

COLLECTING THE

"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"

THE MORCOVE SCHOOL STORIES WERE THE HIGHLIGHT
OF THE 'SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN' PAPERS AND ANNUALS

BY MARY CADOGAN

February 1986 marks the sixty-fifth anniversary of the launching of the 'Schoolgirls' Own', a twopenny weekly paper which starred the charismatic girls of Morcove School, and was to survive for fifteen years with its price and 36-page format unchanged. It was introduced as a sister paper to the popular Cliff House weekly, the 'School Friend', and the Morcove saga not only had associations with that paper's celebrated girls' school, but also with the fictional seats of learning that had been established by Charles Hamilton, as 'Frank Richards' in the 'Magnet' and as 'Martin Clifford' in the 'Gem'.

Morcove was the inspired creation of Horace Phillips ('Marjorie Stanton'), who with only occasional exceptions wrote all the stories in the series until the paper folded with issue 798 in May 1936. (Serials featuring Morcove then appeared in the 'Schoolgirl' until February 1938, under the Marjorie Stanton pen-name, but inconsistencies of style and characterisation suggest that some of these were written by authors other than Phillips.) In 1921, when the 'Schoolgirls' Own' began, Phillips had been for some time a Cliff House author for the 'School Friend'. After Charles Hamilton had established Cliff House, its denizens and environs in the first few issues of the paper, Phillips (and some other writers) took the stories over. His flair was always for the dramatic and tear-jerking story. He achieved the right touch for Cliff House, attracting and retaining readers with his unusual blend of strongly emotional situations and school-girlish larkiness.

Before beginning to write for girls, Phillips had contributed women's stories to the 'Sunday Circle' and 'Sunday Companion'

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The first issue of the "Schoolgirls' Own", which survived for fifteen years in an unchanged form.

— papers which allowed him to give scope to his feeling for romance, which was denied him in the 'Schoolgirls' Own' because of editorial taboos on the subject of sex in the girls' weeklies. However, as we shall see later, Phillips managed to charge Morcove's ambience with several romantic touches. Although Phillips must have enjoyed creating his own characters (after being saddled for some time with those that Hamilton had originally dreamed up), several

of his cast were derivations of Greyfriars and St. Jim's characters.

For instance, his junior captain, Betty Barton — the humble Lancashire lass who has to overcome fearfully snobbish persecution when she first comes to Morcove — echoes the early battles of Mark Linley, the North Country Greyfriars scholarship boy. Naomer Nakara, the 'dusky' fourth-former who is also an Eastern queen, enlived the conventional English school scene, just as surely as Hamilton's Indian Nabob, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, added lustre to the Greyfriars Remove. And Paula Creel, the 'swell' of her form, seems to be a skirted version of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whose exquisite manners, lispng speech and sartorial impeccability she imitates.

ARDENT

These links with the Hamilton papers are further emphasised by the fact that Leonard Shields, a regular 'Magnet' artist, also illustrated the Morcove stories throughout their run. All this, perhaps, is why the 'Schoolgirls' Own' attracted boy readers as well as girls. Certainly today its ardent band of collectors includes men as well as women.

Horace Phillips also drew on the Cliff House characters when building up his Morcove 'chummery'. The ever resourceful Betty Barton (whose motto is "We'll manage!") seems set in a similar mould to Barbara Redfern, captain of the Cliff House Fourth. Betty is a touch more sedate, however, just as her bosom chum, 'merry madcap' Polly Linto, echoes the heartiness of Clara Trevlyn, the Cliff House tomboy, but is slightly less hoydenish than that much loved character.

The intensity of Phillips' writing and the exuberance of Leonard Shields' illustrations made a perfect combination. The covers of the 'Schoolgirls' Own' (blue and orange, like the 'Magnet' in its heyday) were particularly appealing, with Betty Barton & Co. — and even villainesses like sneaky Ursula Wade or imperious Cora Grandways — radiating vitality and charm. As well as the regular Morcove stories, the paper kicked off with two serials and a complete story. These were written by different members of the Amalgamated Press's talented team of male writers, using a variety of attractive female

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pseudonyms. The paper also included 'Cookery Hints', 'Needlework Notes' and, in more lively vein, 'Girl Guides Corner'.

The 'Schoolgirls' Own' was to feature the Guide movement with vigour and enthusiasm, running regular stories with Guiding themes, and offering as a giveaway in the first issue a beautifully reproduced sepia photograph of H.R.H. Princess Mary in Guide Commissioner's uniform. The giveaway plates in the two subsequent issues were of H.R.H. Prince of Wales, later to become King Edward VIII, then the Duke of Windsor; and of Nurse Edith Cavell. These plates are now much sought-after collector's items themselves.

Nevertheless, whatever other attractions the paper offered, it was Morcove that provided its long-lasting and extraordinary pulling power. The school was located on the edge of Exmoor, and the stories soon opened out from the confines of its campus to the bracing atmosphere of Devon moorland mists and Atlantic breezes. Like Cliff House, Morcove stood on a high point overlooking the sea: the saga had its fair share of cliff-top dramas and rescues from



"The Schoolgirls' Own" featured the celebrated girls of Morcove School and their adventures.

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watery graves, but on the whole, suspense was produced through relationships between the girls rather than by the vagaries of the elements and outside forces.

Of all the Amalgamated Press 'schoolgirl' writers, only Horace Phillips could — and did — manage to combine the intensity of Mrs Henry Wood's Victorian melodramas with the robust mood of 'hockey on the halfers!', and other sporty motifs. When describing chummy feelings between girls, he had no reticence in evoking deep emotions. For example, Betty tells her friend Midge Minden that she will enjoy meeting a rather delicate girl called Nell; sure enough, when "poor ailing Nell" arrived "with her limping step, and hand outstretched", Midge felt that "handshakes were not good enough . . . She kissed Nell as if she was already quite in love with her. And perhaps she was." (Of course, it must be stressed that this warmth of feeling between members of the same sex is, in the Morcove context, utterly innocent of homosexual undertones.)

To counterbalance this kind of intensity,

Phillips kept the relationships between the girls and their boy-chums from nearby Grangemoor School under stricter control, which must have been difficult for him in view of his penchant for full-blown love stories. His typical boy/girl relationship is expressed in the 'thus far and no further' friendship that existed between madcap Polly and her brother's friend Dave. His restrained but serious overtures are deflected rather than rejected by Polly. For example, after an especially hair-raising foreign travel episode (they had the most astoundingly adventurous hols!), Dave wants to sit next to Polly in the lorry which is transporting them to safety, but she declines: "Nothing doing! I want Naomer on one side of me, and Pam on the other; then it'll be just like going home on the school bus after a match! Hurrah! Hockey next term!"

CHUMMERY

Betty Barton's chummery included – besides Polly, Paula and Naomer – Tess Trelawney (a talented painter), Pam Willoughby (stately, serene, affluent, intelligent, pretty, and Phillips' favourite of his characters), Dolly Delane (affectionately known as the Doormat, because of her obliging disposition), and Madge Minden, the musical genius of the Fourth.

With Madge, Phillips created an interesting and complex character. Being a musician, she was classed as 'temperamental', and certainly not a conformist. (Even when all her chums bobbed and shingled their hair in the mid-Twenties, Madge insisted on retaining her long and flowing tresses.) Always able to withstand mass pressures, and something of a loner, Madge is nonetheless not allowed to depart too drastically from the straight-and-narrow path of sporty schoolgirliness. Thus Phillips concocted one of his most memorable of Morcove vignettes: "Madge Minden, a cricket bat in her hand, and carrying batting gloves, was strolling down the passage whistling a César Franck sonata."

That colourful and atmospheric description is matched by the author's accounts of the most romantic personality in the saga – a mysterious Arabic girl called Rose of the Desert, who crops up frequently, and braves the dauntingly cold Devon mists and sea-

storms clad only in the insubstantial veils and draperies of her native garb! It is with Rose that Phillips gives fullest rein to his talent for the love story. She rescues Jack Somerfield (the explorer brother of Morcove's headmistress) from slow and horrible death in the desert on more than one occasion. She becomes deeply attracted to this "Engleeshman with the heart that never quakes". His response tends to be matey ("Well done, Rose!") rather than passionate, although he sometimes expresses himself in a flowery manner: "I will never forget how, in the breast of my little brown maiden, there always beats a heart of gold." However, Rose is doomed to frustration: her most axiomatic utterance turns out to be her reiteration of the famous 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', for – after fifteen years of fancying Jack – she eventually bows out of the saga a year or two after he has married a European aristocrat who is a "vision of radiant loveliness".

However, Jack's involvement with Rose gave the Morcove girls the opportunity of going off to the desert for the hols on many

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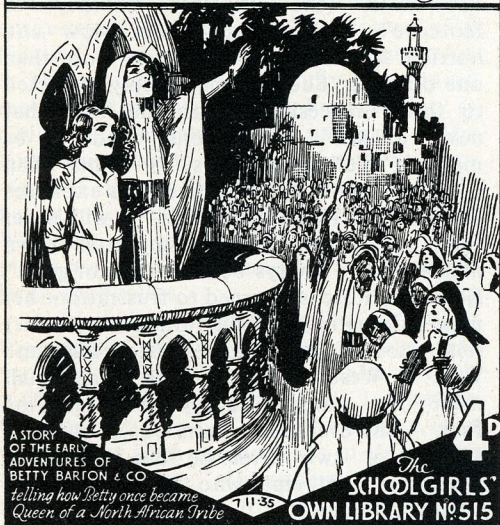
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Many of the "Morcove School" stories also appeared in the 'Schoolgirls' Own Library' series.

occasions, where despite a variety of dramatic experiences (sandstorms, temporary slavery and hairsbreadth escapes from death), a good time seems to have been enjoyed by everyone!

At least, because of the Amalgamated Press's policy of playing down sex in their juvenile papers, Betty Barton and company

were spared the attentions of the rapist sheiks who became so popular in light fiction after the success of E.M. Hull's prototype in "The Sheik". Indeed, for the girls, the camels seemed a greater hazard than the desert's human inhabitants. On one of the many occasions when they are fleeing for their lives, Jack Somerfield asks the girls "with the cheery humour of a Britisher in a tight corner" whether they or the camels are the more exhausted. Paula Creel probably speaks for them all when she replies: "Weally, it is cwuel! . . . Talk about being pwestwate, geals! This is worse than fifty hockey matches wolloed into one!"

Our heroines, of course, managed to put up with privations of this kind, and many others, with splendid spirit — which is one reason why, sixty-five years on, there are lots of us who cherish Morcove memories, and still delight in the 'Schoolgirls' Own'.

The 'Schoolgirls' Own' ran for fifteen years, completing its run with issue 798 in 1936. However, Morcove School stories were also regularly featured in the 'Schoolgirls' Own Annual', which was issued every winter from 1923 to 1943. Collectors should note, however, that the annuals from 1940 to 1943 did not feature Morcove stories, and these are therefore worth less than the earlier editions. Finally, many of the issues of 'Schoolgirls' Own Library' also featured the exploits of the Morcove girls. These are now worth about the same as issues of the 'Schoolgirls' Own' paper itself.

PRICE GUIDE TO THE 'SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN'

All prices refer to papers, magazines and books in Very Good condition.
Items which are incomplete — i.e. missing any pages or portions of pages — or which are marked or defaced, are worth less than the prices quoted here.

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