

# BOOK AND MAGAZINE COLLECTOR

March 1985

No.13



**BESSIE BUNTER MAKES A FAULTY STROKE!**

(An Amusing Incident from the Grand, Long, Complete Tale of the Girls of Cliff House—complete in this issue.)



# COLLECTING 'THE CLIFF HOUSE' PAPERS



Barbara Redfern



Clara Trevlyn



Marjorie Hazeldene

MARY CADOGAN LOOKS AT THE STORIES IN 'SCHOOL FRIEND'  
AND 'THE SCHOOLGIRL' WHICH INTRODUCED BESSIE BUNTER

' "Oh, chin up – chin up!", Jemima muttered fiercely. "Chest out, old thing! Remember the bulldog spirit."'  
(from 'The Schoolgirl')

**I**t is impossible for many of us today to resist quotations like this, and when the Cliff House saga was unfolding in the 20s and 30s in 'School Friend' and 'Schoolgirl' the girls' colourful language was enormously intriguing and addictive to young readers. When tomboy Clara Trevlyn remarked, 'they stung me fearfully for the new hockey stick, but it's a real ripper', her fans entered wholeheartedly into her mood of exhilaration; or they could be plunged into despair when she or others of the Cliff House chummery were misunderstood, cheated or frustrated.

The first story-paper to star Bessie Bunter, Barbara Redfern ('Babs'), Marjorie Hazeldene, Clara Trevlyn and their fellow pupils from Cliff House was the 'School Friend', which began on 7th May 1919 and is now much in demand with collectors. It is interesting that men as well as women collect the Cliff House papers, which may be linked with the fact that the 'School Friend' sprang originally from the ever popular boys' paper, the 'Magnet'. Charles Hamilton (writing under the name 'Frank Richards') had introduced some of the Cliff House girls to the 'Magnet' in minor roles as early as 1909.

Though they were not major characters in this, the girls must obviously have appealed strongly to the 'Magnet's' audience, as Frank Richards kept bringing them into the stories.

The editors of Lord Northcliffe's juvenile papers realized that girls were buying and wallowing in the 'Magnet' as avidly as boys so they launched a girls' paper on similar lines, to feature Cliff House – which at that time seemed all set to become a feminized Greyfriars, with Bessie and her chums developing into skirted versions of Billy Bunter, Harry Wharton and Co. Frank Richards was asked to write the long Cliff House tales for the 'School Friend', which he seems to have done with some relish (although he was also at the time writing a 20,000 word story every week for both the 'Magnet' and the 'Gem', and another of 5,000 words for the 'Boys' Friend'). He wrote his girls' stories as 'Hilda Richards', and the 'School Friend' got off to a great start. It was the first truly schoolgirlish popular paper to be published in Britain – earlier magazines like the 'Girls' Friend' and the 'Girl's Own Paper' were, despite their names, designed for young women rather than children or adolescents.

With its striking red, white and blue cover the 'School Friend' had a lively, inviting look. It measured 7½ x 10½ inches,



and for 1½d. a week offered a jolly good read of thousands of words of addictive fiction. School stories for girls had become popular in the previous decade, especially through the hardback books of Angela Brazil; there was a new feeling of freedom for girls after the 1914-18 war (in which so many women had done 'men's jobs', and helped to establish the pattern of girls doing exciting and not merely domestic things).

## SKELETAL

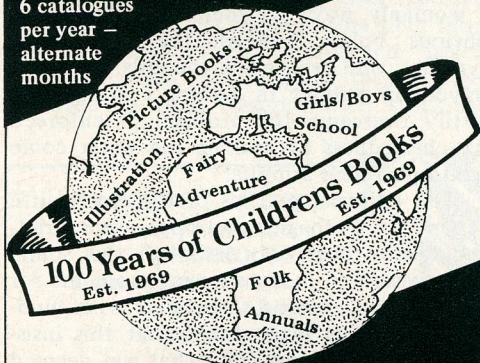
In the early 'School Friend' stories, Frank Richards adeptly fleshed out the skeletal Cliff House that he had brought into the 'Magnet'. The buildings became more defined, and so did the denizens. The sweet but strong Marjorie Hazeldene (to whom both Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry had lost their hearts!) was already well established as a character; so too was her wonderfully robust tomboy chum, Clara Trevlyn, and Bessie, who was just as fat, gluttonous, conceited, fibbing and comically obnoxious as her brother, Billy Bunter of Greyfriars. The author also rounded out adult charac-

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No. 1 OF A GRAND SCHOOL STORY PAPER!

## THE SCHOOL FRIEND

Every 1<sup>st</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Thursday

Part. Vol. I.

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Week Ending May 17th, 1919.



THE ARRIVAL OF BESSIE BUNTER (The holders from "The Circle of 2011" Series 17) Illustration by John Brown

The first issue of the *School Friend*, featuring the much-loved Cliff House character, Bessie Bunter, the brother of the glutton from Greyfriars.

ters who had first appeared in the 'Magnet' — like Miss Penelope Primrose, M.A. (the clever, benevolent but rather old-fashioned Headmistress); Miss Bullivant, ('The Bull'), a hefty harridan who taught maths and drill, and tended to put down any man who didn't agree with her views by walloping him with her hockey-stick or golf-club, and young and pretty Miss Locke, ex-Girton girl and sister of the revered Head of Greyfriars. He created a whole new set of characters to complete the Cliff House Fourth Form and, of course, their teachers.

He brought to the 'School Friend' the sparkle and style which had become so characteristic of the 'Magnet' — but, surprisingly, it was soon felt by the editors that his stories did not have the right touch for girls, and he was taken off the paper. (Some people have advanced the theory that there was something more behind this



# BESSIE CRASHES into FILMS



The **SCHOOLGIRLS'**  
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*As the Cliff House stories progressed, the character of Bessie Bunter gradually moved away from the 'beastly' original created by 'Hilda Richards'.*

decision, that in fact the 'Magnet' and 'Gem' editors wanted Richards off the 'School Friend' because they felt he couldn't possibly keep up the pressure of writing for so many papers, and they didn't want to lose him.)

It is said that Frank Richards wrote the first six stories in the 'School Friend', but an analysis of their style and content strongly suggests that he was only responsible for the first four. Naturally, because of his involvement, 'School Friends' 1 to 4 are the most sought after issues of the paper

today, and they are indeed rare collectors' items.

The Cliff House saga was taken over by different authors, all of whom were male. According to the editorial policy of Northcliffe's Amalgamated Press, men wrote better stories for girls than women managed to do. It was felt that female writers were too protective of the girl reader, and hence produced heroines who were first and foremost good examples of decorous behaviour, and therefore not particularly exciting. Whether or not this argument is true, the stories written by Horace Phillips (who later as 'Marjorie Stanton' created Morcove School in the 'Schoolgirls' Own'), R.J. Kirkham and L.E. Ransome were written with gusto and a great deal of wit. In the hands of these writers (who continued to use the Hilda Richards pen-name), Barbara Redfern, the Captain of the Fourth, and her chums became more real to many readers than their actual friends and schoolmates. They set standards of loyalty, strongly influencing several generations of schoolgirls. All the original Frank Richards characters were retained and developed, and of course new stars were added to the Cliff House galaxy over the years.

## CHANGED

The 'School Friend' ran from 17th May 1919 to 27th July 1929, but from the collecting point of view it should be noted that it changed its size and appearance on 7th March 1925, with the beginning of its 'Second Series'. The page size became smaller (6½ x 9 inches), though there were now 36 pages instead of 20, so the actual reading matter was not reduced. The Cliff House stories were not quite so long as in the 'First Series', and by this time L.E. Ransome was producing them all. During this period, the paper contained several short stories each week by other authors, which were not connected with Cliff House. It had abandoned its striking red, white and blue covers (which look remarkably bold and bright, even to this day), opting for brown tones mixed sometimes with red, sometimes with orange — or green — or purple. It had an unusual and elegant look. Inside, the black and white line drawings of the early paper had been rep-

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laced by half-tone illustrations, but the artist remained the same. He was G.M. Dodshon, whose pictures were distinctive, if somewhat quirky. There is no doubt that he could draw the Cliff House girls with flowing tresses and pretty faces when he wanted to do so; often, however, he made them rather bizarre and oriental-looking.

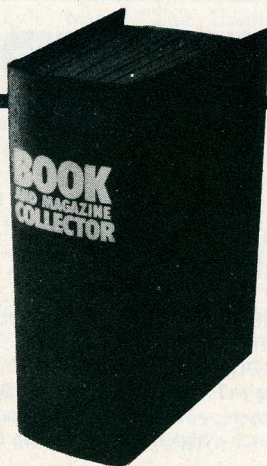
## SLICKNESS

The new format 'School Friend' was, one imagines, an effort to make the paper thoroughly up to date. It had a slickness that went well with the short skirts and bobbed and shingled hair-do's that began to adorn its pages more and more. However, it seems that Cliff House gradually began to lose its popularity. The characters who a few years earlier had been rightly dubbed 'The Most Popular Schoolgirls in the World' now began to be edged off the cover spot by other characters. Towards the end of the 1920s the 'School Friend' ceased publication, and readers were urged to buy its successor paper.

This was the 'Schoolgirl', which began on

3rd August 1929 and ended on 18th May 1940 (because of paper shortages brought about by the Second World War). At first its Cliff House stories were only minor features, but the paper still managed to be wonderfully attractive. It was bright and breezy, and featured, in addition to fiction, some chatty "hints" pages on various feminine topics that make useful reading today in the 1980s! The group of male authors who wrote for the paper were not content merely to reflect the activities of real-life contemporary schoolgirls, they projected a new image of responsible but essentially lively girlhood, in fiction that embodied the soaring spirit (despite depression and unemployment) of the 1930s. In story after story, ingenious adolescent girls debunked pompous parents and teachers – or over-assertive boys! Heroines were spreading their wings. In the early 'School Friend', for example, a girl might have had to pursue a 'baddie' by riding surreptitiously on the luggage grid of his car. But in the 'School-girl', heroines were not only more adventurous but more technically competent; they

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could drive fast cars and speedboats, and pilot aeroplanes (especially after Amy Johnson had thrilled the world with her solo Gipsy Moth flight to Australia in 1930), and service them too. The 'Schoolgirl' plunged its readers (for 2d. a week) into 'tales of bygone days', ghost stories, sagas of mystery and detection, exploits of gipsies in disguise, of poor little rich girls and rich little poor girls. There were also school-girl stories, and hazardous exploits in the outposts of Empire; plots set in film and broadcasting studios, the jungle, the Arctic and the Wild West.

With such a variety of excitements it seemed as if Cliff House had at last lost its hold on readers. It was dropped as a regular item from the paper from 12 October 1929 until the end of March in 1932. Then, surprisingly, it made a resounding come-back, in the hands of a different author — John Wheway, who in common with his predecessor Ransome had also started out as a writer of boys' stories. The Cliff House adventures again became immensely popular, and Babs, Marjorie, Clara, Jemima,

Bessie & Co. resolutely occupied the long story spot in the 'Schoolgirl' (and the whole of the cover) from then until its demise. The 'Schoolgirl' had the same size page as the original 'School Friend', but there was a very new look about it. The cover was in dark blue, orange and white; the heroines in the stories were drawn as typical 'thirties' girls — no longer eton-cropped or shingled, and skimpily skirted, but with crisply curling hair, and the slightly flared, gracious skirts of the period. Dodshon no longer drew the Cliff House personalities. His successor was T.E. Laidler (another male, of course!), whose robust line drawings were reminiscent of those of Thomas Henry (the 'William' artist), and who gave the girls a glowing, slightly glamorous and, above all, an extremely modern look.

## CHALLENGE

Illustrating the Northcliffe girls' papers was quite a challenge, as editorial policy about the girls' appearances was somewhat restrictive. Although it was necessary for the artist not to make the 14 and 15 year old heroines look too childish, they were at the same time instructed to 'play down boobs and buttocks'. (This, presumably, was because many readers were only 9 or 10, even though the characters that they read about were strapping teenagers.) Laidler's ingenuity in carrying out his brief was astounding. He managed to make Babs & Co. tremendously attractive in what can only be called a womanly way; yet there were never any obvious bulges beneath the box-pleated gymslips, and even when the girls were portrayed on holiday in bathing costumes, he niftily overcame the problem of enforced flat-chestedness by making the water come right up to their armpits!

The editorial policies of the Northcliffe papers, for both girls and boys, were strict, and keenly observed. Although this sometimes results in many amusing moments for us (as adults reading the papers with hindsight), there is little doubt that this insistence on publishing only what was deemed suitable for fairly young children helped the papers to keep their identity (they never became ambivalent teenage/romance papers, for example). They also retained their integrity and appeal. There were healthy

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friendships in the stories between boys and girls, but sex was distinctly taboo. Juniors might look up psychologically as well as physically to senior girls, but there were no 'flaming pashes'. Boys might whisper admiring comments about the ripping and beauteous Marjorie Hazeldene, and defend her at great personal sacrifice if ever she was threatened in any way — but attraction never went further than that. Chumminess rather than passion was always the keynote. Members of the opposite sex who cropped up in the 'School Friend' were generally referred to as 'boy chums' rather than 'boy friends', as the latter expression had sexual overtones. Read in the 1980s, the relationship between, say, Barbara Redfern and Jack Tollhurst, her chum from a nearby boy's school, sounds like a study in stilted chastity — although, when one encountered it as a child, it seemed utterly warm and convincing:

"I say, might I trot by the side of your bicycle as far as the gates of Cliff House School?..."

"I shall be pleased for you to accompany me, Jack," Babs said."

The saga of Cliff House in the 'School Friend' and the 'Schoolgirl' provides many insights into the lives of girls growing up in the '20s and '30s, and some fascinating glimpses of schoolgirl fashions throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Whether the girls wore their hair and skirts long, as they did in the early 'Magnet' in 'Edwardian' style, or whether they sported cloche hats like the flappers, and then film-star influenced flared shorts and 'beach pyjamas' when on holiday, they always managed to look elegant. Their stockings



*The Schoolgirls' Own Library reprinted early Cliff House tales. Hilda Richards was one of the pseudonyms used by the legendary Charles Hamilton.*

were never wrinkled, their ties were always set neatly under the collars of school blouses that never creased; they had gloriously waving hair, and fine complexions that owed everything to hockey and healthy exercise, and nothing to artifice. And when the bitches and bounderesses transgressed, and experimented in make-up, they were well and truly chastised:

"You will go to the dormitory and wipe off the powder and change into your drill frock. Then, as you seem to have nothing better to do, you can write me out fifty

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lines.”

Bessie Bunter, of course, was the one member of the chummery who was always untidy – and often quite grubby. Her development in the ‘School Friend’ is interesting; she was soon mellowed – in deference to the wishes of girl readers – from a grotesquely fat and greedy character into a ‘plump and lovable duffer’, who brought out the protective instincts of Babs & Co., and other live-wires at Cliff House. It seems that whereas boy fans of the ‘Magnet’ were happy to accept Billy Bunter as a balloon-like buffoon, girls reading the ‘School Friend’ were uneasy at seeing Bessie in a similar light. Does this imply more gentleness in girl readers? Hardly, perhaps, when one reflects on their appreciation of the villainesses in the saga – like Marcia Loftus, a ferret-faced, sneaky, lank-haired and rather skinny girl; or, in a different category, the somewhat ruthless but fascinating ‘firebrand’ of the the Fourth – Diana Royston-Clarke, who seemed rather like a schoolgirl version of Hollywood’s Jean Harlow – platinum tresses, pouting lips and all. Rich and spoiled, she contemptuously

dismissed the ‘esprit de corps’ ideals of her form-mates (‘I’ll only play if I can be Captain!’), and had a bizarre habit (utterly intriguing to ‘Schoolgirl’ readers) of flashing her violet eyes, dilating her nostrils and yelling ‘Yoicks!’ whenever she was angry, excited or even just mildly irritated.

There were so many colourful and extraordinarily competent characters that readers had high standards to live up to. Their heroines excelled at horse-riding, hockey, cricket, tennis, swimming, skiing and ice skating. (Babs is even a skilled Morris dancer – on ice; no mean feat this, as the lolloping Morris step is hard to execute even on terra firma.) The girls could also unmask spies, baffle international jewel-thieves, resist torturers and, of course, easily defeat scheming prefects and always befriend the underdog.

The world of Cliff House was – and in fact still is for many of us – an exhilarating and satisfying one. That, of course, is why we collect the ‘School Friend’ and the ‘Schoolgirl’, and the associated ‘School Friend Annual’, which featured our Cliff House favourites from 1927 to 1941.

## PRICE GUIDE TO ‘SCHOOL FRIEND’ AND ‘THE SCHOOLGIRL’

All prices refer to complete issues in Very Good condition.

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Long runs of ‘The Schoolgirl’ and ‘School Friend’ might fetch higher prices, and Christmas numbers – always highly attractive – are in particular demand and are therefore likely to fetch a higher price per issue than those quoted above.	

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