

## BOYS PERFORM A MUMMERS PLAY

Residents of Chailey, in Sussex, were recently astonished to hear cries for "A doctor, a doctor, ten pounds for a doctor." They were more startled when a doctor promptly appeared and announced:

*I can cure the itch, the stitch, the palsy, and the gout,  
Pains within and pains without.  
If there's nineteen devils in this man,  
I'll cast twenty of them out.*

Then they realised that it was a sign Christmas was drawing near.

Ever since the last days of October, boys of Chailey have been busy rehearsing the ancient Christmas Mummers Play which they are going to perform in order to raise funds to buy a cinema projector for the village hall.

### ANCIENT ORIGIN

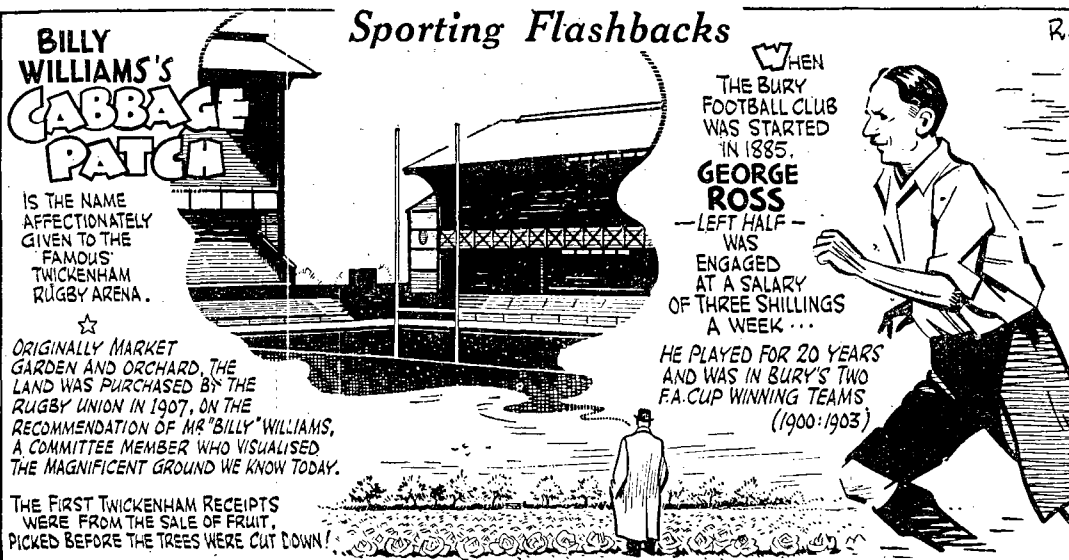
Prehistoric in origin—though largely written in the 12th century and revised in the 17th century—this Mummers Play used to be performed at Christmas time in most English, Welsh, and Irish villages. Today it survives only in a few villages of Nottinghamshire, Hampshire, Dorset, and South Derbyshire, though the custom was recently revived in parts of West Sussex.

The chief characters are St. George and Bold Slasher—son of Father Christmas—who fight a fierce duel with swords which ends in a victory for St. George. That is when the doctor with his magical medicine, the Opplis Popplis Drops, hurries into the room.

Carrying a small bag, he announces:

*In my bag I've crutches for lame ducks,  
Packs and saddles for broken-backed mice,  
And spectacles for blind bats.*

He touches the head and heart of the patient, who promptly rises—cured. This is thought to symbolise the increasing power of the Sun as it rises in the sky with the coming of the new year.



## ONE OF THE FATHERS OF ATOMIC SCIENCE

Next Monday marks the centenary of the birth of the first man to discover that uranium is a radioactive mineral, and therefore might well be called one of the Fathers of Atomic Science. He was a Frenchman, Antoine Henri Becquerel, the winner in 1903 of a Nobel Prize jointly with Pierre and Marie Curie, whose discovery of radium followed as a result of his researches.

Antoine Henri Becquerel came of an illustrious family of scientists, comparable with our Darwins and Huxleys. The first of them to win fame was Antoine's grandfather, Antoine César Becquerel—soldier, discoverer, and one of the best and wisest of fathers.

After a brilliant military career

### MECHANISED CURFEW

The curfew has been rung for centuries at the ancient Cathedral of St. Magnus, Kirkwall. Each night at 8 o'clock the bellringer has made his way to the tower.

Now he will be relieved of his customary journey, for the bell has been mechanised. It tolls 44 times a minute for a period of five minutes.

in Napoleon's army, Antoine César Becquerel devoted himself to the study of electricity, and to him we owe the theory of the electric battery. He also invented instruments of great precision for measuring electro-magnetic forces, and our own Royal Society bestowed on him their highest honour.

His son Alexandre also carried out researches in electricity, and in due course was followed in this field by his own son, Antoine Henri Becquerel, who was born on December 15, 1852.

### THE FAMOUS RAYS

Antoine Henri returned to his grandfather's early study of minerals, and after some experiments on uranium he found, in 1896, that this element at ordinary temperature gave forth an invisible ray that passed through thin plates of metal and affected a photographic plate. These were afterwards called Becquerel rays.

Later on he discovered that rays emitted from uranium salts can ionise the air, that is, make the air a conductor of electricity. He showed that a charged electroscope quickly lost its electric charge when

uranium salts were placed near the instrument. Thus he established fundamental phenomena of radioactivity, though others, among them M. and Mme. Curie and Lord Rutherford, later made the great discoveries which revolutionised the science of the atom.

As a boy, Antoine Henri Becquerel studied at the famous Polytechnic School of Paris, where his father and grandfather before him had won distinction; and later in life he often went there to teach other young students. He was also a celebrated engineer, and directed much bridge-building in France.

He led such an intensely active life that he wore himself out in middle age. He died at a holiday resort in Brittany in August 1908.

### ROYAL RECORDS

The Duke of Edinburgh plans to record the Queen's Christmas Day speech and then play it back to her and the rest of the Royal Family immediately she has finished.

The Duke has often made recordings of the Queen, Prince Charles, and Princess Anne, and sometimes he plays them through at informal gatherings.

## TALES OF FASTNET, SOLE, AND LUNDY

Every day on the wireless we hear references to "areas Rockall, Malin, Shannon," and so on. We all know that they are wide areas round our shores, and some of us know approximately where they are; but few of us know the romance and drama that are invested in them.

A newly-published book should set this right. It is called *From Faeroes to Finisterre*, by John Merrett (Frederick Muller, 10s. 6d.), and contains a collection of Children's Hour broadcasts with a fine salty flavour.

We start at Area Thames which, like the river itself, is "liquid history." It is an area of lightships, 18 of them on the English side alone, and it is the cradle of Trinity House, whose lighthouses and lightships; and buoys have saved so many lives.

### WRECKS AND WRECKERS

We pass on to Area Dover with its tales of battles, smugglers, the Goodwin Sands—tales of the Narrow Seas. Then comes Area Wight, with its memories of wrecks and wreckers and also of heroic life-saving.

Portland comes next, and then renowned Plymouth with its undying memories of Drake and the Golden Hind; to Biscay and Finisterre, and then back to Fastnet, Sole, and Lundy—so we voyage on.

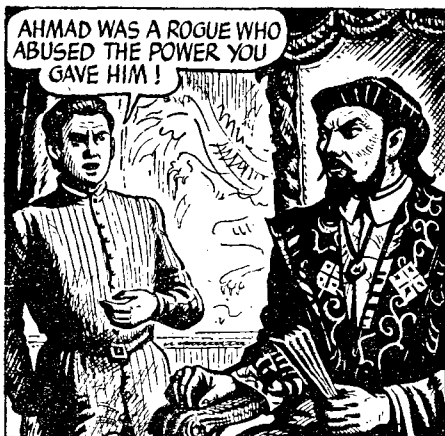
And wherever we heave-to there is some exciting yarn of pirates, shipwrecks, the Armada, sunken treasure—and attempts to salvage it—ships of all kinds, and of sailors who have ever defied the cruel sea.

### TRACK SUIT FOR THE YOUNG PRINCE

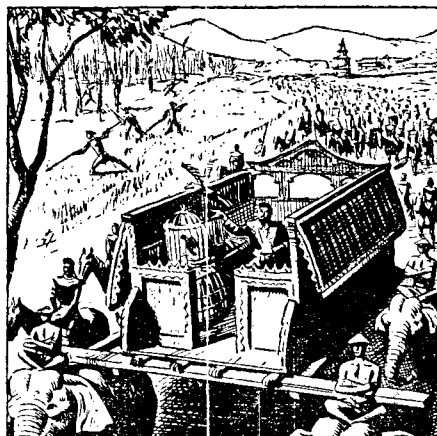
When the Duke of Edinburgh was in Helsinki for the Olympic Games he was greatly impressed by the track suits worn by the Australians.

Recently a small track suit for Prince Charles arrived in England—a present from the Australian team.

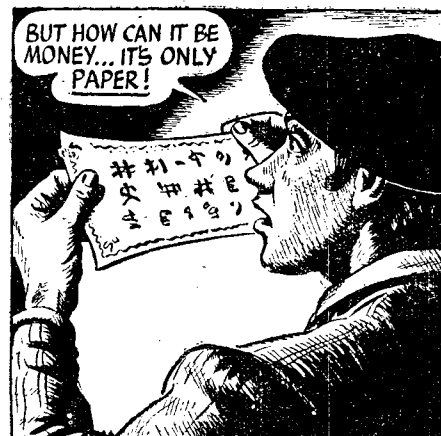
## MARCO POLO'S AMAZING ADVENTURES—the story of an epic journey (5)



Kublai returned to Peking and questioned Marco about the murder of Ahmad. People had already been executed for this, and everyone was afraid to say what they knew. But Marco boldly told Kublai what a tyrant Ahmad had been, and this opened the Emperor's eyes to his dead Minister's infamy. Marco, always modest about himself, does not relate this incident in his book, but we know it from ancient Chinese records.



Kublai praised Marco for speaking up, and the young man became quite an important personage at court. He went on hunting expeditions with the Emperor. These were carried out on a lavish scale. Kublai himself, who suffered from gout, rode in a fine chamber carried by four elephants. Through the top he released his falcons to pursue cranes and other birds. He was accompanied by 10,000 huntsmen.



Marco was continually amazed at the strange things he saw in this faraway empire. The thing which most astonished him was the paper money used in Kublai's dominions. He had never seen anything like it before, and he could never understand the principle of credit by which it functioned. Making money from the bark of trees (from which the paper came) was to him, he said, like "the Secret of Alchemy."



He was also impressed by the system of postal runners who carried the Emperor's dispatches over vast distances to and from Peking. Every three miles on the roads were post-houses where runners waited to carry on the dispatches in the manner of a relay race. Saddled horses and tough riders also waited at the post-houses to carry those dispatches which had to be delivered in the shortest possible time.

Marco finds new wonders when sent to tour China on official business. See next week's instalment