

The Purity of Little Girls

Annie was helping Mrs. Burnett with the children's spring and summer clothes. She had sewn with her two weeks in the fall and had been so industrious and so clever with her needle that Mrs. Burnett had engaged her long ahead of time for the spring sewing. A friend had told her of the young seamstress, and something of her life. Annie was an inmate of the Crittenton Home, and though her baby was three years old now, she still stayed on, being a great help to the matron in the sewing room of the institution. And because she was a quiet, well behaved girl, she was allowed to work out for a week or two now and then to make a little extra money for herself and her child.

Mrs. Burnett had grown very fond of Annie; the girl, she could see, was refined, well educated, and had been reared in a decent home. And Annie appreciated Mrs. Burnett's kind, friendly attitude and did the very best work she could for her. One day as they sat in the sewing room, putting the finishing touches on the little girls' gingham dresses, Mrs. Burnett glanced out the window at a car which had stopped at her next door neighbor's gate. "Look, Annie, there is Nina Wilson," she said. "Isn't she the loveliest thing?" A slim, graceful girl was coming up the walk and both women watched her with interest until she disappeared in the house.

"Nina makes me think of a dainty rosebud, unfolding before my very eyes," said Mrs. Burnett.

"Does she live in the next house? I don't remember having seen her before," said Annie.

"No, this is her uncle's home. Nina is the daughter of Judge Wilson who lives over on Avenue B. She is the only child and her parents value her as if she were made of gold," said Mrs. Burnett with a smile.

"A pure and lovely girl is worth more than her weight in any earthly treasure," said Annie quietly.

"That is what Mrs. Wilson thinks, and she is the loveliest mother; my ideal of what the mother of a sweet young girl ought to be. She is interested in everything which touches Nina's life and yet is scrupulously careful as to what those things shall be. She does not forget that the girl is young and sees to it that she has a proper amount of pleasure with those of her own age. But not one bit of loose or careless behavior is allowed. There are no auto rides at night and no gatherings of any kind without the presence of some grown person."

"How old is she?" asked Annie.

"She is sixteen, a girl's loveliest age, when she is unfolding so beautifully into womanhood. And yet, it is perhaps the most critical period of her life, too, when, more than any other time, she needs the tender, watchful care of a wise mother. Oh, Mrs. Wilson has been such a lesson to me in this respect. When my own little daughters have reached Nina's age, I intend they shall be guarded in just the same way," said Mrs. Burnett.

There was a little pause, then Annie looked at Mrs. Burnett and said, "Why wait until they are budding into lovely young girlhood to bestow all that watchful care upon them, Mrs. Burnett? Why not give it to them now?"

"Why, they are nothing but children," exclaimed Mrs. Burnett in surprise. "They do not need it now; that is, not in just the same way."

"I know that is how most mothers look at it, but I also know that it is a very grave mistake," said Annie sadly. "We have a habit of looking at childhood as a time of carefree, happy innocence and forget that the devil is just

as busy putting temptations into the path of children as of grown people.”

“Oh, I know children are tempted to tell stories and deceive their parents and even to take things which do not belong to them; but surely, Annie, you can’t think that the question of their virtue touches a little girl’s life as it does an older one,” said Mrs. Burnett.

“Perhaps not, yet I do mean that the question of a little girl’s purity is often at stake,” said Annie. “I believe that many a girl who falls when she is sixteen or eighteen or twenty, in spite of the tender, watchful care of her mother, would have been saved that terrible step if her mother had given her the same protecting care when she was six, or eight, or ten years of age.”

Mrs. Burnett looked at the young woman in silence, too much surprised to speak.

“Listen, Mrs. Burnett,” said Annie, “you know that I have a little fatherless child at the Home. But you don’t know any of the particulars of my story. Painful as it is, I am going to tell you that story, hoping that it will put you on your guard about your own little girls. My mother was a good woman, but she did not see that, from the time a girl begins to play with other children, every year of her life is a critical one. No, like you, she thought that the very innocence of childhood would see me safely through those early years, and then, with the dawning of young womanhood, she became tenderly solicitous and on her guard. But it was too late. I had started wrong when I was eight years old.”

“How terrible!” cried the other woman.

“It is not necessary to conclude that I was an unusually depraved child. I wasn’t, but I did have the intense curiosity about life’s mysteries that other children have, and, since I was allowed to play freely and for long hours at a time with little neighbor boys and girls, in the orchard, the woodlot and the large barn on my

father’s place, we children had ample opportunity to say and do a great many things our parents never dreamed of. And yet,” said the girl, with a bitter smile, “I have heard the mothers in our neighborhood congratulate themselves that we children had such a safe place to play as Father’s big old barn, with its many stalls and loft full of sweet, clean hay.”

Here Mrs. Burnett made a sudden motion as if to rise from her chair, and her eyes glanced uneasily out the back window toward the garage, a favorite play place for the children and their friends. But she sank back again as Annie continued her story.

“Of course, we knew we were being very bad children, but the devil whispered that it didn’t make much difference what children did when they were so young; that we would not even think of such naughty things when we were older, but would be sweet and pretty and good like the grown young ladies we knew. This went on, now and then, for several years. By the time I was twelve years old, I began to realize it wasn’t so easy to be a sweet, pure young girl as I had thought. I truly wanted to be, but the memory of those ugly things back there beat me down. I felt that I could never be like girls whose childhood had no black spots because they had been better cared for. “What’s the use of trying to be sweet and pure now?” I asked myself. “I am different and nothing can alter the fact. I grew reckless and you know the rest of the story.”

The girl was weeping by this time, and as she wiped the tears from her eyes, she cried out, “Oh, that mothers would realize how priceless is the modesty and purity of little girlhood! If they did, they wouldn’t be so careless of it, or take so much for granted. They seem to think that the child’s chastity is a question of the future. But it isn’t true; it is a question of now. And because parents do not see this, children are left together in the most

unguarded way, and sin is much more common among them than you have any idea of. I want to say another thing, Mrs. Burnett, which may cost me your friendship, and that is that the dresses you have made for Dorothy and May are not modest. Oh, I know that they are in style, but I believe with all my heart that the devil gets up the styles for little girls these days. I am not so surprised that worldly people should be governed by such fashions, but the thing I can't understand is that you Christian mothers will fall right into line and send your little daughters out half naked because it is the style.

There is May, twelve years old and large for her age. It is very natural that she should still be just a child in your eyes, but she doesn't look that way to other people. She is developing rapidly and will soon pass from childhood into young womanhood. Yet between her socks and the short dresses we have just finished for her there is a big stretch of bare legs reaching halfway to her waist. Dorothy's are even worse. Neither of them have sleeves in their little frocks and the necks are cut very low. Of course, Dorothy is only six years old, but, Mrs. Burnett, how can you expect her to grow into a modest young girl when all her life she has been used to exposing the larger part of her body to the gaze of the public? People have lots to say these days about the immodest dress of women and young girls, but I think the most indecently clad creature among us is the average little American girl, whether she is six or twelve," cried Annie, her eyes bright with intense feeling. "I have heard but one minister speak on this subject—the others are busy crying out against insufficient dress of older girls and women.

But this man said the trouble with the grown ones began back in childhood; that he didn't see how it was possible to produce a

generation of modest young women from a crowd of half-clad little girls. And that when a mother thoughtlessly followed the styles of today in dressing her little daughter, she was making her exposed little body a target for the white slaver (a man who kidnaps girls and uses them in prostitution) by the time she was six years old."

A silence fell between the two women. Mrs. Burnett was grave and thoughtful, and the excitement had died out of Annie's face. At last she said quietly, "The time will come, I suppose, when my little girl will learn from someone that her mother hasn't always been a good woman. But, by the grace of God, she shall never be able to say that I was a careless mother, for I shall guard her purity as the most priceless thing on earth; not only the purity of her young womanhood, but of her childhood as well. And because I want her to be a modest as well as a virtuous child, I shall not put dresses on her which only half cover her little body."

"I believe that you are going to be a wise and good mother, Annie," said Mrs. Burnett, "and there is no reason why I shouldn't be also. I am going out for a few minutes to see what the children are doing." She paused at the door and looked back. "And while I am gone you may begin to rip the hems out of those dresses. We will let them down so that they will cover the little girls' knees," she added.

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