

LET'S BE CONTROVERSIALNo. 138. KING CRICKET IN A GOLDEN SUMMER

Knockers are all too fashionable nowadays. Those who knock the old papers usually have but little knowledge of their subject. Those who knock Britain are a slimey lot who gain attention far beyond their merits. As for the cricket knockers, they, like the poor, have always been with us. Ever since we were children the cricket knockers have been telling us that cricket is dead or dying, and we almost believe them - until the sun shines. There is nothing wrong with cricket that a sunny day won't put right.

I am not sure whether the sun shone constantly in the summer of 1907, but it was certainly a golden summer for the cricket-loving readers of the Boys' Realm, a paper under the direction of Hamilton Edwards. From early May until mid-September the paper was packed with a variety of complete cricket stories plus articles by experts on the game. The star attraction, however, was a long serial entitled "King Cricket" by Charles Hamilton. That it was the title of the serial and not the name of the writer which was expected to "put the story over" was proved by the fact that many instalments were published without the name of the writer being attached. In those days serials were all the rage in papers for boys and for girls, and it was customary for one artist to be commissioned to illustrate every instalment throughout the run of the serial. The artist who illustrated "King Cricket" was E. E. Briscoe, who was probably more successful drawing adults and rural backgrounds than he was later on with schoolboys.

Charles Hamilton, at that time, was only on the threshold of his wonderful success, and, in several ways, "King Cricket" was one of the most remarkable tales he ever wrote. In this column, I once, quite inaccurately, described "King Cricket" as a school story. It is a story of county cricket, and all the main characters are adults.

"King Cricket" is a famous tale. All Hamiltonians know of it, yet, paradoxically enough, few have ever seen it.

At one time - and I don't know how it came about - Hamilton was reputed not to be good at writing about cricket and soccer. So

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far as cricket is concerned, he gives his critics the lie with "King Cricket." The story is packed with cricket matches, and he never puts a foot wrong. The only slip, during the run of the serial, was made by a caption writer who printed: "Ringrose is smartly stumped!" while, as the author and the artist make quite clear, Ringrose was actually run out.

Even more remarkable is the county cricket background, and it is clear that there is not much in connection with the county cricket competition that the writer did not know about. The descriptions of the fixtures and of the grounds on which they were played were indicative of a man who was steeped in county cricket lore - and loved it.

Some of the games were lost; just a few of them were won; some were washed out by rain, and particularly striking are the chapters where Loamshire is supposed to be playing Hampshire at Southampton, yet the rain streams down constantly over three days while frustration grows among the men.

Some of the fixtures are merely mentioned in passing; others are described in full. Loamshire meets Yorkshire at Bradford; the Yorkshire players of 1907 play their parts in the sequence. This introduction of many real, living people into the tale makes "King Cricket" unique among Hamilton stories.

Lord Hawke and George Hirst of Yorkshire; Woolley and Hardinge of Kent; and plenty of other famous players take the field and have their day and their say in "King Cricket."

The tourists that year were the South Africans. They met Loamshire at Loamchester, and thrashed the home team. The touring South Africans played their parts, including Vogler, who "had been on Lords' ground staff last year."

Loamshire was playing Kent - the champions - at Tonbridge, and on the third day of the match, Arthur Lovell, the captain, ordered one of his players from the field. Surrey was played at the Oval; Essex at Leyton; Lancashire at Old Trafford, and Lovell's men met C.B. Fry's men of Sussex at Hove. And all the way through, the real life players were opposite to Hamilton's fictional characters. It is an astonishing tale.

Though there is a lot of cricket, each match is completely

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different from the fixture before and the one after. Hamilton was too sound a writer to believe that descriptions of cricket matches were sufficient to make a story. Comedy is lacking, but there is plenty of drama, and even a smattering of romance.

The cut-and-thrust of the changing-room jealousies is vividly brought to life, and the picture of county cricket, as it was then, is brilliantly portrayed.

Loamshire was at the bottom of the table. The reason for their lowly position was that the county had always been an all-amateur side. No pro had ever played for Loamshire.

Owing to a reversal of his fortunes, Lovell had to become a professional. Half-way through the tale, he became the captain - a pro captain. It made all the difference to Loamshire.

Social reformers like George Orwell could hardly have faulted "King Cricket" for having a snob angle, for a pro was the hero of the story and the real-life pro-players were shown in glowing colours. But it is possible that social reformers would despise cricket as the essence of snobbery, and would condemn making the boys of a nation interested in such a game.

The names of the fictional players are familiar to old Hamiltonians: Lovell, Valance, Lagden and Ponsonby. One or two episodes remind the well-read Hamiltonian of the cricket drama and excitement so finely developed in the Stacey series, nearly 30 years later. Just here and there, in "King Cricket," Hamilton drops into the present tense. It was a common trend among writers, all those years ago, and it gives "King Cricket" a quaintly pleasant old-fashioned flavour when it happens.

It seems strange that this fine story was only reprinted once - in the Boys' Friend Library - where, according to rumour, it was pruned. Yet it is obvious to anyone that the introduction of the real-life players of 1907 made it difficult for the tale to be re-issued a year or two later. And my beloved Kent have not been champions since 1913, yet I love them just the same.

Of course, Charles Hamilton never won the fame which was enjoyed by Frank Richards and Martin Clifford. Otherwise, surely such tales as "Rivals of St. Kit's," "Redfern Minor," "Arthur Redfern's Vow"

and "King Cricket" would have been revived in the thirties. Of these, "King Cricket" was the only period piece, due to its real-life players. It is, indeed, a mystery why the school stories were not featured in the Schoolboys' Own Library, and one would have thought that the S.O.L. would have been an excellent medium for "Cousin Ethel's Schooldays" and "The School Under Canvas," especially as the latter was only reprinted once after its serialisation. One can only believe that nobody thought of it.

At the start of this article I spoke of a golden summer. According to "King Cricket," 1907 was a wet summer, with the rain often streaming down the pavilion windows while the players fumed and fretted in the changing-rooms. 'Twas ever thus!