18.

Why Is there Nobody Nice at St Clare's?

Enid Blyton, *The O'Sullivan Twins* (1942)

This question is, I hasten to add, not my question – and I hasten to add that because the girls' school story is one of those areas of children's literature (and there are many) into which the uninformed critic strays at his (and in this case, definitely *his*) peril. Given that the books were written to be read by young females, and that in many cases those young females have developed into older females with an enviable expertise in what is a huge field, the last person whose opinion might be considered even slightly valid would be an aging male who has not read many of the books in the genre. I have a great deal of sympathy with that point of view: Rosemary Auchmuty point outs out in the Preface to *The Encyclopedia of Girls' School Stories* (edited by Sue Sims and Hilary Clare) that while children's literature has had enough trouble establishing itself as worthy of intelligent study, girls' stories in particular have had to fight for recognition, even by so-called experts. And so one (and especially this so-called expert) should approach this topic with due humility – and beware of extrapolating generalisations from limited evidence!

Enid Blyton's school stories form a small part of her massive oeuvre, but, as one might expect from the professionals' professional, she includes all the right ingredients – midnight feasts, the bully, the sneak, the dramatic rescue, the funny French teacher, the firm-but-fair Headmistress, and so on; all very familiar, and we might assume – indeed, critics generally do so assume – comforting or reassuring. There is no question that she was, and is, successful – the books are still in print after seventy-five years, and in our house her two major series – Malory Towers and

The great days of the girls' school story:
The School Friend in 1936 – with a guest appearance
by Bessie Bunter, Billy's sister.

St Clare's – were read to pieces, literally, by my four daughters to the extent that some of the volumes had to be replaced, rather like hamsters, several times.

Because I am professionally involved with children's books, childhood books stay on the shelves in our house, even after the daughters have left; but when they come back with their families to stay, they return to their books and I find copies of *Little House on the Prairie* or *Betsy-Tacy* left on the bedside tables or in the bathroom.

On one of these occasions, our youngest daughter (in her late twenties) came down to breakfast with a disintegrating copy of *The O'Sullivan Twins* (I have since discovered two more copies about the house) and asked the question, 'Why is there nobody *nice* at St Clare's?'

And so, in the name of research, I read it. The O'Sullivan twins, Pat and Isabel who, in the first of the six-volume series, *The Twins at St Clare's*, learned to love their new school, return in this book for the second term, and a term of, it seemed to me, almost unremitting unpleasantness. This time there are three new misfits. The first is the twins' cousin, Alison, who is not exactly treated with loving consideration, even before she makes her entrance:

> 'I wish Alison wouldn't smile that silly smile so much' [said Pat].
>
> 'Oh, I expect some one has told her what a sweet smile she has or something,' said Isabel. 'Really she seems to think she's a film-star, the way she behaves!'

Of course, they are only imitating their father; as he says, with that moderation that age always brings, 'Well, if you can make that conceited little monkey into somebody nice, I shall be surprised. I never saw any one so spoiled in my life.'

By the end of the book, Alison 'was really learning to be much more sensible' but not before she has been thoroughly humiliated by the fifth-formers because she doesn't know how to light fires, among other salutary experiences. She gets no sympathy from her classmates:

> She went back to the common room, sniffing, hoping that every one would sympathize with her.
>
> But to her surprise, nobody did – not even kind-hearted Lucy Oriell. Pat looked up and asked her what was up.
>
> Alison told her tale.
>
> 'Fathead!' said Janet in disgust. 'Letting down our form like that! Golly, the big girls must think we are mutton-heads.'

> 'It was *awful* being rowed at by so many of the big girls,' wept Alison, thinking that she must look a very pathetic sight. But every one was disgusted.
>
> 'Stop it, Alison. You're not in kindergarten,' said Hilary. 'If you want to behave like an idiot, you must expect the top-formers to treat you like one . . .'
>
> Janet lost her temper. 'Either stop, or go out,' she said roughly to Alison. 'If you don't stop I'll put you out of the room myself. . . .'
>
> [Alison] stopped crying at once, and the twins grinned at each other.
>
> 'Lesson number one!' whispered Pat.

This tough love (as we might charitably call it) is not extended to the second misfit, Erica, and even the narrator does not approve of her: 'she really was a sneak. Not even the mistresses liked her.' We never find out what motivates this unfortunate character: the girls punish her for telling the teachers about their illicit midnight feast (and, worse, not owning up to it), she is not allowed to go into the town, and nobody will speak to her. 'She would have a bad time! It's hard to see glances of contempt and dislike wherever you look, and have nobody saying a jolly word.'

Later on, it is discovered that she has framed Margery (the third of the victims, of whom more in a moment) by spoiling Pat's books and allowing Margery to take the blame. How do the first-formers react – with the loving-kindness and understanding that we might expect from well-bred (or at least well-heeled) young ladies? Well, not quite:

> the girls were intensely angry when they heard that it was Erica who had spoilt Pat's jumper and books – and had allowed the blame to rest on Margery.
>
> 'The beast. The hateful beast!'
>
> 'I'd like to pull her hair out! . . .'
>
> 'Oh, the spiteful creature! I'll never speak to her again as long as I live.'
>
> 'Just wait till she comes back into class! I'll give her an awful time.'

All this bonhomie is interrupted by the 'good' character, Lucy (who has the advantage of having 'dancing black curls, and . . . deep blue eyes that sparkled and shone'), who explains that poor Enrica was scared and unhappy. She then says goodbye to the scared and unhappy Enrica, 'who

dreaded all that her mother would say', with the encouraging words, 'Now you just tell your mother honestly that you've been a mean and spiteful girl.' That should fix things.

And so, as the narrator somewhat dismissively explains,

> poor, mean little Erica disappeared from St Clare's to start again somewhere else. Nobody missed her, and nobody waved to her as she went down the school drive in a taxi with her trunks. She had made her own punishment, which is always much harder to bear than any other.

As for Margery, that poor girl, who has a sad backstory ('nobody cares about me at home, so I'm miserable, and I'm always badly behaved when I'm miserable') is immediately categorised when she arrives as a 'tall bad-tempered-looking girl', and is treated accordingly. True, the other girls attempt to be nice to her (for a time) but after Margery has a row with their history teacher, Miss Lewis, they turn on her:

> 'I think Margery ought to have been expelled from the school! After we'd tried so hard to be decent to her too. You simply CAN'T help a girl like that.'
>
> So once more Margery was sent back to her lonely, friendless state. No one spoke to her if they could help it, and nobody even looked at her.

Given that there is clearly something wrong, do our heroes, Pat and Isabel, stand up for her and help? Actually, no: they deliberately make things worse. On the day of the big lacrosse match, Pat goes into the changing room – and doesn't realise that Margery is there:

> 'Now, don't forget, everybody, if that miserable Margery shoots a goal, we don't clap and we don't cheer. See?'
>
> 'Right, Pat,' said the others. 'She doesn't deserve even a whisper – and she won't get it.'
>
> 'You horrid beast, Pat!' said Margery, suddenly standing up in anger. 'So that's what you've planned to do have you! Just like you! . . .'
>
> The bell rang for the players to take their places. Margery went on to the field, a tall and scowling girl.
>
> 'I'm sorry for the girls she's got to play against!' said Belinda to Rita. 'My word, she's an extraordinary girl.'

Not a word to suggest that Pat's behaviour might not be exemplary.

Margery, fuelled by righteous anger, plays amazingly – 'She ran like the wind, she tackled fearlessly, she caught accurately. . . . She was a miracle of swiftness as she darted about the field, tackling and dodging, getting the ball when it seemed impossible.' Afterwards, Pat feels 'a bit uncomfortable . . . about not cheering her a bit' – but that's as far as her sympathy and human kindness goes. In any case, as she says of Margery, 'It's this meanness I can't stand. . . . I can put up with bad manners and rudeness and even sulkiness, but I just hate meanness.' Margery has to become the Heroine of the Fire, bravely rescuing the craven Erica before her virtues can be recognised.

But we are not quite at the end, as there is always time for the girls to scare the gullible (and French) Mam'zelle into a nervous breakdown. Such fun! And how culpable are the staff? Although they are in charge, the pleasant-faced form mistress, and of course, Miss Theobald, the headmistress, she of the 'calm, serious face' and with a 'compassionate glance in her deep eyes', seem to be able to do little about this behaviour.

No need to worry, though: all is forgiven and away the girls go for the Easter holiday, 'and reunions with dogs and cats and horses at home'. Margery is going to stay with the sainted Lucy, which is, of course, lucky for her. As Lucy says, 'We shan't have any maids or anything, because we are poor now, but Margery's going to help in the house all she can – isn't she a brick?'

The problem from an outsider's point of view (and this applies to boys' school stories as well) is that *The O'Sullivan Twins* – and, my daughters assured me, once they had thought about it, most other books of the same type that they had read – refutes a part of the well-established theory as to why school stories are popular. Fictional schools, it is thought, provide a safe space for children to work out real-life problems through fiction; tensions are contained, and the texts, by having nice people in them who overcome the bad people, are comforting and comfortable. This is why C.S. Lewis was sceptical about school stories in his essay 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children': 'I do not mean that school stories . . . ought not to be written. I am only saying that they are far more likely to become 'fantasies' in the clinical sense than fantasies are.'

That is, they will become mere wish fulfilment.

After some reflection, a breakfast committee of daughters concluded that C.S. Lewis was diametrically wrong. The St Clare's stories, looked at coldly, are *not* fantasies, but raw realism. Girls, together (they said), *are* horrible; perhaps nobody is nice at St Clare's because we have to face the fact that in the school environment, few people are nice at all. The books are *not* the place where readers can emulate the admirable, or identify with

the underdog, and where all comes right in the end. Rather, they are places where girls (or boys) can work their revenge on the great and the good and the self-satisfied – where, rather than being the-new-girl-who-triumphs, we can be in the gang, and bully the outsiders, just as we are bullied ourselves. The only fantasy in *The O'Sullivan Twins* (apart from the displacement fantasy of the reader being an insider at a posh school) is that things end happily for the misfits. (Well, most of them.)

Speaking as a father whose only experience of a girls' secondary school has been watching school concerts, attending prizegivings, and verbally fencing with teachers on open evenings, I can but bow to my daughters' superior knowledge.