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# The Rivals of Morcove



Tells of Ethel Courtway, head girl of Morcove School, and of the mystery that surrounded herself and her adopted brother, Cyril Dudley.

By Marjorie Stanton

### A Great Surprise.

**E**THEL COURTWAY, gently opening the door which led on to the passage, craned her head forward and listened.

All was silent; and yet, with her nerves slightly on edge, the atmosphere of the place seemed charged with phantom sound. Her eyes shifted from the little dark passage to the zig-zag staircase leading to the floor above. Which should she first explore?—or, should she explore at all?

Once more she turned and regarded the wrecked apartment—turned so quickly that the Morcove juniors, peering in at the window, only just ducked their heads in time.

Yes, she must screw up her courage to investigate this affair—it was her duty to try to discover exactly what had occurred.

Ethel, breathing very softly, tip-toed to the foot of the staircase and started to ascend. Arriving on the first landing three half-opened doors met her view. The interior of two of the apartments showed they were bedrooms, the third, however, was a species of boxroom.

The neat and orderly arrangement of the former told her that exciting developments were not to be expected here; but the boxroom, with its view of the mill from the window, gave her an opportunity of spying out the land to the rear of the cottage.

She went over to the window and very cautiously glanced out. A small paved yard was directly below, enclosed on two sides by rough-timbered barns. Directly in front, however, was a piece of open ground laid out as a vegetable patch, and beyond was the dilapidated old mill.

"I ought to have investigated out there first," thought Ethel.

Even as she gazed, the truth of this was brought home to her in startling and sudden fashion. From the door of the mill the figures of three men emerged, and in frantic haste precipitated themselves down the steps, and, bending low as if to escape observation, they scuttled away for dear life.

"Oh!" faintly ejaculated Ethel, forgetting all caution and gluing her nose to the glass in her anxiety to note details of these strangers.

But they were gone too quickly to allow of any identification. Young or old, roughly clad or respectably dressed—none of these things could she discern.

Then it was that she found time to be thankful that she had not investigated that portion of the territory first.

"Still, I'm pretty certain none of them was Maurice Thorne," she ruminated. "And therefore the unfortunate Thorne is probably a prisoner somewhere inside the mill."

Swiftly she further considered the situation, and she garnered one other fact. The occupants of this place—elderly Mr. and Mrs. Bramble—were also not of this party. This,

however, in no way solved the mystery, for the Brambles might very well be in league with the trio.

"At all events," decided Ethel, "there is nothing else for me to do but to pay a visit to the mill; and the sooner I go the better."

With the same cautious and silent tread she descended the staircase; but just as she was about to pass the door of the room where all the damage had occurred, a sudden medley of voices brought her to an abrupt halt.

What now?

The voices for the most part proceeded from shrill, girlish throats; but intermingling with them were two of a deeper note—a man's and a woman's. Ethel peered through the half-opened door and saw assembled by the entrance, the stumpy, square-set figure of old Bramble; his tall, thin-visaged wife, Norah—and the six Morcove juniors!

"But really and truly, sir," the latter were protesting; "we didn't do any of this! On our word of honour—"

"Pah!" snorted old Bramble. "That's the commonest cry when folk are caught red-handed. Didn't do it, didn't you? Then if you didn't, who did?"

"Course they did it," chimed in his wife. "Ain't them Morcove girls everlastingly apoking their noses into other people's business? Aye, and it ain't the first time they've paid us a visit, either, a trampin' over our bit of land, and doin' all sorts of other damage. But this caps all! Ten pounds' worth of damage done, if it's a penny! And"—her voice grew shriller and shriller—"ten pounds they'll have to pay. Cart 'em all back to their 'eadmistress,

Jacob—get the names and addresses of their parents—get the police on the job!"

And Mrs. Bramble, being now properly wound up, proceeded in this style for some time.

Would it help matters, thought Ethel, if she disclosed her presence? A second's reflection told her it would be useless. Later on, when she got back to the school, would be the time to act. No, for the moment she must leave the girls to the tender mercies of the Brambles and make all haste to the mill.

In less than half a minute, Ethel had flitted down the passage, across the yard, and was up the tumbledown steps at the entrance of the mill. Pushing open the creaky door she walked boldly inside.

Lumber and rubbish of all sorts and descriptions littered the place, for no miller had worked here for many a day. Here were the old dished corn-bins, no longer filled with their yellow contents, but voracious dustbins choked with every sort of refuse. Yet the powdery dust had not altogether vanished, and the thick layer on the floor served the useful purpose of marking a track of newly-made footprints for Ethel's guidance.

Eagerly she followed where they led until she was brought up by the opposite wall. Visions of secret passages flashed through her mind as she tapped the woodwork; but no hollow echo rewarded her efforts. Next she examined the floor. No trace of a trap-door. Yet the footprints certainly ended here and in jumbled confusion, as if they had halted for some reason or other.

What reason?

Ethel leaned across the bin to peer the other side, and, as she did so, the wooden barrier under her weight suddenly moved downwards an inch or so, and there was a distinct click, as if some catch had fastened.

Instantly she was on the alert, examining the barrier. It was about four inches thick, very solid in appearance despite its age and battered condition, and apparently securely fixed between the wall and a post. Swiftly her hands moved over its surface in eager expectation of finding some knob, the pressing of which would cause things to happen.

A minute went by—two—and then close to the ground her fingers, digging in a patch of decayed straw, encountered an attachment, which moved slightly as she handled it. Feverishly she tugged at it—at first without result—but suddenly it gave to her efforts, and the barrier moved inwards a few inches, disclosing a long, narrow slit in the floor.

Ethel's brain throbbed with excitement. True, the slit was only wide enough to allow her hand to go through; but doubtless

**E**THEL COURTWAY is the head girl of

Morcove School, and her friend is

**CYRIL DUDLEY**, the adopted son of her

father. To Ethel's amazement, Mr. Court-

way accuses Cyril of dishonesty, and Cyril

has to leave home just as Ethel returns to

Morcove. In the train she meets

**MAURICE THORNE**, one of the boys at

Morcove, who has just come to

visit his mother. Ethel discovers that Cyril has taken

employment at Prior's in a menial capacity.

**STELLA HAWKES**, a Sixth Former at

Morcove, is jealous of Ethel. Ethel has

been asked by her father to keep an eye

on the old mill in the landscape. Going along

there one evening she finds Cyril Dudley

there in conversation with Maurice Thorne.

The two have already shown their animosity

towards one another. Stella prints

an article about Ethel, entitled "The

Truth About Our Head Girl and Her Boy

Friend."

Going again to the old mill, Ethel finds

it upside down, and reads the signs of a

struggle. Was it between Cyril and

Maurice Thorne?  
(Now read on.)



"Yes, Cyril; I know that," returned Ethel quietly.

Cyril regarded her intently. "Listen, Ethel," he said earnestly. "I called at the mill this afternoon because I want to help your father. Yes—by helping him is the only way that I can prove that his opinion about me is unjust."

"Go on—tell me as much as you can," pleaded Ethel.

"Unfortunately there isn't much to tell. I am working practically in the dark—just a glimpse of light here and there, that's all. Your father never told me that he had bought the mill; I only discovered the fact by accident. Also by accident I stumbled across—well, not exactly another fact, but at least a very strong suspicion. There is something of great value either in the mill buildings or in the grounds." He paused. "Other people—enemies of your father—have an inkling of this. It was they who probably attacked me."

Ethel nodded in agreement. "Now," continued Cyril, "I want you to write to your father and hint that curious things are going on there. Can you do this?"

"It is the very thing he asked me to do," "Oh! Tell me, Ethel, does he know I am down here? Have you told him?"

"No, Cyril, I haven't."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Then say nothing about the part I played in to-day's affair," he said. "It would only make him more suspicious of me; yes, even though you told him what I have suffered. Will you do this for me, Ethel?"

"Of course I will. I will do anything to get you and father reconciled. You know that well enough."

"Indeed, indeed I do, Ethel! You give me proof of it every time we meet. Who else but a splendid pal like you would deliberately avoid pressing me to explain all sorts of matters which you know I could explain. No; you are content to wait because you trust me. Oh, believe me, you're a tremendous help—a tremendous comfort. I can't tell you how much I owe to you."

"For some while they plodded along in silence, for there was that perfect state of companionship that does not require perpetual conversational stimulant. Their thoughts were so attuned that they could hold communion together without words. Suddenly—it was just as they reached the road—their happy silence was rudely shattered by the sound of girls' voices.

"Some of your schoolfellows!" exclaimed

Cyril, halting. "It won't do for us to be seen together. You go on Ethel. I can get back to Prior's all right by myself."

"Nonsense!" returned Ethel. "You could never get there without assistance. I don't care if they do see us together. Do you think I'd be ashamed?"

"Do please go on!" he urged.

"No!"—and she caught him by the arm.

"But—" The girls were close at hand now. Ethel could see half a dozen shadowy figures in the half light, striding along the road, and, as their pace was twice as fast as Cyril's hobble, they were soon abreast of them.

"Hallo!" called out the foremost of the newcomers, peering at Ethel. "Why—It's Ethel Courtney! Cheer! Oh!"

The ejaculation was caused by the sudden discovery of Cyril's presence. The light was none too good, but it was sufficient to disclose his ragged and woebegone appearance.

Then another voice chimed in.

"Yes, ha, ha, ha! Ethel and her friend!" came the chuckling comment.

It was Stella Hawkes.

Yes, Stella was there; also Jane Possoms, and the others who were with them were Sixth Formers, and none of them were likely to put a curb on Stella's tongue.

"Been for a nice walk?"

"Thank you—yes!" returned Ethel.

"Ah! And now you're going back to the school. D'you know, when I first spotted you and your friend the horrid thought crossed my mind that you were with one of those Prior's people. But I then saw I had made a mistake. Your friend isn't wearing the Prior's cap."

Much merriment on the part of Stella's companions, for the unfortunate Cyril was wearing no cap at all, having lost it in the scuffle.

"Excuse me," began Cyril, scenting that all was not right. "You see—"

Stella suddenly gave a little feigned cry of surprise.

"Really, Ethel!" she ejaculated in mock protest. "I don't want to appear snobbish or purseproud, or anything like that—but, I say, you know."

"Well!" demanded Ethel.

"Oh, of course, if you don't mind, I suppose it's all right; but I should have thought it was hardly the thing for Morcove's head girl to be seen walking with Prior's boot-boy. Of course, I may be mistaken, but it isn't Prior's boot-boy, and yet—"

She gave an eloquent gesture denoting outraged dignity on behalf of herself in particular and Morcove in general.

"Judging by the pace at which you were coming along you're in a hurry," said Ethel evenly. "Don't let us detain you."

"Look here," suddenly burst out Cyril. "I'm not exactly Prior's boot-boy, but it's true I'm employed there as a servant. I've met with an accident, and this young lady is helping me to get back to the school. Very well, there's no need for you to talk like that. Would it help anyone who was in a plight like mine?"

"Poor Cyril, he had much better have held his tongue."

"Of course we should!" chimed in Jane Possoms. "We didn't understand. You see," she went on artfully, "we thought you and your head girl were friends."

"Er—why did you think that?" asked Cyril feebly.

"Oh, we heard it was so; but, of course, it isn't true—is it?"

Cyril became tongue-tied.

"I say it isn't true!" persisted Jane.

"Not that Jane," moaned Stella, "don't bully the lad. Naturally he's a bit over-come by our taking so much notice of him. Give him time and he'll answer your question."

Cyril looked from one to the other in bewilderment, Ethel, not wishing to worry him, but told him nothing about "The Morcove Mirror" or of the rumours concerning their friendship, consequently he was a

trifle in the dark as to the meaning of this cross-examination. But the hostility of these girls towards Ethel was very plain—particularly on the part of the red-haired one called Stella.

"Might I suggest that you mind your own business?" flashed out Ethel.

"That's exactly what we are doing!" retorted Stella vindictively. "The good name of the school is our business, and we consider the friendships you are forming will hardly add to the reputation of Morcove."

She gave vent to a scornful laugh of triumph over scoring this point. "You have just come from the direction of the landslip, and no doubt you and this fellow have been paying a visit to the Brambles." Ethel started. How had Stella guessed this?

"The Brambles—two common, illiterate people—and a servant—nice acquaintances, I must say," continued Stella. "I begin to see why you got the landslip placed out of bounds for the lower school. It'll be the upper school next, I suppose. Well—we shall see how the school stands that!"

Thus Stella, with bitter memories of her previous interview with Ethel, went through the process known as "getting her own back."

And then suddenly the group became augmented by yet another.

She engrossed had everybody been in this way warfare that they had quite failed to notice the approach of the tall fellow who now walked into their midst.

It was Maxwell Dyke—Prior's head boy!

"Good evening!" he said, with a slight accent of surprise on the repetition of Morcove.

"Good evening!" returned Ethel on behalf of Morcove, and Morcove, as represented by the present company, sniffed.

Dyke shot a brief glance at the assembly. Naturally he rather wondered why they were gathered here in the highway. Then he found out, and was more worthy of his interest. It was the battered figure of Cyril.

"Hallo! What's this mean?" asked Dyke.

"Ah!" murmured Stella. "You may well ask that!"

Cyril felt that Dyke's presence in a measure relieved the situation. These girls were one too many for him; but a fellow he could tackle.

"Met with an accident," he told Dyke.

"Sprained my ankle—er—down in the landslip."

"Jove, that's bad! And Morcove is helping you—relieve the situation home."

"Only part of Morcove," interpolated Stella. "Only our head girl—to be exact."

"Indeed! Jolly decent of her!" said Dyke, with a curious smile in Ethel's direction.

"Well—it's up to me to relieve her of the burden. Come on, young fellow, take my arm—relieve the situation home. But, first of all, thank Miss Courtney for all her kindness."

"Ha, ha, ha!" spluttered Stella.

"I beg your pardon?" exclaimed Dyke, turning on her. "Have I made some joke?"

"Rather," giggled Stella.

Dyke looked from Stella to Ethel, and finally his glance became fixed on Cyril.

"Oh, well," he drawled at length, "I dare say the joke will dawn on me in time. Maybe I'm a bit slow in the uptake, and yet I fancy I can see as far through a milestone as most chaps."

Once more, like met Ethel's, and his look said as plain as words: "I think, young lady, I've some inkling of your secret!"

#### Out of Bounds for All.

SATISFIED with the mischief they had worked, Stella Hawkes and her friends hastened on to the school, arriving there a good ten minutes in front of Ethel.

Stella and Jane Possoms wanted to give their "piece of news" a good start on its way before Ethel got back. There was no need to hint at this to the others—their tongues could be trusted to wag without any urging—but, as they were members of the

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Sixth, only Sixth Formers were likely to hear the intelligence to-night.

Now Stella desired immediate and wholesale publicity.

"Well, then," said Jane Possoms, "why not call a general meeting of the whole school?"

"Don't be an idiot!" snapped Stella. "I'm no good at public speaking, for one thing; and, for another, the bald facts of the case would make me look like a snob."

"Yes—that's true, so they would."

"Please hold your tongue until I've done!" retorted Stella, not at all pleased at this ready agreement. "The best way to do it is to tell it to some gossip under strict injunctions of secrecy."

"Ah, you're right," said Jane, who, coming under that category herself, was fully able to appreciate the scheme. "And the gossip will pass it on with one or two additions to others, who will do add a few more."

"Quite so, and no one can bring it home to you for starting it. Now, there's the junior school. Who's the most likely girl for the job? Ursula Wade, I suppose?"

"You couldn't have a better! Shall I send her up to your study?"

"Yes, collar her and lead it on!"

This Jane promised to do, and Stella retired to her study to await the coming of the champion tale-bearer of the Fourth. Some five minutes later she appeared.

"I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting, Stella," she said, in the unctuous, flattering voice she put on for these occasions. "But I and five others were up before Miss Somerfield. A really terrible thing's happened," she went on breathlessly, "and we're blamed for it, though we're just as innocent as Ethel Courtway—indeed, more innocent, for she really discovered it first, and—"

"Half a minute," interrupted Stella. "Take a seat and compose yourself. Would you like a chocolate? There's a box somewhere about the place—there, on the shelf. Right! Now let's hear all about the terrible thing that Ethel Courtway discovered first. Don't hurry, now!"

"Thanks awfully, Stella!" said Ursula, carefully selecting the largest chocolate. "Well, you see, this afternoon six of us decided to break bounds and go into the landslip. We pelted pretty hard so as to avoid the crowd, and when we got in sight of old Bramble's mill whom should we see on ahead but—Ethel Courtway!"

Ursula paused to give the dramatic effect which she considered the announcement deserved.

"Oh!" said Stella. "Yes—Ethel Courtway. She didn't see us because she was too interested in something else. Ahead of her was some chap—a Prior's boy I should think—who was walking towards the mill. Well, she followed this chap, and we followed Ethel. When he arrived at old Bramble's cottage he went inside—and didn't come out. Presently Ethel talked us out. By this time we had worked our way round to the side, and we were quite close when Ethel entered. A second after she had gone in we heard her cry out—a sort of astonished cry. We peeped through the window—and, my word, the place was in a state! Table upset, chairs overturned, things smashed—just as if there had been a riot there!"

"This is very interesting, Ursula," remarked Stella. "What happened then? Did Ethel continue to break up Bramble's happy home, eh?"

"Oh, no! Ethel disappeared into the house and we—like idiots—hung about outside. I wish we'd have gone inside, too, for then old Bramble and his wife wouldn't have suddenly come on us and captured us."

"That was hard luck." "Yes—wasn't it? Especially as they accused us of having wrecked his old room! He and his wife carried us back to the school and took us before Miss Somerfield. We got a fearful wiggling, besides five hundred lines apiece for breaking bounds. And to cap it all, Bramble's going to summon us for damaging his property."

Stella murmured words of sympathy.

"How lucky for Ethel that she was not caught!" she remarked dreamily. "M—yes!" said Ursula. "But—but—I—er—that is—we had to give her away!"

"Ursula!" protested Stella in pretended surprise. "Surely you didn't?"

"But it had to be done!" cried Ursula. "After all, she wasn't breaking bounds—and then, she went into the room at least a couple of minutes before we did. We had to sort of give her away to prove our innocence."

"Yes—!" said Stella. "Under the circumstances you had to. What does old Bramble claim?"

"Ten pounds! That's one pound thirteen and fourpence apiece for our parents to fork out. There'll be a fearful row at home. But, I say, Stella! I wonder what Ethel's little game is? Strikes me as being jolly suspicious; don't know what you think?"

"You're right," returned Stella solemnly rising and closing the door—the moment for confidence had arrived—"it does! And, in view of what I saw this evening—this, mind you, Ursula, you mustn't let go any further if I tell you—"

"Oh, you can trust me!" breathed Ursula. And Stella, knowing she could trust the

to the mill. That also was out of the question—now!

She could have cried with vexation.

Listlessly she watched the written words grow, barring the landslip from all visitation. It was a death warrant to her schemes—her plans—to help Cyril. Henceforth she would simply be a spectator, unable to do anything. And he? He would go to the mill again; and, if the same experience befell him, who would rescue him?

"There you are, Ethel," said the headmistress. "Pin that on the notice board as you do down. Good night!"

Hearing the fatal paper in her hand, she left the room, and, going downstairs, arrived at the main corridor where the notice board hung. In a few minutes the supper bell would ring out, and, in expectation of the summons, there was a large gathering of girls loitering about the place.

All eyes turned on Ethel as she descended the stairs. A second before all tongues had been discussing her, for rumours were rampant to-night, and every one of them was to do with Morcové's head girl.

It was only when Ethel drew out a drawing-pin to affix the notice, that the words of Stella Hawkes came back to her.



"The muttering grew in volume, until it culminated into a prolonged 'Booh!' 'Take it down! Take it down!' was the cry that assailed Ethel on all sides."

Fourth Former—to talk!—forthwith proceeded.

At the very moment that Ursula was absorbing the details, Morcové's headmistress was also listening to an equally interesting narrative. The visit of the Brambles left Ethel with no alternative, when Miss Somerfield had her up before her, but to disclose what had happened over at the mill.

The only facts she kept back were her friendship with Cyril and her father's connection with the mill—neither of which seemed to have any bearing on the accusation brought against the six juniors.

"We must let the Brambles know of this," said Miss Somerfield; though I fear they will hardly be convinced. To prevent anything of the sort happening again—that is, as far as Morcové is concerned—it will be better to place the landslip out of bounds for the whole school—junior and senior side alike. Pass up a sheet of paper, Ethel, and I'll write the notice now."

Ethel's hand trembled slightly as she handed a sheet of paper to Miss Somerfield. Out of bounds for the whole school! Then good-bye to any chances of her carrying out her father's instructions. Of all the unlucky happenings!

An "Oh, Cyril, too. After what he had told her she had determined to pay many visits

"You'll get the landslip barred for the whole school next, I suppose. Well, we shall see how the school will stand that!"

That is what Stella had said. Ethel drew a deep breath as she realised the possibilities. For a second her hand trembled, so that the pin dropped to the ground. She took out another one. Yes—how would Morcové stand this?

At her elbow jostled the crowd, and those behind cried "Read it—read it!" and surged and pushed to get nearer. As the hubbub gradually ceased half a dozen shrill voices started to proclaim the announcement. She was at dramatic pause for a moment as the words sank home.

Then arose a muttering, which grew in volume until it culminated into a prolonged and violent "booh!"

"Take it down! Take it down! 'Tien't fair!" assailed Ethel from all quarters. Ethel turned and faced the angry crowd. She opened her mouth to speak, but her voice was drowned in the fierce cry—

"This—this is your doing, Ethel Courtway!"

The school against her! Is this what Ethel is facing? The tangled web of mystery around her seems impossible to penetrate, and Morcové's head girl is indeed in a difficult position. What will she do? See a splendid instalment next week.