Fred Bason, author, bookseller, autograph hunter, boxing enthusiast, has arrived: since his last appearance here he has had his Diary published, with due reward and réclame. But, he reflects, "is this fame business all it's cracked up to be?"

Browsing With Bason

by FRED BASON

It was my hour of triumph. My Diary was about to be published, and I had gone along to my publishers to buy eighty copies to fulfil personal orders for fans who wanted autographed copies. It was also my birthday, and at the firm I was given birthday greetings, a cup of tea, and a cigarette, and made to feel extremely welcome and slightly important: the managing director asked me to sign a copy specially for him and so did two of the typists. I felt on top of the world! Then the sales manager came in. 'Ah! Bason' he said, 'Splendid! I was just going to write to you. There's a nice job open for you.' My heart gave a bump. Had I got somewhere at long last? Press and Public Relations Officer, perhaps? A nice office job? I told him I'd be very pleased to accept a nice job—what was it? 'Oh, it's one you can do at home. Will you address one thousand envelopes.' The bubble, the dream within me burst, but I have a poker face, and I bet he never saw any change in my expression as I accepted the job.

So I staggered home with a huge box of envelopes, eighty copies of my own book, and mailing lists sticking out of my jacket pockets. And for the next four days I worked hard.

On September 11, the day my Diary was published, the morning mail brought me letters of praise from Ivor Brown, Michael Sadleir, A. G. Strong, and Sonia Dresdel. They had all read my book and enjoyed it. It was sweet music to my ears. After breakfast I packed the thousand envelopes and the mailing lists into two huge parcels and staggered back to my publishers with them, sweating like a bull. And what should have been a day of glory didn't seem a bit like it—I had gone down to envelope addressing and my cup of bitterness was full. I had been told to present a bill to the Accounts Department, but I'd never done such a thing before and hadn't the vaguest idea what to charge. But what they paid me never, never made up for the bitterness in my heart on that morning of September 11.
On Fame

I'm now a well-known author. You can't be twenty times on the radio, write six books and over 2,000 articles, and still be unknown. But, believe me, pals, fame isn't anything unless you've got the swing. There's a lot of jealous, mean-minded people who envy you your hard-earned place in the sun, and say you got there by 'influence.' If you dare to change your style of clothes and wear a better-cut suiting and exchange a cap for a tribly people say you're stepping out of your class. If you chance to mention something to do with journalism or radio they think you're showing off.

If, on the other hand, you still retain your cap and choker and continue to say 'Lorluvaduck' then you are classed as a character and a card and expected to speak rhyming slang for the rest of your life. Take it from me, mates, this fame business isn't all it's cracked up to be.

And that puts me in mind of a bloke I know who went into a junk shop and asked the price of a pottery figure of Nelson. He was told it was 10s. 6d. 'That's a very high price,' said my pal, 'seeing the figure's got one arm missing.' 'I'm sorry,' said the shopkeeper, 'I hadn't noticed that defect.' And he dropped the price to five bob.

And then there was the unknown-lady who came up to me at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, at a London Writers' Club meeting, and said: 'Are you the Mr Bason who writes in the Saturday Book?' I said yes I was and I hoped she liked reading me. 'Oh yes,' that's why I came up to speak to you. I like your work much better than anyone else's in the book.' I said I was flattered; and blimey, I was! Then she goes on: 'What I like about your writing is that it's broken up into nice short sections. You see, I can't afford to buy books, but I go into Foyle's bookshop every Saturday afternoon, and your pieces are just the right length to read without having to buy the book.'

Fred Bason, the browser's friend! Lorluvaduck!

Aerial Autograph Hunting

On December 18, 1950, my precious American friend and fan, Beatrice Winkler, sent me a huge 136-page showmen's newspaper called The Bill Board. It took me more than four and a half hours of vastly entertaining reading to get from one end of this extraordinary newspaper to the other. And, as if 136 pages wasn't enough, it contained a supplement of 120 pages called 'Cavalcade of Fairs.' On page 81 of this supplement there was a staggering advertisement for Miss Luxem, 'Queen of the Aerial Sway Pole. The Highest Girl Aerialist in the World! Thrilling—

Spectacular. See her death-defying Sway of Death, 130 feet in the sky, swaying in a 30-foot arc across the Heavens.' Miss Luxem, I was informed, did not use a safety net.

The advertisement very considerately gave her address, so I promptly wrote to ask if she would honour me with an inexpensive action photograph of her death-defying sway. I enclosed 5 unused American stamps (from my stamp collection).

This put the idea into my mind of getting some more aerial autographs, so I set out for Olympia with the idea of applying in person for the autograph of La Tosca, the American wire-walking star. I'd seen her picture in the News of the World, and she looked a treat, so I thought a signed photograph of her would go nicely with one of Miss Luxem.

When I got to Olympia I was told to wait till the end of the act, and a little later a man came out and said I must go away as La Tosca had slipped from her high-wire just as she was about to somersault on it, and had fallen some 14 feet and was badly shaken. That was that!

Next day I again picked up The Bill Board and on page 90 I found an advertisement for the Great Berosini of St Louis, Missouri, 'Absolutely One of America's Most Sensational High Acts!' There were two drawings of Mr Berosini doing his act, which consisted of riding a bike along a wire, and then riding a one-wheeled bike round a platform 32 inches in diameter, 75 feet up. The advertisement said he would work at any height, in or out of doors. And it added: 'Does not use a net!' I felt I had to get the Great Berosini's autograph while he was still alive, so I wrote at once, on December 20, a very friendly letter asking him if he could spare me an inexpensive action photograph, with his signature, and I enclosed a 20 cent unused American stamp—the last I had.

Having posted the letter at noon, and called at Foyle's to give my favourite assistant there a Christmas present, I thought I'd go to Olympia again and see if I could get the autograph of another very sensational act, appearing for the first time in the Bertram Mills Circus, the Flying Meteors. This is a five-artiste act, and I wanted the signatures of all five.

When I got to Olympia I had a shock. My friend there, Bill, told me that one of the mainsprings of the Flying Meteors, named Jean, had just crashed through the safety net, landed in the front row of the stalls, and broken his thigh. In the circumstances, I thought it unwise to bother the other four Meteors, and went home.

As I turned into Westmoreland Road I suddenly thought to myself, Fred old boy, I thought, you've been collecting autographs for thirty years, and one day, for the first time, you get round to collecting high-wire autographs. On December 18 you go to get the signature of
La Tosca, and she falls to the ground. On December 20 you go to get
the signatures of the Flying Meteors, and one of them falls to the ground.
Fred old boy, it seems you're a jinx in the circus. Now, Fred, I con-
tinue to myself, you wrote on December 18 to Miss Luxem, Queen of
the Aerial Sway Pole, and on December 20 to the Great Berosini, 'Abso-
lutely one of America's most sensational High Acts.' And neither of
them use nets! Fred, old pal, I says to myself, if those two artistes
survive my letters and oblige me with signed action photographs I swear
I'll leave well alone and never ask another circus star for an autograph
—so swep me bob!

P.S. That was written on December 22. A week or two later I received
from Miss Luxem two 12 x 8 signed action photographs of herself,
together with a long and interesting letter from her home in
Rochester, N.Y.

But, from the Great Berosini—silence! Oh dear! I hope his bike
didn't get a puncture!

Consolation

A fan in Penzance writes to tell me she is very miserable, her husband
has left her, and she has the urge to come to London and find consola-
tion in me. My reply: 'Lady, I don't like miserable women. If you
can't hold your old man you certainly can't hold me. Stay in Penzance.
F. B.'

A Night Out

I went to a stag party given by a film star, and there I drank a couple of
large whiskies. I'm almost a teetotaller, and those two drinks set me right
back on my heels. When I left the party I walked down Oxford Street,
and I was turning into Berwick Street when a woman said: 'Hello,
dearie!'

Now I like to be civil to one and all, so I said 'Hello' to her. So she
said 'Would you like to come along with me?' I said I didn't mind if I
did, though the words came straight out of the whisky bottle because
I'd never been home with a street-walker in all my forty-two years—and
never have since.

The woman asked me how much money I had on me, and I said I had
about 22s. 6d. She shrugged her shoulders and said: 'That'll do.' We
walked the full length of the street, until we came to Berwick Market,
near the Globe Theatre, where we turned into a back turning and went
up some dark stairs to the first floor. The woman unlocked the door,
she was going to charge me 22s. 6d. for it, and all I had left was one penny. So I decided it would hardly be fair to her to go back and hear the rest of that story, and I went home to bed. I hope she didn’t wait up for me all night.

More About Fame

A nice chap called Hailstone asked if he could come and paint my portrait in oils. I told him he could come for a couple of hours each Wednesday morning, which was all the time I could spare. But at the second sitting he told me that he was Georges Carpentier’s fifth cousin. That knocked the starch out of me. ‘With such blue blood in your veins,’ I said, ‘there ain’t no doubt as what it should be me doing you in oils . . . if I could!’

A Story About Salt

The late Alexander Woollcott, the American writer, was a sort of larger-sized James Agate and probably a good deal more vindictive and touchy. I met him in the war, when a well-known actress took me to see him in a restaurant in Dean Street, Soho. His conversation was, of course, mostly addressed to my companion (no names, no pack drill), but he did turn his massive tummy around my way after a while and suddenly say, ‘Waal—what do you want out of life?’ And he glared through owl-like glasses. Well, when you are asked a question like that of all a sudden in the middle of a war after you’ve just come off twelve hours continual A.R.P. duty, and know that it’s not beyond the bounds of possibility that the great Woollcott himself, the actress, and your scribe might all be dead the next day, you don’t quite know what to say. So on the spur of the moment I replied: ‘Waal—a brand new egg and a fighting photograph of Jack Dempsey would suit me right now!’ They asked me to explain. It was all so simple. A photograph of Jack Dempsey had hung for six years in Lizzie’s kitchen (my landlady), where I have my breakfast on the rare mornings I get up to breakfast. But there was no side wall any more, and in the rubble in the backyard lay a hopelessly ruined photograph of my boyhood hero. As for the new laid egg—well, I just fancied one. Alexander the Great said that he’d see egg—well, I just fancied one. He said that years ago the great American actress Katherine Cornell,

on tour with her company in the United States, missed a train connection and did not arrive at Seattle until nearly half-past eleven at night. At the theatre a huge audience had been waiting three or four hours, and the curtain eventually went up at a little after one. Now, said Woollcott, Miss Cornell had a faithful manager named Guthrie, and half-way through the play, when it was well past 2.30 a.m., noticing that Miss Cornell was looking tired, he asked if he could get anything for her. She said, ‘I would like an egg.’ And this chap set out to get her an egg at nearly three in the morning, and succeeded after a fantastic amount of trouble. But when the faithful one returned with the precious egg, the actress had either changed her mind or was sound asleep . . . and eventually—naturally—the egg got sat on.

Now that I have put it down, this mildly interesting story (or was it a fable?) reminds me of a somewhat similar experience of my own. Years ago, as I have related in previous volumes of THE SATURDAY BOOK, I landed myself a pleasant part-time job of being head cook and bottle-getter to a vaudeville star. One night—it was a little after ten, during
the interval at the second house of the Palladium, London—I asked my star if I could get anything for her, and she said, 'Oh, yes, Freddie. Get me some salt.' She had some sandwiches which she had insipid. 'Easy,' I said, without having the faintest notion where I was to get salt at that time of night. It took me quite a time to think out a scheme.

I went into a café and I ordered a cup of tea, which I took to a far corner. Then with great stealth and a lot of managing about with a newspaper I managed to secrete some salt, leaving a penny for it on the table—God knows why I just didn't say to the café-keeper, 'Give me a penna of salt, mate' and save myself all that trouble. Back to the Palladium I rushed with my precious packet and knocked on the door of the star's dressing-room. Her pianist popped his head out. 'What do you want, sonny?' he said—I was always so sonny to both of them.

'I've brought the salt.'

'The salt?'

'Yes, Bob, the salt!'

The pianist turned his head and said into the room, 'He's brought the salt!'

My star said, 'What salt? Salt?'

I said, 'About three-quarters of an hour ago I was asked to get some salt. I have, by using my loaf, been able to acquire some salt. It was needed for some sandwiches.'

'Oh salt—salt for sandwiches. I get it now,' said the pianist.

'Well, throw it away, throw it away,' called out the star. 'We couldn't wait. We ate 'em—without salt!'

And I threw the salt away, over my left shoulder.

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Wilde

The Rector of Bloomsbury sent me a friendly letter of congratulation on my Diary and enclosed as a gift a letter signed by Oscar Wilde. The letter is in the form of an I.O.U. to More Adey for £25, received May 19, 1897, 'with deep and sincere thanks.' I've never possessed Wilde's autograph, and I was so excited I rushed down to the kitchen and called out to my landlady Liz: 'Oh, Liz, I've had a lovely present this morning—Wilde's autograph, very rare, a real gem for my collection!'

'Wilde!' replies Liz, 'He's nobody to get excited about. My brother Bert was a pal of his: often went to "The Ring" with him. Bert could have got his autograph for you years ago. I don't call Wilde much of a catch!'

'But he is!' says I. 'He's a great man. And he's dead, anyway, so Bert can't get his autograph now.'

'Dead!' says Liz, 'I never heard he was dead.'

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Fred Bason

Yes,' says I, 'He died soon after he came out of prison.'

'Prison!' exclaims Liz, 'Wilde in prison! That nice little man!'

'Here, Liz! Who are you talking about?' I asks.

'Wilde,' she says, 'Jimmy Wilde, the boxer.'

'Blimey, Liz! I was talking about Oscar Wilde.'

'Who's he?' she asks, 'Jimmy's brother?'

'No,' says I, 'No relation. He was a writer.'

'Oh!' says Liz, 'Like you.'

'No,' says I, 'Not quite like me.'

Free For All

I went as a guest to a Chamber of Commerce luncheon. When we came out I got talking to a man who'd been sitting near me. He asked me what I did and I said I was a writer, so he asked me if I'd like to go along with him to a function he had to attend that afternoon. I said yes thank you, I'm always on the look out for new experiences. 'Follow me,' he said, and we got on a tram to Blackfriars Bridge, and walked up the first turning on the left of Queen Victoria Street. Half way up this street we went through an archway and across a corridor, and out into the open and then into another place. I didn't know where I was at all. But the chap says 'Follow me!' and I followed him.

We come to a cloakroom counter, with a commissionaire behind it, and we give up our hats and the brown paper parcel containing ten copies of Fred Bason's Diary which I'd bought that morning from the publishers. We go up a spiral staircase with a posh carpet, into a hall that has stained-glass windows and oil-paintings on the walls and two of the most beautiful glass chandeliers I've ever seen. There are a lot of people there, but nobody takes any notice of us. We sit down. It is some prize-giving occasion, and about a dozen young men get diplomas and whatnot. We clap when all the rest clap. I can't hear much of the speaking what's done at the other end of the hall, but I do mine share of clapping.

This goes on for about ½ hour, until a bloke gets up and says that concludes the proceedings and tea will now be served. At this my host, who is still pretty much of a stranger to me, jumps up and takes me over to a long table where we get cups of tea and lots of very rich and tasty pastries. Nobody talks to us, but we have a very large tea, although it's less than two hours since we had a very good lunch. When we've eaten as much as we can, my host says he must be going, and we go downstairs and get our hats, etc. I am very careful to put twopenny in the plate on the counter where we get our hats, etc., and then out we go into Queen Victoria Street.

Before we part at Blackfriars Bridge I thanks my friend for his hos-
pitiability and says I suppose he gets asked to a lot of luncheons and functions of this kind. 'Oh no,' he says, 'I don't get invited, but I often get a free tea and sometimes a free lunch by just popping in where I know there's something going on. Nobody pays much attention to me, and I just listen to the speeches, have a good tuck-in, and come out again. You never know your luck.'

I don't know what the bloke's name was, but I know that those pastries were extra rich. About six hours later I had a bilious attack.

London Street Game

A lot of dear old ladies and gentlemen are interested in London street games. Here's a new one for them.

A boy was sitting on a wall, waving his arms about, and going 'Buzz, buzz, bang, bang, buzz, buzz.' The wall was about five feet high; on the pavement below were three younger boys looking up at him:

'What are you playing at?' I asked the boy on the wall.

'I'm an Atom Bomb,' he replied.

'And the three youngsters?'

'Oh, they're victims. If I jumps down sudden-like, and touches one, he's dead. The game goes on till all three are dead.'

Happy days!

Christmas Eve

I certainly do pick 'em! She was Scotch, buxom, and amiable. Because she'd been injured in the war she was sick in mind and suffered from black-outs. I thought my usual merry company would do her a bit of good, and we became pals. Several times we went out together. She said she liked my company and had no boy friend but me. Soon she said she was getting to love me. O.K., I said, I'll be the doctor; we'll get you well, and you'll always be my girl. O.K. by me, she said.

One morning early she arrived from her home in Surrey to tell me she'd been ordered to hospital and would be away for several months. I was very sad. I promised to be faithful to her and be waiting for her when she came out. I said I'd write twice a week regular, and come and see her at once if ever she wanted me. We kissed. We parted.

I wrote two, three, or even four times a week for three months. In one of my letters I even enclosed my own especially Lucky Charm, with my blessing on it for her recovery. In every letter I renewed my pledge that I was waiting for her.

At the end of the third month she wrote and said she was having some special drug treatment and letters were forbidden as she mustn't make the mental effort to cope with them. She said she'd hold tight to my love and come back to me well and happy again.

Five months silence. I wrote twice to her parents asking for news, but there was no reply. I telephoned the hospital and was told she was making progress and there was no need to worry. She was getting on well and would soon be out. I got her a Christmas gift, and made my plans to take it down to Surrey on Christmas Eve and give it to her parents, who would no doubt be visiting her on Christmas Day. Maybe she'd even be out of hospital by Christmas, and I could give it to her myself.

At nine o'clock on the morning of Christmas Eve I got a letter from her. It went like this: 'Dear Fred, I am now back home and fit well. I have found Jack again who I was engaged to six years ago and broke it off because I was ill. Those six years are now swept away and we have found happiness again. I wish you a Merry Xmas. Yours truly——'.

That was how the letter went——more or less. I tore it into little pieces and put it on fire. She'd never said a word to me about this splendid fellow Jack, who'd somehow managed to be missing during her years of illness.

Oh what a beautiful brush-off! And on Christmas Eve, too.

Merry Christmas

I don't like Christmas anyway. It's the only time of the year when I get lonely. Of course, I've no family, and that means no reunion and no party. Still, all manner of folk from all over the globe write to me at Christmas. Mostly they dash off a friendly greeting to me after reading my bit in the SATURDAY BOOK. I've had as many as 400 Christmas cards——never fewer than 250 these last six years. And mostly I spend Christmas answering them and sending off New Year's cards.

The most awful Christmas I've ever had was two years ago when Lizzie and I were both ill with flu. She was downstairs in her room, too ill to get out of bed. I was practically dying upstairs. On Christmas morn, about 11.30, I managed to get from bed and crawl down to the kitchen. I broke up a small loaf of brown bread into bits, and put them in a large saucepan, pouring in a whole bottle of milk and adding a cup of water. Then I put the lot on the gas-stove and boiled it, stirring with a big spoon. In about 15 minutes the lid began to bubble and I thought the concoction was done. So I took two soup plates, filled them with the bread and milk, adding a little brandy to each. I put my plate back on top of the saucepan to keep hot, while I took Lizzie's down to her. Took! I was so weak I went downstairs sitting, moving the plate from stair to stair as I went. When at last I got to Lizzie's room
Fan Mail

Letter from Chester, January 8, 1951.—‘Dear Fred Bason, I know that you are single and I am sure it is not really good for you. I am 32. I am a very good nurse and I have nice teeth. My husband died over a year ago, and now I would like to look after you. I have a little boy aged 2, very loveable and good as gold. Would you care to come and see me? You would be very welcome and we could talk it over. Make your own date. Yours faithfully, S.—’

Me to S, January 10, 1951.—‘My goodness, lady, I'm sure your teeth are lovely, but I don't want to be bitten, thank you all the same. You do me a great honour, but I do not yet need a nurse. Faithfully, F.’

Letter from Sidmouth, January 11, 1951.—‘Dear Freddie, Thank you for writing such a lovely Diary—and my mother and dad and brother liked it awfully as well. I am 16½. It will not be very long before I am 18. Will you please wait for me. I will be really loving, and share your adventurous life for life. I enclose S.A.E. Please write to me. Always your J.—’

Me to her, next day.—‘Honey, you are a silly little girl. Even if I chose to wait, how do I know Time will wait for me? Find a nice boy of 18, and send me a bottle of cider to drink your health on the day you wed. Forget the letter you wrote me, but don't forget to get Vol. 2 of my Diary.—F.’

Pears

When I was a kid of seven I worked after school hours on a newspaper round for two hours an evening for 2s. a week; and 1s. 6d. of this went to pay for my weekly piano lesson. This left 2d. for sweets, 2d. for reading matter, and 2d. for the cinema. Then one week, as I had toothache, I didn't have my music lesson, and with the 1s. 6d. saved I purchased a secondhand copy of Pears Cyclopaedia. Full of pride I took my Pears to school the next morning, where the main lesson happened to be composition: we had to write on what our fathers did for their living.

Sam Mayo

They say that Arnold Bennett used to carry about with him a £100 note to give to the first person he saw actually reading one of his books. Whether he did or not I never had a chance to confirm, but knowing him as a man of his word I am sure that if he said he'd pay he would. Now back in the year 1927 I was at a music hall—I think it was the Holborn Empire—and I asked a man for his autograph, thinking he was somebody else. When I looked at the book I saw he'd written the name ‘Sam Mayo.’ I thanked him politely, but not with much enthusiasm because I'd only seen him on the boards twice, and each time he'd mumbled in a fearful way to a baby doll on his piano, and I hadn't been able to hear what he was singing, and my opinion of Sam Mayo was not high.

However, having handed back to me my autograph book and pen, Sam Mayo forked out of his wallet a photograph, about 3 by 5 inches, of himself smoking a pipe. And taking my pen back from me he signed this photograph and gave it to me. ‘I thank him again, and took back my pen. He then put his hand in his trouser pocket, pulled out a handful of money and gave it to me. It was 7s., all in shillings. I thanked him once again, but gave it back to him, saying I couldn't take it as it was my pleasure and hobby to ask stars for autographs and I didn't expect to be paid for it.

Then he tells me that he is a back number and feels played out, and he is always seeing people ask other stars for autographs, but they never
ask him. He says he's carried that photo about for nearly a year, hoping someone will some day ask him for his signature, and vowing that if anyone does he'll give him all the money in his right-hand pocket. When I heard this I felt so sorry for him that it seemed the least I could do was take his money. So I did—seven bob in silver, and a signed photograph—all for asking the wrong man.

I'm glad I made Sam Mayo happy that night in 1927 (I was proper sorry to read of his death in May, 1938), because now in 1951 I'm learning myself the pleasure of being asked for my signature. I have now signed, by request, 249 copies of Fred Bason's Diary, 36 pieces of paper, and 9 autograph albums, and I've got a thrill each time I did it. I wonder if the time will come when I shall be happy to pay 7s. to anyone who asks me. Oh God, I hope it doesn't, for I can still feel the sadness of that moment when I asked Sam Mayo for his. He was wearing a cloth cap—not a very clean cap either—but I wish to record that he was not tipsy—just feeling sorry for himself. That's a state no real star should ever get into, nor an author either—though I admit I feel a finger of self-pity myself sometimes—usually at Christmas.

Disillusion

On February 1, 1951, I was turning out a drawer of oddments when I came on one of my vest-pocket diaries for 1931. Twenty years ago! And under 'Memoranda' on page 4 I had written 'Norman—London Wall 2106' and 'Breezy. Seventh Ave. NYC.' I remembered who Norman was—a buddy I went boxing with in my youth. But for the life of me I couldn't remember 'Breezy.' Sounded like an old and burnt-out flame—some American girl I'd bumped into when I had more cheek and hair. So I sat down and wrote a letter to 'Breezy.' You never know your luck.

I got a reply all right. It was from a firm of Funeral Furnishers, and they said they were at my service.

'Breezy!' Blimey!

My Usual P.S.

Except that I now have a secretary once a week to help me with my mail, have been painted in oils, give lectures and talks all over England, have twice visited the Savage Club, and have published Fred Bason's Diary (now in its 2nd edition), I can report no change in me or my style of living. I am still single, still wear a cap, and still answer all letters when S.A.E. is enclosed. The address is still 152 Westmoreland Road, London, S.E.17.

'W

The Allied soldiery.'