

Bookhounds of London

East End Rumours

An artist in Jeffery Yeovil's circle (see p. 87) has a new "discovery," a mentally retarded Limehouse boy who chants prose poetry while in a peculiar trance state. As a dedicated Book-Hound, you recognize the first lines of two of his "trance dictations" as titles of lost essays by Thomas De Quincey: "But if I submitted with Resignation, not the less I searched for the Unsearchable — sometimes in Arab Deserts, sometimes in the Sea" and "Oh, sweep away, Angel, with Angelic Scorn, the Dogs that come with Curious Eyes to gaze." The boy says only that "an old blind lady showed me the papers and wrote the words on my tongue with coal fire."



Suspiciously blond and Teutonic-looking "antiquarians" are combing Wapping, Poplar, and Tower Hamlets looking for "Hebrew books." Perhaps the Ahnenerbe has decided to recover the "Baal Shem of London's" hidden trove of kabbalistic and alchemical documents, which Falk ordered "securely treasured up, but never opened, nor looked into" in his will. Since the only person to ever see these documents since 1782, Falk's executor Aaron Goldsmid, died the next day, surely the Ahnenerbe won't be able to tell forgeries from the real things.



A warehouse in Bethnal Green contains a seemingly forgotten and neglected pallet of perfectly cured, top quality shagreen — sharkskin used to bind books. (Not that you would countenance such goings-on, but such an exotic and expensive-seeming binding is an excellent way to pass an inferior or forged volume to a less-perceptive customer.) By what is almost certainly an odd coincidence, the chap who stumbled on the pallet also stumbled on a sleeping tramp in that warehouse, his arms and legs bitten off. The tramp was obviously deranged, as he claimed he had all his limbs intact the day before — anyone can tell those wounds had healed years ago.



Under its drifts of stained paperbacks and borderline pornography, a shabby book-cart in Liverpool Street Station also sells books from the 18th and 19th century in varying states of disrepair and decay: some as fresh as if they'd come from the printers, most soiled and eaten with worms and dirt. Once in a while, a book written by hand and bound in human skin shows up in the cart's stash — usually on some disquieting topic, or containing extraordinarily unsettling poetry. The cart moves all around the enormous Underground and railway station, never appearing in the same location regularly enough to be shut down by the police. The grimy, furtive cart-keeper speaks no English, and takes only silver.

