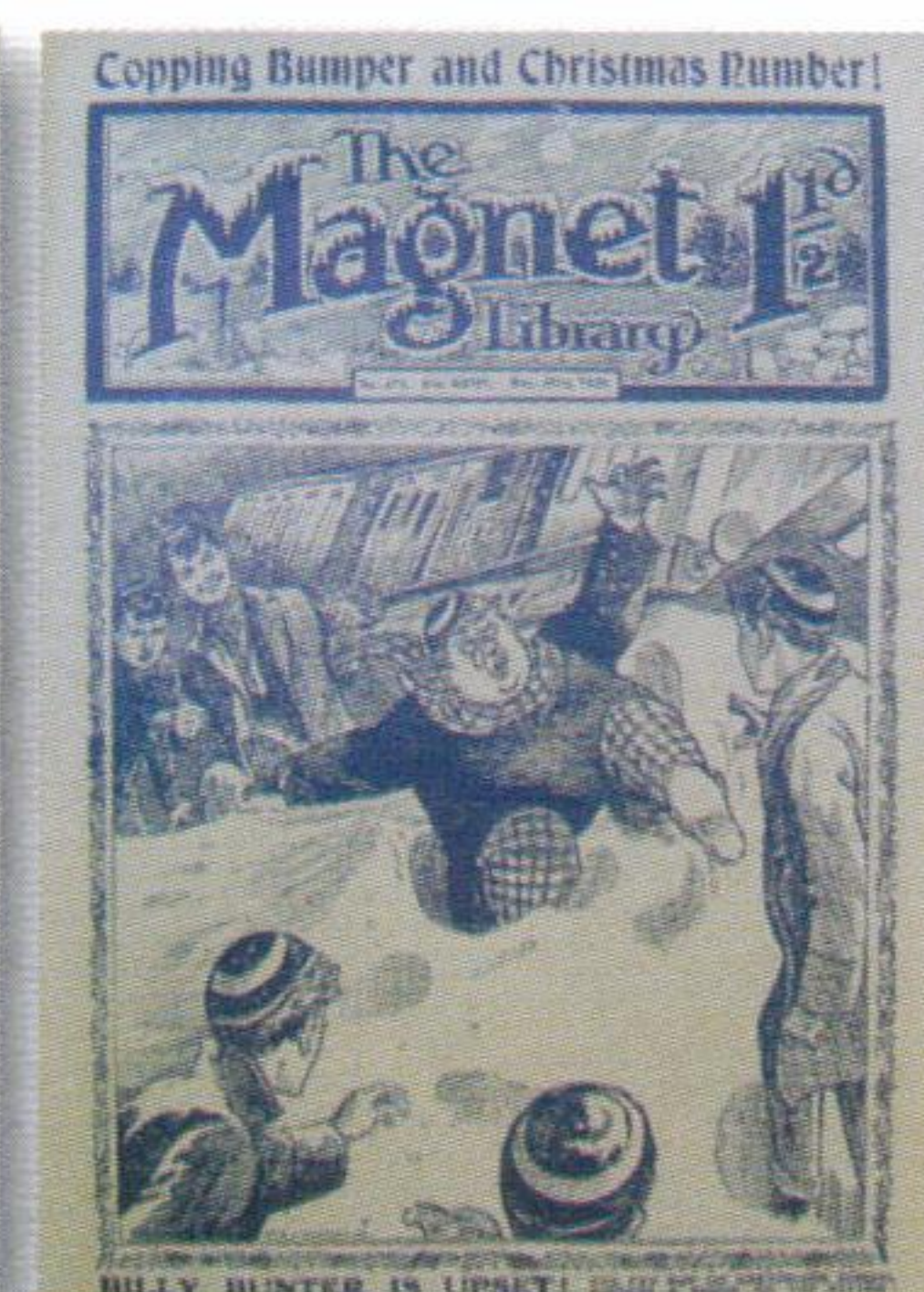
Of the *Magnet* Christmas covers from its declining years, the most memorable was that on the Grand Christmas Week Number for 1938. This came from a period when the weekly had lost its coloured cover and was printed blue on salmon-coloured paper. It depicted Bunter and other characters, resplendent in magnificent



Leonard Shields' Christmas week issue of *Magnet* for 1935 depicts the iconic figure of Bunter; as ever delighted by the prospect of so much food!

fancy dress, 'Doin' The Lambeth Walk, Oi!' The very last *Magnet* Christmas Number, dated 16 December 1939, was less impressive than most of its predecessors with hardly a nod towards the festive season. This is perhaps not surprising for War had been declared three months before and Christmas offered great uncertainty for everyone.

Magnet and *Gem* may have dominated the school story weekly market but a close contender in the popularity stakes was the *Nelson Lee Library*. Inaugurated in June 1915 the *Nelson Lee* was initially a detective story paper that quickly blossomed into a combination school and detective story weekly under the guiding hand of writer Edwy Searles Brooks. While Brooks' writing may have lacked the finesse of Charles Hamilton's best work he gave young



readers an abundance of what they wanted: thrills, spills and adventure. Brooks excelled at the mystery story (he later went on to write close to one hundred hard-backed crime novels) and when he decided to add a Christmas phantom he was at his very best.

The first Christmas number of the *Nelson Lee Library* was No. 78, 'A Christmas of Peril', a double number published in December 1916. The artwork was by Arthur Jones, an illustrator with a very individual style. Although his figure work left a lot to be desired, he had a wonderful knack of imbuing his drawing with a great sense of brooding mystery. While not having a particularly memorable central image, the cover of 'A Christmas of Peril' is beautifully designed, lettered and decorated, giving it something of the quality of an illuminated manuscript. The following Christmas, readers could revel in 'The Phantom of Tregallis Castle', another double length story with an atmospheric Arthur Jones cover design.

The *Nelson Lee Library* always suffered in comparison to *Magnet* and *Gem* due to having a smaller format. Size matters on the news stand and the *Nelson Lee* rarely looked as impressive as its larger stable-mates. Brooks countered this to some extent by using fantasy themes rarely touched upon in other boys' weeklies. An impressive example of this can be seen on the Christmas issue for 1932, the last Christmas issue in the paper's history, where the cover depicted a witch on a broomstick flying in front of a terrified schoolboy. An interior image depicted a group of boys being equally petrified by a hoard



Christmas with **Magnet**. The 1921 issue found the Greyfriars' Boys staying with Hurree Singh's uncle. The coloured cover for this Enlarged Christmas Issue was the work of R.J. Macdonald. And Billy Bunter was rarely more appealing than in the Grand Christmas Number for 1927. Even toward the end of its run the **Magnet** had some excellent covers and the 1938 issue puts the reader in truly festive mood as Bunter & Co. 'Do the Lambeth Walk'.

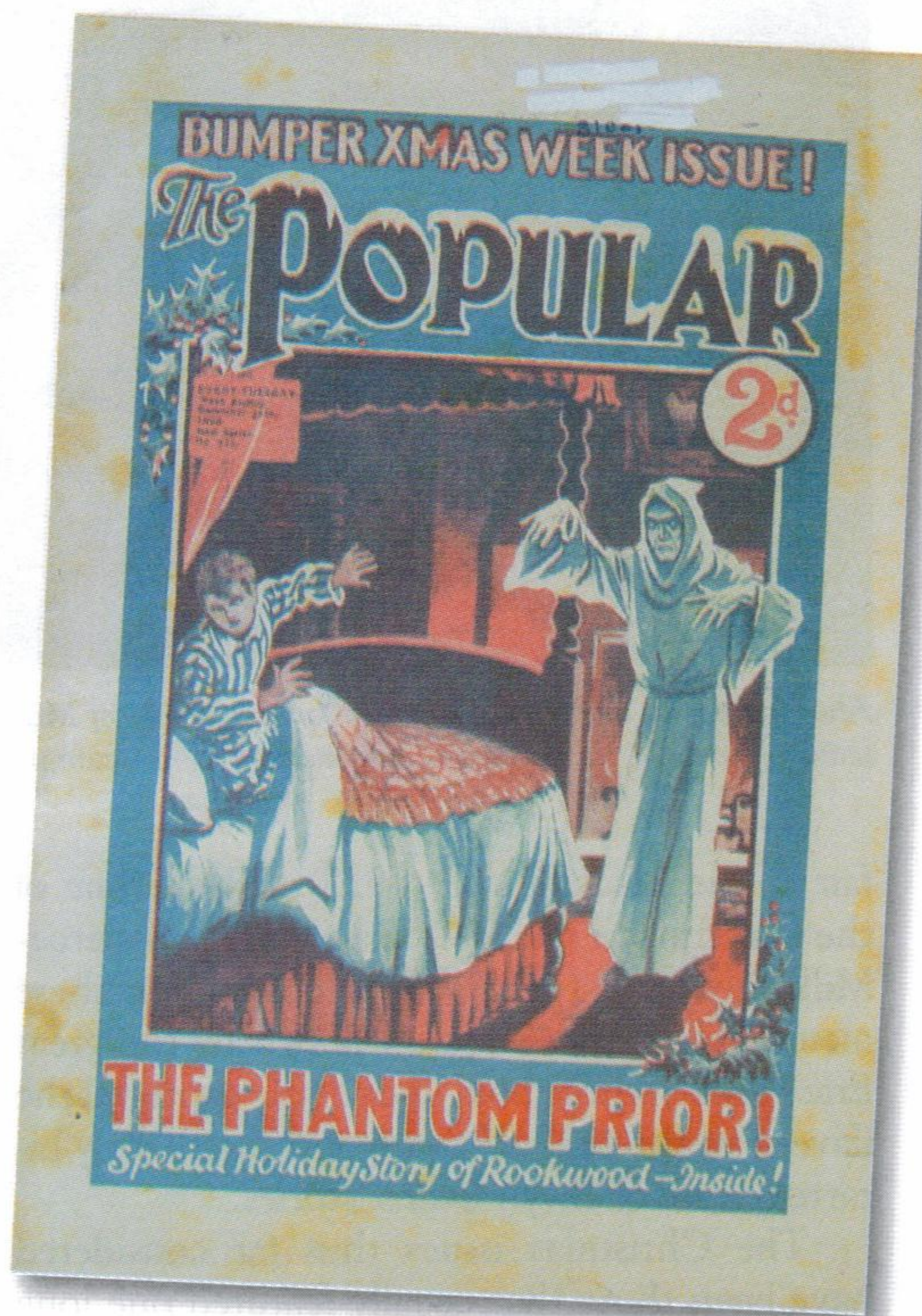


The *Nelson Lee Library* offered a mix of school and detective stories

of imps scurrying across the landscape. In usual Brooks manner both these phenomenon were glibly explained away in the final chapter.

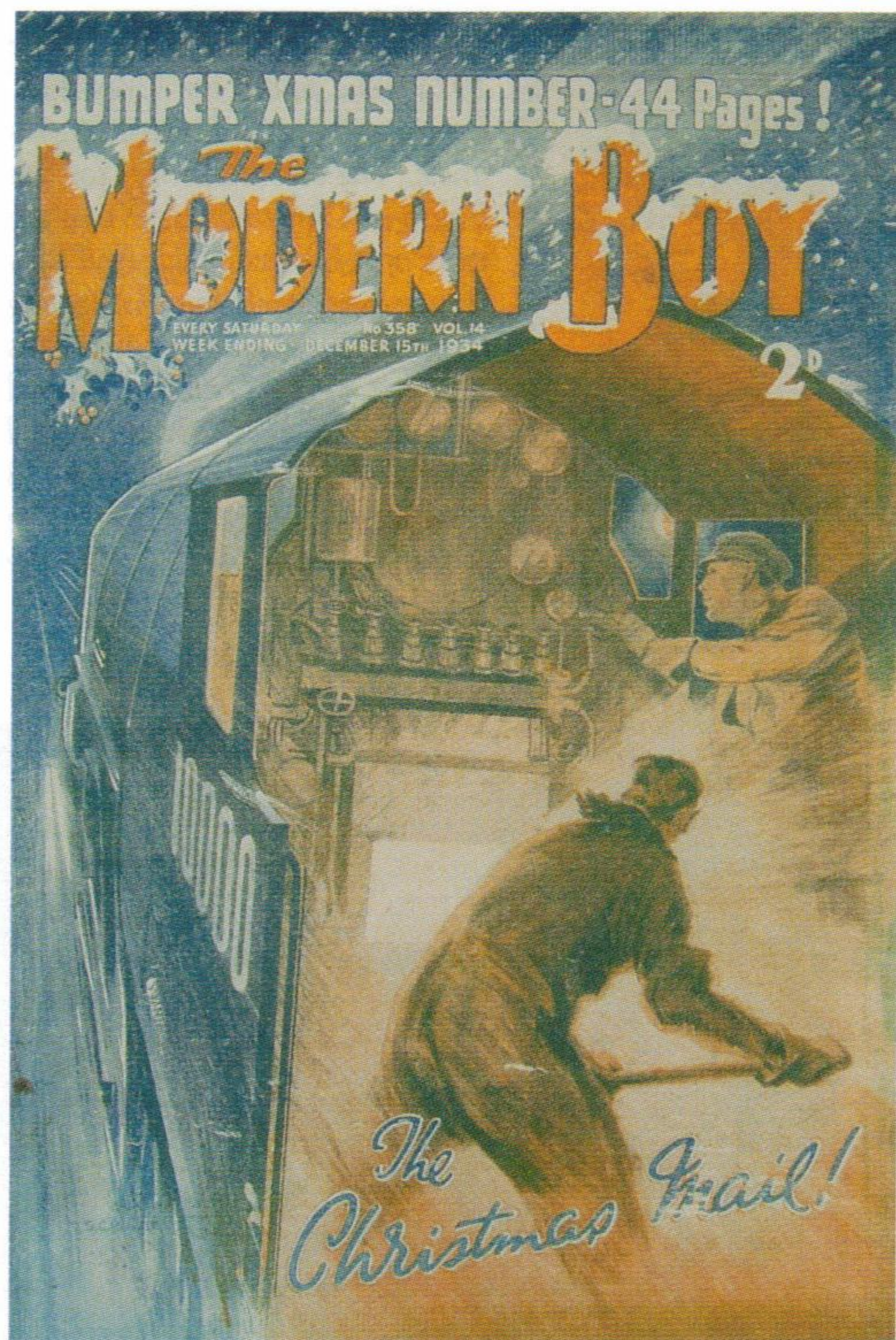
While the *Nelson Lee Library* offered a mix of school and detective stories, for the diehard detective fan who wanted full-blooded, unadulterated murder mysteries there was always the *Union Jack* starring ace detective, Sexton Blake. And this long-lived detective story weekly came very much into its own at Christmas. Many of the early Yuletide issues, however, while offering excellent fare, tended to have rather bland covers, not helped by the pink paper on which they were printed. One early double number that did boast a coloured cover was the Grand Xmas Number for 1917, 'The Peril of the Trehermes' written by Edwy Searles Brooks. As with the *Nelson Lee Library* that particular Christmas, it too was illustrated by Arthur Jones.

During the 1920s, the *Union Jack* came up with the unbeatable Christmas combination of writer Gwyn Evans and artist Eric Parker. Evans



This spooky Rookwood story was the lead item in the Christmas edition of **The Popular** in 1928.

had the capacity to write superb stories yet his mercurial nature frequently caused him to waste his talent through idleness and too great a love for the bottle. Despite the unevenness of his work in general, at Christmas he invariably came up trumps, with such stories as 'The Mystery of Mrs. Bardell's Xmas Pudding' (1925), 'The Af-



Always bang up to date, the Bumper Xmas Number of **Modern Boy** for 1931 had Santa delivering his gifts by auto gyro! In terms of artwork, the cover was outdone by 1934's steam-powered offering.

fair of the Black Carol' (1927), 'The Crime of the Christmas Tree' (1928) and 'The Mistletoe-Milk Mystery' (1929). The covers for these memorable stories were all drawn by the great Eric Parker, whose bold lines deftly captured the flavour of the festive season and the slightly bizarre nature of Gwyn Evans' stories.

The Christmas issues thus far considered have been those that usually featured one long story and one regular set of characters as their main bill of fare. A large number of story papers, however, offered their readers a mixed bag of fiction and these weeklies were every bit as good at celebrating the festive season.

Taking its inspiration – and much of its content material – from *Magnet* and *Gem*, the *Popular* repackaged stories from other Amalgamated Press papers, usually in shortened form. A typical issue might contain a Greyfriars story, a St.

Jims story, an adventure of Robin Hood and an adventure of the boys of Rookwood School. The Bumper Xmas Week Issue for 1926 was in top form with a splendid cover illustration of the 'Phantom Prior' while, two years later, the Christmas week issue bore a cover, drawn by George Wakefield, featuring another perennial favourite – the fall into the frozen lake.

Ranger, a much under-rated story paper of the 1930s, featured a novel cover on its Special Christmas Number for 1932. Here Santa Claus, instead of travelling in a sledge pulled by reindeer, is comfortably perched inside a giant nest whilst being whisked on his travels by a trio of eagles, which he is encouraging through the sky with the aid of a tasty steak on the end of a rod and line! Equally unusual was the cover of the 1941 *Champion* Christmas issue that depicted a football match with a turkey snatching the ball as it heads for the goal.

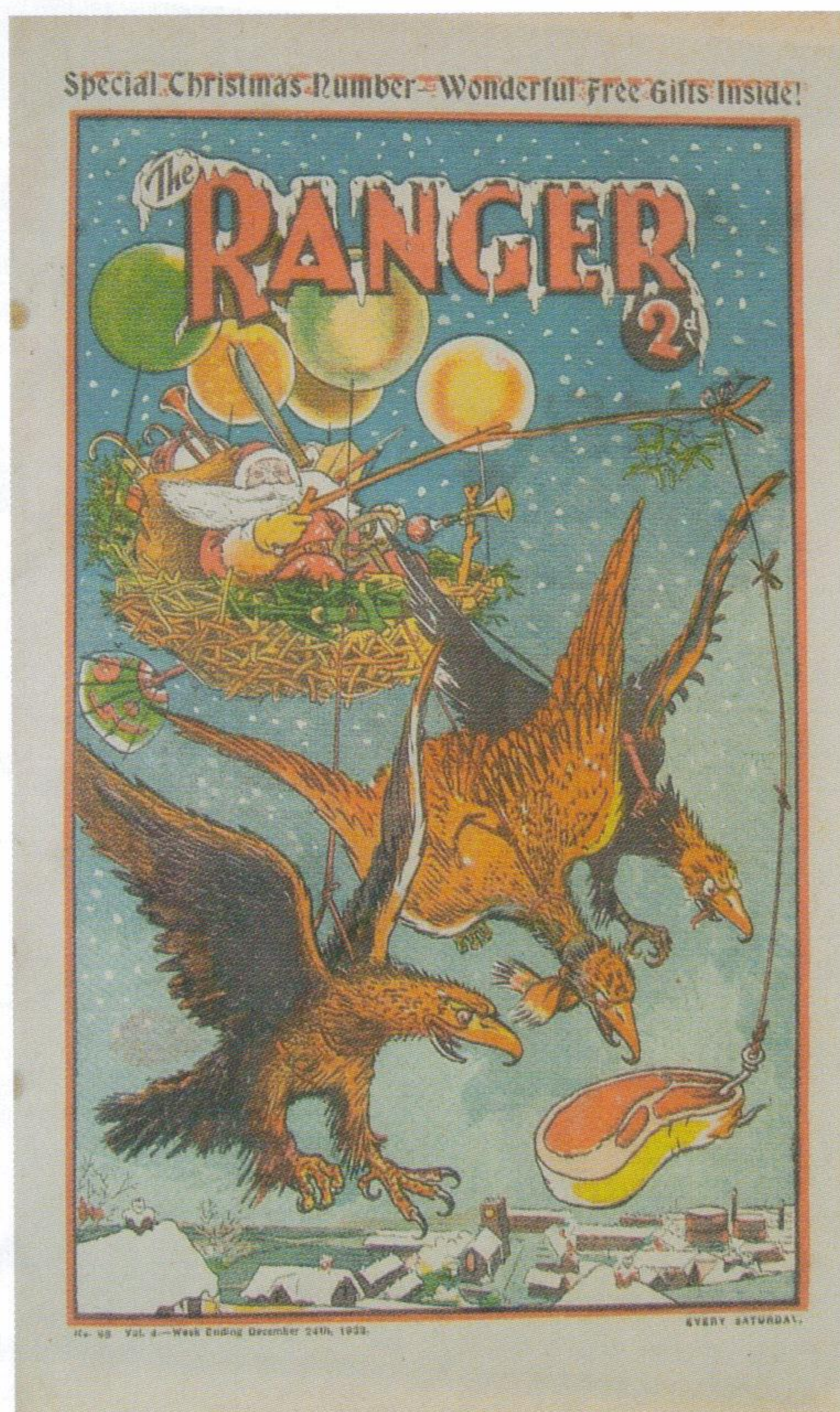
One of the most 'go ahead' weeklies of the late 1920s and 1930s was *Modern Boy* and, while its Christmas issues retained the obligatory snow, they usually dispensed with phantoms in favour of up-to-the-minute transport. The cover of the Great Christmas Number for 1930 depicted schoolboys arriving home for the holidays by motor bike and side-car, towing a further group of friends on a sledge. The following year's cover was even more high-tec with Father Christmas arriving to dispense his presents by auto-gyro. The Bumper Xmas Number for 1934 may have had Mickey Mouse on the back and Biggles inside but the front cover was reserved for that great icon of every pre-war schoolboy, the railway engine. 'The Christmas Mail' train is depicted in all its glory, roaring through the snow-covered night.



Between 1900 and the start of WWII hundreds of weekly story papers came and went

So far we have looked at the Christmas issues of the weekly story papers but monthly magazines for boys often made even more of their festive covers than their cheaper rivals. Invariably printed on better quality stock their Christmas covers were often truly glorious. With the extra space available, usually over one hundred pages, they could offer a huge range of festive stories and features.

For some reason the monthlies were keen on depicting highwaymen on the covers of their Christmas numbers. The *Captain* for December 1913 featured a laughing highwayman in a snow-covered landscape, stagecoach driving off in the background. Inside, 'Black Dick's Wager' by W. Bourne Cooke, reveals that the



The under-rated **Ranger** had this charming cover, by an un-named artist, on its 1932 Christmas Number.

robbery was just a merry prank. Both cover and story were well illustrated by John de Walton. That other ingredient, the ghost story, already seen as being so vital to many *Magnet* and *Gem* Christmas stories, was also present in this issue. 'Boo to a Goose!' by the aptly named Richard Bird, was a school story in which the main character had to prove he was not a 'rotten funk'. Special Christmas features included 'Winter Sports at the Zoo', written and illustrated by L.R. Brightwell, F.Z.S., and the fascinating 'Our Christmas Bookshelf', which reviewed, together with illustrations of the covers, no less than 21 books for boys – and even one for girls ('Dodo's Schooldays' by Kathlyn Rhodes).



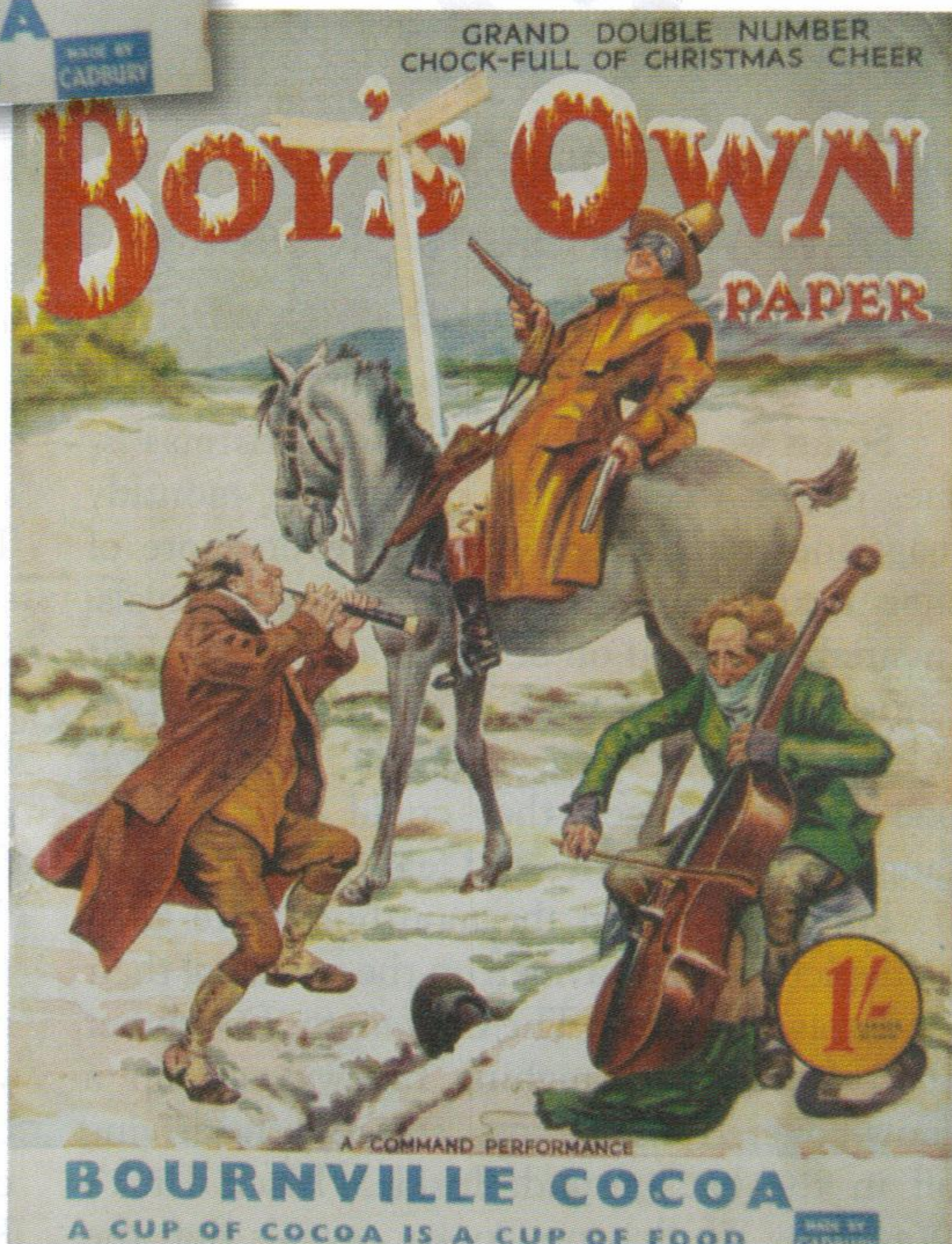
The traditional snow-covered landscapes from two issues of the **Boy's Own Paper**. Can anyone remember the last white Christmas?

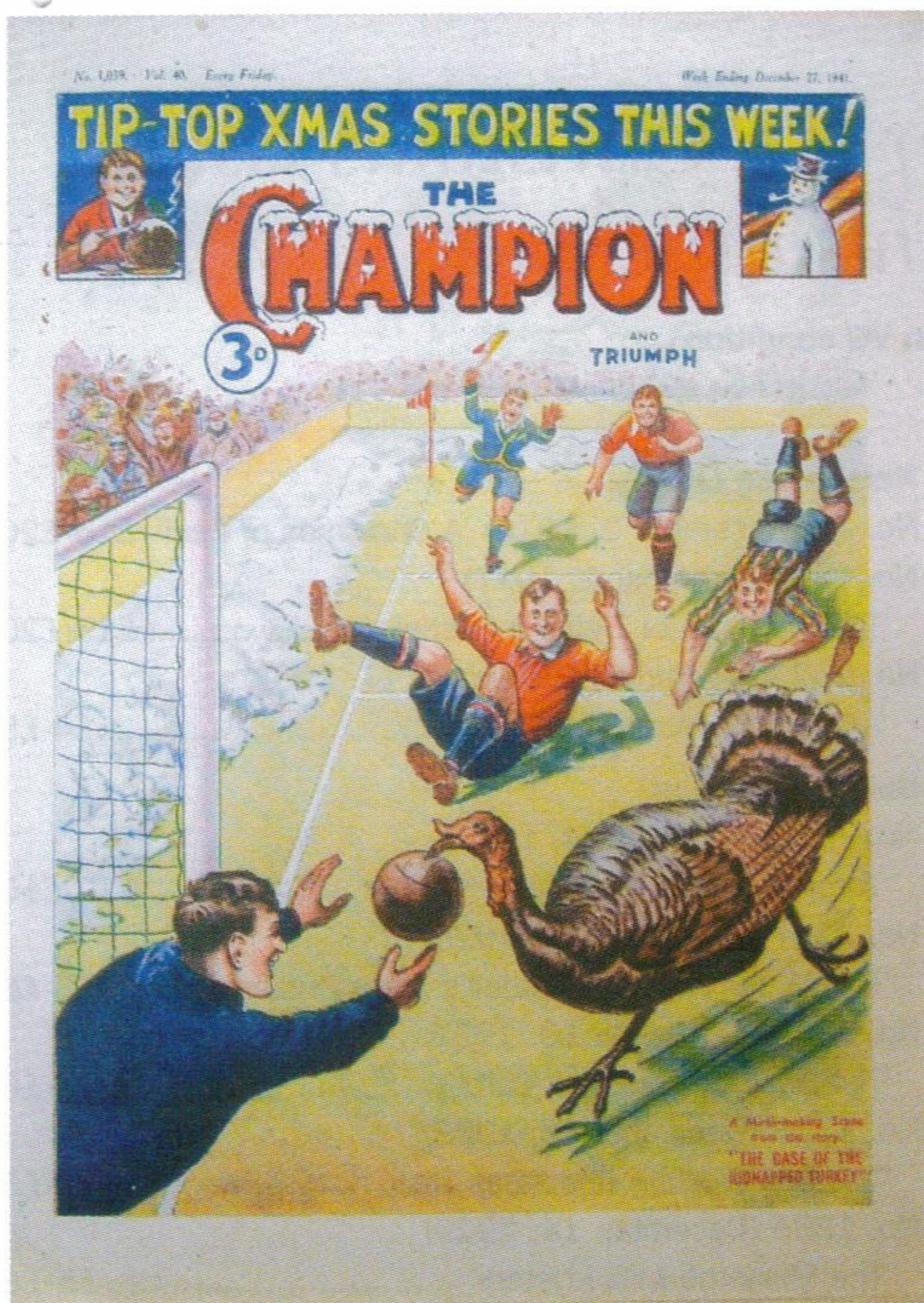
The Christmas issue of the *Boy's Own Paper* for 1937 not only has a splendid Yuletide cover, thick with snow and festive cheer, but contained many seasonal delights inside. Prominent among them were 'Poacher's Pie, An old English Christmas Story', written by Wallace Carr and illustrated by the great Cecil Glossop; 'Prederoy's Sword', a school ghost story by John Lea and illustrated by Kenneth Brookes; and the highwayman story, 'The Magistrate's Guest, A Tale of the Olden Days' by F.W. Gumley and illustrated by Ernest Briscoe.

For the following year's Seasonal offering, readers of the *Boy's Own Paper* were treated to a traditional highwayman cover entitled 'A Command Performance', in

which the mounted robber is commanding a duo of musicians to play him a merry tune. All set, of course, in a snow-covered landscape. The contents once again contain the traditional ghost story, 'December Drums' by Geoffrey Trease, and the no less traditional highwayman tale, 'Knights-Errant' by Wallace Carr, splendidly illustrated by Cecil Glossop, as well as 'White Silence', a story of 'A Christmas in the Frozen Wastes', by Edmund Burton. The editor of B.O.P., Robert Harding, makes sure his work is well advertised with a profusely illustrated page of 'Christmas Gift Books', all but one being stories of adventure set 'on the outposts of our Empire'.

Third of the 'high class' monthlies for boys was *Chums*. Unlike *Boy's Own Paper*, *Chums* was not noted for the seasonal content of its Christmas issues but it more than made up for this fail-





A bizarre offering from **The Champion**, home to the ever-smiling sporting whiz 'Danny of the Dazzlers'.

ing with some wonderful festive covers. Apart from the snow-covered lettering, the December 1931 issue of *Chums* (the 'Empire Christmas Number', with its strongly patriotic cover featuring John Bull and two Union Jack flags) showed little in the way of festive cheer but the following year's issue featured a marvellous Christmas cover of an 18th century night watchman walking away from a coaching inn, the passengers embarking in the background, while two boys lie in wait for him, snowballs in hand.

It was the *Chums Christmas Number* for 1933 that surpassed them all and must stand as one of the very best of all the Yuletide covers for the pre-war boys' story papers. It is an extremely busy scene of a coach laden with passengers and luggage arriving in the inn yard. The landlord stands in the lighted doorway ready to receive all the guests; a tankard of ale is being brought out for one traveller while another is gallantly helping a young lady from the coach; and carol-

lers are singing heartily, not realising they are about to be pelted with snowballs. There is so much vigour and action in this picture – the coachman all the while is struggling, with the help of the ostler, to hold the horses still – and yet the composition is masterly. As with the other two *Chums* issues mentioned, this cover was by Cecil Glossop and ranks among his very best work.

Between 1900 and the start of the Second World War hundreds of weekly story papers came and went and the majority made the most of the festive season in their content as well as in their snow-laden covers. In this brief survey of Christmas issues we have merely scraped the surface in an attempt to whet the reader's appetite and to show something of the variety and quality of the Christmas issues of these papers and especially the splendidly evocative artwork to be found on their covers. Those papers discussed here are essentially a selection of some of our own favourites and there are many more of these ephemeral publications waiting for the collector to discover.



A 'Grand Christmas Double Number' for **Magnet Readers**.

Selective Price Guide for the Christmas issues featured in this article.

Prices for copies in VG condition

Published by The Amalgamated Press

Gem

- No. 37 'Tom Merry's Christmas'
(November 19, 1907) £15-£20
- No. 41 (New Series) 'The Ghost of St. Jims'
(November 18, 1908) £15-£20
- No. 197 'The Ghost of St. Jims'
(November 11, 1911) £15-£20
- No. 302 'The Mystery of the Painted Room'
(November 22, 1913) £15-£20
- No. 724 'Lord Eastwood's Christmas Party'
(December 24, 1921) £6-£8

Magnet

- No. 200 'Wingate's Folly' (December 9, 1911) £15-£20
- No. 461 'The House on the Heath'
(December 9, 1916) £10-£15
- No. 672 'Harry Wharton's Trust'
(December 25, 1920) £10-£12
- No. 723 'The Mystery of the Christmas Candles'
(December 17, 1921) £10-£12
- No. 880 'Harry Wharton's Christmas'
(December 20, 1924) £7-£9
- No. 931 'Loder's Last Chance'
(December 12, 1925) £7-£9
- No. 1036 'Bunter's Christmas Present'
(December 24, 1927) £7-£9
- No. 1139 'Quelchy's Christmas Present'
(December 14, 1929) £7-£9
- No. 1244 'The Ghost of Mauleverer Towers'
(December 19, 1931) £7-£9
- No. 1348 'Bunter the Bully' (December 16, 1933) £5-£7
- No. 1453 'The Spectre of Polpelly'
(December 21, 1935) £5-£7
- No. 1454 'The House of Mystery'
(December 28, 1935) £5-£7
- No. 1611 'A Baffling Quest' (December 31, 1938) £4-£6
- No. 1661 'The Phantom of the Moat House'
(December 16, 1939) £4-£6

The Schoolboys Own Library

- No. 90 (December 6, 1928)
'The Ghost of St. Jims' £8-£10

Nelson Lee Library

- No. 78 (December 2, 1916) 'A Christmas of Peril' £15-£20
- No. 130 (December 1, 1917)
'The Phantom of Tregallis Castle' £15-£20
- No. 152 (new Series) (December 17, 1932)
'Archie's Christmas Party' £4-£5

Union Jack

- No. 737 (November 24, 1917)
'The Peril of the Trehermes' £12-£15
- No. 1157 (December 12, 1925)
'The Mystery of Mrs. Bardell's Xmas Pudding' £5-£6
- No. 1260 (December 10, 1927)
'The Affair of the Black Carol' £5-£6
- No. 1313 (December 15, 1928)
'The Crime of the Christmas Tree' £5-£6
- No. 1365 (December 14, 1929)
'The Mistletoe-Milk Mystery' £5-£6

Popular

- No. 413 (December 25, 1926) £4-£5
- No. 517 (December 22, 1928) £4-£5

Ranger

- No. 98 (December 24, 1932) £6-£8

Champion

- No. 1039 (December 27, 1941) £5-£6

Modern Boy

- No. 149 (December 13, 1930) £12-£15
- No. 201 (December 12, 1931) £12-£15
- No. 358 (December 15, 1934) £12-£15

Published by George Newnes

Captain

- December 1913 £6-£10

Published by Religious Tract Society

Boy's Own Paper

- December 1937 £6-£10
- December 1938 £6-£10

Published by Cassells

Chums

- December 1931 £8-£12
- December 1932 £8-£12
- December 1933 £8-£12

