On being in The Saturday Book

by FRED BASON

I am a very ordinary man and I have taken the same size in caps for many years. I want to remain an ordinary man, and I haven't got any coupons to spare to buy a new cap! The editor of The Saturday Book buys articles on their merit, and not just 'names,' so even a humble one like me gets a chance to be 'in' provided his work is interesting. I was given my chance to make good when the editor bought my article about my friend W. Somerset Maugham, and printed it in his fifth volume. It says much for his kindness and patience when I tell you it was written on odd scraps of paper, looked extremely unprofessional, and hadn't an atom of literary style. With the money the editor paid me I had a three weeks' holiday.

I am by vocation a seller of secondhand books who sends out a good many lists and letters, and my idea of a holiday is not so much as even to see a book, let alone read one, and not to write a single letter. But this was somewhat of a busman's holiday, because 181 strangers wrote to me about my article—kindly, encouraging, questioning and all manner of other kinds of letters—and being a civil sort of chap and not wishing to create the impression that I am high-hatted (instead of small-capped) I replied to every one—even when no reply was really needed.

Twenty-seven people were considerable enough to enclose stamped addressed envelopes, and of these twenty-three wanted something or other (I'll tell you some wants later). Sixty-five others also wanted something, but forgot to enclose a stamp. Four people did me the very great honour of asking for my autograph! (Me—who's collected 10,000 autographs of celebrities during the past twenty-five years, to get asked for my autograph! I can tell you quite honestly it was a real thrill—and it gave me a feeling that I had at last arrived on the bottom rung of the ladder!) I do not include these four exceptional people amongst the collection who wanted something—because I consider my autograph to be nothing, and I'd sign all day long if I felt it would give a fellow autograph hunter any pleasure to possess my signature!

Many letters I need not have replied to, because for the most part the writers merely said that they enjoyed my little article and would like to read more memories of mine. But in for a penny in for a pound, and I bought 154 two-penny-halfpenny stamps, nine packets of envelopes (of an inferior brand), eight threepenny (once a penny) exercise books, ruled feint (very feint), and set to work. And, believe me, ladies and gents, it has been hard work! I had writer's cramp—and I had to buy a dictionary. (After all, I just couldn't let Mr Russell down, after he'd given me my chance, by using words I couldn't spell, and for the most part didn't understand, until I dug out this same grubby but usable Funk & Wagnalls dictionary.) Well, now, having completed the task, I will give you some idea of the pleasures and pains of being 'in' The Saturday Book.

Statistics are for the most part dull reading—except when they deal with sex—so I have no intention of placing the letters in various divisions and subdivisions, but shall just pick out a few of those which I considered interesting, for some reason or other, and give the rough gist of my replies.

The most touching (to me) came from a lady. She had noted that I had
put in my article that unfortunately I was not married. She was willing and ready to change that word 'unfortu-
ately' and rid me of the trials and tribu-
lations of being a bachelor! Poor, dear
woman—she was brutally Frank about herself. It seemed to me that having classified all her defects she wanted to add, 'There! I dare you!' She placed her defects in numbered order. She was paralyzed all down one side, one eye was defective, and 'of course sex is out of the question.' But she could cook a very good meal and her pastry was light. She was of a 'happy disposition, all things considered.' She felt that we would get along very well to-
gether because she was a good manager, loved books, and was something of an authoress—she had written letters to various women's magazines and received six half-guineas for her work! Poor, dear lady! I wrote and tore up all the replies before I could find what I do—hoped were the right words to express my appreciation of the great honour she had done me.
I had to refuse her kind application for post as my wife. I am the last of the Basons, and my ambition, if ever I marry, is to be a father to one son and one daughter. If the gods grant this I shall be so happy.

Fourteen other letters came from recently demobbed, or about to be de-

mobbed, soldiers, who wanted to be-

come booksellers and asked how they
should go about it. To all these I
replied very much along the same lines.
I told them I started book-selling with thirty books purchased at a church jumble sale and with thirteen shillings in actual cash; that that was twenty-
four years ago; and that somehow or other I had managed most weeks to
make a living out of books during all those years. But each year found it
more difficult to make both ends meet—and that if they thought book-
selling was an 'easy living' they'd have a
terrible disappointment coming to them.

The truth is, bookselling—new or
secondhand—is not a bit of fat. I
strangely advised these men not to be-

come secondhand booksellers unless they had a great and good all-round knowledge of books, capital to with-

stand the seasons when few books sell, a shop in a busy street ready to go into, and the means of obtaining fresh stock weekly after they had got their initial collection of books.

There was one exception (there al-

ways is), and he confessed a great love of books and said he'd worried every bookseller in his native city for months before giving him a job to prove his know-

ledge and enthusiasm. That showed
enterprise! To him I sold £4-worth of books for thirty bob (it's the pore wot helps the pore!) and told him to list them at double and worry everyone he knew with his lists for sale. He sold 'em all in ten days, bought a boxful at an auction with his profits, and now he's a self-made, home-made happy bookseller!

Five people told me that their at-

tention had been drawn to my articles in Maugham by the approval the great James Agee had bestowed on it in his Daily Express column. A lady at Leamington Spa wrote asking if I could
sell her Maugham's Of Human Bond-
age, which she had lent and never got back. Another at Fareham asked if I had a copy of Maugham's The Painted Veil for sale. She had lent it to a friend—and had lost both friend and book. It seems to me that foolish people lend books and sensible people borrow them! Very fortunately I was able to supply both these ladies.

There was a lady at Brighton who
wrote that she had some sixty books for
sale, but that every one lacked a title-
page. Her brother had been a keen
book-collector, but with a difference.
He had collected only title-pages and pasted them in albums, throwing the books themselves aside. Would I buy them? No. I wouldn't—dash it all, outside some 16th-century rarities,
then you'll get a bigger price.' Hence, my own *Painted Veil* has 'To Fred, from the subject of his Bibliography,' on the endpaper, while a *Painted Veil* for sale has the following: 'Greta Garbo and Herbert Marshall appeared in the film version of this novel. I hope you like it. Yours truly, W. S. Maugham, Jan., 1938.' It fills the whole of the half-title page, with an impressive and very nice signature to delight the heart of any Maugham collectors. Furthermore Mr Maugham earns more per hour than I do per week! He did it solely to 'put me on my feet,' and, bless him, he never begrudged the time or trouble. I put these facts on record to stop any other readers wasting stamps to ask the same silly question. No one save perhaps his daughter and his doctor can make Somerset Maugham do something he doesn't wish to do.

I had only one letter from America. It came from a tailor in Chicago, who asked if I'd oblige him by naming Maugham's first play. In case anyone else wants to know, it was *The Man of Honour*. The published version was issued by Chapman & Hall in 1903: 50 pages, bound in grey paper wrappers, 2s. It is worth £20 to-day. No, I haven't got a copy.

An interesting letter came from a clergyman in Scotland. He considers that Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* is the greatest novel printed in the last ten years. He also said that he was inclined to think I write just as I talk. He wanted a copy of Maugham's play *The Sacred Flame*. Unfortunately, I do not possess it. I sent him a list of books for sale and was lucky enough to sell him one on flagellation, a Flemish-English dictionary, and a great story by L. A. G. Strong called *The Doll*.

Well, I could write much more about the letters I received if I had the space. Several readers wanted introductions to Maugham. Of course I had to refuse these. He is 73 and not to be bothered—and in any case it's not my place to try to introduce strangers to a distinguished man even if they do like my work (or kid me that they like it). And one strange letter came from a young lady who wondered if I could introduce her to Laurence Olivier, as she wanted him to open a bazaar. Why the heck she asked me I really don't know. Being in *The Saturday Book* with a crowd of really distinguished people does not mean you know your fellow contributors or are ever likely to. There is no *Saturday Book* club—yet!

Five more letters have come since I started work on this article. One was from the publisher of a monthly magazine called *Hobbyist*. Would I care to write an article a month for his magazine at my own price for the next six months. Yes, I jolly well would. I named the price and the editor has paid me the six months' fee in advance! He said that what was good enough for *The Saturday Book* was good enough for any magazine, and he liked my breezy style. I hope it keeps fine for both of us!

Another reader asked if I was the same Bason who had broadcast on the B.B.C. Yes, there's only one writing Bason—you put soup in the rest! A British consul wrote a charming letter and enclosed some Swedish stamps in case I collected stamps as well as autographs. Very much appreciated. Then an aunt of mine wrote to say how proud she was that I was in print again. A neighbour had drawn her attention to my article. I hadn't heard from this aunt for ten years. I could have been dead for all she knew during the war. She wanted a free copy! Sorry, auntie, buy one!

P.S.—This article is copyright, and I don't want it 'digested' free, thank you all the same! F. T. Bason, 152 Westmoreland Road, London, S.E.17.