

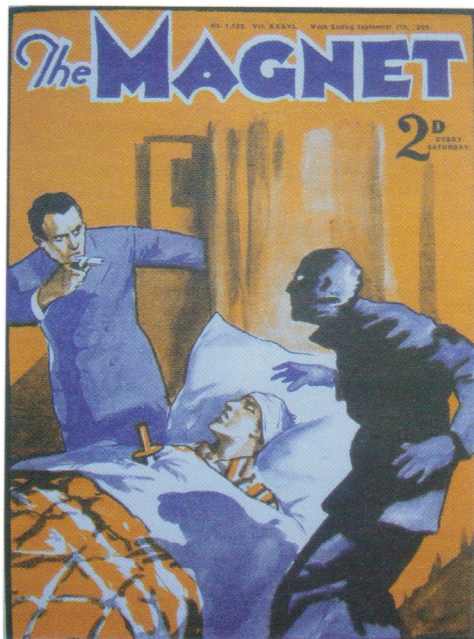
Herlock Sholmes and other detectives created by Charles Hamilton

By Norman Wright

Almost from the moment Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, others have sought to parody and pastiche the iconic Baker Street sleuth. Most efforts were single stories but, in November 1915, a series of delightful parodies began that ran to almost one hundred tales published over a period of nearly forty years. They were the work of Charles Harold St. Johns Hamilton and rank amongst the most neglected areas of his prolific output.

Charles Hamilton, better known to generations of young readers as Frank Richards and Martin Clifford, needs hardly any introduction to readers of this magazine. Born in 1876, he was the sixth child of Marian and John Hamilton. According to *The Autobiography of Frank Richards* (Skilton, 1952) - a book noted more for what it missed out than what it included - Hamilton had his first story published at the age of seventeen and from that moment on he never looked back. For someone with ambitions to be a writer Hamilton was born at just the right time. 'Education, education, education' seemed to have been as much a policy of late Victorian England as it was to become under New Labour, with most of the populace becoming literate after receiving some elementary form of schooling. Advances in technology had revolutionised mass production of cheap magazines and a burgeoning publishing industry with an eye on growing new markets was taking advantage of this to bring out a plethora of halfpenny and penny periodicals to cater to the masses.

Hamilton was a natural storyteller with an engaging writing style, a seemingly endless facility for devising plots and an ability to turn his hand to almost any type of tale that was required. His earliest yarns to be traced by Lofts and Adley (*The World of Frank Richards*, Howard Baker 1975) were sea stories for one of the growing

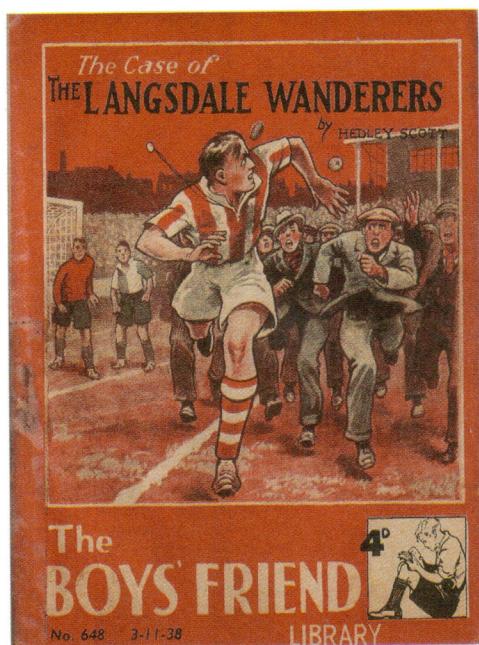


Ferrers Locke holds 'The Terror' at gunpoint on the cover of Magnet 1125, in September 1929.

number of Harmsworth Brothers publications in the 1890s, entitled 'The Slaver Captain' and 'Sunk at Sea'. For much of his working life Hamilton was to pour out stories solely for Harmsworth (later to become the Amalgamated Press) but in the formative days of his career he wrote for all and sundry.

As the new century dawned Hamilton continued to increase his output. Lofts and Adley discovered that during the first half of the first decade of the 20th century Hamilton, in addition to work for Harmsworth and others, wrote several thousand stories for the now scarcely remembered firm of Trapps Holmes. These were all written in longhand in the days before he acquired his trusty Remington typewriter!

With the creation of St. Jim's and Greyfriars in 1906 and 1908 respectively Hamilton found the genre to which he would devote much of his talent for the rest



Cover illustration to Boys Friend Library No. 648, 'The Case of the Langsdale Wanderers', a Ferrers Locke story by Hedley O'Mant, under his Hedley Scott byline, reprinted from the 1926 Magnet serial.

of his life. He honed his skills as a writer of school stories and during the 1920s and 30s was in a class of his own with few, if any, equals in the field. However, despite devoting a huge proportion of his output to school stories for more than fifty years Hamilton still managed to find the time, energy and enthusiasm to write in other fields and the detective genre is one that he seems to have particularly enjoyed.

Early in the century Hamilton had created several detectives, including 'Denham Croft' in *Funny Cuts* and 'Sedley Sharpe' in *Tom Browne's Comic Annual*, but his first enduring sleuth was Ferrers Locke. Locke was the cousin of Dr. Herbert Locke, headmaster of Greyfriars School, and he first appeared in the *Gem* in 1907. He quickly became Hamilton's detective of choice and

turned up regularly over the years at St. Jims and Greyfriars whenever a mystery needed solving. Like all self-respecting detectives of the period Locke lived in Baker Street where he must have been on at least nodding terms with several others of his calling living in the area!

Ferrers Locke was a detective in whose presence the reader could feel relaxed. He would not be taken in by smooth-talking butlers and he would never jump to obvious conclusions based solely on circumstantial evidence. He was a quietly spoken detective who watched and listened, using his guile and brainpower to build up a case. He would then wait for the most appropriate moment to pounce and trap his man. Locke invariably kept the facts close to his chest until the final dénouement. And, when combat was required, his right arm was as strong as any in the business.



Locke the thinker. Illustration from Magnet 939 in 1926.

Locke was used to perfection by Hamilton in the 1929 Ravenspur Grange series of stories in the *Magnet*, a series memorable for being one of the few in the weekly where the villain committed multiple murders. Here Locke's character is subtly drawn to show him as both a man of action and a cerebral thinker. The cover of the issue for 7 September 1929 depicts Locke, revolver levelled, covering a figure clothed from head to foot in black, who has just plunged his knife into what he believed to be the chest of the sleeping detective.

During the 1920s Locke acquired a boy assistant named Jack Drake. Drake came to prominence in a series of around eighty, rather unusual stories featuring the school ship 'Benbow', which Hamilton wrote under his Owen Conquest pen-name for the New Series of the *Greyfriars' Herald* in 1919-20. Jack then moved briefly to the remove form at Greyfriars School before becoming Locke's assistant. An expert at disguise and a sturdy fellow to have on your side in a fight, Jack Drake was an appealing character and the Ferrers Locke/Jack Drake stories became extremely popular.

As with most characters created by authors working for the Amalgamated Press, once payment had been made the characters, as well as the story, became the property of the publisher. With Locke's popularity in the ascent, the AP decided to publish full-length serials featuring the detective. Hamilton's huge workload prevented him from writing these and the job was given to Hedley O'Mant, chief sub-editor of *Magnet* and *Gem*, who, under the name of Hedley Scott, wrote a string of adventures featuring the detective and his assistant, bearing such titles as: 'The Golden Pyramid', 'The Mystery of Lone Manor' and 'The Case of the Langsdale Wanderers'. These were initially serialised in the *Magnet* and later reprinted in book form in the *Boys' Friend Library*.

Hamilton detested 'substitute' writers



The first appearance of Herlock Sholmes coloured up for use in the Hawk reprint volume.

using his characters and refused to have any dealings with O'Mant on his infrequent visits to Fleetway House. However, to be fair to O'Mant he was not the only writer using Ferrers Locke. The character was popular enough for nearly three dozen full length exploits to appear in the *Boys Friend Library* over a fourteen year period. When serials featuring the genuine article ran out the Amalgamated Press was not averse to dusting down old Sexton Blake adventures, changing the names of the lead characters and publishing them in the Library as new Ferrers Locke adventures.

Hamilton created a sleuth of a different kind for the pages of *Modern Boy* in 1935 when he wrote 'The Schoolboy Detective', featuring Len Lex. Len was sent to Oakshott School by his uncle, a Scotland Yard Detective-Inspector, to help track down a notorious crook known as 'The Sussex Man'. A second series of Len Lex stories appeared in *Modern Boy* in 1936 and some of the



The Greyfriars Herald New Series. Christmas issue for 1920.



Illustration from 'The Mystery of the Mince-Pie'. The Greyfriars Herald 25 December, 1920.

adventures were later reprinted in two issues of *The Schoolboys' Own Library*. It has to be said that there was nothing really special about this series of stories.

Perhaps the least well known of all Hamilton's detective stories are those written under his Michael Blake pen-name for the obscure firm of William C. Merrett in 1945. Merrett was one of the small publishing outfits that mushroomed at the end of the war and Hamilton wrote stories for four of their 'one shilling' series of 36-paged paperbacks. His 'Headland House' series for girls and 'Sparschott' series for boys are relatively well known amongst aficionados but his 'Romance' series, under the Winston Cardew byline and his 'Detective Series' as Michael Blake are extremely hard to find and, while Denis Gifford (*Story Paper Price Guide*, ACE 1989) suggests that four titles were published in

the series, the present writer has only ever come across No. 1: 'Death in the Dark'. This traditional country house mystery features Inspector Plummy and the private investigator, Lynch Grant. Written when Hamilton was approaching seventy years of age, it is another example of Hamilton's ability to write on demand any type of story that was required. 'Death in the Dark' was recently reprinted in a very limited edition for the Friars' Library, by Hamilton enthusiast Nandu Thalange.

Ferrers Locke and Lynch Grant may have been detectives par excellence but Hamilton's most memorable sleuth, Herlock Sholmes, was the total antithesis of 'the great detective'. 'The Adventures of Herlock Sholmes' began on 20 November 1915 in a most unusual publication, *The Greyfriars' Herald*. This was a small format weekly of twenty pages that purported to be the school

magazine of Greyfriars School, edited by Harry Wharton with contributions written by members of the Remove form. The main offerings in the first issue were 'The Pride of the Ring' by Mark Linley, 'The Swindled Schoolboy' by Harry Wharton and the first Herlock Sholmes story: 'The Adventure of the Diamond Pins' by Peter Todd. By 1915 Charles Hamilton had an extremely heavy workload, producing weekly stories for *The Magnet*, *The Gem* and *The Boys Friend*, and he could only be persuaded to contribute one item per week for the new periodical. It was an inspired decision to ask him to write the Herlock Sholmes adventures. After writing a plethora of school stories the Sholmes parodies must have come as something of a breath of fresh air that gave him the chance to indulge his, sometimes, wicked sense of humour in a way that rarely showed in any of his other writings.

From the start Sholmes proved to be one of the most bizarre of all Hamilton's



Illustration and text from 'The Case of the Potato-Jack', from *The Popular*, March 1921.

characters. Sholmes had all the foibles and habits of the original Holmes but in a highly exaggerated form. Whereas Holmes took his cocaine in small quantities, Sholmes had the drug delivered by the cask-full and his addiction was described in such a humorous and off-hand way that it would have today's Politically Correct Brigade shrieking with horror. Sholmes was the most inept of detectives - the Clouseau of his age - yet for all his incompetence he invariably solved the cases and had Dr. Jotson gasping with wonder at his 'brilliant' deductions.

That Hamilton was an enthusiastic reader of Conan Doyle is demonstrated time and again in the way he managed to capture the very essence of the genuine article. The humour and the mood were irreverent but the Sholmes stories were written with real love and feeling for Doyle's originals. The stories often began with Sholmes and Jotson in their Shaker Street apartment and, before Mrs. Spudson showed in the client, there would be delicious moments over the breakfast table as Sholmes amazed Jotson with his powers:

'I see that you have not shaved this



Illustration from 'The Missing Cricketer' in *The Greyfriars Herald New Series*. June 1920.



The Magnet for 17 December, 1921 contained 'That Ghostly Xmas Knight', a Sholmes story published under the Dr. Jotson byline was almost certainly not written by Charles Hamilton.

morning, Jotson?"

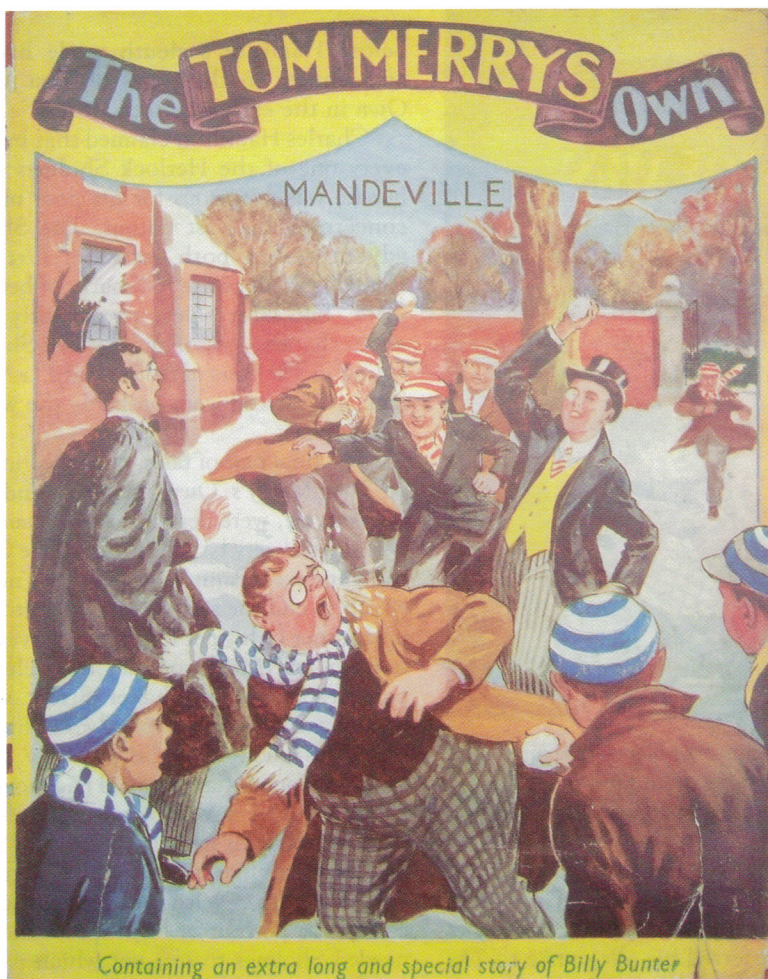
'Sholmes how could you possibly know -' He laughed.

'Is it not a fact?' he asked.

'It is a fact, certainly. But how you guessed -' 'It was not a guess, Jotson!' Sholmes frowned a little. 'I never guess. I leave guesswork to the police. It was simple deduction, Jotson, simply explained'.

'The Adventure of the Diamond Pins' was followed by a further seventeen stories. Many were skits on tales from the Holmes canon: 'The Yellow Phiz,' 'The Bound of the Haskervilles,' and 'The Freckled Hand.' The latter is one of the very best, beautifully parodying Doyle's original as the detective pits his wits against the dastardly Dr. Grimey Pylott who comes to a sticky end in the coils of a 'huge rattlesnake'.

Other stories, not based on the original canon, often poked fun at wartime shortages or politicians who were even more inept than Sholmes. There was a dry delivery to the dialogue and a biting edge to the humour that must have gone over the heads of the original eleven to fourteen year-old readers of *The Greyfriars Herald* but which the adult audience can savour. In the eleventh adventure, 'The Foreign Spy', Sholmes takes on a case for Sir Obviously Hardley-Sain, who runs the Red-Tape and Sealing-Wax Department of the government. In the course of their conversation Sir Obviously says: 'Of course, as a Minister, I cannot be expected to see what is obvious to every man in the street, neither should I desire to do so,' a view of the political mind-set that will resonate with the reader as much in 2009



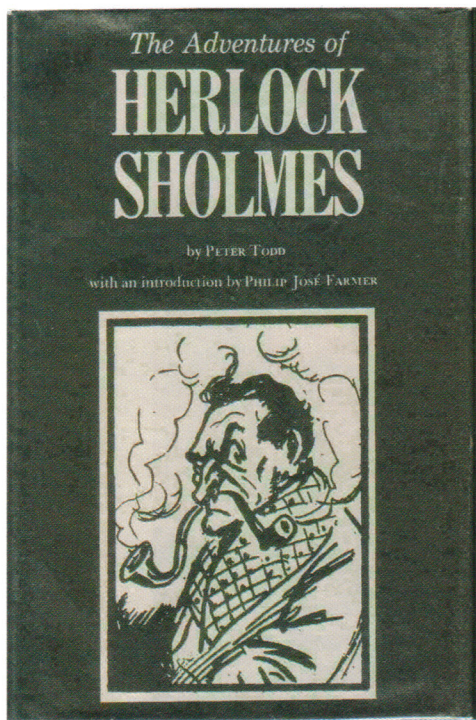
Cover of 'The Tom Merry's Own' for 1952, wherein Sholmes made his final original appearance.

as it did when first published in 1916.

Clients were usually overjoyed when Sholmes successfully solved their problems but there were occasions when such was not the case. 'The Missing Mother-In-Law' was a beautifully crafted story in which Sholmes displayed logic and pin-sharp deduction worthy of Holmes himself, in order to discover the whereabouts of Mrs Knagg, who had moved in with her married daughter and then, one morning, left the house with an umbrella not to be seen again. Feeling bored, Sholmes undertook

the case uninvited and without the prospect of a fee, his only motive being to 'bring joy to a humble household.' After successfully returning the mother-in-law to the bosom of her family Sholmes receives a visit from her son-in-law who, after ascertaining that without Sholmes' intervention his mother-in-law would still be missing, 'hurled himself violently upon Herlock Sholmes, hitting out with indescribable fury.'

Wartime paper shortage brought an end to *The Greyfriars' Herald* in March 1916, after only eighteen issues. But Sholmes



The 1976 'Adventures of Herlock Sholmes', published by The Mysterious Press in the USA, collected together the first 18 adventures.

bounced back nine months later in 'Herlock Sholmes' Christmas Case', the first of six stories published in *The Magnet* before he transferred his allegiance to *The Gem* where eight further tales appeared. Between December 1916 and April 1919 a total of two dozen new Sholmes adventures appeared irregularly in either *The Magnet* or *The Gem* before the detective got back to regular weekly appearances in the pages of the re-launched New Series *Greyfriars Herald* in June 1920.

Thirty-two Herlock Sholmes adventures appeared in the New Series *Greyfriars Herald*, the last in February 1921, before Sholmes resumed his erratic career, appearing off and on over the next four years in either *The Magnet* or *Penny Popular*. There was then a quarter of a century break

before Hamilton's sleuth made his final appearances in the pages of *Tom Merry's Own* in the early nineteen fifties.

Charles Hamilton claimed that he wrote every one of the Herlock Sholmes stories but he was notorious for his poor memory concerning his vast output. The Sholmes adventures in both series of *Greyfriars Herald* bear all of the hallmarks of being his work, but later tales, particularly those under the 'Dr. Jotson' or 'Herlock Sholmes' byline in *The Penny Popular* and *The Magnet* lack sparkle and were probably the work of other hands.

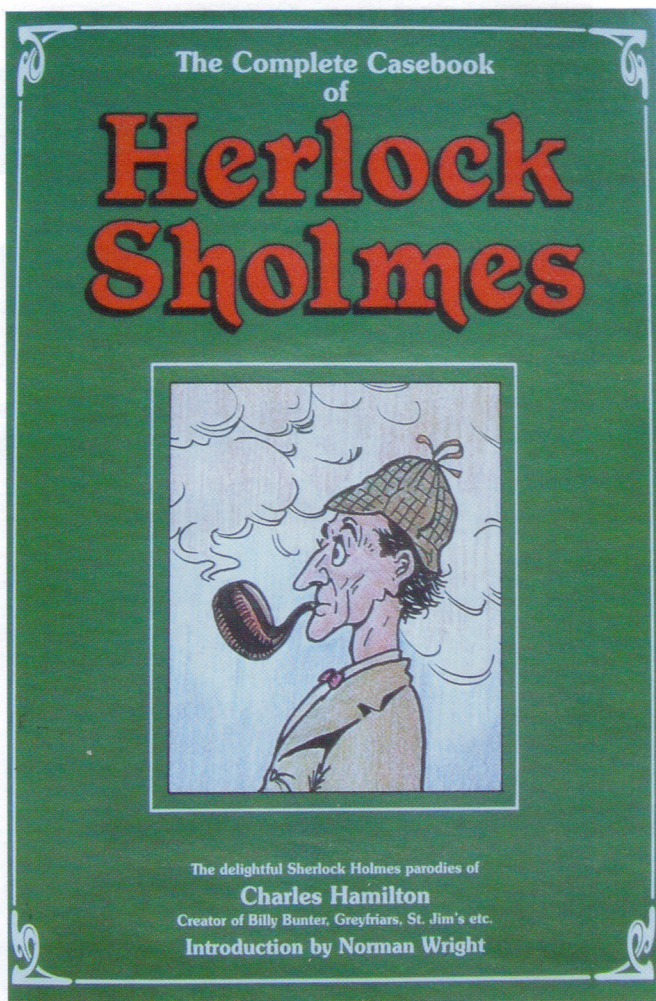
The final pair of tales, published in issues of *Tom Merry's Own* for 1950 and 1952 respectively, were certainly from Hamilton's pen and the very last adventure, 'The Case of the Perplexed Painter', was a high note on which to end the series. Here Hamilton sent up another of his pet hates: the purveyors of modern art. Mr Scrooluse, the celebrated painter, arrives at Shaker Street with a dilemma. Two newly finished works had been left in his studio while he was away. On his return he found that the maid had moved the paintings and removed their name labels. Now he could not tell which picture was 'Sunset on the Apennines' and which 'A Portrait of Lord Popcorn'. With his lordship due to collect his portrait at any minute the artist needed Sholmes to sort out which painting was which. With the aid of a fish sandwich, left over from his breakfast, and Lord Popcorn's dog, Sholmes was able to solve the baffling case. Readers familiar with the series would have recognised that Hamilton had dusted off a Sholmes plot first used in 'The Case of the Cubist' in *The Greyfriars Herald* in December 1920.

The stories in the *Greyfriars Herald* were accompanied by lively, light-hearted line drawings that perfectly captured the mood of Hamilton's stories. The portrait of Sholmes, in dressing gown and smoking two pipes that was used to illustrate the first story, beautifully summed up Sholmes'

character. According to various sources the Sholmes stories were illustrated by Lewis Ross Higgins, a staff artist who worked on many Amalgamated Press weeklies, including the comic *Chuckles*. Higgins died in 1919, at the early age of 34. Most of the Sholmes stories in both series of *Greyfriars Herald* appear to have been illustrated by the same hand and that leaves the researcher in a bit of a quandary. When the original series ended did the editor have a stockpile of ready illustrated stories that were then used over the next few years in *Magnet*, *Gem* and the New Series *Greyfriars Herald*? Or, after the death of Higgins, was a new illustrator told to copy his style? Perhaps the assumption that the artist was Higgins is incorrect? As the drawings were unsigned and made over eighty years ago it is doubtful if 'The Case of the Possible Illustrator' will ever be fully solved!

In 1976 The Mysterious Press in the USA published *The Adventures of Herlock Sholmes*, comprising the first eighteen stories in an edition of 1250 of which 250 copies were issued in slipcases and signed by Philip Jose Farmer, who had written an introduction for the book. Despite its short print run copies can still be found at a modest price. In 1989 Hawk books published *The Complete Casebook of Herlock Sholmes* that collected together all 95 known stories with an introduction by the present writer.

Charles Hamilton created many excellent



The 1989 Hawk Books volume, *The Complete Casebook of Herlock Sholmes*, that collected together all 95 known stories.

characters during his busy and prolific career. The boys of *Greyfriars* may be his best known characters but others are equally interesting and anyone who has ever chortled over Bunter or enjoyed Doyle's original Sherlock Holmes stories are missing a treat if they have never paid a visit to Shaker Street and entered the madcap world of Herlock Sholmes.

DETECTIVE SERIES Nº1

DEATH in the DARK

by MICHAEL BLAKE



DEAD MAN'S MONEY.

'Death in the Dark', Hamilton's scarce detective thriller published under his Michael Blake pen-name by William Merrett in 1945.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY TO HERLOCK SHOLMES & OTHER CHARLES HAMILTON DETECTIVES

A guide to current values of first editions in VG condition (with) and without dustjackets (Note: weekly/monthly story papers issues without dust jackets)

HERLOCK SHOLMES STORY PAPERS PUBLISHED BY THE AMALGAMATED PRESS

THE GREYFRIARS HERALD (original series) (weekly story paper)

All issues have Herlock Sholmes stories No.1 (20 Nov. 1915) £8-£10
Nos. 2 to 18 (1915-1916) each £3-£5

THE GREYFRIARS HERALD (New Series) (weekly story paper)

Issues from June 1920 to February 1921 with Herlock Sholmes stories each £3-£5

THE MAGNET (weekly story paper)

Issues published between 1916 and 1922 with Herlock Sholmes stories each £6-£8

THE GEM (weekly story paper)

Issues published between 1917 and 1919 with Herlock Sholmes stories each £4-£6

THE POPULAR (weekly story paper)

Issues published between 1921 and 1925 with Herlock Sholmes stories each £3-£5

THE TOM MERRY'S OWN (Mandeville Publications, 1950)..... £4-£6 (£8-£10)

THE TOM MERRY'S OWN (Mandeville Publications, 1952)..... £4-£6 (£8-£10)

THE ADVENTURES OF HERLOCK SHOLMES 1976 (The Mysterious Press US)

signed edition by P.J. Farmer of 250 copies in slipcase..... £20-£30 (£40-£60)

THE ADVENTURES OF HERLOCK SHOLMES (The Mysterious Press, 1976, US) Trade edition of 1000 copies.. £15-£20 (£30-£40)

THE COMPLETE CASEBOOK OF HERLOCK SHOLMES (Hawk books, 1989) £6-£8 (£10-£15)

LEN LEX STORIES STORY PAPERS PUBLISHED BY THE AMALGAMATED PRESS

SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY (Monthly story paper) Issues with Len Lex stories by Frank Richards

No. 353 The Schoolboy 'Tec' £4-£6

No. 371 Asking for the Sack £4-£6

FERRERS LOCKE STORIES PUBLISHED BY THE AMALGAMATED PRESS

BOYS FRIEND LIBRARY New Series)(Monthly story paper) (selected titles)

No. 23 A Marked Man £8-£10

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No. 99 The Sporting Detective £8-£10

No. 123 The Case of the Langsdale Wanderers £8-£10

No. 127 The Mystery of Lone Manor £8-£10

No. 147 The Brotherhood of the White Feather £8-£10

No. 159 Four Against the World £8-£10

No. 273 What's Wrong With the Rovers? £8-£10

No. 286 The Masked Death £8-£10

No. 401 Nobby the 'Shooting Star' £8-£10

No. 478 The Man Behind the Scenes £8-£10

No. 648 The Case of the Langsdale Wanderers £8-£10

MERRETT 'DETECTIVE SERIES'

No. 1 DEATH IN THE DARK (WCM Publications, 1945, cardwraps) £12-£15

No. 1 DEATH IN THE DARK (Friars Library 2007 facsimile reprint) cardwraps £7.50