being an autobiography, with a philosophical digression or two, wherein Mr. Bason is seen as barber, tipster, bookseller, A.R.P. warden, civil servant, not to mention his long reign as king of autograph hunters and prince of cigarette card collectors, the whole forming a very remarkable document indeed.

The Bason Story

by FRED BASON

I have the honour of appearing in volumes 5, 6, 7, and 8 of this annual. Perhaps you will recall that in my first contribution I gave you the low-down on my high-up friend, W. Somerset Maugham.

Next I told you of some of the pleasures and trials of being a Saturday Book contributor. My 'Who's Who' in volume seven gave pen-pictures of celebrities I've met in my long reign as the king of autograph collectors. Last year you read—or should have read—'Basoniana.' This time at the request of Leonard Russell and numerous other people I am leaving out my famous friends and writing about myself.

Now you know jolly well that I'm not a high-class literary bloke. I'm merely a cockney who does a bit of writing when it's too cold for him to take his barrel of second-hand books out into the gutter. I'm a writer from sheer necessity, and at any gathering of literary celebrities I feel like a blooming fish out of water. So please bear with me if I do a little rambling and don't keep to strict chronological order.

I was born at an early age and have lived all my life in Walworth, a slum district of London, ten minutes from Big Ben and fourteen minutes from Bow Bells; and when there is any quiet in Walworth you can hear the chimneys. Thus I am a veritable cockney. I do not feel particularly proud of the fact, but on the other hand I am most certainly not ashamed of it. I was an only son, and came into the world when my parents were in their forties. My childhood was particularly lonely and unhappy, so let's skip it. Some old geezer told parents at a school prize-giving at Croydon the other day that it was important their sons should do the sort of work they liked; it did not matter what money they earned, because there would be no very rich and no very poor in the near future. I wish he'd told this to my parents the day I left school at 14—it would have saved me over a year of jobs I didn't like. My father was a master jobbing harness-maker, but he wanted me to be a carpenter, whereas my mother, thinking of a nice clean job for me, wanted me to be a barber! And my mother got her way.

How I Became a Barber

Two days after I finished my schooldays there appeared in our local paper, the South London Press, an advertisement for an apprentice for a local barber's shop; and my mother commanded me to go with her to see about it. Weedy-looking specimen though I was, I got the job: I was to be lather boy and work me way up—though God knows where 'up' was! Wages, 7s. 6d. a week and tips, hours, from 7.30 in the morning until 'when the shop was empty at night.' Actually the door shut at 8, but there was always a shopful of customers when it closed, and these had to be polished off and polished up and then the pad had to be cleaned before I could push off—and that meant it was seldom earlier than nine that I left that so-and-so barber's shop! Dirty faces, filthy noses, decayed teeth—that was my lot in life for six months. The air was foul, and I breathed hair-clippings for more than twelve hours a day—and for the most part the conversation was just as foul.

A great many of our customers never thought of washing before they entered the shop—my lather would clean as it moistened the beard, and when I handed them the towel to finish drying their chins they'd rub their faces as well and so have a wash! You'll realize that I'm writing of twenty-five or more years ago. Today, with laundry so expensive, barbers are more particular. And the assistants are far more independent nowadays and would refuse to shave a dirty man.

I had a half-day's holiday on Thursday, when we closed at one o'clock, but on that day I had to go on hands and knees and thoroughly scrub out the shop, and so it was usually 3 o'clock when my half-day started. On Sundays I had to work from eight till one, but here again though we closed the shop door at one there was always a shopful of customers who had come across from the pub just a few minutes before our closing time for a Sunday shave (which lasted many of them a week).

Did I learn to become a barber? No fear! I had set my heart on becoming a bookseller; books had been my companions in childhood, I was always a bookworm, and even a worm will turn. After six months as a lather boy I had a razor in my hand for the very first time, and I made such a bloody mess of the job on an old geezer's chin—he had volunteered for a free shave—that the boss grabbed the razor and told me exactly where I could go to . . .

Now, I thought, I shall be allowed to buy and sell books for me living. But oh dear no! Dad had his say, and he took me to a carpentry
factory in the next district; and what with telling the boss I was a brany boy, giving him a cigar, and fixing him up with a cert winner for that day's racing (which did win), he persuaded him to give me a trial.

**My Dad**

**ON A CERTAIN VERY MEMORABLE DAY** when I was about twelve my dad had his first, last, and only big win at racing. He won exactly £200 on a Lincoln and National double. But to tell you the truth it caused more trouble than it was worth, because for the next thirty years he chased the rainbow of another big win, and it for ever evaded him.

When he brought the £200 home in notes and silver my mother cried: it seemed to mean something akin to security. Dad promptly made some purchases to celebrate the occasion: a diamond ring, which cost about ten pounds, for my mother, and for me a 15s. scooter; and there was a huge basket of fancy fruit all tied up with pink ribbon that must have cost a fancy price. The rest of the money he put away in a biscuit tin at the bottom of the kitchen cupboard—a matter of some £180.

But not for long. In five days he had lost the whole sum, and on the sixth day he asked mother for 5s. to tide him over till someone paid a bill for harness work he'd done!

A mugs' game, all right. When my dad died at 78 he left behind a crowd of friends and 14s. 9d. Betting kept him and us poor.

**How I Nearly Became a Carpenter**

I HAD NO OBJECTION TO CARPENTRY as a career, but I went into it with the idea that some day, when I could please myself how I made my living, I would make bookcases and bookshelves and so save myself a great deal of expense when I opened my own bookshop. My mother said it would be a nice healthy job—such a change from the barber's shop. It was a change, but it wasn't healthy. They put me to work at the wrong end of a planing machine, covering me with chips and choking me with sawdust: I had to pull the planed planks out and stack them into neat piles. My wages were 21s. a week for twelve hours a day. We had a half-day on Saturday and the shop closed at one o'clock, but I had to stop behind and put the chips and sawdust into sacks—and if you've ever tried to hold open a big sack with one hand and shovel chips into it with the other you know it's a blooming tricky job; with someone holding out the sack we could have done it in half an hour, but alone it took pretty near two hours.

During the four months I was there, at no time was I taught even the rudiments of carpentry. Looking back I reckon all I learnt was the use of a straight left, how to rough-house when your opponent was too tough and tons above your weight and something of the handicap of horses.

It was while I was at this woodwork factory that I went full tilt at my hobby of autograph collecting as a means of escape: I got the autograph of Marie Lloyd at the Camberwell Palace of Varieties at the close of my first month as a carpenter. I remember how reluctant I was to go up and ask for it—my clothes were so torn and shabby, and even after a vigorous wash and brush up I wasn't free from sawdust. But having at last found the courage I said I was sorry I wasn’t poshly dressed. Marie was very nice indeed and called me a ‘little man’ and ’dearie’ and said clothes didn’t matter a bit, it was what they covered that mattered most. When I repeated the conversation to my workmates the next morning (and with pride showed them her signed photograph) they had a great laugh, but I’m sure Marie didn’t mean it that way.

In the end this job caused me to collapse—and through a long illness I still heard the roar of that confounded planing machine. Fortunately they didn’t keep the job open for me; and when I was well again I was at a loose end.

Now I'd always been a bibliophile in my own small way, and at least three-quarters of my very slim pocket money went on books. I had an uncle living in Wandsworth who kept a book-china-old clothes shop; and most Saturdays I walked from Walworth to Wandsworth (about five miles) to buy books from him; he also allowed me to dive down the wastepaper sack and take home any books I needed from it. My folks, however, wouldn't believe that bookselling was a real job for a beginner. Dad wanted me to take up carpentry again, but by heck I'd had enough of it. For a while I did dead-end jobs, but I suppose they both eventually that I'd set my heart on becoming a bookseller and my own boss, so I was told to give it a try. If I failed, however, it was back to carpentry... That threat alone inspired me to make good.

**As My Own Boss**

A JUMBLE SALE WAS ADVERTISED outside a church off Coldharbour Lane, Brixton. Admission was 2d. With 11s. 8d. capital and a sack I went to that sale on a Saturday afternoon, and the vicar's wife charged me 8s. for 28 books that I chose myself. Somehow I felt jolly pleased with the deal; now I had some stock, and 3s. 6d. for expenses. Taking the books home in the sack made me sweat, for I'd chosen the fattest and biggest from the miscellaneous collection on the stall. All day Sunday I spent cleaning up my wares—and I was so inexperienced that
I even used boot blacking to make some of them look nice and shiny! Those that wouldn’t shine I washed with soap and water and a large scrubbing brush. I can’t remember the titles all this time afterwards, but I know some were theology and that others were bound volumes of magazines, and there was a book on astronomy which fascinated me. On Monday morning off I went to Charing Cross Road lugging some 15 or 16 of my treasures, and—what luck!—I fell into very kind and gentle Jewish hands and was able to sell out at a profit. With the confidence of inexperience I took all my books carefully out of the sack, laid the sack out, placed the books on it like a row of soldiers, and asked the bookseller to pick out his needs. He chose six. At first he refused to make an offer, but as I hadn’t the slightest idea what to ask I said I would accept the best offer he could honestly make as I desperately needed the money. Whereupon he showed me a 10s. note and asked if I’d be quite satisfied with that. I said ‘Oh yes, sir!’ And he handed it over. As I was putting the rejected books back into my sack he gave me an extra 6d. for calling him ‘sir!’ It was a lesson I never forgot—politeness pays. I asked him where he thought I could sell the rest of my wares, and he named a shop across the way. Again it was a Jew and again a kindly Jew; he chose only one book and paid the 4s. I had the impudence to ask.

After that I had a run of bad luck; no one seemed to want the few which remained—they were probably junk. I had made a profit, but I did so much want to sell out so that I could go home with absolute and undeniable proof that I could make a living as my own master as a seller of second-hand books. At last, off Seven Dials, I found a furniture shop with a row of books as a sideline. Taking off my cap, I asked if I could display some jolly nice-looking books I had for sale. Permission granted. I turned the sack upside down and out fell my wares. ‘They are pretty nearly all real leather—leather sir, not just paper things!’ The man called me ‘a funny kid’ and said he’d give me a real paper ten shilling note for them if I’d give him the sack as well and run to the corner for the Evening News. I said I’d get his paper gladly, but I couldn’t part with the sack because it was my dad’s and thus on loan, and in any case I hadn’t any other means of transporting my stock. We compromised: I got his paper, and also some bread and cakes, and posted a letter.

I don’t know whether he made a profit on those books, but I do know that after 25 years as a seller of books I still call on him—yes, and frequently display my stock on a sack as I did when I was 15. On this my first venture at bookselling I got 24s. Twenty-four shillings! And I’d sweated my guts out lugging huge planks of wood around for 21s. a week! Bookselling, evidently, was the life for me.

My Own Library When I Was 16

1. Swiss Family Robinson (School prize), ruined in fire 1942.
2. Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (Birthday gift from Uncle Charlie) blighted, 1942.
3. Liza of Lambeth, by W. S. Maugham. (Very battered—but I still possess it 28 years later!)
4. Pears' Encyclopaedia (Kept it for 10 years and then replaced it with a more up-to-date edition).
5. Boxing, by Tommy Burns (Sold this in 1943 to Johnny Best, boxing promoter).
6. Bits from an Old Bookshop—A Bookseller's Memories (Still have it 28 years later):
7. Barlasch of the Guard, by Seton Merriman. (Sold it profitably some years later.)
8. Volume of the Strand Magazine for 1896. (Eventually made up a 'run' and sold them.)
10. Walker's English Dictionary, 1830. (Beautifully bound.)
12. Hide and Seek, by Wilkie Collins (Battered yellow-back).

Love in the Slums: a Digression

IT IS THE GENTLEMAN'S PLEASURE and privilege to pay the bill when he takes a lady out for the evening—but not in Walworth; the rules of etiquette there don't work out quite like that. You find a girl and you suggest the flicks, theatre, or posh dinner out West—and if she is no one's steady bird she says O.K. If she pays half of the expenses of the night out you know it's all temporary and you have no claims on her at all.

Well, you have your date and see her home. If she doesn’t indicate that a kiss is required you just shake hands and suggest another date. If she’s enjoyed herself and you’ve pulled no fast ones she may say O.K. and name time and place. At this second meeting, if she doesn’t keep you waiting for more than half an hour consider you are in her good books! And if she’s there right on time consider she’s friendly towards you! Now if at the close of this second date she again insists on paying her half then just consider that you are still on appro and being sorted out and picked over. She may this time say that there’s no harm in a kiss, so you give her a hearty one or not according to what sort of night you’ve had in her company. Were you bored? Did she get fidgety when you talked about yourself? That kiss of yours will tell her lots—and
maybe more than you intended it to tell! If the next date is in the afternoon or early evening and it’s still light, folks see you together, and it’s a move up for the affair. If she takes your arm on this outing she’s getting warm! Now after the stroll you suggest the pictures, and she doesn’t mind if she does—which means she will. You pay and bang goes 3s. 6d. of your pocket money. Now on the way home what happens? Does she talk of paying her half? If she does, then let her, for she’s still very cautious—and this may go on for months! But suppose she makes no suggestion whatever of paying her share and suppose that near her home she stops and of her own free will kisses you and is obviously prepared to linger in that amiable frame of mind. Then, boy, you’ve clicked! She has accepted you—she is your steady and you’ll have the great pleasure of paying for all her entertainment till she finds a better beau with more of the ready, or gets tired of you, or you yourself have a bust-up and find another piece of homework more to your liking. If you look after her well you will probably have the supreme pleasure of keeping her for the rest of her natural life!

Me—I haven’t got a steady—wish I had. But I know the rules, for I went all through these routines in my twenties.

How I Became a Tipster

RATHER PRECARIOUSLY, BUT ALWAYS just managing to make both ends meet and to give my mother a reasonable sum for my board and keep, I pegged away at book ‘running’—i.e., buying books from one source and running them to another and selling as quickly as possible so as not to be cluttered up at home with unsaleable books—for about three years. Then by sheer good luck I got in the good books of a famous author and of a famous variety star. The author specially autographed copies of his first editions, and I was then able to sell them at anything from six to ten times the price I would have got for them unsigned (oh no—it wasn’t a racket. The author not only knew what I was doing but wrote longer inscriptions than usual so that I could ask an even better price). As for the actress, she was a darling. At 18 I had a certain cockney charm which greatly amused this American star, and she made me a sort of mascot.

With the money I got from the sale of the autographed first editions I was able at last to obtain capital enough to open a bookshop. I thought my life ambition was achieved—my own master in my own bookshop, all in four years! But I had failed to reckon with the vital fact in bookselling that you can’t wait for stock to come to you—you have to seek it fresh all the time. My shop was in New Church Road, Camberwell, and because it was barely 5 ft wide I called it the Little Bookshop.

After a while I found I was not making such a good living here as I’d made from book-running, but I refused to close down and return to the sack on my back. Then—was I lucky!—I got friendly with the American variety star. As soon as I closed my shop—and I closed it sooner than I should on most nights—I changed into my best suit and spent the evening as her head cook and bottlenecker. I adored her. I’d gladly have died for her. She was about 28 and was earning over £200 a week. I was 18. She took me everywhere as a sort of pet lamb to follow Mary! My mother met her on a couple of occasions and they had heart-to-heart talks. I never knew what was said, but evidently it was all right by both of them.

My heart’s delight was popular in all manner of society, and at one midnight party we met a famous trainer of greyhounds. Somehow or other he and I got on like butter on toast—swimming pals after a couple of whiskies; and at the suggestion of my star, who said that the trainer was to help me if he could, we came to an arrangement that if I phoned a certain number at a certain time of day three times a week, I should receive information of a greyhound who was ‘on the job’ and bar accidents would win.

Now the folks in my neighbourhood were all for a bet on the dog— the motor coaches for the evening trips to the dog-tracks started outside my bookshop door every night. I therefore gratefully grasped this gilt-edged opportunity of presenting them, for a small fee, with at least genuine information of genuine ‘triers’ (for not all dogs in a race try to win every time). The next day I phoned, and a dog’s name was given to me. Should I bet on it myself? No—betting had ruined my father. I got a large sheet of white paper and in dense black charcoal I printed these words:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

Allow me to present to you the name of a dog which will, I assure you, win tonight. Its name is . . . Put your shirt on it. But don’t forget tomorrow who gave you this very valuable information.

This sheet of paper I stuck in the front of my window, and all day long I drew people’s attention to it. When the coaches began to fill up around 5.30 outside my shop I went alongside each calling out the name of the dog! All this was rather rich, seeing that I hardly knew one end of a greyhound from the other and had never seen a greyhound race or visited a dog-track in my life!

The dog was in the 8.30 race. I closed my shop at 6.30, went home, had tea, changed my clothes, wrote five or six letters, and at 8.15 was back at the shop. At 8.40 I phoned to the track, and one thing I remember vividly about that phone call is that my hand trembled as I held the receiver. I learnt that my dog had won by 4 of a length and that
the price was expected to be about 7 to 2 (i.e., put 2s. on to get 7s.—3½ to one). At 9.15 a boy came along with a penny greyhound result sheet. I gave him 6d. and wanted no change. It told me that the correct price was 3 to 1. Refusing to wait for the light of morning, I put up a big notice at once:

What did I tell you? I said it would win and it has at 3 to 1.
Now don't forget the man who didn't bet on it but gave you the tip.
And watch this window for more information!

They didn't forget me—I received just over £4 before midday the next day, and many bottles of beer, several packets of cigarettes, a nice bunch of flowers, and two seats for a show at the Lyceum.

The long and the short of it was that being a tipster was very profitable until my source of information dried up. And it did dry up. You see, I soon had a huge following, and, seeing that they so frequently won, larger and still larger sums were invested, until the price of the dog was being killed, and the owners of the dogs that my friend told me about were unable to get fair odds.

In the strange manner that Fate laughs at all of us, I got a signwriter oneday to change the sign above my shop-front from the LITTLE BOOKSHOP to the GREYHOUND BOOKSHOP (see Clegg's Directory of Antiquarian Book-sellers for confirmation), because I was doing far more business as a tipster than I ever did as a bookseller. On that very day when the new name was painted up in flaming red letters, I went to the phone for my information—to be told that there was no more information for me ever.

The man said he had expected me to put a fiver or tenner on and thus build myself up a little stack of money, but he had not expected me to broadcast the information to all and sundry and spoil the market. He further said that I'd been a little fool, and he warned me never to reveal his name, or his boys would come over and bash me into nothing! The truth was, he did me a very kind action, but it all went wrong because I'd always promised myself never to gamble on anything other than books.

So there I was, left high and dry. For a week I tried to forecast winners on my own, but I knew so little about form that only one won out of five selections, and that at a price which did not cover the losses of the other four. My clients drifted away, my run of luck was over.

Then for two or three weeks I gave no selections at all and set my mind to work to find a system whereby I could forecast with more certainty dogs that would win. Eventually I did find one which enabled me to forecast at least seven winners out of every ten selections! And what is more, it still does.1 My clients returned, and for many months all was

1My system was to tip only dogs who were last-minute substitutes, by comparing overnight probable runners with the actual runners. When these substitutes were first or second favourites in the betting forecasts, they became my nap selections.

How I Became a Cigarette Card King

RETURNING TO EARTH and scratching up a living from it after a luxury cruise wasn't easy. True, I had round about 600 books of medium value, but I was stumped for ready money. Now since I was 15 I had been not only an ardent collector of autographs and signed photographs, but also of cigarette cards (i.e., those cards that used to be inserted in packets of cigarettes and were usually in series of 50), coins, stamps, and matchbox labels. Invariably all my treasures were housed in the wardrobe and my clothes chucked about anywhere—and there wasn't a table or a chair that didn't have boxes of cards or what have you underneath it!

I now set out to make a sideline business by selling cigarette cards. In those far-off days I had only three competitors in the world who made a living in this way; and right from the start I touched lucky. Owning myself about 200,000 cards, I was able to interest a wide public in cartophily—the posh word for collecting cigarette cards—by means of short articles in all manner of magazines and journals—Pearson's Weekly, Tit Bits, Everybody's, the Leader, the Exchange and Mart, and so on. My articles were pioneer efforts and brought me within a very few weeks an exceedingly large mail. It seemed that thousands and thousands wanted one or two odd cards to complete sets. As people frequently offered me 1s. for a single card, I broke up my own sets and made a very good living out of it. One of my articles in Pearson's Weekly brought me over 200 requests for more information on values and varieties, whereupon the editor asked me for a short article on cards every week, agreeing to pay me £1 extra for every 50 genuine inquiries I answered from his readers. For five years I wrote on cards, and went from Pearson's Weekly to Tit Bits. I continued my 'Cigarette Card Box' weekly feature until about six months after the beginning of the war, when cigarette cards ceased to be put into cartons.

I have already recorded in an earlier volume of this book that two weeks before the war started I travelled to Germany alone, and with no
knowledge of German except 'No,' 'Yes,' 'I love you,' and 'Please sign my book,' to try to get Hitler to swap fag cards with me. I knew that he collected them and supervised all new issues, which for the most part were for the greater glory of Germany. I took with me 200 choice English sets, but I couldn't get near him. I contented myself with buying several thousand sets of German cards, and returned to England the day before war was declared. The first incendiary bombs to fall in Westmoreland Road gutted the room in which all my cartophilic treasures were housed, and those that were not burnt were soaked with water. Irreplaceable treasures! When the fire was out I went up again to see the ruins of a lifelong collection, and I sat and cried my heart out. When later I made a claim for about a tenth of the true value of the cards, autographs, and stamps, the Government people laughed at me, and I did not receive a single penny compensation. Lizzie, my landlady, got about a quarter the value of the home she had lost—she settled for a cash sum down without waiting, as the money was needed for replacements. For three years we had no roof and only half a front wall to 152. More bombs, or blast rather, destroyed the back kitchen and ruined autographed photographs which I had put up on the walls to keep my courage up and remind me of the good old days. Later I moved the remainder of my treasures to the basement, and blime, we then got flooded out by stopped-up drains, the water pouring in and making a further mess of my remaining cards! Today I possess about 5,000 cards—all that remain of a collection once 1½ million strong!

So ended my reign as a king of cigarette card collectors and dealers. It was one of the busiest periods of my life; I might have made a fortune if the war hadn't come. During the war I was a full-time A.R.P. warden in Walworth; but I was badly injured, and after six months in and out of various hospitals and convalescent homes I was discharged.

**It Took Me Twenty Years to Get it: Interlude**

**ONE OF THE VERY FIRST BOOKS** I ever sold was on the art of making patchwork quilts. I remember it so well because, having paid 3d. for it as a sheer gamble, I was utterly astounded when I was offered the enormous price of 15s. for it within a few days. I was so astounded that when the lady paid over her fifteen bob I gave her 2s. 6d. back for luck! I had looked at the nice coloured pictures in the book and promised myself that some day when I was rich I would own a patchwork quilt in all the colours of the rainbow, and that it would cover my bed.

In the days when I had money to burn I would willingly have paid £10 for a genuine Victorian patchwork, but I never saw one in all my travels. Then one day I saw on a barrow a brown paper parcel, and curiosity made me open it. It contained some 2,000 six-sided two-inch wide patches, some sewn in long lines to each other, some loose. I got them for a reasonable sum, and for two weeks Lizzie (my landlady, Mrs Keep) and I sat for hours joining patch to patch. Then she backed the whole with some blackout material, and I now have a real patchwork quilt like those I saw in the book twenty years ago. And do you know where I found this uncompleted genuinely early Victorian collection of patches? In my own home road, Westmoreland Road, Walworth.

**Uncivil Civil Servant**

**IT TOOK FOUR DOCTORS, A RED CROSS COMMANDANT, A TITLED LADY AND THE WELFARE OFFICER OF SOUTHWARK TO GET MY HONOURABLE DISCHARGE FROM THE A.R.P. AS UNFIT FOR FURTHER DUTIES.** There was no 'working a ticket' once in the A.R.P. you stopped there till you were practically dying on your feet! It was such a thankless task that anyone in their right senses preferred the Army. For about a month after my discharge I did nothing—at least, nothing that I can remember save chop wood in my backyard and cry for God knows what reason.

But with the help of a kindly doctor, some treatment, and a good deal of will to get better from myself, I did slowly mend, and I was mending when I was called before some tribunal formed, it seemed to me, just to see what I was doing to help the war along; for I was the only one in front of that body of hard-faced women and pukka sahibs with military bearing and aged dials. They fired questions at me and I got all flustered and tongue-tied—and after about ten minutes of wasn't I ashamed of myself for doing nothing to help the poor Poles, Czechs, and what not I broke down and cried. So they made me a Civil Servant. I was ordered to go to one of the Ministries to be found a 'light' office job.

I really can't remember that at that Ministry I was allowed to do a single thing which helped the war effort. Persons on the staff—and they were mostly over military age, or invalids, or mothers with families, or throwouts from the Services—had a certain little amount of work to do, and if they didn't rush it they could just manage to make it last nearly a day; what with breaks for 11 o'clock tea, well over an hour for lunch, tea again at 3, and preparations for departure at about 5! And they jealously guarded their little section of work in case the chief saw them doing nothing and transferred them to a much busier section in a less pleasant office in a not so congenial district.

When I arrived on the scene for my light office job it was so light that it consisted practically of addressing a few envelopes, repairing and re-labelling a few more, seeing that everybody had nice white sheets of blotting paper to doodle upon, and making myself as inconspicuous as possible, so as to be in no one's way. A child of ten could have done all I did in my year as a Civil Servant. The hours dragged, I got piles
from sitting inactive for hours; so I bought some twopenny exercise books
and filled in my time writing articles, which appeared in magazines all
over the world.

All the same, I can honestly say that I never neglected the little bits
of work I was given. I merely speeded it up and went back to journalism.
Everyone was exceedingly kind to me—too kind. They just didn’t bother
about me at all. Sometimes I was told to lose myself for the afternoon as
there was to be an inspection of the staff: I suppose they thought I might
blurt out a few uncomfortable truths. I did after a while protest that I
could do more work if I made office files and repair envelopes, and I
wasn’t sorry to find myself transferred to the stationery department of
the Ministry. I assisted here in ordering and sending out rubber stamps.
We almost became rubber stamps! Then I was transferred to Pens and
Inks with a kind man as my boss, but it was all pretty futile, and I made
it my business to get the sack.

All the time I was working in this Ministry I spent my entire lunch
timess buying books in and around Charing Cross Road. My wages were
very good, and I always had at least £2 a week to spend on books.
Knowing that when the war was over I should return to my own job of
bookselling, I stocked up my home with the best books my money
would buy.

Finally, the Ministry gave me the option of being transferred to a
branch many miles from home or the sack—and as I was begging for
the sack I was delighted when I got it.

So ended my career as Civil Servant.

Those Lantern Slides

I had, of course, to report to the local Ministry of Labour in
Walworth Road that I was available for work, but I begged them to let
me return to bookselling, for I could have got dollars for England by
selling my books in America. But oh dear no—I had to do work of
National Importance! So they sent me to the London County Council,
at County Hall, where I was taken on as a temporary clerk in one of their
innumerable departments.

Here I became nothing more or less than an errand boy. I was given
fiddling filing jobs, made to get the newspapers and run messages—anything
except the clerical work I was paid to do. So one day I took the
law into my own hands and went to another office and saw and spoke to
a really real L.C.C. official, when he left he promised to see what he could
do to help me. I told him that I was able to make first-class toys from
oddments like cotton reels, matchboxes, and old tins; that I was an
authority on the art of toy-making and had written books (Toys for
Nothing and More Toys for Nothing, published by Hutchinson) and
articles on the subject over many years, besides broadcasting several
times in the Children’s Hour on how to make good toys at no cost
whatever. A week later I was transferred to the equipment supply
department at Stockwell, and through the kindness of several officials I
was eventually given an office all to myself where I invented and made
good toys for children out of salvaged oddments. These toys were put
on display in another large room so that teachers calling for equipment
could examine them and go back to their schools with fresh ideas to
keep children interested and amused. The six months during which I
made toys were the happiest of all the war months for me. I was doing
a job I loved doing, I was practically my own boss, since no one disturbed
me—all they wanted was results, and in those six months I made over 200
first-class exclusive toys. My work was play, for I loved it; but work it
was, because every toy had to be conceived in the simplest way possible.
It is easy for a handyman to make a battleship from matchboxes, cotton
reels, and paper, but I had to plan so that a child of eight or nine could
make it.

As a result of all this pleasurable work I got fit and well in mind and
body—my nerve came back. In six months I gained 8 lb. in weight, and
was returning fast to my normal 8 st. 4 lb. when the axe fell! There
came to Stockwell a very big noise in the L.C.C. to make readjustments
and cut down the staff; and he of course saw the roomful of toys I had
made. On finding out that I had been engaged for temporary clerical
work and most certainly not as a toy-maker, he very soon put a stop
to my activities, and within a week I was transferred—not to clerical
work, on dear no—to the lantern slide department, and there for four
or five months I did up lantern slides, replacing their broken glass fronts
and framing them with black tape. It was no longer the red tape of the
Civil Service, it was the black tape of the L.C.C. Hour after hour I sat
at a tiny table in a draughty top-floor room mending those confounded
little slides—thousands of them! Take off the broken fragments of glass
(broken in cartage from one school to another, though why they were
never packed in padded boxes beats me), get out a square of glass to
cover the actual glass slide, put the two together, and then bind with
gummed black tape. And this went on for hour after hour. I couldn’t
take any pride in the work; a boy of 14 or 15 could have done it—and
for all I know now is.

Then the war finished, and as I was one of the last to arrive I was
naturally one of the first to go. I hope I left behind friends who think
of me occasionally.

I am grateful to Stockwell, for it was there I returned to good
health.
The Circle Completed

I HAD TO REPORT TO THE Labour Exchange that I was ‘free,’ and again I begged them to let me lodge my insurance and employment cards with them and return to my former profession of antiquarian bookstalling. But the man I saw was reluctant to release me. ‘I see,’ he said, ‘that you are a bookseller. Look, there’s a proof-reader’s job going at Lloyd’s Shipping Registry. Here’s a card of appointment—go after the job at once.’ Well, what the hell proof-reading has to do with bookstalling God above knows. However, I went to offices in Southwark Road to be given a trial. I had, of course, done a little proof-reading for my own books when the galley sheets were sent me, but proof-reading for Lloyd’s huge Shipping Registry was an entirely different matter. The type was mostly small Bible size, and most of the ‘readers’ were old men with 50 years’ experience and union cards and big magnifying glasses! I lasted exactly one day. Someone had to check the proofs I’d checked, and although I found an odd full stop or comma out of place, this expert found dozens of errors I’d overlooked! I got 18s. for my day’s pay and a terrific headache.

Back I went to the Labour Exchange. The same man served me. Would I care for a job as a jobbing gardener or assistant editor of a boys’ 2d. coloured comic? ‘No!’ I said. ‘Let me see the boss of this Exchange.’ Eventually I saw the boss and he said I could most certainly return to bookstalling at once. A charming man—I wish now I’d bought him the best cigar in London. Free, free! No more to be directed to this job and that; free once again to become a book-runner at 38 as I was at 15! The merry circle was complete—I’d got absolutely nowhere in life! True, I knew a great deal more about books and was unlikely to use boot polish to clean them with. True, I had a very nice stock of good-class books, I knew their values, I had a few pounds in the bank to tide me over the blank period. But all in all I was starting out all over again.

Having a Go at Shelley

FOR FOURTEEN YEARS I WROTE and wrote and no one paid the slightest attention to my writings. True, they hit the target and I got paid for 90 per cent of them, but that was because I chose obscure magazines and never dared to show my wares to the better-class and more famous journals. But now I have been discovered. Editors commission my work, I get a steady fanmail, and I am able to earn enough to pay for my cigarettes the whole year round out of my wages for words! I haven’t exactly arrived, but the train is slowing up and although the platform is in a fog it’s somewhere there in the distance . . .

So, greatly daring, I joined the Society of Authors.¹ I’ve paid my subs

¹ I resigned after a year because I considered it impudent to continue—I’m no author.

and I feel happy to be in such a posh do with eminent literary blokes. One of them called upon me recently. He said he wondered what I was really like—I felt like something out of the blinking zoo. I was only medium pleased to see him because he was to some degree patronizing; but he said I ought to improve my education—and he’s the third bloke to tell me that inside a month!

When he’d pushed off I thought over what he’d been saying and decided I’d have a bash at this improvement of the mind once again—recently I did have a go at Einstein’s books and try to understand relativity, but I couldn’t make head or tail of what he was writing, so I gave it up. Then I explored the drawings and doings of Aubrey Beardsley, but he seemed to be a genius who went wrong somewhere, and although I could see that he had a dandy eye for line I preferred Arthur Rackham any old day. So I gave up art.

Then I thought I’d have a basinful of Shelley, and I get hold of a nice little edition, slip it into my pocket, and jump on a bus and go over to the Regent Palace Hotel lounge. Here I get a comfortable chair, a welcome smile from a clean-looking waitress, and a shandy all for 1s. 2d. Then I open Shelley at page one to find the first do is called The Daemon of the World. I don’t know what a daemon is, but I’m having a go! And it starts, ‘How wonderful is death, Death and his brother Sleep! One pale as yonder wan and horned moon, With lips of lurbird blue. The other glowing like the vital morn, When throneed on ocean’s wave It breathes over the world; Yet both so passing strange and wonderful!’ Well, I can’t get the hang of it, so I read it out loud—‘How wonderful is death,’ etc. There is a geezer sitting right next to me and he looks round startled and amazed. But I don’t care, on I go mumbling the words to myself. Then a bloke in evening dress comes up and says, ‘Excuse me, sir—are you feeling well?’ I say I’m feeling all right in a way, but I’m having a go at Shelley. ‘Ah,’ he says, melancholy-like, ‘I’d keep off sherry if I were you.’

The One-Legged Man

I ALWAYS WRITE OF WHAT I see and know. I leave fiction to others. Having said that, I will tell you of a ghost I saw. Take out a map of England: you will see the tiny village of Langstone, near Havant, in Hampshire, opposite Hayling Island. Langstone is at the foot of the tall bridge leading to Hayling Island. Dear friends of mine at the Petersfield Bookshop loaned me after my illness a room above a storage place close to an old windmill that had been converted into living quarters, where I could stay and look after myself and get well in peace and quiet.

You go up the main street of some twenty tiny houses from the mill,
pass over the main road (Havant-Hayling motor-bus road); facing you then is a quiet shady lane leading to wide marshes and smooth mud (little sand) for miles. At ten one morning I went down this lane on my way to catch the bus to Portsmouth. It was a bright day and the birds were singing. I was happy. Then suddenly it seemed as if all was silent. I stopped. I felt uneasy. In front of me, not more than twenty feet away, there lay on the ground a naked man, and he had half a right leg—a stump above the knee. He was old—I would say well past sixty—and bald and awfully thin. I walked forward slowly, and I was afraid. There was silence in that lane. I looked around, thinking I should need help; there was no one about at all. I walked nearer and was within three or at the most the four yards—the distance of an ordinary room—when the man vanished. He didn’t fade away, he simply vanished. But I saw that man with my own two eyes on the ground stark naked—and I say that I saw a ghost.

G. Bernard Shaw and Me

February 1, 1949. In this month’s Chambers’ Journal there appears the article by me entitled ‘The Romance of a Book-Runner’ which I mentioned in last year’s Saturday Book as being accepted by them. They had it exactly thirteen months before they printed it. But it wasn’t an unlucky thirteen—oh no, to be sure!

February 17, 1949. A letter from John M. Dickie, editor of Chambers’ Journal. Dear Mr Bason: You will be interested in the enclosed postcard which came in for you today from Ayot St Lawrence, on the behalf of G. Bernard Shaw. I hope you will be able to help, and to your advantage. Yours sincerely.

The card from G. B. Shaw via Dr F. E. Loewenstein, Remembrancer to Mr Shaw, says that I am the man they are looking for, and asks me to try to get out-of-the-way Shaw items, such as Press cuttings, programmes, leaflets, pamphlets.

February 20. Me to G. Bernard Shaw, c/o Dr Loewenstein: Blimey, I reckon I ought to put up a coat of arms or something, book-runner to G. Bernard Shaw! Lor Luvva blooming duck! Alas, I can’t help very much at the moment because all I have got in the way of Shaw interest is Press Cuttings, first edition, 1909, for which I require the sum of 7s. 6d. (I trust it isn’t too expensive) and three programmes—first-night ones; they are a little unusual and for them I ask the sum of 2s., which isn’t a bit expensive—plus postage, a tanner, which makes 10s. I hope G.B.S. considers this a fair and honest price. I send these four items right now. And if he or you don’t want any of them I wonder if Mr Shaw would do me the honour of autographing one item personally to me; I promise faithfully never, never to sell it. I would keep it as a souvenir of a real red-letter day in the life of a very ordinary book-runner. No offence intended by this request, I assure you. I promise you I will do my best to get more Shaw items but, of course, I am unable to guarantee results because, you see, book-hunting and leaflet-hunting is all a matter of luck. But believe me, I will most certainly try.

March 2nd. My copy of Press Cuttings, published Constable, has been in my possession for about seven years waiting for someone to pay me 7s. 6d. for it. Now G. B. Shaw has sent it back to me with the following amazingly long and generous inscription in his own handwriting. On the half title: fifteen lines of 110 words: The Lord Chamberlain banned this play as too personal to General Kitchener, not recognizing that Mitchener is a caricature of the Duke of Cambridge and quite unlike Kitchener. He even objected to Balfour as offensive to Arthur Balfour and Herbert Asquith, though the compound Balsquith was in Punch almost every week. A club had to be formed, and the play presented as a private entertainment of its members. The members received tickets on payment of their entrance fees. Later on the play was licensed with the two names changed to Bones and Jones, the ringmaster and the clown of the Christy (Negro) Minstrels established then in London. G.B.S. Inscription on the title-page, also in the noble handwriting of G.B.S., consisting of 10 lines of 42 words: This, the first and only separate edition, was discovered 40 years later by Fred Bason, snapper-up of such highly considered trifles, and autographed for him by the friendly author G. Bernard Shaw of Ayot St Lawrence on March 1, 1949.

So my copy has in all 25 lines consisting of exactly 152 words (I wonder if Mr Shaw, with his witty mind, intended it to be the same number as my humble home—152?). Be that as it may, this copy stays at that address; it’s not for sale at any time or at any price. This is one book I jolly well won’t sell—so there!

Afterthoughts

Leonard Russell introduced Nicolas Bentley to me, and he in turn introduced me to a firm of publishers; and with Mr Bentley editing my awful English I believe my diaries for the past 27 years are to be published. Glory be!

I want to return to Funchal in Madeira and see if I can recapture the joys I found there in my twenties. I also want to find out whether the girls did turn to fat!

I am always delighted to hear from readers, and I promise to reply to everyone in time. But please—please—you must provide me with a stamped addressed envelope. The address is 152 Westmoreland Road, London, S.E.17.