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MORCOVE MUSINGS

by Dennis L. Bird

Greyfriars, St. Jim's, Cliff House and many other famous schools feature regularly in the pages of "Collectors' Digest", but in recent years there has not been so much about another notable academy - Morcove. The Editor and I felt that it was time to redress the balance a little, so this is the first of an occasional series about Betty Barton's alma mater.

Many readers will have fond memories of the activities of the study 12 girls, but such reminiscences belong in later articles. I want to begin with the story of the school itself. It was situated in magnificent scenery facing the sea, on the north coast of Devon - that is, somewhere along the spectacular 50 miles of coastline that runs from near Hartland Point to Lynmouth The nearest town was Barncombe, which seems to have been somewhat itinerant; it is variously described as being five, six, and even ten miles from the school. Much closer was the village of Morcove itself, which sounds from its name as though it must be right on the coast - but we hear little of it in the saga.

The school itself dates only from the nineteenth century, but it stood "on the site of a much older scholastic establishment" (I quote from the "Schoolgirls Own Annual" of 1928). Many centuries earlier there had been a monastery there, but during the reign of King Henry VIII most of the buildings were pulled down. What little was left standing was turned into a so-called "dame school" in the time of queen Elizabeth I. In the 1820s, a tremendous storm assailed the North Devon coast and most of the aging buildings collapsed. The site was then abandoned for several years.

Eventually someone had the idea of opening a new school there. The land belonged to the Earl of Lundy, of Barncombe Castle, who became a director of the school, and a handsome structure soon arose in white stone, the facade being in the Grecian style. There was "a large main building with north and south wings." The classrooms, Great hall, music-room and dining room were all in the main building. The North Wing housed the headmistress's private quarters, the staff common-room and bedrooms and the kitchens.

Most of the girls' dormitories and studies were in the South Wing, the Sixth Formers having the ground floor. The Fourth Form studies were on the third floor, but their dormitory was in the main building.

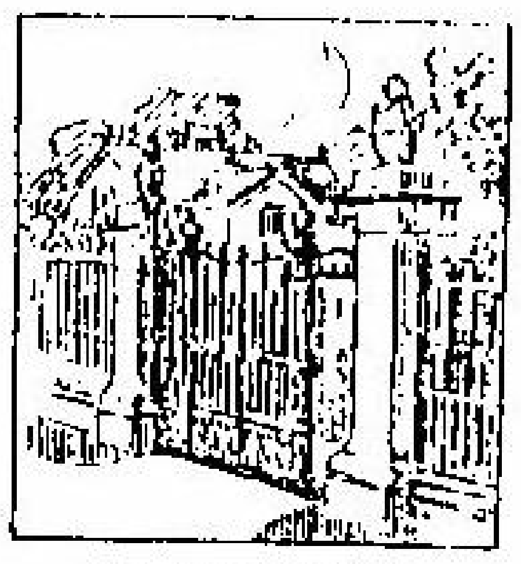
In front of the main building was the quadrangle, with playing-fields stretching away to the south. Near the kitchen-garden (which provided all the fresh vegetables needed) were the coal-house, some disused stables, and the garage for the headmistress's car and the school bus.

"The lodge and school gates are directly in front of the main building," says the Annual. "The Lodge is a pretty little house occupied by Septimus Steggles, the school porter. His wife, called by the girls 'Dame Steggles,' runs the school tuckshop."

At the extreme east end of the grounds stood the last relic of Morcove's old days. It was a ruined tower which at some time had been a gatehouse. It might have been part of the original monastery of Morcove, or perhaps it was the home of the Tudor lady who ran the dame school.

And ever present were the moors which ran right down to the top of the stern cliffs which plunged sheer to the often troubled waters of the Bristol Channel. The beach was a favourite resort, and so were the many mysterious caves.


A view of the Entrance Hall


The School Gates


A Busy Scene in the Tuck-shop.


The Last Ruin.

Such was the background to the Morcove stories, which ran from 1921 to 1938. The school's ethos may sound a little strange and old-fashioned in these cynical 1990s - although I think we could do worse than pay heed to some of those values, summed up by an anonymous pupil in that 1928 Annual:

"Our girls....'play the game.' There is practically no sneaking in our school, our mistresses are all perfectly good sorts, and we pay just as much attention to the athletic side as we do to the scholastic. The result is that a girl, when she leaves Morcove, is not only thoroughly educated in the scholastic meaning of the word, but she knows how to keep up what we proudly term 'the Morcove spirit.' None of our old scholars have let us down yet, and we hope they never will."

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MORCOVE MUSINGS

by Dennis L. Bird

No. 2 of an occasional series

Horace Phillips was a true Victorian. Born in Camberwell, London, in 1881, he was 20 when the Great Queen died, and his writings ever after exhibited the values that he had learned in his early life: earnestness, patriotism, respect for the aristocracy, a liking for melodramatic and sentimental stories, and what our Editor Mary Cadogan has called "hearty decency." He had a sense of humour - rather heavy-handed at times - and a fascination with the exotic which led him to set many stories in the Arabian desert or a romantic corner of Europe which he called Turania.

He became editor of "The Scout," "The Boys' Journal," and other papers in the early years of this century, and wrote women's stories for the "Sunday Companion" and "Sunday Circle." Then came his great opportunity to develop as a writer. When the weekly "School Friend" launched the Cliff House stories in May 1919, Charles Hamilton (as "Hilda Richards") was the original author, but the management soon removed him because the girls' stories were distracting him too much from his commitments to "The Magnet" and "The Gem". Horace Phillips was invited to become "Hilda Richards," and although he held the appointment for only a few months he was so successful that he boosted the "School Friend" circulation considerably. He was then offered the task of creating an entirely new set of school characters in the Amalgamated Press's latest venture, a 2d-a-week paper called "The Schoolgirls' Own". The first issue was dated February 5th, 1921; the cover was orange and blue - colours adopted the following year for "The Magnet" - and it featured the first of many attractive drawings by Leonard Shields. Both Phillips and Shields thought their new creation would prove ephemeral, but in fact their partnership was to continue for exactly 17 years, until the issue of "The Schoolgirl" dated February 5th, 1938. This was the saga of Morcove School.

Horace Phillips' first story in the "Schoolgirls' Own" covered 11 pages out of a total of 36. There were three other stories by different writers, and features on needlework, cookery, and Guides. The "SO" was a small journal, with a page size of only 6½ inches by 9 inches. The later Amalgamated Press papers ("The Schoolgirl", "Schoolgirls' Weekly" and "Girls' Crystal") were larger - 7½ inches by 11 inches. So Phillips' 11 pages in the first "SO" equated to only about 8 pages of the companion papers. But that was a substantial proportion of the weekly contents.

He wrote 789 episodes for the "SO", and when that closed in May 1936 there were another 89 in "The Schoolgirl" and 30 in annuals - a grand total of 908 tales. He also wrote under the name "Joy Phillips", but he is best remembered as "Marjorie Stanton," the memorialist of Morcove.

ENTER: BETTY

"Scorned by the School" was the title he gave to his first instalment, but it is eight pages before we get to Devon. He wanted to establish the personality and the family background of his heroine, Betty Barton. We meet her in her Council school on a pouring wet day in Lancashire; the very first words set the tone:

> "Just one little face at the schoolroom window, peering out at the pelting rain! Such a sweet, pretty face; but oh, how pale and thin, and with what a world of trouble in the bright blue eyes!"

A far cry, this, from the precincts of one of England's finest boarding schools, where she was soon to receive her education. This was Ribbleton (there is actually a place of that name - a suburb of Preston), and the Bartons lived there in desperate poverty.

Joe Barton worked in the mill, and was "worth his £5 a week before he got hurt by the machinery"; now he is lame, and is "very little use," earning a mere 18 shillings (90 pence) a week. His wife has to work as a charwoman, to keep the family going - for there are five mouths to feed. Joe and Nell have three children: Betty, the eldest, and Doris and little Joe. To make matters worse, Mr. Barton is run over by a lorry and will be off work for weeks. The baker calls for the money owing, and the rent collector talks of giving the Bartons notice.

Horace Phillips gradually tightens the screw of grinding poverty, just as Charles Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell had done seventy years or so before him. In the cynical 1990s his style may seem sentimental and melodramatic, but taken in the context of his times he has a rather endearing earnestness and a very positive identification with his characters. He really feels for the Bartons in their distress. And he is (probably unconsciously) making quite a political point, for the family's troubles are due to economic circumstances in general and to the greed of one wealthy family in particular. Their name (as significant as any in a pantomime) is Grandways. Josiah Grandways, once poor himself, "had only acquired his wealth by profiteering during the war." Clearly he was one of those "hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war," in Stanley Baldwin's telling phrase. It was Grandways' mill where Joe Barton had been injured by inadequately-safeguarded machinery; it was Grandways' slum dwellings and rack-rents which bore so hardly upon the Bartons' living conditions. And it was Mrs. Grandways who paid Nell Barton a pittance for her hard work with the scrubbing-brush.

The Grandways' two girls, Cora and Judith, were no more attractive - young snobs who went to Ribbleton's "Private Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk," and who lost no opportunity to deride their charwoman's daughter.

"Never mind: I'll manage," was Betty's steadfast response to all life's ills and accidents (no, her middle name was not Pollyanna). She was consistently brave and cheerful, always ready to do the hard work about the house and to encourage her despondent siblings.

All this Horace Phillips conveys in his first seven pages, leading to a chapter predictably headed "The Darkest Hour". And then, rather as in one of the Victorian pantomimes of which he was probably fond, an unseen magic want is waved. A telegram arrives at the Bartons' squalid home. Joe Barton's brother George had gone to America five years before (1916) to seek his fortune, and Betty's "dad gave him £20 to emigrate with." Now he was back, "sun-tanned, well dressed, prosperous," driving his own car and, as he put it, "with my pockets stuffed full of money." At a stroke, the Bartons' problems are solved. Mr. Barton can have the best care and attention in hospital; his family move into "a fine mansion," and his eldest child is to go to one of the most exclusive schools in the country.

No wonder Betty set out for Morcove with "radiance rare and fathomless" and magic in her eyes (Thomas Hardy's words). Uncle George had warned her that there would be rich girls there, who might be a problem. "I'll manage!" she said. And her first impressions of Morcove were all she

SPLENDID NEWS FOR BETTY!
"Betty," said Uncle George, "I am going to send you to a big boarding school. Do you think you'll be happy?" "Oh, Uncle!" gasped Betty.

could have wished. The jovial school porter Steggles met her at the station, and at the school she was received by her form-mistress Miss Redgrave in most kindly fashion. "How tired you must be, Betty, after such a long journey... I come from the North myself." "Oh, do you?" exclaimed Betty, feeling drawn towards this beautiful young lady. (Horace Phillips was always inclined to make the relationships between his characters quite intense, even at first sight.) Betty is conducted to her new study, passing several girls "who gave her a friendly smile at once, and that did a great deal towards driving away her natural nervousness." What could possibly go wrong? We shall see.

(I am indebted to the writings of Mary Cadogan, Tommy Keen, and W.O.G. Lofts for the biographical information on Horace Phillips.)

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MORCOVE MUSINGS

No. 3 of an occasional series

by Dennis L. Bird

(NEW READERS BEGIN HERE)

In the October 1994 "CD" we read of the poverty-stricken Barton family in Lancashire. Joe Barton was a mill-worker crippled by unsafe machinery; his wife had to become a charwoman to provide money to keep the family going - for there were three children as well, Betty, Doris, and little Joe. The wealthy but unpleasant Grandways family were the cause of all the Bartons' ills: Mr. Grandways owned the factory, and charged exorbitant rent for the Barton hovel, while Mrs. Grandways paid only a pittance for her cleaning. Their two girls Cora and Judith lost no opportunity to make the Bartons feel inferior. Then everything changed as if by magic. Mr. Barton's brother, who had emigrated to Canada, returned a rich man; he bought a fine house for the family, and paid for Betty to go to renowned Morcove School in North Devon. NOW READ ON.

If Betty thought her new life would be a happy one, she was soon disillusioned. On the day of her arrival at Morcove, Miss Redgrave took her to study No. 7, which she was to share with two other girls. And who should they be? None other than Cora and Judith Grandways, suddenly transferred from Ribbleton's Private Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk.

The Morcove author "Marjorie Stanton" (Horace Phillips) soon showed what a sturdy character he had created in Betty Barton. She valiantly held her own when the Grandways revealed to the rest of the form that she was "Our charwoman's daughter at home." Even more damning, apparently, was their disclosure that Betty had been to a Council school. "I say, you know, a jape's a jape; but don't carry it too far," said one girl. "She can't really be a Council school girl. Why, her face is clean!"

In the 1990s that dialogue must sound pretty unconvincing; class distinctions matter so much less nowadays, thank goodness. Yet those of us who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s can recall the social barriers of the time. To the middle-class parent, a Council school was only one degree better than a Borstal. The thought of a girl from there going to a famous public school and mixing with their own well-brought-up daughters was horrifying.

Horace Phillips handles this scene well, bringing out the seemingly unbridgeable differences between Betty and her new form-mates. She combines humility with a proper self-respect, in a rather fine speech:

No. 1 OF A NEW PAPER! GRAND PLATE GIVEN FREE! OVER £100 IN PRIZES!

The Schoolgirls' Own

2D

NOT WANTED! "You can clear out, Betty Barton!" exclaimed the snobbish girl. "We've no use for Council School kids here!" (See "Scorned by the School!" in this issue.)

No. 1. Vol. 1.] PUBLISHED EVERY TUESDAY. [Week Ending February 5th, 1921.

"I haven't come here with any big ideas about myself. I'm a new girl, and I expect to be sat upon a bit, like a new girl anywhere. But I've got a bit of pride.... I and my people are as good, any day in the week".

"What utter rubbish!" shrilled Cora Grandways. "Our people have been rich for years!"

"And how have you used your riches all that time?" flashed back Betty. "What about all the slums in Ribbleton that your father owns - the slums that helped to make his fortune! Has he ever used his riches to make others happy? For all their poverty, my parents have given far more pleasure to other folk than yours ever have, and I'm proud of them."

That is strong stuff - quite political, too - for a schoolgirl's story paper. It shows how deeply Phillips identified himself with his characters and their problems. Writing within a strict stylistic formula that inevitably seems rather dated, he nevertheless engenders real feeling.

After that first dramatic clash with her fellow pupils, Betty was summoned to see the Form captain. In view of later developments (Betty herself was to fill that position for most of the next 17 years), this was a curious meeting. Betty optimistically thought that this girl must be a scholar with "a sense of fair play, a sporting spirit, and a fineness of character that was above paltry snobbery."

She was, of course, in for a shock. "She saw a tall, slim girl lolling on a couch, with a very bored look in her eyes, the lids of which had a languid droop." For those readers who know only the latter-day Morcove stories of the '30s, there is piquancy in the captain's name. For she is Paula Creel, of the unpronounceable "r"s ("Bai Jove! I want a stwong girl, don't you know"). This is not the "beloved duffer" of the late stories, who by then had become a devoted friend of Betty; the early Paula was a much less amiable personality. She showed her spiteful nature by pretending to believe that Betty was a new school servant, sent to spring-clean her study. Sharply corrected by Betty ("I'm a new girl"), Paula lamented that Morcove's headmistress Miss Somerfield was "jolly democratic, and this is what comes of it" - a washerwoman's daughter joining the form.

Poor Betty! That first long instalment of February 5th, 1921, ended with her firm Churchillian resolve: "Let the whole term go by, without bringing me a single friend! I'll manage - alone!"

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MORCOVE MUSINGS

No. 4 of an occasional series

by Dennis L. Bird

Horace Phillips ("Marjorie Stanton") had begun what was to prove a long-running series of stories about Morcove school in the first issue of "The Schoolgirls' Own," dated February 5th, 1921. Working-class Betty Barton from Lancashire, whose mother was a charwoman, had suddenly found herself whisked from her Council school to the exclusive girls' public school at Morcove in Devon - the result of her generous uncle's return after making his fortune in Canada.

The first long instalment ended with Betty in despair when she found herself the target of spiteful, snobbish remarks from her new form-mates when they learned that she did not have rich parents like theirs. In the second episode ("For Another's Wrong," February 12th, 1921) it seemed briefly as though she had found a friend - but at first things went from bad to worse. Two of the girls tried to trick Betty into subscribing money to "charity": to provide soap for Council school girls (in other words, herself).

Phillips was now introducing some of the characters who were to feature in the series for many years. One of these two charming japers was Ella Elgood, later to be one of "the three Es" with Eva Merrick and Etta Hargrove - girls who were not really bad at heart but who were always easily led by bad company.

The author also aired some of his stereotyped phrases which,as time went by, readers might find either endearing or annoying. Any merriment was always greeted "Ha, ha, ha!" - never two "ha's" or four, but three. Any incredulity was indicated by "Wha-a-a-at!" (four "a"s).

Poor Betty's suffering was increased when she was set upon and dressed up in a sack-apron with a pail tied to her waist. "Brooms and brushes were forced into her hands," and a big notice hung round her neck: "Member of the Royal Society of Scrubbers!!!" The three exclamation marks did not of course relate to the present-day meaning of the word - they merely emphasised the humble cleaning duties of Betty's mother. This joke went too far, and came to the notice of the Form's junior mistress Miss Ruth Redgrave. She took pity on Betty, and confided that she understood the Lancashire girl's predicament. She too, it turned out, came from a background of poverty, and was looked down on by the staff in a similar way. Betty suspected that Miss Redgrave was concealing a dark, sad secret - a hint that was to be followed up in later stories. As with the cinema and nowadays TV, Horace Phillips believed in the technique of the "trailer".

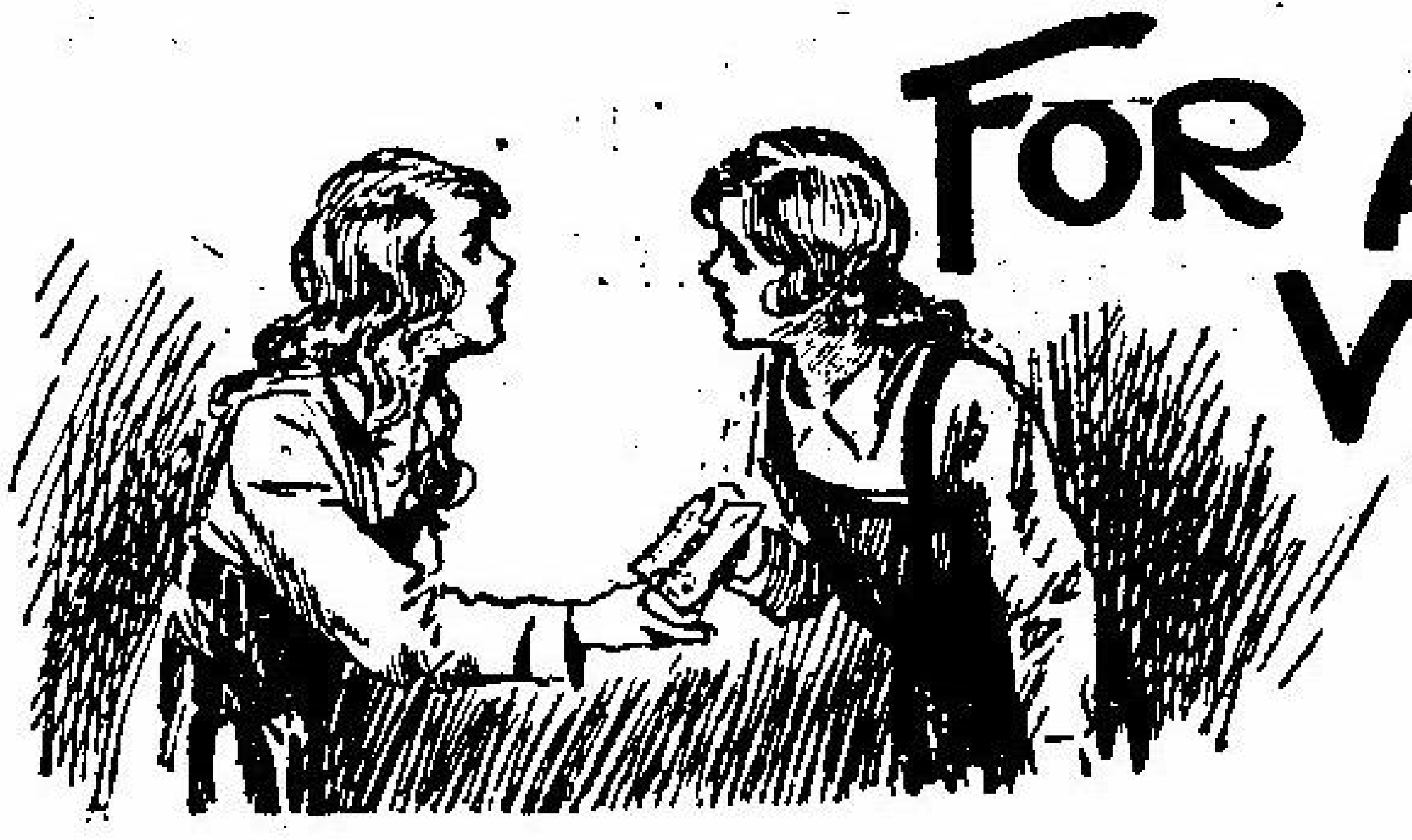
The one brief gleam of hope for Betty came when a girl came to her study with a message, and let slip that she had worries of her own. She was "a thin-faced girl, with pale lips and colourless eyebrows. Betty had already marked her out as a very quiet girl... Betty's hard life in the past had made her ever ready with sympathy." Soon she was offering the hand of friendship - and more than friendship. She generously gave 30 shillings (£1.50 - a large sum then) to settle her form-mate's debt.

The response was fulsome. "Oh, how can I ever repay you for this?... If ever I can help you - be a true friend to you - I will!... How could I fail you at any time, Betty?"

But the girl's name was Ursula Wade - and for the next 17 years Horace Phillips' readers were to associate that name with all that was mean, deceitful, and dishonest. She never reformed. It is a mystery why she was never expelled.

All too soon, Betty found that her new "friend" was false. An attempt was made to steal money from Ella Elgood's money-box. Suspicion fell on Betty, and Ursula - the real culprit - failed to clear her name. Betty was accordingly marched off to the Form-mistress's room, and readers met another personality who was to play a large part in Morcove's future. "An impressive, aristocratic figure was Miss Massingham, in her stately black dress, and with her head of snow-white hair. Gold-rimmed glasses were in keeping with her distinguished looks; but, when the best had been said of her, she seemed rather a cold, statuesque being."

No. 2 of a Grand New Series of Long Complete School Stories, introducing Betty Barton, the Girl from the Council School. Every reader of this story is certain to fall in love with Betty.



FOR ANOTHER'S WRONG!

BY

MARJORIE STANTON.

The "evidence" against Betty was purely circumstantial, so there was not much that Miss Massingham could do. However, she made it very clear that she did not believe Miss Redgrave's plea that Betty was perhaps shielding someone else. Such noble feelings could only come from girls from "fine families whose chivalry is traditional." So Betty was sent back to her class with a cloud over her head and a bitter feeling in her heart. "She was fated to remain the unhappy victim of treachery and malice....and all this without ever finding one true friend to turn to in one's troubles!"

Horace Phillips knew how to tear at his young readers' heart-strings. (Will Betty ever be happy at Morcove? Will she one day find a true friend to share her joys and sorrows? Look out for further Morcove Musings!)

ACCUSED OF THEFT! "She can't answer!" exclaimed Judith Grandways, glaring at Betty. "Look at her white face—look at the misery in her eyes! She is the thief!"

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MORCOVE MUSINGS

by Dennis L. Bird

No. 5 of an occasional series

For readers of the Morcove stories in the 1930s, Betty Barton must have seemed very much an "Establishment" figure (although that phrase was not coined in its present sense until 1955). Secure in the love of her friends, clear in her mind as to where her duty lay, she was the girl to whom her classmates looked for leadership.

It was all very different when she first went to the famous Devonshire public school for girls in 1921, as this series has been showing. The basic problem was social class. Betty's Lancashire parents were humble folk - father a factory worker, mother a charwoman. Only the arrival of rich Uncle George, who had made a fortune in Canada, changed the Barton life-style. It was he who paid for her to go to Morcove, albeit with a query: "You'll be amongst some rich girls there, you know. Do you think you'll keep your end up - eh?"

"Yes, uncle," was the answer. "I'll manage!" But neither he nor Betty knew just how difficult life was going to be for her among the supercilious snobs of Morcove.

Horace Phillips (or "Marjorie Stanton," as the author was better known) began the third instalment of his long-running saga with Betty being forcibly evicted from the study to which she had been allotted (ironically, the Study No. 7 which was later to be famous in the annals of Morcove). She had been told to share with the spiteful Grandways sisters, Cora and Judith, who did everything they could to make her unhappy. Their latest effort roused Betty's fighting spirit. "This is the study I was placed in, and here I mean to stop until I'm told to shift... I don't care a rap for you or the rest of the Form. I'll keep my end up somehow, against the whole lot of you!"

The riotous eviction was interrupted by the Form-mistress, Miss Massingham, who arranged a rather unsatisfactory compromise: Betty would move out into a study of her own - but it would be a small, grimy, ill-lit boxroom. At least it removed her from the company of the Grandways girls - but life was otherwise no better. Still the cruel tricks and sneering gibes of the Fourth Form continued against the Council-school girl. She was assailed with pillows; her bed was made unusable. And there was never any friendly ear into which she could pour her troubles, no kindly word to give her fresh heart.

Then, at last, a change came in Betty's fortunes, although at first she did not realise it. Intent on cleaning up her insalubrious study, she had gone downstairs to borrow a broom and a dustpan. Passing through the hall, she met "a girl who was a complete stranger to her, entering the house while Steggles the porter was bringing in a portmanteau.

"Hallo," said the strange girl loftily. "You might fetch in my other things from the cab! Steggles is grousing, and I can't carry everything in myself."

"I'm sorry I can't help you; but I'm not one of the servants," said Betty, rather resenting the other girl's manner." The newcomer found it hard to believe that Betty was a scholar - "A Morcove Schoolgirl with a dustpan and broom - my word, this is something new!"

That was the rather unpropitious beginning to what was to become a firm and lasting friendship - for the unknown girl, returning from a few days away to attend a family wedding, was Polly Linton. Like the other Morcovians, Polly was well off, with Linton Hall as her address; but she differed from her Form-mates by having no silly ideas about class distinction. Polly took people as she found them - and she soon found Betty to her liking. Some unobtrusive kind acts showed Betty that here at last was a girl who might befriend her.

And so it proved. After a particularly nasty trick was played on Betty, Polly overcame the normal schoolgirl scruples and went to Miss Redgrave, the junior Form-mistress. "Cried Polly excitedly: 'I'm a girl who hates blabbing; but there is something in all this that fairly sickens me, and the truth has got to be told by me.'"

Horace Phillips entitled this episode "The Friend She Found" (February 19th, 1921), and it ended with dewy-eyed sentiment. Polly told Betty how she had for some time been "feeling terribly fed-up" with the supercilious Form captain Paula Creel and the rest: "Isn't snobbery a hateful thing, Betty? Wouldn't it be glorious if someone could fight it!... We are the couple to do it." And despite Betty's demurs, she foresaw that Betty might one day become captain of the Fourth Form - "and don't forget that I predicted it!"

Polly's alliance with the unpopular new girl was at some cost to herself. She too became an outcast. In the following week's episode she moved in with Betty into the latter's minuscule study. This, in fact, was no hardship, for Polly had previously had to share with the Form sneak, Ursula Wade.

THE UNHEEDED COMMAND!

"Stop that row!" exclaimed Ella won't have it!" "Hallo, what do you ant?" asked Polly Linton. "This is udy, not yours! All old lumber wi iven away to-m row!"

Polly soon lent a hand in improving the boxroom study, and sent Ella Elgood and others about their business when they remonstrated. She made no secret of the fact that she detested the Form's attitude to Betty, and Fate played into the new chums' hands at the school concert. Cora and Co. presented a malevolent playlet about "Barty Betton" and her working-class family - and inadvertently started a fire backstage. It was Polly and Betty who extinguished it ("The Girls Who Saved the School" - Horace Phillips' title for this episode of February 26th, 1921) and earned the public gratitude of the headmistress, Miss Somerfield.

A tide of hatred had threatened to engulf Betty Barton, but now it was slowly turning - and its new trend was reinforced at the end of episode 10 (April 9th, 1921) when she and Polly were joined by the musical member of the Form, Madge Minden.

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MORCOVE MUSINGS

No. 6 of an occasional series

by Dennis L. Bird

I have just been to Morcove, and I was delighted to find that the landscape is very much as described by Horace Phillips ("Marjorie Stanton") in the long-running series he wrote seventy years ago for the "Schoolgirls' Own" weekly.

As we know from a letter Phillips sent in 1938 to a young admirer of the stories: "You deserve to be told something about the origin of the word 'Morcove'. I made it up as a kind of variation of the place-name Mortehoe, in N. Devon."

That tantalising hint tells us very little about Phillips' knowledge of the area. Was he really familiar with the rocky coast of North Devon - or did he just pick the name at random from an atlas? Did the prevalence of the word "Barton" in the area (Buttercombe Barton, Stowford Barton, Woolscott Barton, the curious Damage Barton) perhaps give him the name for his chief character, Betty Barton?

From my recent visit, I am inclined to think that he did in fact write from personal knowledge of this remote corner of Devonshire.

As readers of "Morcove Musings" may recall, the saga began with the first issue of the "Schoolgirls' Own", dated February 5th, 1921. The Bartons lived in abject poverty in Ribbleton, a suburb of Preston in Lancashire. Then Uncle George came back from Canada, where he had made a fortune, and he shared it with his brother's family - thus enabling 14-year-old Betty to go to Morcove, one of England's most exclusive boarding-schools for girls. The resultant contrast in social class provided much of the plot material for the early stories, as Betty battled to establish herself.

She would have had to make several changes on her long, lonely train journey to Morcove. Probably she would first have gone from Preston to Crewe, then to Birmingham, Bristol, Taunton, and Barnstaple. Finally she would have travelled on the Barnstaple-to-Ilfracombe line (which existed from 1874 to 1970). The little train would have chuffed its way through Braunton and up the steep gradient to Mortehoe (Morcove) Station, 600 feet above sea level. Here she was met by the jovial school porter, Steggles, who drove her (in pony-trap?) the mile or two to Morcove School.

Whereabouts could that have been? "The Schoolgirls' Own Annual" for 1928 gives us a description. "Although the school is itself a fairly new building, it was built on the site of a much older scholastic establishment... a dame's school in the time of Queen Elizabeth" (the First). A tremendous storm in the 1820s destroyed the old buildings. Later in the 19th century "the directors of the present Morcove School decided to build on this historic site."

There is to this day one, and only one, large house near Mortehoe. It is called Twitchen House, and is now the centre of a discreetly-wooded caravan park. It is half a mile from the village, and is described by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in his Devon "Buildings of England" book as "a large, studiously Old English house" in William Morris-inspired style, with a "spacious stair-hall with quarried glass... impressive reception hall... decorative plaster ceiling."

Could this be Morcove School? Alas, no! In the 1928 Annual Horace Phillips says "It is a very handsome white stone building in the Grecian style. There is a large main building with north and south wings... The Fourth Form dormitory is on the third floor..." This is all on a much grander scale than Twitchen House.

The village of Morcove does not feature much in the stories after the first few instalments. The real village of Mortehoe, however, should not be so lightly dismissed. It is about a quarter of a mile from the sea, approached from the Woolacombe direction in the south by a steeply winding road which suddenly brings you to a little row of shops, a couple of churches (one now a private house), and a handsome inn, the Chichester Arms. A mile to the west is the grim headland of Morte point, aimed like an arrow at the low, dim blur on the horizon which is Lundy Island, some 17 miles out to sea. The coastline round Mortehoe consists of jagged rocks, coves, and headlands - a real Wreckers' Coast - and Horace Phillips also writes of caves, although I did not find any.

He describes Morcove variously as five or six or ten miles from the main town of Barncombe. That is an obvious conflation of the two real places in the locality, Barnstaple and Ilfracombe. The nearer is Ilfracombe, about six miles away; Barnstaple is more like twelve. In the stories, "Barncombe" is famous for its Creamery (I did not find it) and its castle.

Barncombe Castle is the home of the Earl and Countess of Lundy, and their 18-year-old daughter Lady Evelyn Knight, who is a good friend of Betty Barton & Co. Can we locate this castle? Ilfracombe has a 19th century Castle House overlooking the harbour, and a Castle Hill - but nothing like the fortifications described by Phillips. Barnstaple, on the other hand, had a formidable castle in the 12th century. It rose above the flat surrounding land on a man-made mount, and as Pevsner says, "the wooded motte of the castle still rises above the rooftops." By the early 16th century, however, the walls had fallen into ruins and not much remained. In the 1720s, Castle House was built in the precincts, and survived until 1976. Perhaps this is where Lord Lundy (a director of Morcove School) lived?

My visit showed that it is not really possible to identify the places mentioned in the Morcove stories in the same way as in, for example, the Arthur Ransome or Malcolm Saville books. Nevertheless, I came away feeling that Horace Phillips had convincingly portrayed the North Devon countryside as background to his entertaining tales of school life in the 1920s and '30s.

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