AST year in this book you had quite a basinful of Bason; and even the critics (who seldom like anything except what they write themselves) gave it a nice bit of genuine praise. I was delighted; it did my ego such a lot of good. This year I’m going to have a bash at telling you something of the district of London where I was born and where I have lived all my life. I may even go outside Walworth and write on London as I, a Londoner, see it. But one thing is positive: I shall write a good deal more about Bason!

The neighbours in the house on my left are the Donovan’s, with their two young daughters. On the right are the Thorne’s. I have not had a conversation with either of these families during the past twenty-five years. If I happen to see one of them I may pass the time of day—‘Nice weather’ or ‘Looks like rain.’ But as for anything like a conversation, I’ve never had it; and we’ve never had a row—in any case, it would be a hard job to row with me. I like peace and quiet and I make sure I get it! I leave all the usual sociability in the hands of Lizzie, my dear kind landlady. She makes the conversation for me.

I’ve seen many changes in Walworth. Thirty and more years ago, fights, rows, and sheer brutality and beastliness were quite the Walworth fashion. Folk came slumming down the Walworth Road just to see the fights. Policemen walked around in pairs; they were never safe alone, they’d get a bashing just to keep the bloke’s eye in and for the fun of it! Women wore black eyes with pride! At every house in our road people would spend summer evenings sitting on the steps or in chairs under the porch (most of the houses are more than a 100 years old and have basements). And the top end of the road was occupied by bars and shops that were all aglow till past midnight. People started to do their shopping after ten at night. Next day’s meat was bought around midnight—they thought the longer they waited the cheaper it became. (Actually the butchers put the price up 6d. to take 6d. off!) Westmoreland Road is still a market-place, but the glitter has gone forever.

Nowadays the police are really quite kind and agreeable, and once (about two years ago) one said ‘Good night’ to me; I was pretty taken aback, but I piped up a reply. And when I was a young man I beat a constable at table tennis in a tournament, and he actually shook hands with me and said the best man had won! That, by the way, is all I’ve ever had to do with the law.

In 1948 I had the chance of becoming a public man: I was invited to stand at the Borough Council elections in my district under the Tory banner. So I said to myself, ‘Fred,’ I said, ‘what would it be worth to you?’ And the answer was, ‘Nothing but a headache’—and as I get quite enough headaches in life (my eyes play me up at times with too many hours of reading and writing) I declined with thanks.

Mark you, I reckon I stood a very good chance of getting elected, because lots of folk know of me, although few know me to speak to. I don’t think I have a single fan in my own home district except perhaps the Librarian of the Public Library; he collects all I write and puts it into the reference library, but maybe rather more as a duty than as a pleasure. None of my neighbours knows I am a writer, but they know I sell books because up to September 1949 they’d all seen me on many, many mornings fill up a barrow with second-hand books and push it away out of Walworth.

Religion does not play a large part in the lives of Walworth folk, but I would be the last to call them irreligious. The religion is there, but the people won’t go to church. I remember how disillusioned I was when in some way or other—via the Boy Scouts, I believe—I got to know a grocer who was a chapel warden, a Sunday School teacher, and a man very much to the fore at all local religious meetings. He could get up and deliver
a most touching prayer off the cuff, and in a voice trembling with emotion. I can see him now, silvery hair, kindly face, the inevitable butterfly collar. But he was caught in some monkey business—either giving short weight, or putting sand in the sugar, or watering the milk, or very likely all three, and paid a very stiff fine. I happened to meet him in the street, and I said to him, 'You aren't half a persisting hypocrite. Fancy robbing poor people like that—and you a Bible-thumper!' He looked at me very calmly and said, 'You are mixing business with religion. They don't mix!' And off he went, leaving me flabbergasted.

At the top of the Walworth Road is the Elephant and Castle, probably the biggest road junction in London, because traffic to the bridges over the Thames passes through it. They say that there are more spits hanging out around the Elephant and Castle than in any other part of London. This is said, but I'm sure you'll find many more boys in the back streets of Bermondsey or Soho, and over in Petticoat Lane you'll find more still. I have always felt some kind of sympathy for our local crooks; they seem to do such silly things, like pinching lead piping from blitzed places and hiding it in a sack. And of course a Bobby asks them what's in the sack—and the answer is six months!'

We have a local paper—it's called the *South London Press* and has a big circulation. (Its columnist 'Wanderer' by a miracle found volume 9 of the *Satirical Press* book and gave my work in it much praise—he hadn't seen volumes 6, 7, and 8). It was in this local paper, on its 'Letters' page, that over a period of six or seven years I learnt what little I know of the gentle art of writing. I practised in its pages. But the day I got my first guinea cheque for literary work I ceased forever to write for the *South London Press*.

When I was writing for this paper, on every topic under the sun, there had been a correspondence on the tragedy of loneliness; and in one of my expansive moods I sent in a letter that got me into great trouble. Simply, I said that anyone who was really and truly lonely could come round to 152 Westmoreland Road on Sunday at 4 o'clock and have tea and cakes with my folks and me and we'd try to make them welcome. And very nice too—only more than 100 people turned up! (We possessed no more than seven teacups.) It took a couple of policemen to turn all the poor old souls away. I got a thrashing from my father for that, even if I had been full of the best intentions.

We are fortunate in having in little Walworth one of England's biggest and best cinemas, the Trocadero. It holds an enormous audience and seems to be filled to capacity every night. In pre-war days the Trocadero gave a solid 4-hour show three times a day—a full stage show, two feature pictures, a comedy, plus the news. It was probably the best value in all London's entertainments. In 1938 I was paid to appear as a 'local celebrity' in a stage show at the Troc—I was a celebrity because I had appeared in the B.B.C.'s 'In Town Tonight,' in a pioneer television show, and had been the star of several 'shorts' made by Pathé films. It is true that by 1938 I'd written five books and more than 500 articles, but not a soul in South-East London knew it.

This Troc show was called 'In Town Tonight,' and eight or nine stars and characters (I was a character) were engaged for the week. In addition, many other celebrities dashed down to the Elephant and Castle for one appearance only, and thus the show was really different three times a day.

I don't know if any of these one-performance stars got paid or whether they did it for publicity. But I got paid. Yes, sir! For my 'performances' on the stage I received the fabulous salary of 50s. (and lost £5 worth of trade in my own business to earn it!) On the afternoon of my first appearance I met Dave Crowley at the stage door—he was then the lightweight champion of Great Britain and very much in the limelight and the money. He asked me what the dressing-room accommodation was like and what I was being paid. I said, 'Fifty bob.' 'Per show, of course,' he said. I shook my head. 'Per day? Well, it's not bad!' 'Oh, dear, no, Dave. Fifty bob for the blooming week of at least eighteen shows.' Looking back, though, the Troc may have been right—I wasn't worth very much then.

But all in all the week was one of the happiest of my whole life. For one thing, I, the king of autograph collectors, was the envy of all other autograph collectors: I was right there on the spot, and not even the police could stop me from getting additions to my collection.

At my first appearance I was very nervous, but I soon got over it. I spoke for three minutes on autograph and cigarette-card collecting, on ambitions, and gave advice to would-be authors—anything, in fact, that came into my head. At one performance I nearly got the bird: a trick was played on me. On this day I had to make a speech at a dinner at a hotel near Victoria Station between the 6 and 9.45 appearances. So I appeared for the 6 o'clock show in my rather humble dinner jacket—the whole outfit only cost twenty-five bob second-hand, so you can see it was not much to write home about. As I waited in the wings I found myself nervously fussing with the black tie, and I said to one of Teddy Joyce's bandsmen who was standing near, 'Be a pal—see if this tie's O.K.' So I held up my head and he arranged it—the swine. He 'arranged' it all right: pulled it, without my knowledge, of course, right above my collar so that the tie was round my neck half an inch above it. And when I was on the stage I kept wondering why people were tittering and why I couldn't hold them as usual. A mean trick, but I made that swine pay for it: I'm a chap who doesn't easily forgive. Apart from this the week
passed very pleasantly. A year later the Troc had a couple of other shows in which I again appeared as a local celebrity.

The Fall of the Mighty

It was during my first appearance at the Troc that an incident happened which made me feel very sad. As I came out of the stage door one evening a poor old coloured man with a flat nose and signs of a cauliflower ear asked me if Prince Monolulu, the tipster, was still in the theatre. I went backstage again to find out. Monolulu was there, surrounded by stagehands, and they were all going through the runners for the next day's racing. I told him there was a rather large coloured gentleman at the door who looked like an old boxer. 'I expect it's Frank,' the Prince said. 'Oh, tell him to come downstairs.' 'And who's Frank,' I asked, and the Prince said it was Frank Craig.

Now I've been a boxing fan for a good many years, and Frank Craig was to me a magic name. Forty years ago he was called the Harlem Coffee Cooler—and one punch from him cooled any Englishman! He was the Joe Louis of 1900. He used to chew gum through the whole of every contest. Not that he had to chew for long—a couple of rounds usually accounted for his opponents. He also discovered and developed and for a time even trained Jack Johnson. Craig did not fight in the days of big purses and he got less than £20 for fighting Bob Fitzsimmons.

That night at the Troc Frank Craig was broke. He had no money at all, and he needed a couple of shillings to get a bed and food at the Salvation Army Hostel in Waterloo Road. I got this bit of news from him after I'd invited him in. When I asked him if he would be so kind as to write something in my autograph album, he said quietly that it was over twenty years since anyone had asked for his autograph. It gave him some trouble to write; a pen was obviously an unfamiliar weapon in his huge hands. However, he did manage to inscribe a decipherable, 'Best wishes from Frank Craig, ex-champion of the world.' I did not know, and have never been able to trace, that he was ever actually a world champion, but at probably 70 he was still boxing in a boxing booth at over 60 he could have knocked me out with a playful tap from either hand, and I did not feel inclined therefore to question his claim. I was happy to slip 2s. 6d. into the side-pocket of his very thin and battered raincoat. I hope the Prince helped the ex-champ—I expect he did, for he is noted for his generosity to coloured folk.

The next day I got to wondering about Frank Craig. Now, one of my pals is the famous author L. A. G. Strong, and he's also a keen fan. I got to thinking that, if I could get Leonard and Frank together somewhere some day, Leonard could then interview the old man and get all kinds of fighting memories from him, all of which would make a fine series of articles. And Leonard would, I knew, deal liberally with Frank Craig and give him a generous rake-off of the divvies. Well, when I get a brainwave I don't chew the cud—I get on with it. L. A. G. S. replied by return to the effect that he'd be delighted to meet Frank Craig and would come to London for any cast-iron appointment I could make, and whether he wrote the articles or not he would help Craig (Leonard is a dear kind man). All I had to do now was find Frank Craig, and that seemed easy.

It appeared that when the ex-boxer had any money he kipped either at Bruce House, in Drury Lane, or at Rowton House, in Newington Butts, near the Elephant, or possibly in the Hostel in Waterloo Road. And when he had no money at all he kipped anywhere—in a doorway, under arches. They knew Frank Craig at the place in Drury Lane, but hadn't seen him for several months. I left my card with a message written on it, and tried the other places. No luck. Two days later I saw, outside Wyndham's Theatre, Ernie Rice, the ex-lightweight boxing champion, who now occasionally does 'bits' in films. I told Ernie of my quest and he said I'd be pretty sure to find Craig at a café on the fringe of Soho, near the London Casino—it was a kind of club for coloured men. I went to the café. Oh yes, they all knew the ex-boxer very well. Yes, he did show up at times—might be next day, might not be for months. How on earth did he make a living? I asked. Everyone shut up instantly. Blimey, I do believe they thought I was some kind of private inquiry agent! Me! Anyway, my search went on for days and days, and it was all no go. At last I learnt that a relation of Frank Craig's had taken him under his wing and into the country near Maidenhead. Frank Craig would never more want for a bed or a meal. Of course, all this happened twelve years ago, but if Frank Craig is alive and happens to read this, here's wishing him good fortune; and if he ever needs any pin money either L. A. G. Strong or myself will still write those articles based on his recollections.

I may mention here that every Sunday morning in East Street Walworth (a much more colourful market than Petticoat Lane) Tommy Noble, the ex-bantamweight champion, sells embrocation which he makes up himself—it's a superb rubbing oil for backaches. Oh no, this is by no means a similar case to Frank Craig's: Tommy Noble has a really thriving business and does very well indeed.

Also in Walworth used to stand Sid Smith, who was the first flyweight champion of England. He used to guess your weight for one penny; if he was more than 3 lb. out you did not pay him. Sid was a dear old man. Once I took a snapshot of Leonard Strong on Sid Smith's scales, and it was published in Leonard's book Shake Hands and Come Out
Fighting (Chapman & Hall, 1938). I took my copy along for Sid to autograph the picture and he wrote: ‘To Fred, with all good wishes from the first flyweight Champion of the World, Sid Smith.’ But when I tried to slip him half a dollar for his trouble he was most indignant and said he had not sunk so low in that life that when someone asked for his autograph he had to be paid to oblige. We were both famous Walworth personalities, he said, and he was just as delighted to sign as I was to receive. A very dignified little man! He died last year.

What else shall I say about Walworth? There are not really any attractive features or things of historical interest there. I suppose the Michael Faraday Sunday School and Faraday Park, the Robert Browning settlement and the Browning Hall must have some association with the men who bore these famous names, but what it is I don’t exactly know. I could, of course, obtain all the data at the Reference Library in the Walworth Road, down to the very smallest detail. They are like that there: very proud of local history and local celebrities. They have a far larger collection of my own writings than I possess myself, and I very often have to pop up there to look up something I wrote twenty odd years ago—and they are all so very polite and patient with me.

Mr Boone, the Chief Librarian, had two photographs taken of the 152-word inscription which Bernard Shaw put in one of his books for me and which I told you all about in volume nine of the SATURDAY BOOK. He came to see me immediately he read that volume and asked permission to photograph G. B. S.’s inscription: it was, he said, a matter of great local interest. He did not say if the interest was from the Shaw or the Bason aspect! I believe that the picture is to be framed and hung near Shakespeare’s bust in the Reference Library. I feel rather honoured and have suggested to the Southwark Borough Council that they had better open a subscription for an enamelled plaque to be fixed to the wall of 152 with an inscription to the effect that for over forty years the famous author Frederick (SATURDAY BOOK) Bason lived here!

Just One Day. November 28, 1949

I had to get up at 8.30 sharp because I had told Lizzie to spend the morning in bed: she had a nasty chest cold. Usually she gets up first, makes a cup of tea for herself, and reads the newspaper, and at about a quarter to nine brings a cup of tea to my room with my mail, as well as the newspaper, which I read as I eat my breakfast. One of us has to be up between 8.15 and 8.40 because of the postman. We have at 152 Westmoreland Road only a medium-sized letterbox for the biggest mail of anyone in the road; one of us has to go to the door to take it from the postman because it is always too big or too fragile to go through the letterbox. For instance, on this morning Edward G. Robinson, Jean Sablon, Charmian Innes, and Dirk Bogarde sent me autographed photographs, and I should have been distressed had they been bent and pushed through the box.

The mail was interesting. It included a very generous order for £2 4s. 3d. worth of books from Frank Pettingell, the actor, who said in his letter that I was a very witty man and that he would be delighted to meet me in person soon. Mrs W. returned a handsome stamp album and many hundreds of stamps which I had sent to her to re-sell if she could: didn’t think the lot was worth 10s. 6d. (next evening I got 12s. for same!) Mr Rainbird generously sent me 100 copies of Modern Living, a threepenny magazine for women issued for the North Thames Gas Board; it contains articles on cookery, knitting, kitchen decorations—and one by me on autograph collecting. These magazines solve my Christmas card problem this year: I intend to autograph the article instead of a mere card and send the copies off to friends and fans in Canada and America.

The mail also contained a charming letter from Nicolas Bentley, who is editing my diaries for publication, hoping that I was better in health (I was poorly when he called the other day). Mr Jones, of Torquay, ordered a book by Rachel Ferguson, but unfortunately he was too late. There were letters from Beatrice in New York and Gracie in Olean (district of N.Y.), two very loyal and loving friends of mine, both ordering copies of the SATURDAY BOOK. The rest of the mail was not particularly interesting: invitation cards to art galleries, notices of auction sales, and some American magazines.

We had fried bread this morn, which I did in Lizzie’s absence; and I finished reading my mail while the kettle was getting hot. Lizzie and I like a strong cup of tea (three teaspoonfuls for two cups). She drank hers propped up in bed with a big green dressing gown round her shoulders. I had made her breakfast tray look nice with a paper doily—Beatrice had sent me some from New York. On the tray were too large slices of bread and butter and a cup of tea (and the aspirin bottle in case she needed it). I had three slices of fried bread.

By about 10.15 I have answered three letters, packed up the parcel for Frank Pettingell, and am ready to go out. I am not feeling well and still have a cold, but I must go out. Say ‘So long’ to Liz and she says she’ll be up in half an hour or so. Go first by bus to Wyndham’s Theatre to deliver Mr Pettingell’s books—delivery by hand saves damage in the post. Next, as Cecil Court is near by, I pop into the shop of David Low, the bookseller, for a few minutes’ chat. He says kind things about my work in Volume 9 of the SATURDAY BOOK—and that reminds me that I must get some more copies. My next call is at the Interval Club, 22 Dean Street, where they are holding a Bring and Buy Sale in aid of funds for
something or other—I'd read about it in the *Stage* on Friday and promised myself a visit. I get there a little after twelve, but I do not go in—yes, I know I'd gone all that way, but I said to myself, 'You have brought nothing with you.' And Bring and Buy Sales mean that you can't buy unless you bring—so I go away.

I walk now from Dean Street to the Duchess Theatre in Aldwych to pay 6s. for seat C4 in the circle for the first night of *The Philadelphia Story*. This is a bit of a treat I give myself: I don't often indulge in 6s.-seats—the gallery's my mark—but I feel that somehow or other I must get out of the gallery rut and sit occasionally in a seat befitting a well-known journalist. This is not swank, just good policy; and in any case there's no gallery at the Duchess, so it's 6s. or stay at home. Then I get on a bus and go down Fleet Street to Ludgate Circus and walk through narrow alleys to Hutchinson's trade department. There I buy three copies of Vol. 9 of *The Saturday Book*. I think I can say they are pleased to see me. Mr. Skinner, at the counter, is a delightful man and always makes a nice parcel for me with a neat string handle as well! I present him with two greyhound selections that I hope will win, being careful, however, to point out I do not recommend them ascerts but believe them to be genuine triers. (Both dogs lost! I felt ashamed.)

At 1.45 I arrive back at 152 Westmoreland Road and there is more mail—the second post arrives at 12.15. It consists of two orders for single books from Public Libraries. I had offered 150 or so, and all they require is one each (by Zane Grey). I do not feel inclined to supply one volume only, as my profit will be sixpence and the postage eightpence.

Next, a light snack of boiled rabbit, tinned peas, potatoes, bread, but no time for a cup of tea, as I must leave at 2.10 for my next appointment and I am never late for engagements. It is with the Parker Pen Co., 15 Grosvenor Gardens, and I am to see the sales director. Of course I have to wait five minutes for a No. 12 bus to take me to Westminster Bridge—it always happens that way. At Westminster I change to one going to Victoria Station. Am now in rather a hurry, but notice first that variety is still at the Victoria Palace and second a placard which says *Death of Tom Walls*. (I don't buy a paper.) The last time I saw Tom Walls was at the Garrick Theatre and he'd been given a very mixed reception: it was just one of his off nights. And when the show was over I went round to the stage door not to get his autograph but to express sympathy. But as I went forward to wish him luck I was shoved aside by someone who was obviously protecting him. A voice asked for Tom Walls's autograph and there was an abrupt 'No.' I never saw him again.

At 2.52 I get to the Parker Pen Co. and am asked to wait. At 3 p.m. dead I am shown into the office of Mr. G. R. Coulthard, a brisk and very business-like American—at the snap of his fingers things are done. But with all his briskness there is civility and humanity. We get down to brass tacks. I had had my Parker 51 taken from me by an American film actor at Waterloo Station, and I hoped to acquire another by interesting Mr. Coulthard in photographs of myself collecting autographs from famous people. But although I was seen holding a pen in some of these, it was not the right pen. The upshot was that I received a superb Parker 51 as a gift from this firm, and some day (no hurry) when a photograph of me is taken in which I am actually holding the pen, they want that picture. We shake hands on the deal. Before I depart I display with pride the *Saturday Book*. Mr. Coulthard had never seen it. It impressed him. 'There's nothing like this in America. It looks very English—and you are very English. No wonder you are in it.' He hit the nail on the head!

I depart at 3.23. I next have to go to a pal to beg a kind action. Will he allow his typist to do an important letter for me? (I can't type.) He agrees. The letter is to the Editor of the *Evening Standard* asking him if he'd care to consider me as a columnist! I want to write a Friday night column, 'This, That, and the Other.' I know a lot of people. I do funny things. I really live every day and see such a lot in a week. Would he care to have a little faith in me? I chose the *Evening Standard* because their book critic highly praised my *Saturday Book* article, so I feel I have a pal there. At any rate, no harm in asking. It's the first time for many years that I've applied for a job. I could be the Leonard Lyons or Walter Winchell of London Town if only some editor would let me have my own column.

I post the letter in Victoria Street, keeping my fingers crossed. Next I hop on a bus; and I get back to 152 at about 4.15. Lizzie is no worse. The Doctor has been: it is acute bronchitis that's affecting her heart and she must stay in bed a week. No more tea in bed for Freddie just now, but what does that matter—Lizzie is so precious. She has written to her daughter to see if she can come over and give a hand on Friday. I rush out to post this letter: it is one of those rushing sort of days. When I return the afternoon post has arrived and there are six letters for me: an invitation to a party at Belsize Crescent, and five letters from readers of the *Saturday Book*, which has been out three weeks. I shall reply in due course, but not tonight, Josephine! I set about preparing tea. Lizzie has a bit of currant bread, cut very dainty. I have two chunks of the same smothered in blackcurrant jam. We both have two cups of tea.

It is now five minutes to six, and I have to make a decision. Do I go to Manor Place Baths to see Tommy McGovern fight Al Wilburn and in all probability win (he did—on points) or do I attend the London
Writers' Club at Caxton Hall to hear informal talks from the Editor and the Fiction Editor of the Woman's Own magazine? Caxton Hall has it, and in the twenty-five minutes prior to the meeting I show some two dozen people the new Saturday Book, and they all congratulate me. I also give away fifteen copies of American books which U.S. fans have sent me. I always do that, heayen help us all, to spread happiness and goodwill. (But no one there has ever given me a book!) I sit with my pal Nadell. He is a grand fellow, and a grand artist. We always sit together—whichever gets there first saves a seat for the other. The lecture starts: it is really on how to write fiction for the women's magazines. I'm not particularly interested, but both are very nice ladies, with charm and intelligence, and I don't go to sleep.

The meeting closes at 8.30. I have a cup of tea with Nadell at a café near Caxton Hall. We part at five to nine. I rush along Victoria Street and get a No. 12 bus home, reaching there at 9.20. There is a play by T. S. Eliot on the radio which started at 9.15, but I manage to pick up the thread of it.

Now one of the things I can really do is listen to a play on the wireless or, say, Music Hall, and write a letter or an article at the same time and miss nothing. So as I sat in the easy chair I thought I would write of this day, if only to tell myself just what I've done. Actually I've been rushing here and there the whole time and achieved very little. The play ended at 10.45. By 11.23 I had entirely written all that you've read here of my day. Now I've got myself a hot milk. Oh, I forgot. I kissed Lizzie good night at 9.20 and asked for a good night for her. It is now midnight, and I put out the light.

An Unpleasant Incident

I once knew a chap named Barry who made his living by selling jokes, gags, and scripts to comedians, and a very good living he made of it. He had a nice flat just off Tottenham Court Road, and on many occasions I visited him there (he is dead now) because he made me a sort of agent of his to buy anything in the way of early joke books.

I heard one day that a shop in Watford had a collection of some 150 joke and gag books of 1902–1912 vintage, together with books by Harry Lauder, T. E. Dunville, and other variety stars; the lot had formerly been owned by a minor variety comedian. Barry said he would take a gamble and pay me £8 for the lot if I could get them, and that he wouldn't complain if he happened already to possess some of them. I felt very confident that I could get the lot for a fiver—and £3 profit, plus a day's outing to Watford, seemed very pleasant. I put on my best clothes, made myself presentable, and set out on the journey.

Until we got to Bushy there were four people in the carriage, plus myself. But then three got out and I was left with a young woman whose age I would put at between 18 and 20. I remember her so well—I had cause to. Black coat, which looked like real astrakhan but probably wasn't, pretty red hat with a bird perched at the side of it. She wasn't heavily made-up—she looked a charming, neatly dressed young woman. I was reading a Zane Grey Western, and she was sitting opposite me. After a time I had, as I read, the impression that she was studying me; so I looked up, gave a little grin, and returned to my book. Then she spoke, quite quietly, in a completely matter of fact tone. She said, 'I want one pound.' I looked up. 'I beg your pardon,' I said. 'What did you say?' 'I want one pound.' 'Whatever for?' I said. 'Why should I give you a pound?' She said, 'We're alone in this carriage. I've only got to disarrange my clothes, scream, and pull the communication cord... and that will mean trouble for you, won't it? I think it's worth a pound of your money to avoid trouble. Do I get it? You've about five seconds to decide—we'll soon be in Watford.'

She got up. She was a good deal taller than I and well built. She wasn't beautiful—just acceptably nice. Yes, she looked such a nice girl. I don't know what you would have done, but I took off my trilby hat, took a pound note from under the sweat band, and gave it to her—and within a few minutes we were at Watford. I called her all the names I could lay tongue to, but she just smiled. All she said was 'You've been wise. I could easily have made it ten pounds, but I didn't think you had it.' As she got out of the carriage, leaving me sitting in the corner, she gave a funny shake of the head and put two fingers to the side of her hat, as a porter does when you tip him. When I got out of the train she was a good way ahead, and in the crowd I could only see that red hat with the bird on the side of it.

The books I had gone to see turned out to be a top-grade collection: better than I had anticipated, which is rather unusual. And I was short by about 25s. of the price asked. Now I had an Aunt Rose living at the extreme other end of Watford, and I could have called upon her and got a temporary loan; and in the High Street was a firm of booksellers with whom I'd done business from time to time by post, and who would, I'm sure, have advanced the 25s. I needed to complete the deal. But somehow my heart had gone out of the business. I asked the owner of the collection if I could have half an hour to decide, and he said, 'Most certainly—a day if you like. This is a specialist collection, and I've had them a week. They'll sell some day. I'm in no hurry.'

I went across the road to a nice pub and had a meal. When I returned I told the man that I'd go back to London and talk it over with my client, and if he cared to buy them well and good. And then I told...
him what had happened to me in the train. He advised me to inform the police and describe the woman. I said he could, but I wouldn't; and also I wouldn't come to Watford again!

Returning to London I went at once to Barry's flat, explained the whole collection to him, and suggested that he went to see them himself —and, of course, told him what had happened to me. He said I had been a fool; and it would only encourage the woman to do it again when the opportunity presented itself. This annoyed me. It's all very well for someone to tell you you've been a —— fool, but what the heck could I do—I was absolutely caught.

'But you did nothing,' he said. 'You sat in that corner and didn't move from that corner?' 'That's right.' 'Then,' said Barry, 'all you had to do was smoke a cigarette!' I asked him to explain, and he said, 'You are sitting in a carriage and you smoke a cigarette. Naturally the ash falls upon your coat and trousers—it always does.' I agreed. 'Well, man, that's the perfect alibi! You continue smoking your cigarette. Let her rave and storm, let her tear her clothes off—so long as she don't come near you. If she attempts to get near you, kick out. The station is reached. She screams. People come to her rescue. She makes complaint that you've molested her. You still sit there. The guard or some official arrives. Keep calm. Eventually they'll have to come round to asking you your version of the affair. When they do you swear that you've not moved from the seat at all. And you point to the cigarette ash which lies undisturbed on your jacket and trousers! How could you be attacking a girl when the ash of the cigarette you are still smoking is on your clothes and you yourself have not a hair out of place. And you'd then point out that the distance between the two stations did not give anyone time to smoke two cigarettes, and that people got out at the last station. Man, you were dense! She must have seen you were an easy touch—women can see that at a glance.' I was silenced.

Next day Barry went to Watford to inspect the books; and his powers of persuasion were such that he made the owner split the collection in half, and he bought just the half he wanted—whereas to me the man had said all or none. Barry paid me £3 commission and, in his kindly way, gave me a further ten shillings as compensation for my unfortunate experience, adding the sly dig that my loss of ten bob would teach me that not all women were angels. But as I pocketed the money I couldn't help saying to him, 'You remember the alibi you told me about. But what happens if one is a non-smoker?' He looked at me a moment and then said, 'I'll think that one out and tell you next time we meet.' But we never met again. He died the next week.

The Way It's Done

I've already told you how I bought a ticket for the first night of The Philadelphia Story, at the Duchess. Well, a journalist friend wanted my impressions of this to me rather dull and very obvious play. I was to telephone him at the close of the second act or at the end of the show. I had a high temperature and was downright ill, but I went to try to cheer myself up. I was, in fact, so ill that, although I had my autograph album with me, for the first time in twenty years I did not even attempt to take it from my pocket, although the Lockwood and lots of minor stars of the screen were in the audience. My seat in the circle was quite comfortable, and as cigarettes tasted awful I sucked an acid drop.

At the close of the second act I had quite made up my mind that I was bored. The lady next to me took out her knitting. The man next to her began to tear his programme into fancy shapes. The man in front of me kept saying, 'How many dollars is this going to cost us!' I felt I had quite enough for my report, so in the interval I politely asked the doorman if he'd direct me to the theatre's telephone. He said that the phone was out of order. 'But surely there's a phone I can use,' I said. 'It's important—it's not a silly personal call, but a Press job. I have to send a report of this play to someone unable to attend.' 'Can't help it—no phone here, sir. You'll find one in the Waldorf Hotel or down the Strand.' It was raining quite hard and I was aching all over—I couldn't have walked to either place for Phyllis Dixey. I leaned against the wall, and the place was suddenly going round and round. The doorman must have thought I was drunk. Then the theatre steadied itself and towards me came the vision of a tall and stately angel. It was Valerie Hobson.

'Doorman,' she said, 'where is the phone please?'

'It's out of order, madam.'

'Out of order? What do you mean. No phone in the theatre at all?'

'The public phone is unfortunately out of order.'

'Do you mean to say there is no usable phone in this theatre?'

'Oh, I expect there's one in the manager's office—but that's engaged.'

'And where is the manager?'

'He's engaged as well, madam.' He was very polite.

'And where is the manager's office?'

'It's up those stairs, madam. But the manager is very busy.'

With regal dignity Valerie said, 'We are also busy!' And up the stairs she walked with superb grace. I haven't the slightest doubt that Miss Hobson used the manager's phone and that the manager was delighted to be of splendid service to Miss Hobson.

The bell rang. I went back for the last act. It was just a little better,
with a little more action, but, on the whole, I'm sure I have in my bottom drawer a much better play—and it wouldn't have cost any dollars. In fact, the Duchess management could have had it that night in exchange for the use of their phone!

I didn't attempt to ring my pal up. I managed to get a taxi, and although the driver didn't much want to go all the way to Walsworth I told him to get the hell there as fast as he could, unless he wanted a dead man in his cab. He got me there in double quick time and even helped me up the steps. Lizzie put me to bed and insisted on my having neat rum (Navy brand). And amidst sleeping and waking and pain and misery I could see phones and Valerie, Valerie and phones. I never moved from that bed for four days, and I forgot all about my promised report. My pal was fed up, and I lost a friend. But I did see Valerie Hobson in a very regal role.

No Dinner with the Duchess

If you'll turn to page 35 of Volume 7 of this book you'll see that I once took Arnold Bennett to a show which I called the Beggars' Theatre. It was a place where pavement and queue artists entertained their own folk and tried out new numbers on them. I recently went down Lambeth way, where it was, and found that the tiny street of mean houses had vanished and that there were pre-fabs there now. For the record the street was called Saville Place. 'I'd never have had the opportunity to poke my nose in there had it not been for a pal of mine called Frankie, who used to be a pavement artist but retired from that profession to take up the salvage racket, when paper fetched a pretty price a ton and rags higher still. He used to go from door to door, leaving an empty sack and calling for it next day. He cleared a packet.

What is this leading up to? I'll tell you. Latterly I have begun to indulge in a copy of the Stage every week to keep myself well informed about theatrical things; and recently I happened to see in that paper an advertisement for the Concert Artists' Association, who were giving a concert at Victoria Hall, Bloomsbury Square, W.C.1. I wrote to the secretary of the association, told him all about myself, and said that although I was neither a manager nor a booking agent (the advertisement said these could apply for seats) I did happen to be a journalist in search of a story, and maybe if I found a story at Victoria Hall my tale might mean a scrap of publicity for some known or unknown artist. By return of post I got a nice letter to the effect that the committee of the C.A.A. had decided that I could have a free ticket. Blime, I said to myself, did they really have to have a committee meeting to decide whether I was to have a free ticket or not? However, when I went along on the Sunday I discovered that there were eleven acts; and I'm not going to say a word about them except that in their various ways they were all extremely good. This was no amateur show. These people knew their stuff. As they were in many cases trying out fresh songs, impressions, and jokes upon the audience I would say, with due respect, that the general idea was the same as at the Beggars' Theatre, although, of course, these folk were genuine and highly respected artists, and a brilliant evening they gave us all.

Well, at the end I was standing just by the exit pulling on my gloves when there emerged a woman who was decidedly a smashing bit of homework. She was, I would say, in her early thirties—very handsome and very well built, but without not stagey. She glanced at me rather as if she'd seen me somewhere before; and a moment later I had an inspiration. Raising my black trilby hat, I asked if I might speak to her for a few moments. Permission being readily granted, I explained that I was a writer and had been given a free seat for the concert with a view to my finding something to write about—but, though I'd had a most enjoyable evening, I was without tangible information about the association. Could she help me in any way? I would, I added, be delighted to call a taxi and take her to supper at the Regent Palace Hotel. We could be there before ten and talk as we ate in comfort. She looked at me a moment from head to toe (which doesn't take very long, as I and Napoleon are the same size) and then said, 'My fee as company is five guineas an evening.'

'But madam!' I said.

She raised a neatly gloved hand as if to silence me, and added: 'But seeing that it's rather late—and that you're rather a little man—I will accept two pounds.'

'My God!' I said. I was absolutely flabbergasted. 'Two pounds!' She nodded in quite an amiable manner. 'Then what was left of my little bit of Cockney wit came forward, and I said: 'Madam—you stay there. 'You stay there just a couple or so years, and I'll be back. I may have grown a couple of inches by then—and then I'll have two guineas worth!' And with that off I went into the bitter night.

I still don't know much about the C.A.A.—I don't expect I shall ever know anything more. But if anyone wants to make anything out of this do let me know, because I could pick that woman out again in a hundred! It was her way of speaking that lingers in my mind—naughty wasn't the word for it; she must have thought she was a duchess. But seeing that it's rather late—and that you're rather a little man—I will accept two pounds!' Blime, things ain't half coming to a pretty pass in London if you have to pay two quid for a woman to come and have a nice little supper with you! There's one great consolation in having a landlady
—Lizzie’s never asked for a tanner to keep me company over fish and chips . . . she’d get a proper telling off if she did and all!

Jenkins

Today it stands a tall, bleak, lonely building. It lies some twenty yards from the Walworth Road, and is immediately behind Jack’s Super Clothing shop, where I buy most of my clothes and get a West End fitting at a Walworth price. Fifty years ago this large old building was a chapel. Latterly Sir Charles Cochran used it to store theatrical scenery in. To me it brings back many childhood memories. When I was a nipper it was my favourite cinema, and many things about it remain firmly imprinted on my memory.

About 36 years ago the building was put up for public auction and was purchased by a proper old card by the name of Jenkins. I don’t think anyone knew his Christian name. He made the former chapel into a cinema and called it the Picture Emporium, but no one, no one at all, called it by this impressive title. It was always Jenkins. There were three grades of seats and three prices: 2d., 4d., and 6d. For 6d. you went into a select balcony where once the organ used to be and the choir sat. Up there the seats were plush. Downstairs the Emporium was divided exactly in half by a foot-wide whitewashed line; below it the price was 2d., above it 4d. From the age of six to nearly twelve I spent a great many hours at Jenkins. I was a cheeky Cockney and in my way as cheeky as old Jenkins himself, and I believe he liked me. He was a very fat jovial old man whose age, when I first knew him, was anything from 55 to 65. At one time he’d been a boxer and he had a tin ear. He had his little ways. He always wore a red waistcoat of some figured material with a red plush smoking jacket with black cord twined around the sleeves and down the front—frogged I think you call it. This jacket was his pride and joy—and, oh, yes, and sweet peas. Invariably he had sweet peas, when they were in season, pinned on it. I never recall his having any other buttonhole. He could talk sweet peas as an expert. My dad was also partial to a buttonhole and grew sweet peas. When I took (I confess stole) some of ours to Jenkins, I became quite his little paleo.

Jenkins was a big man weighing quite sixteen stone, and he was his own chuckler-out. If there was any unseemly behaviour on the part of some little so and so (the spoke very bluntly) it was his unpleasant task to remove the said little so and so by the crop of his skinny neck and land him on his so and so in the gutter, the same being his right and proper place. He insisted on silence for his sixpenny patrons—he would have selective behaviour (‘selective’ was his favourite word) or know the so and so reason why. He’d have no guttersnipes in his super-cinema: had it not been a chapel? Right is right!

His rules of behaviour were broken only on Saturday mornings, when there were special children’s shows—admission one penny a child. If the child was under 4 an adult could go in free with it to see that accidents did not happen. The penny show lasted for two hours, and on coming out every child was presented with a tiny packet of sweets (they were throwouts from sweet factories, and Jenkins got them at so much per hundredweight). And as an additional attraction every thirtieth juvenile patron was presented with a free pass for the following Saturday. I never once managed to get a free pass, and today I believe that Jenkins gave them to the poorest-looking children, irrespective of whether they were the thirteenth or thirtieth. He was a kind-hearted old cove.

To reach the Picture Emporium you had to walk down a corridor which was about six or eight feet wide and had a brass railing down the exact centre. To shield the patrons there was a tin roof nearly up to the actual entrance of the cinema. On entering you walked down the left of the railing, and on coming out you used the right-hand side—and woe betide you for using the wrong side of the railing; no matter if the corridor was completely empty, Jenkins would call you back and put you right. ‘Them’s the rules, and rules have to be followed out in a correct manner, as befits an Emporium!’

Jenkins was his own Barker, and summer and winter, except at meal times, you saw him with his behind against the brass railing calling out the titles of the outstanding films to be seen for two, four, and six. (Pence were never mentioned.) Along the corridor were framed pictures of the stars of those old days. Jenkins had his own favourites—Charlie Chaplin, Alma Taylor, Chrissie White—their photographs were right at the entrance. And beside them stood the patron, who was there as much to protect his stars’ dials (in case one of his patrons took it into his head to slip one of the photographs under his coat) as to draw in the passers-by.

You were never quite sure what you’d see at his cinema, because quite often a piece of one film was stuck on to the end of another, and you’d get Jack Pickford in a thriller which ended with Fatty Arbuckle in a rib-tickler!

Jenkins himself must have had the constitution of a lion. Even in the depths of winter he’d stand at the entrance of that draughty old corridor down which the wind flailed, and although he’d wear an overcoat it was never done up—you could always see the red waistcoat and the deeper red smoking jacket! I knew him for about six years and never once saw him in anything else, except very tight-fitting trousers which had pockets right in the front on each side, so that as he put his hands in he could give support to his fat old belly.
I was about twelve years old when dear old Jenkins died. He had a lovely funeral—plumes and all! The cinema changed hands many times after the old card died, but no one seemed able to make money out of it. They just didn’t have the touch of the master—and, besides, the new managers never gave away sweets or anything. And the tanner seats went up to eightpence, which caused much local argument. Jenkins, too, always gave his lady patrons a cup of tea and a tiny biscuit at the matinée performance. Many a lady paid her fourpence and popped into Jenkins for a quiet sit down and a cuppa char—I doubt if they saw the films or took any interest in them. It was a restful place (much more peaceful than home, with a lot of noisy brats around you), and for fourpence you could have not only tea and a biscuit but a nice little nap! And you’d be gently woken up at about the right time to go home to get the old pot and pan’s tea.

Oh, yes, Jenkins had a heart—and a business mind as well. When I was unable to earn a penny by doing errands, or cleaning windows or steps, I very often polished the Emporium corridor’s brass rail and for this got in on the nod. It was possible to bunk in free by climbing over two walls and entering via the lavatory, which was at the back of the cinema in the open. But I never tried it: I was too scared! I saw one local bully get such a thrashing from Jenkins for doing just that.

Many times in my youth I went without dinner in order to spend my dinner money at the cinema. On one occasion I was allowed to pay fourpence admission in four instalments—what would an Odeon manager say if I asked to do that today for a one and threepenny seat? The managers of super-cinemas today seem to have completely lost the personal touch. I recall that Mr. Jenkins would affectionately tap your arm and ask you if you had enjoyed the show, and why. And for a good reply you got a free pass with the management’s compliments!

I was nearly six when I saw my first film at Jenkins. Experts on cinema lore and history may be able to trace it. It concerned Red Indians, one of whom had been befriended by a white doctor and learnt something of medicine under his hand. When the Red Indian had returned to his people and his friend had become an Army doctor, it happened that the former’s tribe went on the warpath—and naturally it also happened that the white doctor was in the division sent to punish the tribe on the w.p. John Bunny was in two comedies that afternoon as well—fast-moving slapstick—and on the stage a man played a violin which had (good heavens!) tiny electric bulbs alight all round its edges!

I salute the memory of Jenkins. He made thousands of poor people happy in Walworth more than thirty years ago.

A Little Later On.—I have just walked up my road and round to the gloomy old building—I like to be sure of my facts. I now find that it has been taken over by the Coliseum, for a little board nailed to the door says, ‘The Coliseum Scenic Stores.’

Sequel

If any one of my fans took it upon himself to collect all the articles and letters I have had printed in the past twenty years he would have quite a job, because they now number a little over two thousand pieces in all manner of magazines and periodicals throughout the world, from New Zealand to Los Angeles. I don’t mind admitting that many of the magazines appeared for only two or three issues: I’m one of the few authors who not only like to get in on the ground floor but will take whatever is going for their work. If the till has been empty I’ve often taken my wages in copies of the magazine—which, on sunny days, I would sell from a barrow in the gutter of Tower Bridge Road, Bermondsey. I always leave the fee to editors and have at no time in my literary career argued over cash—or forgot to say thank you, be it for 5s. or 5 guineas!

Now in all those articles I have put down facts—I leave fiction to my betters—and even when they may have appeared tall tales I have been very careful to supply evidence of my statements to editors. But there has been one exception to this: I was unable to give any support to the true little ghost story which I wrote for Volume 9 of this book. You had to take my word for the veracity of the account of the ghostly figure of the thin old man with one leg whom I saw so clearly lying in that gloomy lane about one hundred yards from the foot of Hayling Island Toll Bridge.

Now comes a sequel. Early this year I had a visit from Mr. Edward Greer, a former Civil Servant, who lives near Havant, in Hampshire. He was in London and thought he’d pop over to look me up, buy a few books, and affirm my own and only experience of seeing a ghost—for he had seen the same figure in the same lane five years before I had! He described the quiet shady lane that leads on to swampy land where you have to be very careful or you will sink down pretty deep in a few seconds. He described the body, mentioning the grey matted hair on the chest which I had seen but had left out of my short narrative. Mr. Greer agreed with me on the extreme thinness of the body, but whereas I had said the head was bald, he recalled a fringe of grey hair rather bushy at the back. I closed my eyes and visualized again the figure lying there, but could not recall a fringe of hair—I could still see the bald head. But it is reasonable to suggest that we might not have seen the figure at the same angle.

I asked Mr. Greer if he’d made any inquiries locally about a one-legged
man, and he said that he had. The ghostly figure had shocked him as it had shocked me. But whereas I had gone on down the lane, he had retraced his footsteps, crossed the main road, gone down the tiny main street of Langstone, and into the local for a pint to 'steady himself.' Over his pint he related his experience to a couple of locals in the bar. He fully described to them the naked one-legged man, very thin and rather long in the body, and he was even able to describe his thin long nose, which he called the Duke of Wellington kind. Neither of the men was able to recall a one-legged man in those parts, when in came a third party, another local. When the question was put to the newcomer he thought for a moment—oh, yes, he did remember a one-legged man, very thin, very tall. He walked with a crutch and carried a haversack in which there were not combs or shoelaces but miniature Bibles and hundreds of little text-cards in colour. The man was an evangelist, and it was his habit to stop passers-by and ask, 'Have you been saved?' And then he'd hand them a text or two or some Bible readings in pamphlet form. He never asked for money, 'Don't know how he got his living. Never heard of anybody buying a little Bible off him.' The man had come several times to Langstone, perhaps as late as 1932 or 1933—then no more. Mr Greer asked what sort of a face the evangelist had, but his informant couldn't remember anything except that he had one of those aristocratic noses, thin and high in the middle!

Mr Greer stood the three men a pint each. He was quite satisfied that the preacher fellow had come to harm in that thickly treed lane, or on the marshlands, and that he'd seen his ghost. Then he forgot the incident until he read Volume 9 of THE SATURDAY BOOK and discovered that I had seen the same ghostly figure. I saw the ghost in September of 1945. Edward Greer saw it in June or July of 1940.

I am truly delighted to record all this, because it will be a matter of interest not only to my readers but to everyone interested in psychic research. All we need now is for some Bible society, or missionary organization, or other association which distributes Bibles and miniature texts to write to me giving the name and details of a one-legged man who hopped around the villages and towns of Hampshire in the service of Christ. If anyone has this information I'll be delighted to hear it.

P.S. I still sell second-hand books for my living and write articles for my pleasure. I haven't changed my style of living or my address, which is 152 Westmoreland Road, London, S.E.17. But only when a stamped addressed envelope is enclosed can I answer letters, except in the case of those from the U.S.A., which I reply to in a spirit of international friendship and goodwill!

P.P.S. Fred Bason's Diary is now published, price 8s. 6d. With the best will in the world, I cannot really give you one for nothing.