Among my Souvenirs

by FRED BASON

Do you remember that old song of the 'twenties that ended with the words '... among my souvenirs'? It came into my head the other day when I was sitting by the fire and looking round me chests and boxes and albums and wondering what to write for me fans in The Saturday Book. You wouldn't believe what a lot of funny things happen to a bloke who merely goes through life collecting signatures on scraps of paper. Every picture tells a story, they say, and every autograph does, too.

In the days before World War Two, me and Liz—that's me landlady in case you don't know, for I'm still unmarried in spite of all the hints I've dropped to me fans—me and Liz used sometimes of a summer's evening to take the cheap excursion from Fenchurch Street to Southend. You could be on the sea front by seven, and stay till after ten, sniffing the winkle barges and whelk stalls, and looking at the sea—if the blooming tide wasn't out.

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Well, one evening we got down to Southend and was walking down the High Street lookin' in the shops, when I notice a man beside me with a small black moustache. Suddenly it dawns on me that I've seen this man's face on a cigarette picture, and I think it must be a famous cinema organist.

Out comes my little album which I always carry around for emergencies like this, and, lifting my cap, I say to him: 'Excuse me, sir, I'm an autograph collector; it's my life-long hobby; and I would very much appreciate your signature.' 'Well, I'm not anyone of any consequence,' says this man. 'Never mind,' I say, thinking he's merely being bashful, 'if your aren't famous now I'm sure you will be one day,' and I press the album into his hand.

The man shrugged his shoulders, took the album, and wrote in it Suffer little children to come unto me, Very truly . . . and signed his name. I thanked him politely, and as he walked away Lizzie came up and said 'Who've you got now?' 'Reginald Foort, the famous broadcasting organist,' I replied. But when we looked at the book we saw the signature was not Reginald Foort but Alfred E. Rouse.

Two years later Rouse was hung for murder. I saw a facsimile of his signature in a Sunday newspaper, and there's no doubt mine was genuine. I hope Reginald Foort will forgive me for telling this story, but it's true enough, and I think he'd admit there was a resemblance.

Anyway, my polite remark to Mr Rouse about him becoming famous one day was right enough. And in 1938 I read in an American magazine about a lawyer in the state of New York who collected murderers' autographs, so I sent him Rouse's and asked if he'd like to do a swop. After four months of silence there came a friendly letter from this lawyer and a 'swop'—a line of music from Ninon by Tosti, who wrote 'Goodbye,' plus Tosti's full signature and the date. I was well satisfied. Don't care for murderers meself.

You never know your luck. One sunny day I sat down on a bench in Hyde Park and there was a bloke beside me looking real sad and worried. I got chatting, talked about the passing birds—both sorts—and what a lovely day it was and how I'd won half a dollar on a dog the night before. But nothing I said seemed to cheer up this bloke. Just as I was going I asked him, sort of casual, what his name was, and he said 'Bruce Bairnsfather.' 'Not the inventor of Old Bill, of the Better 'Ole?' I said. 'Yes,' he replied gloomily. I whipped out my album there and then and he drew a lovely cartoon of Old Bill
in it. There's a man who brought millions of people a bit of happiness. But he didn't seem to have any himself.

I met Ian Hay because he slipped on a piece of orange peel in Mount Street, and I helped him up and brushed him down. We had tea and cakes together and a nice long chat. I once picked up a glove outside Harrods and ran to give it to the lady who'd dropped it, and blimey she turns out to be Marjorie Bowen. One foggy night I banged into a great strapping bloke in Seven Dials and he asked me where he could get a taxi. ‘You won’t get one on a night like this, sir,’ I said, ‘where do you want to go?’ ‘The Adelphi,’ he replied, so I showed him the way there and you could have knocked me down with a feather when he told me he was Chaliapin, the Russian bass. He sent me a lovely signed photo later, as a thank you.

It's funny the way things turn out. Among my souvenirs is a huge signed photograph of Ella Shields, the unforgettable 'Burlington Bertie.' I got it from her at the Victoria Palace. But first she gave me a less than postcard-size snap. ‘Thank you, sir,’ I said, with a straight face. ‘Give that back to me,’ she said, and went back into her dressing-room, to come out a few minutes later with a magnificent full-length signed print. I was staggered. ‘You called me sir,’ she said. ‘It was a great compliment.’ Funny, ain't it!

I see from the ticket which I've kept that I went to the Palladium as the guest of Nellie Wallace on June 6, 1927. How did that happen? I'll tell you. I was getting her autograph and I said to her, surprised like: 'Why, you're quite good looking! Yet you make up ever so ugly on the stage!' Oh, readers, I couldn't have said a thing better! Instead of a gallery seat that night I had a stall, at her expense.

Theatre tickets, photos, cuttings—I pull open a drawer and who don't I find. There's, Charles Laughton, Jack Dempsey, Madeleine Carroll (I think I must have been the first bloke what asked her for her autograph—how I loved her!), Frank Woolley, Mary Pickford looking very sweet, Sybil Thorndike (my, wasn't her hair untidy as she signed it!), and Mimi Crawford—remember her? We was great pals twenty years ago, and now she's a Countess—Hi yer, Countess! How's you?

It was a piece of mine in The Saturday Book which brought me, from the Rector of Bloomsbury, an I.O.U. signed by Oscar Wilde. I think G. B. Stern was a bit surprised once when I said I thought Wilde the greatest British writer of the past hundred years. 'Yes, perhaps,' she said, 'if you're considering what might be called ornamental writers.' 'Well, if Wilde's an ornament,' I said, 'I'd be proud to sit on the same mantelpiece with him.'

When Lady Windermere's Fan was revived at the Haymarket Theatre, I went round to the stage door to try and get the autographs of Cecil Beaton and Oliver Messel, who'd both had a hand in that glorious production. As I was waiting there I got into conversation with a young chap of sixteen or so who was standing at the door, and I asked him whose autograph he was after. 'Oscar Wilde's,' he said. He just wouldn't believe me when I said Wilde was dead.

After a few minutes I went inside, where I met an actor I knew and told him about this bloke asking for Wilde's autograph. 'Not really, Freddie!' exclaims this actor, and out of the door he pops, finds this young chap, and says 'I understand you want my autograph, my dear fellow?' 'Golly, are you Mr Wilde?' says the lad. 'I am indeed, dear boy,' says the actor. 'Then would you sign this album please, mister?' When I went out this bloke was still there. 'Think I'm potty, do yer?' he calls out to me. 'Well, I've got Mr Wilde's autograph now, and you ain't, see!'

These are some of the funny little memories that come back to me when I sit among my souvenirs.

I wonder what my wife, when I find one, will do with all my treasures. Will she say, 'I'm your only treasure now,' and chuck 'em all out in the spring cleaning? If she does, I can promise her a glorious bust-up. Something returns from the lost years when I take up the ballet shoe of Vera Nemchinova (what a beauty she was!) or peer at one of the first photos Gracie Fields ever gave to a fan, or another of darling Alice Delysia, or when I look at the inscription G.B.S. wrote in my copy of Press Cuttings or the sketches of themselves which George Robey and Harry Lauder did for me.

But before I get proper miserable thinking of me lost youth and the hazards of marriage, I'd better end with the information that since I appeared in The Saturday Book last year I've spent a day aboard me first liner, the United States, by invitation of the owners, I've drank vodka and eaten caviare, and last Thursday night I was Noël Coward's guest at the Café de Paris. But I'm still at the same address, 152, Westmoreland Road, S.E.17, where you can see me sitting with Liz and me other souvenirs if you turn back the page, and I still answer all letters when a s.a.e. is enclosed (no need for s.a.e. for U.S.A.).