

Norris, Kathleen Thompson  
Unreasonable mothers  
ADU 5710

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by

KATHLEEN NORRIS

THE PAULIST PRESS

401 West 59th Street

New York, N. Y.



836922

# Unreasonable Mothers

BY KATHLEEN NORRIS.



YOU want the youngsters to be happy, don't you? You want them to love you, don't you? You can't separate them from their own crowd, can you? You don't want to make them different from the others,—peculiar and conspicuous,—do you?

These are not my questions. These are the questions good mothers,—Catholic mothers, too,—toss about carelessly when the terrible question of the modern girl, her jazzing, painting, smoking, drinking, motoring, reading, spending, flirting, and all the rest of it, arises.

And having given these careless and superficial queries what might disrespectfully be described as "the air," these good mothers put the whole topic away again, with a sigh. "No, of course not," they say, as a sort of blanket answer. And that ends that.

My question, if I may respectfully and dubiously offer it,—for the little girls I love are children at the moment, and their problems and perhaps my appreciation of them are some years ahead,—my question would be: do we, we Catholic mothers, know what we expect of our growing girls and boys, and if so, what is it?

In all the other things we do, there is a rule. School children have a definite code; so many lessons, so much play; so much promptness and politeness; certain things required; certain things forbidden.

The maids have their rules; the shops theirs; the nursery has its rules about food, naps, manners. Policemen, sailors, doctors, teachers, scientists—all have their definite laws.

But if the most precious creatures in our world, Mary, eighteen, Tom, twenty, have their code and their rules, what are they, and where are they?

Most mothers—not all, but we of the big cities see a rather alarming proportion of them—most mothers make up their rules from day to day. Mary asks separately for permission to go to every party; there is no law about it at all. Sometimes

Mother lets her go to a really undesirable gathering, just because she is so sick of disappointing the child!

"You can't say 'no' every time," said a heartsick mother in California a few months ago. She had said "yes" a few hours before, and as a result her beautiful seventeen-year-old was lying, for the last time, unrecognizably mutilated and quite dead, in her mother's arms.

Perhaps it didn't occur to this mother, but it might to us, whose tragedies haven't befallen yet, that you don't have to say "no" all the time, if the code says it for you.

If a baby asks for matches you don't deliberately, sigh, frown, mitigate the situation with a "Not to-night, dear." Matches mean fire, and fire destroys life, and therefore the baby is left in no doubt as to whether he may have them or not. There is what lawyers call a static piece of code about matches.

But there is no static code about allowing your little girl to race about the dark countryside with a half-intoxicated youth who has only twice before driven a car. There is no code about rouge, lip-red, hip-flasks,

ugly books, ugly stories, dancing,—to-day she may not do these things; to-morrow she may, if she cries hard enough, or pouts long enough.

And her mother, who had courage enough to bear her, and keep the matches away from her, and refuse her walnut creams when she had a fever, and the moon when she wanted it,—her mother, who may have to answer at a High Tribunal for her soul some day, says pathetically: “Well, what can you do? You can’t say ‘no’ *all* the time!” But why can’t you? You *do* say “no” all the time about certain dangerous things, why not about others?

Well, the truth is, we are lazy, we modern mothers. To raise our daughters,—and incidentally our sons, for what we teach our daughters is communicated to our sons and other women’s sons,—to raise our daughters to be temperate, self-controlled, dignified, pure in thought and desire as well as act, would mean that from their babyhood upward we must devote to them all the things we are too lazy to think about—much less attempt. Time, intelligence, prayer, example, companionship—the very words exhaust us!

Easier far to buy her the new coat she doesn't need at all, but wants so badly, to give her plenty of money for beauty parlors and taxis and slippers, and to ship her off for a whole long evening with five other very youthful persons, who will be steadily eating, drinking, dancing, whispering, speeding along lonely roads, for several hours, and, having placed her in this perilous position, murmur lazily in her powdered ear, with a parting kiss: "Now do be careful, darling, and don't get into any silly scrape! Remember the terrible trouble poor Anna got herself into, and Isabel having to testify in court that the boys had been drinking when the accident occurred! Good night, dear. Good night, Bob."

"Her Father doesn't approve of this sort of thing one *bit*," says Mother, going back to the sitting room, and picking up her bridge hand, "and I think he's quite right. But what can you do? The girls say that the boys won't pay any attention to them if they aren't right in the thick of things, and after all, they're only young once. Three hearts? I think we'll double that."

Meanwhile, press and pulpit thunder

against the sacrifice, the despoiling, of youth and innocence and goodness. Meanwhile, the vague, spoiled, pleasure-exhausted little souls and bodies drift into what they call marriage, attempt to reconcile the new state with the old freedom for kisses and dances and suppers and cabarets, weep their disillusioned tears, and find themselves at twenty-six or twenty-eight utterly out of harmony with life, ignorant of its spiritual values, bewildered by its disappointments, obliged to accept the appalling fact of an unhappy marriage, or the even less thinkable solution of a barren and permanent loneliness purchased through the divorce courts.

Without raising the delicate question as to whether Catholic mothers are perhaps a little more sane than others, we may at least assume that hundreds and thousands of girls within the fold to-day are leading lives of extravagance and dissipation nothing short of insanity.

Isn't it our fault? Isn't it because we older women are so lazy and so weak?

To be sure, we can occasionally show a flash of character.

“No, positively not,” we can say, “not with those men, one of them divorced so scandalously, and the other a notorious drunkard. You needn’t tease, Mary. Your’e *not* going.”

But what an empty, dramatic gesture this is! How different from the position of both mother and daughter, had the first formed that child’s soul steadily and carefully, through the years, to the point when to want to go on a dancing party with men of that stamp would be quite out of the range of possibility.

Such men ought not to have the privilege of friendship with Mary; they ought not to be free of her home. Far from apologizing to her child for refusing them absolute responsibility for her, body and soul, for a whole long evening, Mary’s mother ought to apologize to Mary for ever having permitted her to meet them, at all.

But where are the mothers who have built about their children a rigid and bracing atmosphere of self-denial and spiritual peace?

We know life is hard. We know goodness is not found, tied up in a milliner’s box, or in a rich marriage, but that it must

be forged, coined, chiseled, by our own weak hands. We know that cabarets and jazz and lip-red and silk stockings are not better for Mary in her girlhood than they will be in her thirtieth year, and we know that the appetite grows upon the stuff that feeds it.

Are we so blind that we can silence our souls with the bland hope that the atmosphere of tea-dances, road houses, midnight supper clubs will somehow miraculously prepare that child's heart for the sacrifices of wifehood and motherhood, for the kitchen and the nursery, for prayer and faith and hope and charity?

Hardly. Indeed we think we are not blind to the situation at all. We love to exchange horror stories; we remind each other that the daughter of those lovely people woke up in a low-grade hotel, the morning after the dance, and didn't know how she got there. We say with a great air of moral firmness that the whole thing is getting ridiculous, and that something ought to be done about it! Thank Heaven, it will stop when the child marries.

"But you *can't* marry, on less than six thousand a year, nowadays," says Mary

pathetically, caught in all the danger of a long engagement.

"It's true!" her mother concedes ruefully, with a sigh.

Marriage is a Sacrament. Purity is a virtue. Are these to go down to defeat in a hurricane of rouge-pots and curling-irons, shoe-buckles and theater seats, high-powered roadsters and cover charges?

One of the tragic features of the whole mad business is that the youngsters are not happy. Go to a tea-dance at some big hotel some afternoon—alas, any afternoon, for they dance three hundred and sixty-five times a year, and satisfy yourself that the exhausted, painted, half-clothed, flushed, perspiring, eternally competing and eternally unsatisfied children of to-day are not happy.

Much as we give them, they want more. Given a white rabbit coat, Mary, who has never been taught any theory of self-denial, wants a chinchilla. Given chinchilla, she muses of becoming a great movie star, wishes she could meet Baldino Baldi, dreams of impossible conquests, and frets because she has—what a girl recently

complained of to me—a “morality complex,—so I never can do anything!”

Dozens of girls eagerly quoted to me recently the article in the modernest of magazines called, “The Worthless Woman Triumphs.” It was a shallow and a shoddy article, Mary Stuart and George Eliot, among others, being casually adduced to illustrate the edifying point indicated in the title, but its reception gave me a startling glimpse of the mind of the girl of to-day.

That is her ideal, is it? That’s where all the beautifying and perfuming and idling tends. To a belief that the worthless woman triumphs.

No end to what we give them, to what we let them read and say and eat and drink and wear and do. And one of the tragic features of the whole mad business is that the youngsters are not happy.

Girls of to-day, forgive us, your mothers, who know what we might have done to make you good as well as happy. It is we who fail, not you.

We know that when you were little children we might have gathered the children of the few women we love and trust, the

few who think as we do about life, and have said to you:

“These are your friends. You must all grow up together, united through your faith, through your schooling, through your parents. You may have all the joys that are good—games under the attic eaves, tramps, picnics, summer trips, theatricals, charades; you may have a home gymnasium, a costume trunk, billiards, croquet, tennis, dancing, cameras, bicycles, skates, books.

“Best of all, you may have your mother and father, at the family table, and your friends’ mothers and fathers, at theirs. They will listen to you, laugh with you, make you listen and laugh in turn. Your lives shall be theirs, and theirs yours, for all the quiet months of work and play, and in the holiday gatherings, and the mid-summer excursions, you will find that the young persons outside your circle are only too pathetically anxious, only too grateful, to be occasionally included.

“But public dances, night clubs, racing cars, road houses, drink, dangerous company, dangerous books, dangerous plays and movies—these you shall *not* have.

You may as well realize it now, in your very small childhood. These are against your code, these are forbidden.”

Fortunately for my argument, I know that this course succeeds. I know four Catholic women who have kept their children safe. Five nights a week each family is at home, but on two nights all eighteen of these devoted persons, little and big, are together. And there is no outside attraction that will lure those children from the family party; to them the most exciting thing in the world is to have Friday night arrive, and to have the cousins begin to troop in for two whole days of joy.

So that I assert positively that it *can* be done. Not easily, perhaps, but much more easily than our cowardice leads us to dream. It can be done, and what a crown upon Catholic womanhood if it were through us that the new fashion began!

For let us suppose the worst. Let us suppose that a Mary or a Tommy breaks loose from the clan, tires of the jokes and the intimacy,—but they never will!—and disappears, to find more exciting company, to try new roads.

Why, even then, the bulwark of the fam-

ily code is behind them like a wall. Even then, they know that they are deliberately exiling themselves. Even then, when the white lights flicker, and the stifling filthy air of the dance hall dizzies them, and the constant idle babble of ugliness and sin goes on, are they not going to be the richer for the sudden rush of homesickness, the sudden longing for Mother again, pure and tender and strong, for the aunts and uncles and cousins, the crazy charades that made everyone laugh until he cried, the innocent comments of the smallest members of the group, the wild squabble over sleeping arrangements and the division of bathing suits? Isn't our own position stronger now, and to be infinitely stronger some day at the Bar of Justice, if we can say, "We tried. We prayed, we worked, we counseled. We offered him the gold, but he took the brass."

What family among us hasn't got a girl whose Daddy thinks she sings more prettily than Jeritza? Maybe Jeritza wasn't in good voice the night Dad heard her, but have you heard our Margaret sing "The Minstrel Boy?" What mother hasn't got a son that isn't funnier than Charlie Chap-

lin, when you once get him started? Have you heard Dan do the Jewish woman getting out of the subway with four kids?

Why do we let them go away from us, when what they want, and what we want, are the old, beautiful home things: friendship, laughter, talk, hospitality, family love, and a chance to develop their own personalities, find their own self-expression, before the most appreciative audience in the world?

One day some years ago I was nervously watching four small children at the shore. After I had called out agitated warnings about deep water, rafts, diving, ropes, the beach fire, and other dangers, a little boy came to my side and seriously rebuked me.

“Mother, don’t worry. Kids don’t *want* to die.”

Kids don’t want to die. And we don’t want to see them die, either; we don’t want to see purity, sanity, temperance, self-control, judgment, piety, youth and freshness and goodness, die out of them. Let us save them if we can. Let us help them to see what no young person believes naturally, but what they can be brought to believe, that goodness and happiness are

reconcilable terms—indeed, that they *must* be reconciled, if we are to have wise, clean-minded, balanced women and men to carry parenthood to the generations to come.

If there are going to be tears, better have them now, while she is safe, than hereafter, in divorce court or morgue or hospital. If she is going to despise you to-day for forbidding her her freedom, forbidding the attractive but dangerous company admittance to your house, what of it? For your principles and your God this is not too much to do.

Easier this than your child's hatred a few years from now, when, principles and religion sacrificed, she is going to despise you anyway. What if our girls do rage and cry? They cried when they were babies, and we did not feel it so serious a matter.

And they won't cry long. In a few years, in one generation, the decent, the good, the sane thing might be brought into favor; and the girls whose parents still let them run wild, make their own laws, sell their beauty and bloom and characters and souls for a few hot, extravagant hours of self-deceiving, crush out their taste for

home ties, books, conversation, home and faith,—these will be the unfortunate, the pitied girls.

For girls can't mingle with badness, and miraculously extract goodness from it. Every time we give them a bad thing, countenance a dangerous friendship, a poisonous book, an immoral play, a reckless expedition, we take a good one away. They can't have both; they can't have the ugly precocious knowledge that the conversation of certain acquaintances imparts, and at the same time the purity of heart that keeps God in sight.

They are our children, not our equals. They are our charges, not merely amusing and independent human beings who happen to live in our houses. We make them what they are, and what they are going to be.

They ask for bread: love, faith, service, goodness, the secret of happy lives. And we give them stones: dancing, dressing, money, painting, flirting, speeding. It will be an uncomfortable day for some of us when we have to answer for it, when too late we hear the sorrowful young voices saying:

“Mother, kids don't *want* to die.”

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New York, N. Y.

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