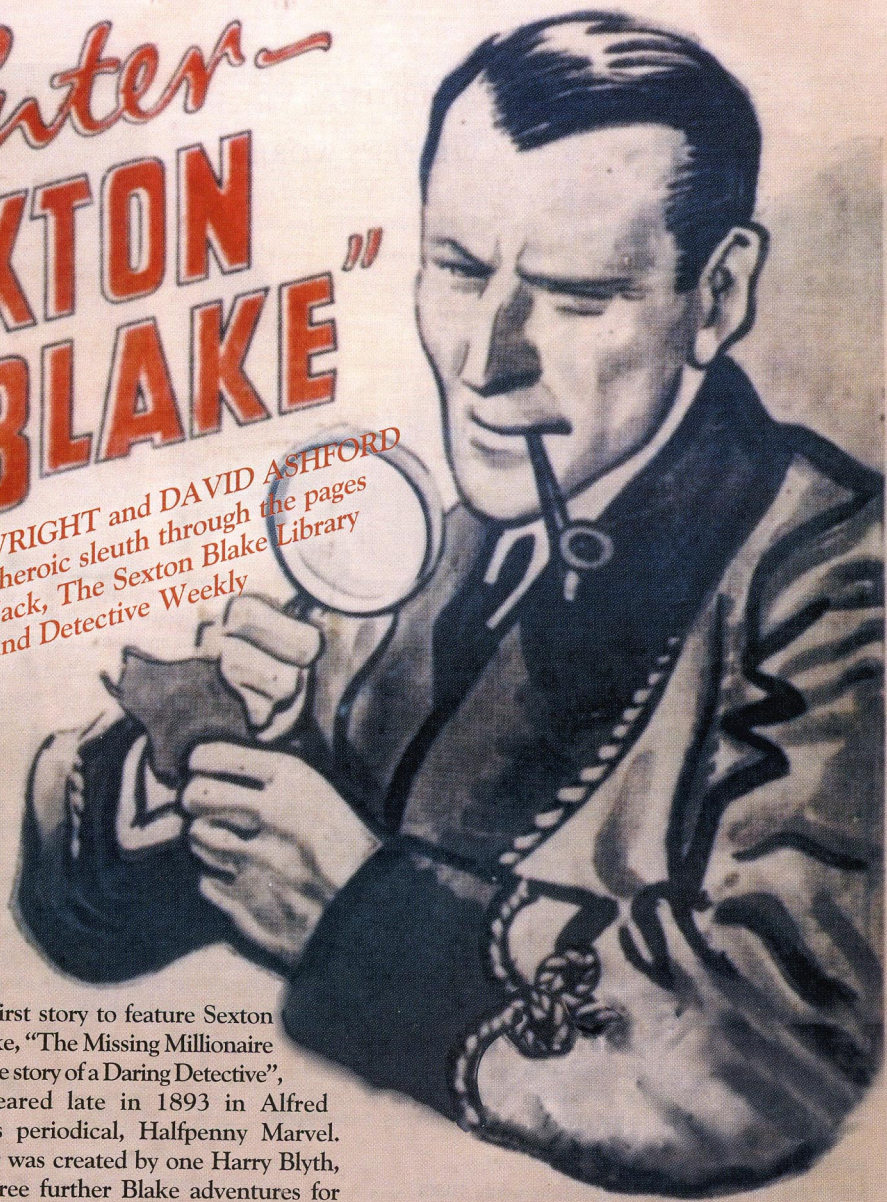


"Enter- SEXTON BLAKE"

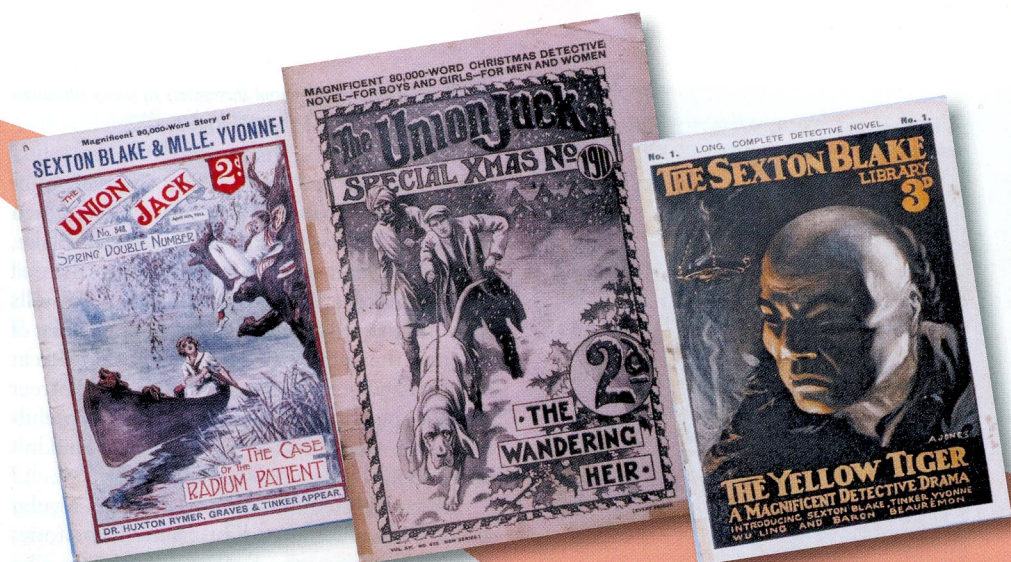
NORMAN WRIGHT and DAVID ASHFORD
follow our heroic sleuth through the pages
of *Union Jack*, *The Sexton Blake Library*
and *Detective Weekly*



The first story to feature Sexton Blake, "The Missing Millionaire - The story of a Daring Detective", appeared late in 1893 in Alfred Harmsworth's periodical, *Halfpenny Marvel*. The character was created by one Harry Blyth, who wrote three further Blake adventures for the weekly, three under the pen name of Hal Meredith and one under his own name. Little is known of the creator of this detective legend other than that he was a freelance journalist and that he had been commissioned to write the series for the *Halfpenny Marvel* as a result of a series of crime articles he had written for the *Sunday People*. As it turned out Harmsworth got an incredibly good bargain.

The nine guinea fee Blyth received for the first story included payment for the copyright of the character and, over the decades, Blake must have earned for the company a small fortune!

In addition to the four Blake adventures for the *Halfpenny Marvel*, Harry Blyth also penned two stories of the detective for the *Union Jack*, a companion paper, launched in April 1894. Over



Left & Middle; Two Union Jack double numbers from Christmas 1911 and Spring 1914 – each with an 80,000 word story. Right; The scarce first issue of the 'Sexton Blake Library', with its atmospheric Arthur Jones cover art.

the decades Blake's exploits have appeared in numerous publications but the *Union Jack* was the first of three main periodicals within which Sexton Blake thrived and prospered. In this article we will focus our attention on the Sexton Blake detective triumvirate: *Union Jack*, *The Sexton Blake Library* and *Detective Weekly*.

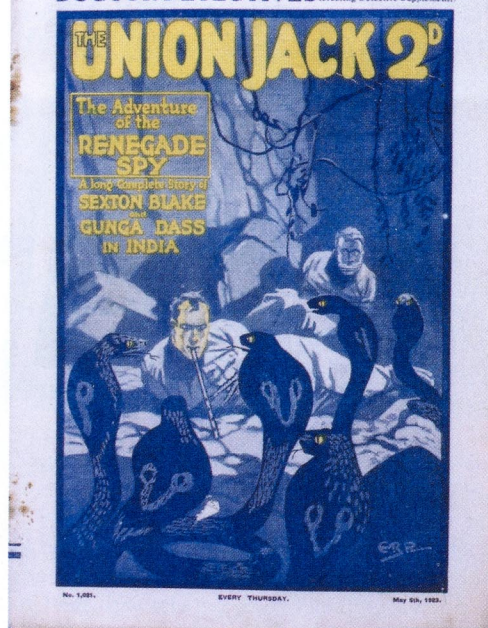
"Sexton Blake - Detective" appeared in *Union Jack* (original series) number 2 in May, 1894, but for the next eight years his adventures featured only spasmodically throughout the run of the halfpenny series of the weekly. However, when *Union Jack* increased in size and price late in 1903, Blake's appearances became more frequent and, from number 95, he became the paper's resident detective, featuring in every issue until its metamorphosis into *Detective Weekly* in 1933. In those early adventures, when the weekly sported a pink cover and was crammed with incredibly tiny print, Blake was very much the Edwardian gentleman, the stories and characters offering a fascinating insight into the period.

Blake had a number of assistants in his early cases but it was in *Union Jack* number 53, dated 15th of October, 1904, in a story entitled "Cunning Against Skill", that we first read of his definitive assistant: Tinker, a tough, wiry Cockney lad with plenty of common sense and a strong right

hook. It was not long before Tinker became as indispensable to Sexton Blake as Dr. Watson was to Sherlock Holmes. Very popular with the *Union Jack's* predominantly juvenile readers, Tinker could drive any type of motor vehicle, ride a motor bike, a horse, and even pilot an aeroplane, as well as looking after the more mundane jobs such as pasting the cuttings into Blake's index.

**Try as they
might, the scum
of the underworld
could not
destroy him**

One of the hallmarks of the Blake stories in *Union Jack*, *Detective Weekly* and *The Sexton Blake Library* was that they were invariably bang up to date and any new invention was quickly incorporated into the stories. Sexton Blake was one of the first fictional detectives to forsake horsepower for the petrol engine. Although throughout the Edwardian era he was frequently



Blake and Tinker often found themselves in sticky situations as in this 1923 *Union Jack* cover by Eric Parker.

finest roles was in “Pedro Takes Charge”, published in the *Union Jack* in May, 1926, when through his efforts the day was saved - for Blake, Tinker, England and the Empire. When the evil conspirators are finally rounded up, Blake tells them that they “committed the fatal mistake of ignoring the third member of our Baker Street manage. I refer to Pedro!” Blake’s Fleet Street ally, the splendidly named “Splash” Page, ruefully comments that it is a pity that Pedro couldn’t be interviewed for his newspaper!

Blake frequently worked with the regular police force. In the earliest *Union Jack* stories Will Spearing was the Scotland Yard man who figured most frequently but probably the best, and certainly the most fondly remembered, was the bluff Inspector Coutts and many stories in all three publications began with him sitting in Blake’s consulting room baffled by some mystery and seeking the detective’s advice. He and Tinker would often indulge in friendly banter, each trying to get the better of the other.

Most of the stories that featured in *Union Jack* were between thirty and forty thousand words in length, with the occasional extra long tale appearing in one of the ‘Double Numbers’ that were a feature of boys’ papers before the First World War. It became apparent that many readers preferred the extra long Blake stories and to accommodate this demand book length adventures of the detective began appearing irregularly in issues of the monthly *Boys’ Friend Library* (see BMC 235). Noting the popularity of these long stories, William H. Back, the managing editor at the Amalgamated Press who had been responsible for the detective appearing weekly in *Union Jack*, proposed launching a regular monthly *Sexton Blake Library* that would offer readers 50,000 word stories that they could really get their teeth into.

The title of the first issue, published on 20th September, 1915, was “The Yellow Tiger”. It was written by G.H. Teed, probably the most popular Blake author of the time, and featured one of his super-villains, Prince Wu Ling, a Chi-

jumping into a hansom cab, by the time Tinker joined him in 1904, he was breaking through road-blocks in a fast car and rushing through quiet villages on a motor-bike.

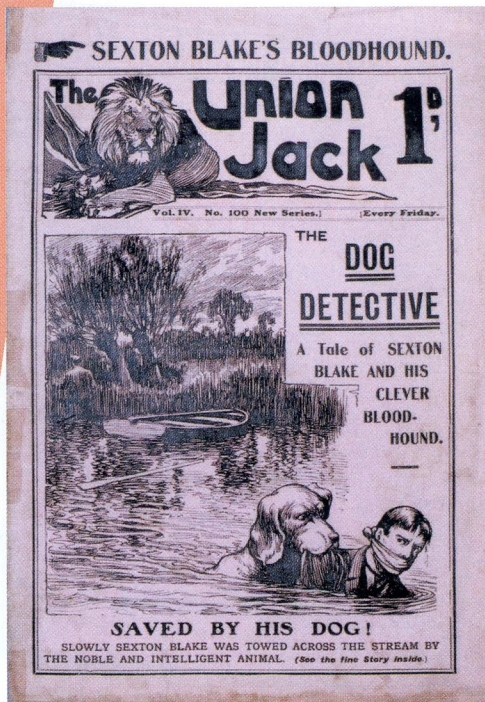
In 1905 two memorable, and permanent, characters made their debut in the saga. The first was Mrs. Martha Bardell, Blake’s garrulous housekeeper, who first appeared in “The House of Mystery” in September, 1905, and was still keeping a motherly eye on her “two gentlemen” almost sixty years later. She was created by the prolific William Murray Graydon but her finest hours were in stories by the great Gwyn Evans, who rounded out her character, made much of her propensity for malapropism, and gave her almost starring roles in a number of memorable Christmas stories during the 1920s when *Union Jack* sported a coloured cover was at the peak of its popularity.

Another important member of the Blake ‘family’ was Pedro, the pure-bred bloodhound, who arrived a few weeks after Mrs. Bardell in *Union Jack* number 100, in a story aptly entitled, “The Dog Detective”. One of the bloodhound’s

nese mandarin bent on world domination. "The Yellow Tiger" is something of a legend amongst collectors, with only a handful of original copies known to exist. A VG copy will cost the collector in the region of £75. Fortunately for those with limited funds who wish simply to read the story, a volume comprising the first four issues of the *Sexton Blake Library* was reprinted by Hawk Books in 1989 with a long introduction by one of the present writers.

1915 was a risky year in which to start a new, rather expensive publication and it says a lot for Blake's pulling power that the *Sexton Blake Library* flourished so successfully. Within two years the number of monthly issues had risen to two; later four and, for a short time, even five issues per month. For a while the *Library* enjoyed 120 pages per issue but, with the shortage of paper caused by the Great War, this was reduced to 64 pages. This page count was retained throughout the *Library's* long run, apart from during its Golden Age in the thirties when it grew to a substantial 96 pages. With the Amalgamated Press distributing their publications throughout the English-speaking world Sexton Blake became a truly international star.

Initially Sexton Blake had appeared very much in the shadow of Conan Doyle's super-sleuth but, as the decades passed, the myriad authors responsible for chronicling his exploits developed the detective into a more dynamic character. While still retaining most of Holmes' cerebral characteristics, when it came to dealing with the threat of sudden death Sexton Blake left Sherlock Holmes standing. Blake's consti-

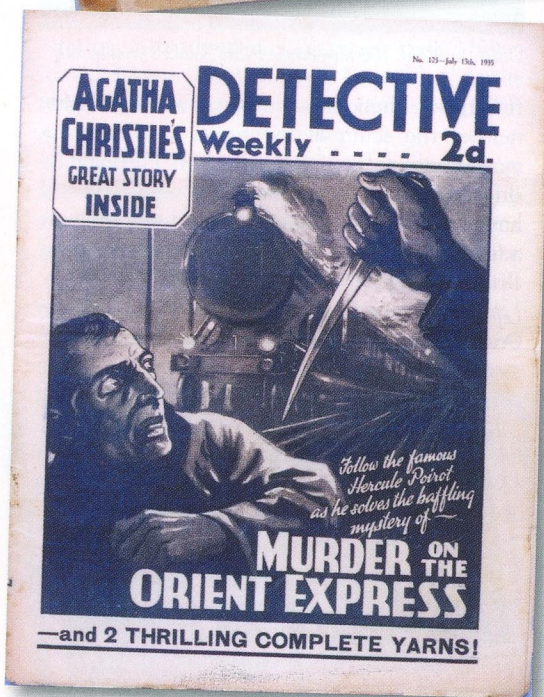


Union Jack No. 100 introduced Pedro, Blake's wonder dog.

tution was phenomenal and, try as they might, neither the scum of the underworld nor the master criminals could destroy him. He could be slugged and left in a cellar for a week and still have the energy to dispatch half a dozen thugs in a fistfight. The appeal of Blake was summed up

Left: The first Union Jack to regularly bear a coloured cover, October 1920. Right: A striking cover from 1923.





SBL New Series (2nd series) No. 1 1925. As with 'The Yellow Tiger' this tale was written by G.H. Teed. 'Get me Scotland Yard - Quick!' Detective Weekly No. 1 Feb 1933, bears a wonderful Eric Parker cover. In 1935 Murder on the Orient Express was serialised in Detective Weekly. Copies are now highly collectable. Even in 1936 stocking tops helped sell the SBL! Artwork again by Eric Parker.

well in an advertisement for the *Union Jack* that appeared in the *Sexton Blake Library* :

Sexton Blake!

You could say that name anywhere in the world where English is spoken and be sure of it being recognised - with pleasure. For Sexton Blake has become a household word, a symbol for the glamour and thrills we look for in a detective story.

A Sexton Blake story means something really first-class in the way of detective fiction. And you can get one every week! Stories that get you really worked up with excitement, stories in which baffling mystery, non-stop action, brilliant deduction and thrills are welded into one masterly whole by expert authors...

His adversaries invented vile tortures

All the deductive logic and atmospheric sense of mystery to be found in the Sherlock Holmes stories were combined in the Blake tales, together with a great sense of pace, terrific bursts of action, and plenty of novel twists. The characters were larger than life and the stories were often bizarre in the extreme, but the quality of writing was amazingly high. The Blake writers had style, their stories frequently full of striking passages painting an atmospheric picture of mystery and fear.

Nothing ordinary ever seemed to happen to Sexton Blake. His adversaries specialised in the more subtle arts of dealing death and invented all sorts of vile tortures and unpleasant endings for Tinker and himself. It was all in a day's work for the pair to find themselves bound and gagged in a room filling with poisonous gas or in a pit full of all manner of horrors. Death by circular saw, death ray, packs of starved rats, venomous snakes, being roasted alive, lowered into tanks of man-eating sharks or simply being flung into the London sewers or the River Thames: it was all in a day's work for Blake and Tinker.

In the formative years of the Blake saga in *Union Jack*, many artists contributed illustrations

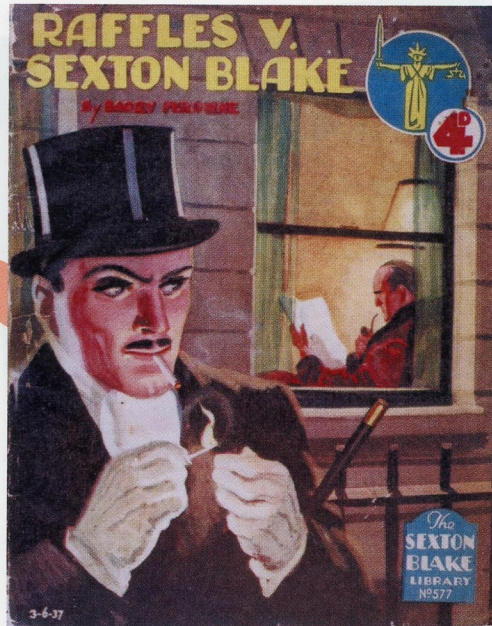
to accompany the detective's exploits. A number of the very early stories had crudely-drawn pictures which, one has to say, often matched the poor quality of the stories but, as the standard of the adventures improved more care was taken over the artists selected to illustrate Blake's adventures.

One of the first artists who could be called a "Blake regular" was E.E. Briscoe whose illustrations were invariably rather static and unsuited to the mystery genre. Far more suitable were the action-packed drawings of Harry Lane, who usually managed to convey a fine sense of the mysterious. In *Union Jack* no. 1000 (a scarce issue that presented readers with a coloured art-plate depicting Blake), the paper's editor, Harold Twyman, praised a number of the artists who had contributed to the saga. He praised H.M. Lewis' "bold and graceful line work" and commented that the style of Val Reading ("Val") "is varied, and his pictures are full of action and 'go'".

Fred Bennett, Sid Pride, A.J. Valda and a number of other, anonymous, illustrators contributed to the *Union Jack* during the early 1920s but probably the most influential of the early Blake artists was Arthur Jones, of whom editor Twyman wrote, "His hobby is his work". Jones was certainly prolific throughout the quarter century from 1915 to 1939 when he poured out an almost continuous stream of darkly-brooding cover illustrations for a range of Amalgamated Press papers. Jones' work is instantly recognisable, his compositions usually achieving a spine-tingling atmosphere of mystery and menace.

Although Arthur Jones drew for the *Union Jack*, it was his series of cover illustrations for the *Sexton Blake Library* that really gave him the opportunity to develop his unique style and complement the eerie tales of mystery that were such a feature of the monthly issues during the 1920s. It was a wise move on the part of "Willie" Back to choose Jones to paint the cover for that memorable first issue, "The Yellow Tiger". Jones went on to paint over 500 covers for the *Sexton Blake Library*.

In 1922, Harold Twyman began to use the work of a young artist named Eric Parker in



Above Right; 'Raffles V Sexton Blake' published in 1937 was the first of only three Raffles stories in the SBL.
Above Left; A typically bold cover, used in March 1938.

Union Jack. By the mid-1920s, Parker was illustrating more Blake stories in the paper than any other artist. He portrayed the detective along the lines of Sidney Paget's Holmes, with hawk-like chin and high forehead, but he also gave him a glint in his eye and a lithe, panther-like quality that boded ill for any criminal who crossed his path. In 1929 Parker began to paint the covers for the *Sexton Blake Library* and, over the next thirty years, he was to produce almost 900 covers for the publication, establishing the definitive image of the detective and his world (for a full account of Parker's work see BMC 218).

In 1925 the *Sexton Blake Library* began its 'second series'. No immediate differences could

**"Get me Scotland
Yard, quick."**

be discerned but, as the decade progressed, the *Library* entered its 'golden age'. The 1930s was very much the decade of the detective story and the *Sexton Blake Library* was fortunate in being served by many first class writers. Stories of the very highest quality featured within its pages. Old favourites like G.H. Teed and William M. Graydon continued to contribute while other writers of the calibre of E.S. Brooks, Gwyn Evans, Gerald Verner, Ladbrooke Black, Rex Hardinge, Anthony Skene, John G. Brandon and Gilbert Chester joined the ranks and regularly had book-length Blake novels published. This was the decade when English country houses, rural cottages and sleepy villages became favourite settings for Blake and Tinker. During this 'golden age' too Eric Parker's cover artwork was at its peak. While all pre-war issues of the library are sought after those from the mid to late 1930s are the most desirable and are becoming increasingly difficult to find.

If Blake was lucky with his writers and illustrator he was also lucky with his editors. With Twyman at the helm of *Union Jack*, the

weekly went from strength to strength. William Back, founder editor of the *Sexton Blake Library*, looked set for a long and successful reign and his sudden death in 1922 was a blow. The *Library* was taken over by William Home Gall for a short time and then by Leonard Pratt, who carried it through its golden years of the mid and late 1930s and continued in the editorial chair until 1954.

In 1933 *Union Jack* was considered to look old-fashioned and was given a face-lift and re-titled *Detective Weekly*. The pages and the type-face were both slightly enlarged and the coloured covers replaced, initially, with black line art on a buff background. The cover of the first issue bore a splendidly atmospheric portrait of Blake sitting at his desk, gun in one hand, telephone receiver in the other. "Get Me Scotland Yard Quick" read the caption. The story was entitled "Sexton Blake's Secret" and dealt with Blake's wayward brother, Nigel. (The detective seems to have been unfortunate with his kin for one of the very first long Blake stories, "Sexton Blake's Honour", published in the *Boys Friend Library* in 1907, had also concerned a near-do-well brother!) Blake's adventures continued in *Detective Weekly* until 1935 when, for some unfathomable

reason, it was decided to drop the character in favour of stories featuring other detectives. Fortunately, the change did not last long and, in 1937, Blake made a triumphant return due to popular demand. The following year the first of four "Sexton Blake Annuals" was published and had it not been for wartime paper shortages it is likely that the annual would have continued for many years. Another casualty of the conflict was *Detective Weekly* itself, which came to an end in May 1940.

Despite the demise of *Detective Weekly*, Blake still continued to entertain thousands of readers every month in the *Sexton Blake Library*. In 1941 the *Library* began yet another 'new series'. "Raiders Passed", a novel by John Hunter, a popular and highly prolific writer, was chosen to kick off the 'third series'. Until 1947 *The Sexton Blake Library* continued to comprise 96 pages, but with issue 149 the page count was reduced to 64. Another noticeable difference between the third series and its predecessors was the gradual decline of 'serial villains'. Throughout the 1920s and '30s Blake had pitted his wits against a group of 'super villains' who regularly appeared and became almost as popular with readers as Blake and Tinker. During the third

Towards the end of its run DW had a cover make-over. This issue, from January 1939, began serialising the story of a BBC Blake radio serial.

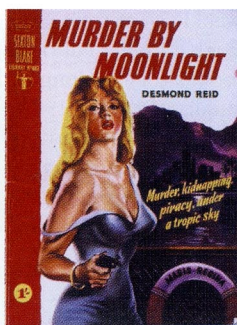
Third Series No. 1 (1941) a wartime tale by John Hunter. 1956 saw the start of the new look SBL. No 359, 'Frightened Lady', is considered first issue of the fourth series.



series of the *Sexton Blake Library* these serial villains all but disappeared, leaving Blake to pit himself against lesser crooks on a 'one off' basis.

During the early years of the 1950s the *Sexton Blake Library* reached a low ebb. The standard of stories began to decline. Editor Leonard Pratt had been a tower of strength during the *Library*'s 'golden years' but, by 1953 he seems to have been coasting towards retirement. Sales were falling and it looked as if the publication might be dropped. Many popular authors had either died or ceased writing for the *Library* and, although John Hunter and Rex Hardinge were still contributing the occasional story, the majority of the monthly adventures were being ground out by just a handful of writers. Even Eric Parker's covers were beginning to look rather lacklustre. The fact that the *Library* survived and flourished for almost another decade was due to William Howard Baker who took over as editor in 1956. He gave *The Sexton Blake Library* a completely new look, moving Blake and Tinker to swish new offices in Berkeley Square and giving the detective a female secretary. Although the numbering did not begin at '1' again, Howard Baker regarded No. 359, 'The Frightened Lady', as the first issue of the fourth series. The stories became tougher and Blake developed a more hard-boiled approach to criminals. The covers became noticeably different with long-legged blondes giving them

1963's 'The Last Tiger' from was the last of the 'library' format SBLs. 1964 saw the start of the fifth series in regular paperback format.

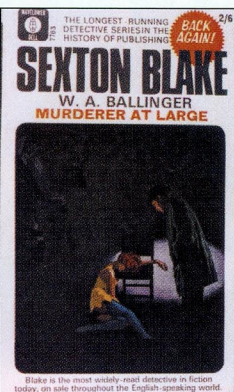
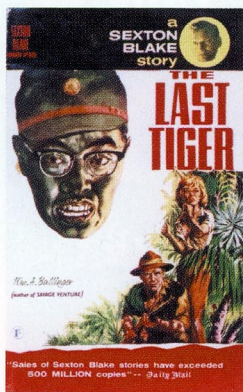


Two typically eye catching covers from the fourth series SBL - not popular with long-standing Blake fans.

eye-catching appeal.

Sexton Blake had always been at the cutting edge of change and Bill Howard Baker saw no reason to abandon the maxim of always keeping the detective ahead of the game, a philosophy that had served Blake so well for over half a century. Despite protests from long-term Blake fans, the re-vamped *Sexton Blake Library* proved popular with a new generation of readers and, under Bill Baker's guiding hand, lasted until 1963. The last issue, number 526, was entitled "The Last Tiger", in homage to the very first issue of the *Library*. If people thought this was the end of Sexton Blake, they were wrong. Two years later he bounced back in a series of regular format paperbacks, again edited by Howard Baker, and published by Mayflower Books. This 'fifth series' of the *Library* ran for 45 issues, finally coming to an end in 1968.

Sexton Blake is the longest running British fictional detective to appear in print. His exploits began in 1893 and, with a break of only two years between the end of the fourth series of the *Sexton Blake Library* and the commencement of the fifth series, were published on a regular basis from 1905 until 1968. The bulk of his best exploits were published in *Union Jack*, *Detective Weekly* and *The Sexton Blake Library* and copies of these three publications, particularly those published during the 1920s and '30s, are increasingly sought after by a growing band of collectors who have discovered the wealth of first class detective stories that can be found within their pages.



Price guide to Sexton Blake issues of Union Jack, Sexton Blake Library and Detective Weekly.

Prices are for individual copies in VG condition with their original covers.

Union Jack

(First series)

'Sexton Blake – Detective' April 1894	£20-£30
(No. 2 without covers)	£5-£8
remaining issues containing Sexton Blake stories	each £3-£4

Union Jack

(Second series)

No. 51 'Sexton Blake's Triumph' (First Blake story in 'second series')	£4-£6.
No. 53 'Cunning Against Skill' (first story featuring Tinker)	£10-£15
No. 97 'The House of Mystery' (first story featuring Mrs. Bardell)	£10-£15
No. 100 'The Dog detective' (first story featuring Pedro)	£10-£15
No. 1000 'The Thousandth Chance' (with free presentation plate)	£15-£20
No. 1000 'The Thousandth Chance' (without presentation plate)	£6-£8
Double Numbers	each: £12-£15
Other Christmas issues	each £5-£6
Other 'pink-covered' issues (up to No. 885)	each: £3-4
Other issues with coloured covers (nos. 886-1531)	each: £3.50-£4.50

Sexton Blake Library

(First series: 382 issues)

(NOTE: Author's names were not given in the first series.

Names were later discovered from publisher's records) No. 1 (1915) 'The Yellow Tiger'	£65-£75
Nos 2- 10	each: £15-£25
Issues by E.S. Brooks	each: £7-£9
Issues by G.H. Teed	each: £7-£9
Issues by Gerald Verner	each: £7-£9
Issues by W.W. Sayer	each £7-£9
Issues by G.N. Phillips	each £7-£9
Issues by Gwyn Evans	each £7-£9
Other issues	each: £6-£7

Sexton Blake Library

(Second series: 744 issues)

(NOTE: Author's names were not given at the beginning of the second series. Names were later discovered from publisher's records.

Where two names are given below the first name is the authors real name, the second is the name under which later stories in the library appeared)

No. 1 (1925) 'The Secret of the Coconut Groves'	£25-£35
Issues by E.S. Brooks	each: £7-£9
Issues by G.H. Teed	each: £7-£9
Issues by Gerald Verner/Donald Stuart	each: £7-£9
Issues by W.W. Sayer /Pierre Quiroule	each £7-£9
Issues by G.N. Phillips /Anthony Skene	each £7-£9
Issues by Gwyn Evans	each £7-£9
Issues by John Creasey	each £35-£45

Issues by Barry Perowne	each £15-£20
Other issues.	each: £6-£7

Sexton Blake Library

(Third/Fourth series: 526 issues)

(NOTE: When William Howard Baker took over the editorship of the Sexton Blake Library he considered it to be the start of the 'fourth series' but the numbering remained unchanged. Collectors therefore consider that 'the fourth series' begins with issue number 359)

No. 1 (1941) 'Raiders Passed'	£20-£25
John Creasey issues	each: £35-£45
Issues up to number 148 (last of the 96 paged issues)	each: £4-£5
Other issues between nos 149-358	each £1.50-£2.50
No. 359 'The Frightened Lady' (first issue of fourth series)	£5-£6.
No. 526 'The Last Tiger'	£5-£6
Other issues between 358-525	each:£1.50-£2.50

Sexton Blake Library

(Fifth series: 45 issues)

(NOTE: Now issued as a standard paperback) No. 1 (1965) 'Murderer at Large'.	£2-£3
Other issues between 2- 40	each £1.50-£2.50
Other issues between 41-45	each £2.50-£3.50.

Detective Weekly

(NOTE: issues up to No. 130 featured Sexton Blake in every issue. Issues from 131-250 featured other detective stories.

Blake then appeared frequently, but not every week, until issue number 309.

From issue number 310 until the final issue (No. 379) Blake featured every week)

No. 1 (1933) 'Sexton Blake's Secret'.	£15-£20
No.2 'Sexton Blake at Bay'	£10-£15
Issues by E.S. Brooks	each: £5-£6
Issues by G.H. Teed	each: £5-£6
Issues by Donald Stuart	each £5-£6
Issues by Pierre Quiroule	each £5-£6
Issues by Anthony Skene.	each £5-£6
Issues by Gwyn Evans	each £5-£6
Issues by Barry Perowne	each £5-£6
Issues by John Creasey	each £15-£25
Issues 124-129 (serialisation of 'Murder on the Orient Express').	each £5-£6
Other issues.	each £4-£5

Further reading

The Sexton Blake Index 2nd Edition edited by Duncan Harper (Privately printed 1993)	£10-£12.
Detective Weekly by Lofts & Adley (Privately printed 1987)	£4-£5
Sexton Blake A Celebration of the Great Detective by Wright & Ashford (Museum Press 1994)	£12-£15

Zenith: Prince of Chaos:The story of Anthony Skene (George Norman Philips) and his creation Zenith The Albino A Biography & Bibliography By Steve Holland (Privately printed 2002 by Norman Wright) out of print.

Gwyn Evans: A Biography & Bibliography By Steve Holland (Privately printed 2004 by Norman Wright) . . .in print £5.00 p&p paid in UK

Gerald Verner (Donald Stuart) 1897-1980 A Bibliography By Bill Bradford (Privately printed 2000 by Norman Wright) in print £2.75 p & p paid in UK

G.H. Teed (1886-1938) A Life of Adventure – A Biography & Bibliography By Steve Holland (Privately printed 2001 by Norman Wright) . . .in print £5.00 p & p paid in UK