

# The Man who Plays SEXTON BLAKE

By GUY FLETCHER

George Curzon in 1917



EXACTLY six feet in height, of spare, athletic build, Sexton Blake's most dominant feature is his eyes. Grey, level, and piercing, set deep in his lean, somewhat ascetic face, they are indicative of an acute intelligence, while a humorous glint therein reveals his human kindliness.

The above is the description of Sexton Blake in Ernest Dudley's article, 'The Private Life of Sexton Blake', in a recent issue of the RADIO TIMES; and it might well be a description of George Curzon.

It is small wonder that one of the best of our character actors should have been cast for this

for the front seats, ½d. for the back. He and Wilson were invariably charlatades, with pails and aprons. Curzon achieved such fame that he was invited to act in the pantomime, being the only cadet to do so without being in the choir. His part was that of the great prototype of Sexton Blake—the equally immortal Sherlock Holmes.

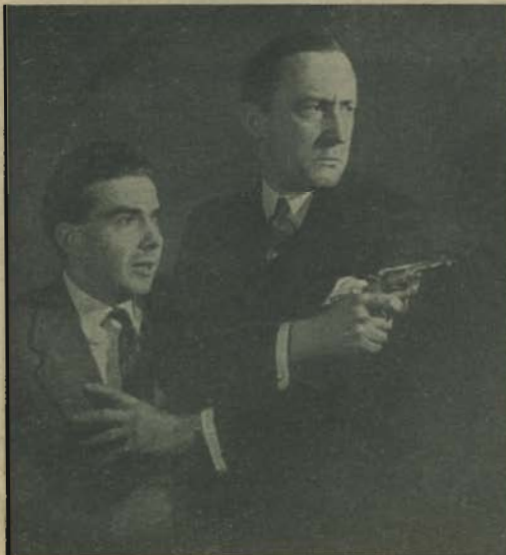
He spent most of the war in the *Lord Nelson* 'running the ship's concerts and things'; in 1915 he went to the Dardanelles; in 1916 he spent some time on a Q-ship, and there, strangely enough, acting became his duty. Behold young Curzon deceiving the enemy in a blonde wig, his half-humorous, half-ascetic face covered ironically with '1½' Leichner grease-paint, as he sat on deck disguised as a girl in what was apparently a passenger ship. . . .

The war ended; he was posted to the *Vindictive*, wrote a thriller called *Opportunities* and put it on at Gibraltar.

In 1924, a Lieut.-Commander at twenty-six, he was 'axed' from the Navy, and decided to take up the stage as a profession. During a matinée of *Not in our Stars* at Wyndham's he saw Gerald du Maurier.

'Don't be a fool', said Gerald and a good deal more. But eventually: 'I suppose you realise you have to wait. Guy Fletcher is on for Eric Maturin. You'd better understudy him.'

So Curzon did, for £3 a week. (I heard how good he was and never let him play for me!)



GEORGE CURZON

This fine actor is now broadcasting every Thursday in his first radio rôle, that of the celebrated detective, Sexton Blake, as a feature of the 'Lucky Dip' programmes. You see him here with Brian Lawrance as Tinker.

part on the air, especially when he has acted the rôle in no fewer than three films.

I know Curzon well. It seems a fantastic thing that so fine an actor made his first professional appearance on the stage understudying me, whom the stage gave up!

He wasn't meant for the profession. He is the son of the late Hon. F. G. Curzon, second son of the third Earl of Howe, and of his wife, that accomplished actress, Ellis Jeffreys.

He went into the Royal Navy *via* Osborne and Dartmouth College, and unwittingly his mother in him asserted herself from the start. It was the ambition of every cadet to get into the choir, because only choir boys were allowed to act in the annual pantomime. They wouldn't have young Curzon; so he got up his own show.

He and his partner gave it in the Reading Room on Saturday afternoons; four houses; 1d.

## Stage, Films, Radio

His rise to fame was sensational. Four years later I was at the first night of *Mr. Pickwick* at the Haymarket. Mr. Pickwick, Charles Laughton; Mr. Jingle, George Curzon—my former understudy!

What a marvellous performance he gave of Dickens's strolling actor turned cheap swindler! He looked like him, he spoke like him as he recounted in jerky, telegraphic style Jingle's audaciously lying stories. He was, in fact, 'Alfred Jingle, Esq., of No Hall, Nowhere'.

It wasn't surprising that the audience shouted for him at the end and that Basil Dean led him down to the footlights.

In 1930 Curzon doubled the parts of Mr. Darling and Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, and Barrie always said he was the best Darling and Hook since Gerald, who created them. He has played them in five productions. In 1931 he went over to the films. He has been starring on the screen ever since, his performance in the name-part in *The Impassive Footman* being greeted as the performance of the year.

With such a record, when he is so good an actor, so versatile—he can both sing and entertain—with such a splendid voice, it is difficult to believe that his initial broadcast as Sexton Blake last month was his radio début.

● For half a century the popular detective, Sexton Blake, has had a vast and admiring audience. Now his exploits are to be put on the screen.

**A**T the age of 24, film star David Farrar was faced with a problem that, to the average person, would be no problem at all.

From the age of 14 he had been working on newspapers, and at 24 he was already a successful journalist, with a big career ahead of him.

Now he had to decide whether he would accept an editorial position at a salary that was exceptional, even for Fleet Street, or if he would drop his journalistic career and start a new one as a touring actor at a mere £7 weekly.

The ordinary person would not have hesitated, the newspaper job offered everything, cash a career and security and, besides, David knew that business inside out.

Acting was something entirely new to him but he had ambition in that direction and he had confidence that he could repeat his Fleet Street success on the stage.

That he had the courage to turn down the bigger offer for the rather nebulous one, simply because it appealed to him, is something he has never been able to understand, especially as he was then only recently married and had the added responsibility of a wife to take into consideration before throwing up an already successful position.

Whether it was instinct, or whatever it was, it is now apparent that David made the right choice, for today he is one of the most popular leading men of British films.

Farrar's latest film is *Meet Sexton Blake*, the first of a series of subjects in which he will play the detective of fiction.

Sherlock Holmes, in his deer-stalker cap, Inverness cape and huge pipe is a figure known to everybody, but although his famous rival, Sexton Blake, first put in an appearance fifty years ago and has been appearing regularly ever since, few are able to visualize him.

In casting an actor for the role, director John Harlow had to decide just how the famous detective looked, and interviewed many dozens of actors before he remembered a manly looking young fellow, David Farrar, who had appeared for him in a Warner Bros. subject.

A test proved Farrar ideal, and while he has adopted no eccentricities of dress but wears a belted camel-hair coat and dark trilby, he has permitted one concession to tradition, a large pipe in the Sherlock Holmes manner, so that he can look thoughtful in moments of contemplation.

So successfully did he interpret the role and so virile and outstanding was his performance as Blake that British National immediately signed him up for the lead in *The World Owes Me A Living*, a screen version of the novel by John Llewelyn Rhys, dealing with the dauntless fliers who toured the country in flying circuses in peace time.

Farrar has worked hard to get where he is but he has a firm conviction that you are born to be what you are, and that while hard work can improve upon destiny, he is still a very lucky man whose success has been due, in equal measure, to hard work and a kindly fate.

During ten years in newspapers he went through every branch of the business and secured an all-round expert knowledge on a variety of papers.

He won his B.A. through taking courses at night, and he has written a book on journalism which is still the official text-book at the University of Missouri.

Though journalism was his career, his hobby had always been acting, and this he indulged in by appearing in

plays for several leading London amateur dramatic societies.

When he said goodbye to Fleet Street he gained great experience by touring around the country for 18 months; playing every conceivable role—an excellent custom—in the hard school of repertory and touring companies.

It was while playing in a provincial theatre that he was spotted by the head of RKO Radio Pictures in this country and was given his first film chance.

The late Ralph Hanbury, then in charge of RKO, fixed him a small part in a film, but before their association could develop, Hanbury had to make a business trip to America and later, on his return home, was killed in one of the early blitzes of the war.

David went back to the theatre and opened the Grafton in Tottenham Court Road, London, at a time when raids and the blackout meant financial doom to most places of entertainment.

His outstanding success was in *The Wandering Jew*, which ran for seven months, but he starred in numerous equally well-known plays until a bomb closed the theatre down.

Theatre business was in a bad way, so he decided to have another go at the films, and was seen as the blind priest in *Sheep Dog of the Hills*, the detective in *Suspected Person*, a drunken Nazi lieutenant in *Went The Day Well?*

This last part brought him an offer of three pictures from one of the major companies, but Warner Brothers had already spotted him, and he had been signed to make *The Night Invader* at their Teddington Studios.

The picture was shown to the film trade and trade press reviews were so excellent that David believed his big break had come at last.

However, for some unaccountable reason, the picture was held up for twelve months before it was finally released, and by that time it had lost much of its topical value.

Warners then signed him to appear in *The Dark Tower*, directed by John Harlow, and this was followed by *They Met in the Dark* and *The Hundred Pound Window*.

Lately he has been seen in *For Those in Peril*, a subject made as a tribute to the Air-Sea Rescue Service.

Farrar takes his fan mail very seriously, which may be one reason why it probably exceeds that of any other British star.

Whereas some artistes regard fan mail as a burden and an unnecessary nuisance Farrar welcomes criticism.

"In the theatre," says Farrar, "the audiences' reaction is felt immediately, but films give no such opportunity, and fan mail is the only sure way of an actor or his producer finding out the public's verdict on his performance."

His mail varies from enthusiastic young admirers to experienced film-goers, and he makes a special point of answering every one of the many thousands that reach him.

Acting is still his hobby and he had an efficient little theatre at his Dulwich home where he used to stage plays and try them out on an audience of critical friends.

Unfortunately his home came in for attention from an enemy bomber and while he saved many of his professional relics, including photographs of his old play productions, this home no longer exists.

Farrar is not the pretty type of leading man once popular on British screens, neither has he the affected Mayfair drawl, cultivated by so many of our younger stage and screen players.

Maybe this explains his great popularity in the provinces, as well as London.

He has a wife and young daughter, Barbara.

L. J. H.

Meet  
SEXTON BLAKE

Sexton  
Blake



David Farrar and Anders Timberg in a scene from British National's new Sexton Blake story, *ECHO MURDERS* (Anglo-American)

# SEXTON BLAKE

## —my hero

by  
**LAURENCE  
PAYNE**



Laurence Payne, actor and writer, had a childhood ambition to be Sexton Blake. Now he plays the famous detective on television and recalls here his thoughts and hopes when he was simply a helper on a milk round

*Sexton Blake at work. Laurence Payne, top, plays the famous detective, with Roger Foss, as Tinker, and the bloodhound called Pedro*

**M**ORE years ago than I care to remember, I assisted an irate, bumpy-faced milkman named Fred with his deliveries in North London.

He had a built-in dislike for most things, particularly the Germans, the weather, England, me, and most of all, milk!

Why then, you may well ask, did I suffer his brooding hatred and evil fits of dyspeptic rage to trudge sturdily behind his clattering handcart, my thin, boyish treble upraised valiantly against the elements in that old familiar cry of London, *Milk-o-a!*

The reason was both simple and brilliant. My calculations told me that the pittance due from Fred at the end of the week, tuppence, added to the sixpence handed to me as a bribe by my mother on condition that I gave up biting my fingernails, would enable me to afford, not only the usual necessities of life, like sherbet dabs, gob-stoppers, and liquorice boot-laces, but also the current edition of "The Adventures of Sexton Blake."

Yes, it was that long ago since I first became acquainted with the famous detective and his equally famous young Cockney assistant, Tinker. I was too young, I suppose, to

appreciate the smooth, deer-stalked Sherlock Holmes, certainly too impatient to tolerate the good-natured bumbling of Dr. Watson, and so Sexton Blake was, for me, a natural; the quick-thinking, quick-acting, elegant Mr. Blake.

He was the man who could fight a leopard with the best and a duel with the worst, who could outshoot, outwit and outmanoeuvre the craftiest arch-criminal in the business.

He drove a Rolls-Royce called the Grey Panther and owned a bloodhound named Pedro; these, together with the incomparable, irresistible Tinker, added up to a mighty and formidable deterrent to any would-be delinquent.

Though he was what we would today call a private eye with no police regulations to cramp his style, he retained, unlike many lesser private eyes, a healthy respect and admiration for Scotland Yard.

He was my own particular brand of hero, and when, finally and not without regret, I had given up being an engine-driver, laid aside the loincloth of Tarzan, and discarded the golden sword with which I led my army of desperadoes, I turned for comfort to Sexton Blake.

I even dared, upon occasion,

to identify myself with him, but Blake without Tinker is bread without water, fish without chips, and the insuperable problem was to find a Tinker willing to offset my own talents.

The boys I approached either didn't want to know or knew better. There was a girl named Betty, I remember, with whom I was in love at the time, who agreed to take over the part until such time as a permanent replacement could be found, but alas, even in the rosy flush of my passion, I could, with honesty, never have lain my hand upon my heart and said: "Betty, you're a smashing Tinker!"

Since those days a great deal of water has flowed beneath many bridges, and now, as an author in my own right, I have been responsible for the creation of my own detective with assistant, and because of the lingering memory of Sexton Blake, I often wonder how much influence he may have exercised over my characters and the various unpleasant situations in which they frequently find themselves.

And then, suddenly, out of the blue, Sexton Blake has raised his head again. My boyhood aspirations have been realised. I am helping to bring him to the television screen.

# On the trail of super-detective SEXTON BLAKE

by reporter Bill Swallow



**S**EXTON BLAKE was first published in 1894 in a magazine called 'The Marvel' selling at a halfpenny. Immediately established as a popular character, Blake has now taken on folklore status and is known throughout the world.

In 1922 the magazine 'Union Jack' featured Sexton Blake stories and more recently Thames Television recognised the ace detective's great following and so a new audience, the TV viewer, was introduced to the super sleuth.

Now published by Howard Baker in hard cover form at 21/- it is interesting to see how Sexton Blake's price has changed since the days of 1894.



From his latest series, Sexton Blake lands in the desert—and more trouble!

**W**HAT has made Sexton Blake such a world famous crime fighter . . . and why has the Thames TV series been so popular?

I motored down to Teddington Studios to find some of the answers, and to meet the stars of the programme.

Title role actor Larry Payne looks exactly like you'd expect Sexton Blake to look—tall and charming.

"I used to save every penny of my pocket money to buy Sexton Blake comics," he remembers. "Blake was my greatest hero—if only they'd had TV in those days . . ."

What is the secret of Blake's tremendous and growing success?

"Blake is different to all the other modern-day heroes—and he doesn't have all the gadgets like James Bond or the Saint. So he has to rely on sheer brainpower."



The crime-fighters stand before the wreckage of their aircraft.

Setting the Sexton Blake adventures in the Roaring Twenties has its problems. Everything has to be exactly right—a viewer would soon spot a too-new car or a distant TV aerial in the background!

Larry explained that the producer always likes to shoot outdoor scenes in the autumn: "Then the dead leaves hide the white lines in the middle of roads. They didn't have white lines in those days."

Did you know that Larry is a famous Shakespearean actor? Roles like Macbeth and Romeo are every actor's dream. But Larry reckons that playing his boyhood hero is one of his greatest joys.

## Perfect assistant

And what about Tinker, alias Roger Foss? Roger, a young Cockney just like Tinker, is making a big name for himself in pantomime and pop records. He has been everything from a butcher to a laundryman in his time. So how come he's so perfect for the part of Blake's ever-loyal but sometimes-in-trouble assistant?

When the cameras stopped rolling, he explained. "I know Larry's way of acting just as well as Tinker knew Sexton's way of crime-solving. I can always tell exactly what he is going to do in front of the cameras which means it is always done very naturally."

It is, too—retakes are rare on the Sexton Blake set.

But hold on—we're forgetting the third of the terrible trio, Blake's fearsome looking bloodhound Pedro.

Pedro is played by Sanguine Saintly, who lives in Hampstead. Seeing Pedro's hungry set of gnashers made me terrified of meeting him. "Good afternoon," I said, very politely. I needn't have worried—a wag of a tail and a big wet lick meant we were friends for life!

Sanguine is a pro actor all the way through. He's never late for rehearsals, and nobody has yet heard him complain about those long working hours—although, sometimes, Roger has to carry a big lump of cheese around with him to stop him wandering off behind the cameras!

*A crash-landing in the desert, somewhere between Tangier and Timbuctoo—and Sexton Blake escapes from the burning aircraft.*



*Pedro the bloodhound howls mournfully. But he needn't worry, Tinker is only stunned!*



## BBCtv AUTUMN SEASON

Our front features this week reflect the very wide range of interests catered for in BBCtv's new autumn season. With one bound, Sexton Blake leaps onto the screen—and onto this page; and *Target* returns on BBC1 (page 17); so do Simon Groom, Goldie and *Blue Peter* (page 11). Bowls is the latest sport featured on BBC2 (page 8) and Jack Jones's biographical novel *Off to Philadelphia in the Morning* is serialised in three parts on BBC1 (page 15)

### Sexton Blake and the Demon God Sunday 5.55 BBC1

By writing the new BBC1 serial, Simon Raven has joined the long, and strange, list of chroniclers of Sexton Blake. Here JACK ADRIAN, who wrote a Sexton Blake novel himself at the age of 17, reintroduces Sherlock Holmes's only real rival to the title of 'the Great Detective'

## Detective story

ONE of my most urgent fantasies is this: lay a leather blackjack smartly across the back of Sherlock Holmes's skull, bind him hand and foot with steel manacles, cram him into a lead-lined coffin, and toss it into a deep cellar, with the tide coming in at one end and a horde of giant killer rats at the other. And let him ratiocinate himself out of that.

Not much chance, I suspect.

Sexton Blake, on the other hand, could have handled the situation with—well, with both hands manacled behind his back.

Once he'd struggled out of the black pit of unconsciousness, a phial of acid (secreted in the heel of his right boot) would have made short work of manacles, and a small explosive charge (the left heel) would have blown off the coffin lid (hazardous, but needs must). After that, a tussle with the rats, and then into the water. It would only have meant the mild discomfort of tortured lungs for a few minutes before his head would be breaking surface round about Wapping Old Stairs—with Tinker on hand in a fast launch.

The essential difference between the two detectives was that while Sherlock pondered, Sexton rolled up his sleeves.

I believe it's called *élan*, possibly *éclat*. Back in the 20s (Blake's heyday) they called it dash. And certainly Blake must have been born with plenty of it to have survived for nearly

85 years (though having a bright lad like Tinker as a foil helped, of course; it was a stroke of genius on someone's part not to saddle him with a stodgy partner).

Blake's first appearance was in the *Halfpenny Marvel*, in 1893 (coincidentally, in the very same month that Conan Doyle had Holmes and Moriarty plunging over the Reichenbach Falls), and for more than a decade he popped up in a variety of papers. But from 1905 onwards his permanent home was the weekly *Union Jack*, and it was here, and in the *Sexton Blake Library* (1915 to, roughly, 1968), that he became, to put it mildly, a household name.

That Library is what's best remembered today. Four issues came out every month, and from 1922 to 1940 each issue had 60,000 words crammed between its paper wrappers. And when you consider that a normal thriller of that length cost 7/6d (that's 37½p to you), the *SBL* at fourpence (1½p) was a phenomenal bargain.

A few more statistics; nearly 200 writers have dipped into Blake's casebook, hammering out well over two hundred million words (in the 20s alone his chroniclers were racking up an astonishing total of 330,000 words a month). His exploits have been featured on the screen (nearly 30 films since 1909), on the stage, on radio and television.

He's been slugged, clubbed, chloroformed, gassed, knifed, run down, gunned down, injected with poison, ejected from planes, hurled over cliffs, pushed in front of trains—and the number of times the floor has suddenly dropped from beneath him must run into four figures.

Mind you, though Blake himself lived a fairly hectic life, that of the majority of his chroniclers was, to say the least, colourful; and, in some cases, pretty racketsy.

G. H. Teed was a plantation overseer, sheep farmer, rubber planter and general rolling stone before he settled down to write some of the best Blake

stories of the Golden Age (roughly 1914-34); S. G. Shaw lived with Red Indians, tramping the Canadian backwoods as a trapper, lumberjack and farm-hand; L. C. Douthwaite prospected for gold around Hudson Bay; John Bobin was an itinerant laundryman by trade, who wrote his first Sexton Blake stories on the backs of old envelopes.

Mainstream thriller writers like John Creasey, M. B. Dix, John Newton Chance, Barry Perowne (who had the bright idea of resurrecting Raffles and pitting him against Blake), and Delano Ames all had a crack; novelist Jack Trevor Story injected his own peculiar brand of maverick farce into the saga.

There were doctors, clergymen, engineers, draughtsmen, boxers, newspapermen (including one *Daily Mail* war correspondent). One writer, doubtless in search of practical experience, did a short stint in a hospital mortuary; there were two ex-members of MI5, and two Edwardians, as they would probably have termed it, scions of noble blood (one of whom disappeared in such mysterious circumstances that researchers have even suggested he was murdered).

Not a few could bring that extra touch of authenticity to scenes of prison life—from first-hand experience; one disagreeable character hurled an editor down a lift-shaft; another threw a typewriter out of the fifth-floor window of the editorial offices, nearly braining a cab-driver; yet another pilaged material from writers such as Edgar Wallace and Sax Rohmer—not simply plot-ideas, but whole chunks of dialogue and description; a goodly number found the fire escape at the rear of the editorial offices of inestimable value in the thwarting of duns of one sort or another; at least two were pursued down Fleet Street by irate middle-aged gentlemen brandishing riding-crops. Not surprising, then, that the characters they wrote about were such a splendidly bizarre crew.

There was, for instance, Mon-

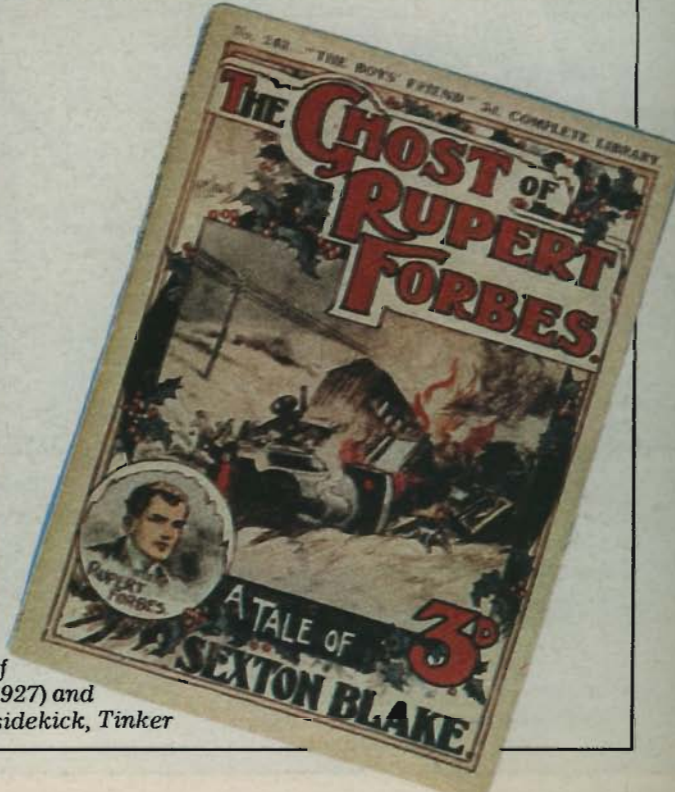
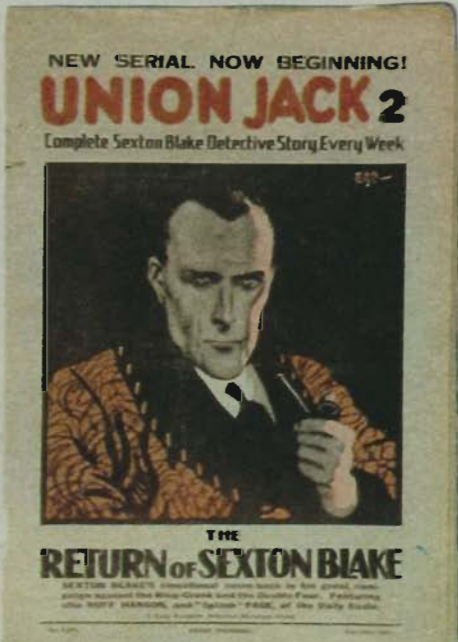
sieur Zenith, an albino with stark white skin and pink-irised eyes, whose normal mode of dress, even in broad daylight, was silk hat, white tie and tails, who smoked cigarettes soaked in opium, and who, when irritated, was quite likely to carve his initials on your face with his sword-stick.

There was The Owl, whose least disturbing ability was that of being able to see in the dark; Dr Satira (with 'the eyes of a snake, the head of a vulture, the face of a fiend, and the voice of a cooing dove'), whose pets were a bunch of murderous Missing Links; Prince Wu Ling, whose wily world-wide machinations make Fu Manchu seem like the merest tiro; the homicidal Frau Kranz, who packed a .44 automatic in her petticoat; the abominable Dr Cagliostro, whose mighty underground Colosseum was the scene of ghastly acts of torture and inhuman savagery, put on for the benefit of millionaire sensation-seekers; the hideously vulpine Max Lupus, whose scheme for getting rid of Blake was so diabolical that even . . .

But enough. A full cast list of Blake's antagonists would probably fill the *RADIO TIMES* thrice over, and it's easy to understand the popular theory that he's remembered more for his adversaries than for himself—in any case, with 200 or so writers chipping in, there was a distinct personality-change almost every week. Happily, for over 30 years, Eric Parker's distinctive illustrations fixed the detective's image solidly in the public mind. Where it is still fixed to this day. And this seems odd, since the last original Blake thriller was published ten years ago.

But perhaps not so odd. Sexton Blake stories may not have been great literature; nor were they, generally speaking, trash. In her famous essay on detective fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers pointed out that at their best, Blake stories displayed 'extreme ingenuity and an immense vigour and fertility in plot and incident'. Holmes was never eulogised thus. ●

BBCtv AUTUMN SEASON



With one bound . . . Jeremy Clyde (top left) becomes Sexton Blake, hero of innumerable ripping yarns like those in 'The Union Jack' (1908), 'Union Jack' (1927) and 'The Boys' Friend 3d Library' (1913). And Philip Davis (top right) becomes his sidekick, Tinker