HAVING SOME BEERS WITH HARRY
Editor's Notes

I know, it’s been a while. *Keeler News* has become an annual, more or less. But it survives! In between promoting my book *The Typewriter Revolution*, I’ve been accumulating the Keeleriana you can find in this issue. Enjoy—and send me more!

Ed Park, now an editor at Penguin Books, alerted me to *Fra Keeler* by Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi. Here it is in its Italian translation, which sports a particularly enticing title. Might be a must-read!

Or how about this novel? It “clocks in at over 800 pages … It has a complicated plot involving secrets, conspiracies, and betrayals. … [the author] chooses not to dramatize many of the most striking scenes, [and instead] structures the novel as a series of long conversations between various combinations of [a] large and diverse cast of characters. During these conversations, the buried plot of the novel is slowly revealed as the characters confide in, threaten, and negotiate with each other. … In the end, the novel is more about the nature of storytelling itself than it is about the actual working out of the mystery. … it’s about how people construct reality out of the stories they tell each other.” — That’s James Hynes describing Eleanor Catton’s Booker prize-winning *The Luminaries*.

I’m sad to report that Ned Brooks, longtime *Keeler News* subscriber and literary omnivore, died after falling off his roof on August 31. Over a ton of fanzines from his collection are now at the University of Georgia. It was always a treat to receive his own zine, *It Goes on the Shelf*, with mini-reviews of delightfully miscellaneous and peculiar books.
**KEELERIANOS EN MADRID**

Last June, I was glad to get to spend a few days in Madrid, my native city, for the first time in thirty-one years. As Keelerites around the world know, Spain was HSK’s best market in his final two decades, which means that there are some devoted keelerianos there today. With Alberto Oyarbide, AKA Sobórnez, I visited the Reus booth at the big Madrid Book Fair, where staffer Iván displayed fresh new editions of classic Keeler titles as we showed him some volumes of *Keeler News*. It turns out that the “Ediciones del Azar” Keelers (KN #80 & #82), like the one to the left of Iván’s head, are also Reus products.

The next day, I met three Keeler-loving madrileños at the monument to another fairly well-known wordsmith, Cervantes (below). We proceeded to hoist some beers in homage to Harry (cover). Readers can find Alberto López Aroca’s Holmes/Keeler fantasy in KN #82, and Ramón Zoido’s article on *Waltzing Clown* in KN #84.

Although he couldn’t join us in Madrid, rocker and Keeler fan Julián Hernández recently published the above novel, featuring a sinister character named Insecto Palo (Walking Stick) who performs a “hydrotrepanation” on one of his neighbors. The effect is something like a mashup of Keeler, Burroughs, and Bulgakov. ☪
HSK in the TLS:
Harry Stephen Keeler

The Times Literary Supplement remains a respected English literary institution, and it has become a touchstone for those wishing to keep abreast of the current trends and releases in the British literary world.

The TLS began life in 1902 as a supplement to the English newspaper The Times. In 1914 the TLS became a separate publication, while remaining affiliated with its parent paper. During its history, the TLS has not only included reviews of most of the important authors of the 20th Century, but numbered amongst its reviewers and editorial staff some of the great names in British literature.

The publication has been issued weekly during its lifetime, and surely stands as one of the most esteemed (if sometimes controversial) reviews of literature. Apart from critiques and announcements of new books, the TLS was a notable forum for publishers and booksellers to hawk their wares.

In the light of such literary grandeur, it might seem ambitious to ask: Does the TLS review crime fiction? Crime fiction has not always been a genre considered “serious” literature by the cognoscenti (though it has made inroads over the years). I can’t comment on how the current TLS handles crime fiction, but I recently had the opportunity to peruse bound annual volumes of the TLS for 1930 and 1934 (hefty volumes they are, too!) and of course, given the period of these volumes, the first question which came to mind was: I wonder if the novels of Harry Stephen Keeler are mentioned in the TLS?

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the TLS of the early 1930s published numerous reviews of newly-released crime fiction. The reviews are solid short critiques of the books of a host of crime fiction writers—some, like John Dickson Carr and Dashiell Hammett, now universally known to the public, while others such as “Simon” (aka Oswell Blakeston and Roger Burford), Roland Daniel, Walter S. Masterman, E. Charles Vivian, Gelett Burgess, Garnett Radcliffe, E. R. Punshon, Edmund Snell and Gilbert Collins are now not as widely known as they deserve to be (though Ramble House continues to work at rectifying this state of affairs in regard to some of these writers).

But what about Harry Stephen Keeler? Mirabile dictu — Keeler’s book releases were not only noted, but several were also reviewed.

There are simple announcements of the release of two Keeler titles, The Fiddling Cracksman and The Travelling Skull. Now for the reviews of three novels by Harry Stephen Keeler.

Prior to 1974, book reviews in the TLS were unsigned, so there is no indication of who wrote
these reviews. It is noticeable that the reviewer makes no critique of the novels as such (though there is no suggestion of a negative opinion), but confines himself to synopses of the plots—no mean feat when it comes to Keeler plots. Obviously the reviewer or reviewers took notes of the books’ twists and turns, and, though the reader is not given the reviewer’s clear verdict, the overviews given would surely have been tantalizing to the purveyor of crime fiction novels who was looking for something beyond the norm.

**TLS, Thursday, April 17, 1930, p. 338**

**THIEVES’ NIGHTS: The Chronicles of De Lancey, King of Thieves.** By Harry Stephen Keeler. 7½ x 5, 316 pp. Ward, Lock. 7s. 6d. n.

Ward Sharlow is alone in Chicago, with exactly sixty-eight cents between himself and starvation, when suddenly his eye catches sight of an advertisement in an evening paper asking him to call upon a Mr. Belzar at the Empire Hotel. Sharlow presents himself at the hotel, where he meets Belzar—in reality John W. Atwood, a wealthy merchant—who proposes that Sharlow shall impersonate his dead son for a fortnight for the sum of 10,000 dollars and a first-class passage back to London. Sharlow accepts and is straightway installed in the Atwood household on Lake Shore Drive, where every one accepts him as being the young Atwood. Among the possessions of John Atwood is a valuable emerald, about which he boasts one evening at dinner that no one will ever be able to steal it from him, and a few minutes later he falls back dead in his chair under mysterious circumstances. The death of John Atwood allows Sharlow to continue his impersonation of Calvin Atwood—since only the dead man knew his real identity; but complications quickly follow the arrival of two cousins who immediately detect Sharlow as an impostor. An attempt is made by the terrible De Lancey, the King of Thieves (who remains almost an abstraction until the final chapter), to steal the emerald; and in the end there is a surprising revelation.

**TLS, Thursday, October 23, 1930, p. 868**

**THE GREEN JADE HAND. In which a new and quite different type of detective unravels a Mystery staged in Chicago, Bagdad on the Lakes, London of the West!** By Harry Stephen Keeler. 7½ x 5, 318 pp. Ward, Lock. 7s. 6d. n.

In the dim ages Kang-Tse, the illustrious Chinese jade worker, had made a little green jade hand. This hand was furnished with six fingers and was not quite an inch long. In modern times—it matters not how—the curio had found its way to Cleveland, U.S.A., whence it had been stolen and eventually sold to a Chicago art dealer, Casimer Jech. About the same time as this transaction was effected another art treasure—a rare book of great value—also passed into the keeping of Jech. This time, however, no sale secured the treasure, but a nefarious sleight-of-hand trick in the auction rooms by Casimer himself. The private sale of the book to a noted collector, Amos Carrington, was delayed by this gentleman’s illness, and both book and jade ornament reposed in the dealer’s safe. Now the same book had been recognized by another collector, Horatio Silverthorne, who had intended to make a quiet purchase at the sale. Discovering the substitution and suspecting Jech, he eventually managed to force the latter to part with his stolen property. Shortly afterwards the dealer was murdered, apparently surprising a burglar in the act of rifling the safe. There were few clues, and nothing tangible to mark the crime as professional or amateur work. Eventually it was left to a half-witted police servant to provide a satisfactory ending to this ingenious book.

**TLS, Thursday, January 11, 1934, p. 29**

**UNDER TWELVE STARS. A Mystery Novel.** By Harry Stephen Keeler. 7½ x 5, 250 pp. Ward, Lock. 3s. 6d. n.

The theme of crime inspired by greed and revenge is not new. It has been employed before by Mr. Keeler, but in this new story he has gone one better with decorations and elaborations appropriate to the American scene. The murder is that of a man in an empty house with a dragon-topped hat-pin protruding from one eye. There are two people engaged in solving the mystery, one of them a private investigator, and the other a down-and-out clerk suspected of having committed the crime. No matter how smoothly the machinery of the plot runs, there are enough surprises at every turn to
keep it going. An enterprising young man loses his job through handing out a promissory note for $2,000 by mistake to a customer, and comes to Chicago in the hope of finding the man who received the note. Alone in Chicago with exactly one 1921 twelve-star nickel and two pennies in his pocket, his eye lights upon an advertisement in the newspaper offering $5 for every twelve-star nickel of 1921. Eventually he finds himself in an empty house in Washington Square with the dead body of a man at his feet. Then there follows a succession of events, from murder to the theft of a valuable ruby, and tragedy upon tragedy—till the evening when the owner of the hat-pin tells him that she wants to marry him. 

This apparent photocopy of HSK’s typescript for *The Six from Nowhere* (“Alternate Possible Title: *Beware the Switcheroo!*”) sold on eBay recently for $95.99. It came from the collection of Charles N. Brown, late editor of the fanzine *Locus*.

Meanwhile, a typescript of *The Circus Stealers* from the collection of longtime Keeler fan and friend Harry McEvoy also sold at auction (price unavailable). This text is signed by Keeler and enclosed in a handsome case, along with a portion of the cover of the Portuguese paperback *O caso do cadáver endiabrado (The Case of the Crazy Corpse)*. For more on these circus novels, see *KN* #15, pp. 11-12.
Excerpts from the Press

St. Paul News: A new mystery story writer makes his appearance in America most impressively.

Knoxville (Tenn.) Sentinel: Conan Doyle’s successor is found. The story’s intricate plot leading from the fashionable apartment of a lovely Southern girl to a graveyard in Chinatown, to a newspaper office, and finally to an old ghostly asylum, proves beyond question the author’s ability to devise plots as complicated as any that ever came from the famous English writer.


Newark (N.J.) News: One of the most entertaining and clever crime stories published in a long while.

St. Paul Dispatch: One of the best yarns of the year.

Brooklyn Citizen: A crackerjack detective story, skillfully woven. Keeler knows well the technique of detective story writing.

Salt Lake City Telegram: The author has his keen sense of the dramatic most effectively in depicting the manner in which spectacular news stories are fed to the public.

New York Times: So complicated that for the first three chapters the chief mystery was as to the direction the author was taking. The story is worked out with ingenuity.

Buffalo Times: So baffling that midway in the book we felt that not even a Houdini could disentangle the plot.

San Francisco Argonaut: Mr. Keeler’s newspaper background is impeccable and he also knows how to provide thrills. . . . A super-plotted novel.

The London Times: The Author has displayed an almost uncanny ingenuity in the construction of his plot.

HAVE YOU READ

FIND THE CLOCK

by Harry Stephen Keeler

Editor of 10 Story Book?

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10 Story Book, September 1927
ON his now-classic web page about HSK, Bill Poundstone writes, “Most Western literature avoids coincidences. The author is permitted a single unlikely premise, and then everything is supposed to follow inevitably from that. Keeler’s stories are coincidence porn. Coincidence is very much the raison d’être.”

Is it a Western prejudice to sneer at coincidence? Might there be a connection between Keeler’s Sinophilia and his love of the serendipitous? And anyway, isn’t real life full of coincidences?

For instance, when Roger Ebert discovered Keeler in 2010 and I asked him whether he’d like to join our society, he wrote, “Please enlist me. I sent that link to Guy Maddin the filmmaker and David Bordwell the film scholar and they both wrote back that they knew who Keeler was and in fact had been thinking about him on the previous day!” Quite a coincidence, wouldn’t you say?

Ebert’s tale made me pay attention to David Bordwell, who, a few months later, published a blog post titled “No coincidence, no story.” Bordwell notes that in several Hong Kong action movies, “a major plot movement is triggered by sheer accident.” It seems that the screenplays are “using chance rather than causality to move their action forward”; they’re “built out of casual encounters and unpredictable turns of events,” contrary to the screenwriter’s received wisdom that, although a story can be set off by a random event, you should never “use a coincidence to develop or resolve the plot.” But Bordwell questions whether even Hollywood films really stick to this dogma, and then digs deeper, puzzling over the nature of coincidence itself and citing Aristotle’s Poetics to show that even a very unlikely event can be acceptable within the right narrative frame. For instance, comedies and melodramas can thrive on a good dose of coincidence, and poetic justice may demand it. Bordwell concludes that “every moment in filmic storytelling seems to bristle with possibilities of convergence and revelation.”

The principle “No coincidence, no story” also shows up as the title of a 2013 episode of the radio show “This American Life,” and in Jenny Crompton’s book Unbelievable! The Bizarre World of Coincidences (2014). But what is the source of the phrase?

It’s routinely called a Chinese proverb. As a scholarly source on the topic, Bordwell refers to Kam-ming Wong’s article “No Coincidence, No Story: The Esthetics of Serendipity in Chinese Fiction,” in International Readings in Theory, History and Philosophy of Culture (St. Petersburg, Russia: EIDOS, 2003), Vol. 16, 180-97. Naturally, I tracked down the article.

According to Wong, the Chinese phrase is wuqiao bu cheng hua. Qiao (橋) can refer to what is clever, crafty, opportune, or coincidental. (Wong provides no Chinese characters or tones, although I was able to track down the character for qiao. An online search yields very few hits for his transliteration of the phrase. Is there an error?) Wong recounts some key incidents in classic Chinese tales such as “The Oil Peddler” (1627), where the plot is propelled by four coincidences and the happy ending piles on two more. After the heroine marries the hero, she discovers that her new husband has previously taken her long-lost parents into his household. Meanwhile, the husband, Qin Zhong, discovers his long-lost dad as follows: “in an attempt to look for his biological father, he had Qin, his original family name, and Bianliang, his place of origin, painted separately on the pairs of oil barrels his attendants were carrying. Mr. Qin, his father, happened to be working as an attendant in the first temple Qin Zhong visited and noticing the family and place names, discovered that Qin Zhong was his son.” It really does sound like a classic Keeler ending, where a message sent out into the universe happens to find its target and allows everyone to live happily ever after. Happiness and happenstance go hand in hand.

Wong advises us: “Coincidence, like the Way [Tao], can only be grasped in all its manifestations by an audience or reader who with his or her ear fully attuned participates freely in the play of creation itself…. [For] the esthetics of serendipity … to realize its optimum impact, the reader or audience must attend to every detail, allusion and sign embedded in the narration or narrative and decipher them in light of the larger cultural, historical and cosmological context.”

Words to bear in mind as we get our jollies from Keeler Koinkydinks. ☠
Here’s a wonderful item from the collection of Ben Shires: a copy of The Five Silver Buddhas sent by Harry to his beloved aunt Laura B. Jones, with a remarkable inscription and a typed explanation that was paper-clipped to the book:

Dear Aunt: This is autographed exactly as I autographed Mr. Rabb’s book. The Chinaman has no idiom by which he can say (that which is your pet peeve!) “With the kindest wishes of the author.” The nearest he can come to that is to write it as set forth here on this flyleaf, i.e. HOPING YOU ARE WELL AND PEACEFUL IN A HUNDRED WAYS -- THE AUTHOR. To which I have added, in pure Chinese phoneticisms, "Ha Ree Kee Ler".

I wouldn’t put it past Harry to make up these characters. But a colleague from China tells me, “The characters are accurate, and the sentence, together with his name in transliteration, make sense in Chinese context.”
"LIKE to go to a show?" asked Hyde, cheerily. There was no answer from the taupe overstuffed where a 1929 model of loneliness lay, dainty little legs over one arm, golden, bobbed hair against the other.

"Want me to tune in some jazz on the radio?" next offered Hyde. The compact little vision of loneliness stirred but did not vouchsafe a reply except to rattle her magazine angrily.

"Like to go out for a bite to eat and a dance at one of the hotels?" offered Hyde. This time the magazine was distinctly shook, but there was no reply unless the turning of a page could be construed as such.

"Dammnit!" roared Hyde, "this is the end. Night after night when I talk to you you sit there like a sphinx and don't say a darn word. You don't want to go anywhere; you don't want to do anything. He grabbed up his hat and coat and strode from the room. Half an hour after he had gone she of the doll like figure and irritating lips looked up vaguely and said: "What did you say?"

When the case came up in court the charge brought by Hyde was the age old one—with variations; he named not a correspondent, but correspondents!

"To Witt:" boomed Hyde's lawyer: "Jack Woodford, Hazel Goodwin Keeler, Lew Worth, Paul Brown, Will H. Preston, Charles Edworthy, Gerald J. Lane, James L. Dilley, Bruce Patterson, Lon Jerome Smith, Frank Kenneth Young, Jack Thompson, F. F. Winthrop, and the June number of 10 Story Book."
Letters Many

I haven’t even finished *Riddle of the Traveling Skull*, my first Keeler, and I know this is going to be a lifelong relationship. I currently run a blog that reviews movies that defy ordinary film conventions in entertaining ways—movies often called trash cinema. I’ve often wondered if there was an equally-insane, equally-entertaining counterpart in literature, a set of books or authors who infused their works with a unique eccentricity. I consider Keeler to be one of these authors. At some point I’m going to start a column on the blog dedicated to reviewing these books, and I think the first entry is gonna have to be *Traveling Skull*. It left too much of an impression on me for me to keep my thoughts and feelings about it quiet.

Adam Bezenecny
White Bear Lake, Minn.

I’m a lecturer in the English Department at Indiana University. I love a good unconventional mystery and I love Thomas Pynchon. Right now I’m reading *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull*.

Anne Delgado
Bloomington, Ind.

I discovered Keeler while reading the book *De Sciencefictionschrijver* by the Belgian writer Bavo Dhooge. It is a great pleasure to discover more about Keeler at your website. I especially enjoyed (and was suprised by) the section “Keeler in Dutch.”

Frits de Roo
Geleen, Netherlands

See *KN* #77 for a review of Dhooge’s novel.

I also liked the enthusiasm of S. Craig Zahler’s reviews of his first three Keelers. Of course, any man who lists *Titus Groan* as his favourite novel (as I do) must have impeccable taste.

Chris Mikul
Haymarket, NSW, Australia

Thanks for another stimulating issue. I continue to marvel at how you’re still finding new pieces of the Keeler puzzle. I’m intrigued by Keeler’s stint in Marshall Field’s mailroom—as a prescription for melancholia!—and like the name of Hazel’s organization, the American League of Pen-Women.

Marshall Field’s mailroom! Does it not sound like the dead letter office? Ah, Harry!

Bill Poundstone
Los Angeles

I discovered HSK while reading Jack Woodford’s *Plotting for Any Kind of Writing*.

George Ness
Las Vegas

Found a mention in 1916 that Keeler was a member of the Missouri Writers’ Guild, which was founded the year before.

Morgan Wallace
Orlando, Fla.

*Morgan also contributes this ad for one of HSK’s early serials. The Illustrated Companion published “The Stolen Finger” in seven parts, Sept. 1915-March 1916. It had previously published “The Trepanned Skull” in March-April 1915.*
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