

"SCHOOL AND SPORT"

By Tom Hopperton

Among the shoal of boys' papers started in the years after the 1914-18 War, there is one which holds a peculiar fascination for me, not so much for what it was, but because of what it might have been. "The Gem" assumed its final form almost by accident, as Tom Merry had to expel his co-tenants and St. Jim's only supplanted Clavering as an after-thought, while "The Magnet", which had a Minerva-like birth, was launched on the strength of less than twelve months' popularity of its friendly rival. When "School and Sport" saw the light on 17th December, 1921, however, its new school of St. Kit's was being developed from the ripened experience

of fourteen years of St.Jim's, thirteen of Greyfriars, and six of Rookwood. Given a fair field, it should have been the king of them all.

An added spice was given, too, because of my idea that the paper, resulting from differences in Fleetway House, was a "breakaway" by Charles Hamilton and H.A.Hinton, deliberately designed to meet and beat their A.P. successes. Thanks to the kindness of Mr. Hamilton, who has unrevellled for me some of the remarkably tangled skein of the short-lived weekly, I now know that this was not quite correct. Although nominally owned by Popular Publications Ltd., it was Hinton's child, and Mr. Hamilton, while yielding to persuasion to write for it, disclaims any intention of entering into competition with his own papers, which loyalty to his publishers would have precluded. He thought, and still thinks, that in those so different days there was room for everyone and that "School and Sport" could have lived happily by the side of the A.P. publications. Not unnaturally, he found that not everyone shared that view! He inclines, too, to the belief that Hinton thought as he did, but, while I diverge from his opinion with the utmost diffidence, it is difficult to conceive that the editor was thinking of anything but direct competition with "The Gem" and "The Magnet". He copies their unique make-up of a 30,000 word school yarn featuring the same cast continuously - even drawing in the same author - and the matter is surely clinched by the prior publicity which included circularising readers of the other weeklies, whose names and addresses could only have been obtained through Hinton's official connection with the A.P.

Sentimental reasons presumably kept "The Boys' Friend" and "The Boys' Realm" to their traditional - and awkward and outmoded - format. Why an editor as experienced as Mr.Hinton chose to duplicate it in 1921, and why he was content with the less than mediocre drawings of R.E.Evens are likely to remain unsolved mysteries. He was better served with the serial. "The Cruise of the 'Tartar'" was above reasonable reproach, probably because "John Winterton", the reputed author, had all the earmarks of being Duncan Storm.

The play's the thing, though, and it is on the main stories by "Clifford Clive" that our interest centres. The opening series, putting it in bald outline, deals with Harry

Nameless, a boy of unknown parentage, going to St.Kit's School on a scholarship, being befriended by a deceptively languid aristocrat named Algernon Aubrey St.Leger whom he rescues from drowning, discovering that his father is Colonel Lovell, St. Leger's uncle, and breaking down the largely snobbish opposition to him in the school until he becomes Captain of the Fourth. There is nothing particularly original in this type of plot, which was used in "Boys of England" way back in 1879, while in 1915-16 Frank Richards had sent Frank Courteney to Highcliffe under somewhat similar circumstances in the Boys' Friend Library. I am not one of those impossibilists who demand brand-new plots in every issue of a boys' weekly: the point is, why this particular type of plot, which is admittedly dramatic but - despite the smooth and convincing narration - contains more inherent improbabilities than most.

(To be continued)

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(continued from last month)

The choice indicates, I believe, that Clifford Clive was writing at the top of his bent, and that the eventual failure of the paper was in no way because of lack of care or attention on his part. Many years afterwards, he stated that the Courtenay stories were, in his opinion, the best work he had produced, and there is nothing more natural than that, in the electrified atmosphere of "School and Sport's" initial struggle for a place in the sun, his inspiration flowed from the same fount as that treasured best.

For Harry Lovell to surmount his obstacles and take the captaincy occupied five numbers. What then? "They used to say at the A.P. that a 'barring-out' was a sure card to play." (Frank Richards, 1951.) Clifford Clive, 1922, agreed with him. A substitute Headmaster was imported, whose acid tyranny precipitated a revolt. The record now becomes more than a little cloudy, for diligent enquiry has failed to unearth any copy after No.7, in which the barring-out tale began, although Mr. Hamilton certainly wrote the continuation which filled No.8, and after he felt constrained to cease writing for the paper, H.A.Hinton did as he had done in "The Gem" and "Magnet" and brought in a substitute writer. Anyway, whether the paper ran for nine or ten issues, or even the twenty with which it is credited (on what evidence I don't know) in the 1947 "Annual" matters little. The important part for our purpose ends with No.8, and that yarn we have in reprint form.

The stories are thought-provoking in the extreme. In the initial bid for popularity, strong plots were hurrying events along at a much faster pace than in the contemporary papers, where the series form was well developed. The

barring-out, for example, was over in two weeks, while the Remove could have been relied on to hold out for anything up to three months. This was inevitable. It took about four years to assemble the permanent residents at the older schools, and most of the sub-plotting which allowed the series to combine length with unflagging interest depended on the developed characteristics of the leading boys. The final atmosphere of St.Kit's was still to be worked out, and the interest of the reader had to be maintained by dramatic plots while the constructional work on the cast proceeded. It is significant that there was no house division and there could have been none of the concentration on conflict that kept the characters of the St.Jim's juniors so curiously static. As at Greyfriars, it was in the stars that the that the stories would have stemmed from developing subtlety and complexity in the delineation of the characters.

In view of the foregoing, it is not surprising that the boys of "School and Sport" were sketched, rather than etched. Herry Lovell was so much the creature of circumstances that his character had not crystallised: Algy derived something from D'Arcy and a little more from Mauly, although quite distinct from either: Bunny Bootles was a not unfamiliar blend of fatuity, mendacity and greed, but seems to me on a close comparison to be further advanced than the contemporary Owl along that mellowing road which sublimated Bunter's early dross — perhaps because he was not circumscribed by Bunter's stock situations. The fourth cardinal point of the St.Kit's compass, Bob Rake, appeared from Australia in No.5, when his vote tipped the election to Lovell, and formed a bluff, even rowdy, contrast to the others. What further importations would have been made we shall never know, but, with "The Gem" and "Magnet" in mind, we can do more than guess.

Taking all in all, the stories were certainly not inferior to their competitors, and Hinton could count himself a most fortunate editor in having prevailed upon Clifford Clive. One could really have gambled that the combination of editor and author must have been infallibly successful, but there were factors other than the mere established strength of the A.P. weeklies to take into account. Mr.Hamilton speaks of his old colleague with a certain affection as a good chap (as does Clive R. Fenn) and

no-one should know better. As editor of "School and Sport", however, H.I. Hinton showed some peculiar traits. He was "chancing his arm" from the start, as the paper was undercapitalised, and the format was a grave editorial blunder. Some slashing of the stories might have been expected with No.7, when the page height was reduced by $1\frac{1}{2}$ " and the number by four (ominous sign!) but the length of the feature stories was miscalculated from the start. The poor author, acting on instructions, turned out each week yarns from which 5,000 words were coolly hacked. This would have been galling under any circumstances, and how much more galling when each batch of copy brought in reply hearty and genial letters — none of which contained a cheque! In short, Clifford Clive received not so much as sixpence for his efforts, and while he took it philosophically, I gather that the same gentle resignation was not featured prominently in some other quarters.

A little was saved from the wreck. Non-payment meant that the copyright remained with the author and, with some of the names altered, the entire run was serialised in "The Boys' Friend" and subsequently reprinted in the S.O.L." That was perhaps not much to show for a venture begun with such high hopes, but Clifford Clive can at least derive now some comfort from the fact that external factors alone sank "School and Sport". On merit, St.Kit's could have held its own.