

Life in Way House Training School for Girls

(Memoir by Marjorie Eileen Grieve, née Brown)

The 'orphanage' was founded by the Hon. Mrs Way, the home being named Way House. It was located in the village of Brockham, Surrey. Up to 45 girls were housed there.

I arrived there in 1922, at the age of about five-and-a-half. I had only been there a week when I went down with the measles. I couldn't have been very popular, as eleven others caught it from me. One of my earliest recollections was being in a night nursery with a strap hanging on the door. If we were naughty we would be marched downstairs, where the strap would be used on us; however, I do not remember anyone actually having it used on them. Looking back, of course, one can hardly believe that little children would have had such a threat hanging over them. I had many a nightmare. In one, I felt my mattress being pushed up, and waking, I jumped off the bed screaming. The nursemaid, who also slept in the nursery, used to let me get into bed with her. Should I be naughty during the day, she would say to me: 'That bogeyman will come tonight and I won't let you back into my bed.' I wonder now how they could have taught us the prayer: 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child', and yet have that awful strap facing us.

At about seven years of age we had several chores, such as cleaning knives with emery paper, cleaning brass doorknobs on every door in the house, and cleaning the staff's shoes. At about eleven years I remember having to scrub the square yard, as it was called, in almost all weathers, at 7 a.m., having only an old sack to kneel on. At the same time we had three drains to clean out. This may have been why some of us had chilblains. At fourteen or so, at 9 p.m. we had to clean a huge grate with black-lead (could not do it earlier as it would be too hot). We also had to clean the flues. Then we had to wash ourselves in cold water (ugh!) before going to bed.

We did have some good times, however. Like most children, we hung up our socks on Christmas Eve and awoke early in the morning, to find apples, oranges, sweets, nuts, hankies, hair slides, and other things I cannot remember. Also on Christmas morning, about half a dozen girls at a time sang a carol at Matron's bedroom door, then were allowed in with a

kiss. We then played in the back yard till breakfast time. Spying a gap in the dining room curtains, we could peep through to see presents displayed by each girl's place. I saw a mound of gifts by mine, and could hardly wait for the time to go to the dining hall. When we did march in, alas, it transpired that this pile of presents were for another girl.

The rest of Christmas day was the same as other days. Boxing day was the best day of the year. In the afternoon we played games in the dining hall, all the members of staff taking part. In the evening we each had two gifts off the huge, beautiful Christmas tree. Some weeks earlier we all had a turn at stirring the Christmas pudding and making a wish for what we wanted. I always wished for a doll, but to no avail; though I did once receive a toy monkey, on account of being a bit of a monkey. I once asked for a car, meaning a pedal car, but received only a clockwork one; but of course such a luxury as a pedal car would not really have been on. In the evening we sang carols, with the assistant matron Miss Taylor, whom we all loved, at the piano. We loved this.

When I was about ten or eleven, a lady who lived in Dorking (Westcott I think) took me under her wing as a kind of aunt, though I continued to live at the home. This followed upon my asking Matron why I didn't seem to have a birthday (strange to say, she hadn't realized this predicament). I didn't know who my parents were, and there was no-one else outside to take an interest in me. My first, wonderful gift from this aunt was a china baby doll. She had made all of its clothes, even crocheting its long gown. Unfortunately, as it was so breakable I was only allowed to play with it once a month. Then for some reason I didn't see it for quite a while, and if I remember correctly I was ignored each time I asked about it. However, a girl who cleaned the sick-room told me that she had seen a doll on top of a cupboard in there. This room was always kept locked when not occupied, and so I decided to pretend to be unwell. I claimed to have swallowed a small magnifying glass, not realizing — oh dear — that I would be given castor oil to help get it through my system. I had to complete the deception by placing the magnifying glass in the chamber pot. Anyhow, when I looked up at the top of the cupboard I could see a pair of doll's legs which I took to be those of Robin, as I had named the doll; but it was too high for me to reach, and there was nothing to stand on. That was the last I saw of it.

My 'aunt' also bought me a pair of shoes — brown, though all the other shoes at the home were black, as I recall. They pinched my feet (she hadn't been able to take me to a shop), but I didn't say anything in case they were taken away from me. I wore them only on Sundays.

Another unfortunate occurrence was that I and another girl got ringworm, and we had to have all our hair shaved off. We were taken as outpatients to a London hospital. What misery we went through. We had to wear mob-caps, and really felt humiliated, especially when we went to school - some children were singing: 'Hard boiled egg, hard boiled egg, hit 'em on the head with a hard boiled egg'. But when our hair grew back, as I recall, we both had lovely thick curls, where before we had had straight hair.

Another, vivid memory. If one had been very naughty, one might be punished by being made to sleep in the staff bathroom, with a board across the bath instead of a mattress. This really scared me; it was so eerie being all alone at night, cut off from the dormitories. One could have a whole week of such night-times, too. Another time I and four other girls, after school, had to stand in a small area known as the red passage with our hands behind our backs for at least an hour a day for a week (this, at least, is how I remember it). This was a week when Tay's mother was in charge, Tay and Matron being away on holiday.

As I have implied, I loved Tay, Miss Taylor. Once, I had been really naughty earlier in the day. I was in the bed at the end of my dormitory, and it was quite late at night. I knew that she would be coming along the adjoining passage to extinguish the gas light, and along the dormitory. I pretended to cry as she came past my bed, and she bent over me and asked what was the matter. I said I was sorry that I had been naughty. She gave me a cuddle and kissed me, saying that she had forgiven me. I had pretended to cry simply in order that this would happen, simply to get a cuddle. I soon went to sleep after this. It had seemed so endless waiting for her to come, but I had been so afraid of dropping off and missing her.

The red passage, also, was where the medicine cupboard was. One day during this week, Tay's mother, Mrs Taylor, went to get a jar of malt extract, which was given to girls who needed it. Unfortunately she dropped the jar, which broke. While she went to get something with which to clean it

up, I, though I was not one of those thought to need it, bent down and began calmly scooping it up with my finger and devouring it. I cannot remember whether I had had it before, but I remember finding it delicious. Mrs Taylor, returning, caught me at it and boxed me round the ears, then made me stand on a chair with my hands on my head out in the yard, near the dining room door. I stayed there till it was pitch black, and became very afraid. I had been letting my arms down from time to time, and eventually cried out when I saw a light under the door. Mrs Taylor unlocked the door and said: My goodness! I forgot you were there. She did actually apologize, but said she hoped it would be a lesson to me not to do such a thing again, for I could have got glass in my mouth. And yet, the real reason why she caught me was that I had been concentrating on avoiding the glass. The cupboard was a low-level one, so the jar probably had not splintered much anyway.

One year we were told that there was to be a treat, namely that if we were very good we would be able to go on a day's outing to Whipsnade Zoo. We had six weeks to wait; and a chart was put up on the dining room wall — if any girl accumulated six black marks, she would not be going. I was always getting into trouble, mainly because I would talk when I shouldn't. However, I was determined to be very good, and was getting very excited when the last week approached; then I managed to get the whole six black marks in the last week. On the morning of departure, Matron asked if anyone had a small attaché case to lend to one of the girls who was going, to take her sandwiches in. I slowly raised my arm, and Matron said: 'Come here, child', which I did, in front of everyone. She said: 'This child is a real little Briton, she's willing to lend her case in spite of not being able to go herself. Now she shall go'. I had won! Somehow I knew that this could happen. This attaché case was another gift from my honorary aunt. As I have said, I was at times naughty, and think that one could get more individual attention in this way than by just being good.