

## LIFE AT A CONVENT SCHOOL

By Ethel Ingalls



HERE clings to the convent, even in these days, much of legendary romance, aiding the belief, even among intelligent people, that the cloister is at best but a prison house in which many a woman lives out a miserable existence. But this is not the case. The woman who enters a convent in this nineteenth century does it not only of her own free will, and because she is actuated to lead a life of sacrifice and seclusion from purely religious motives, but does so only after the prolonged trial of the novitiate. Should she find, during this time, that she cannot be content with the life she is purposing to lead, she is urged to return to the world by the advice and with the assistance of the religious order to which she has belonged.

TO the majority of the convents of the religious orders in the United States are attached schools, usually called academies; and although the number of nuns in the convent community may be great, but a small proportion are commonly employed on the faculty of these academies. The latter comprises the directress, who superintends the entire school, an assistant, prefects, and teachers of English and the accomplishments.

To the uninitiated there is no distinction between the terms academy and convent; but the pupils of the former speedily learn to distinguish between them. They, although actual inmates of the convent school, are allowed to cross the threshold into the convent proper but once a year, just prior to the annual closing exercises. This interior is forbidding and gloomy, but only because of the absence of decoration and luxury which startles the unaccustomed eye, and is more than compensated by the exquisite cleanliness and order which pervade every corner.

But it is not of the lives within the convent that we are to speak, but of the pupil's life in a convent school, under the supervision of these religious women.

THE great outcry against a convent education is the proselyting of which the nuns are so frequently and unjustly accused.

During my entire school life, and out of a probable thousand souls that were sheltered within the cloistered walls, there were but two converts, and neither of these had been previously united with any church, nor had they ever been baptized. Under no circumstances will a pupil be permitted to embrace the faith without the entire sanction of the parents or guardians; and even when consent is given, it is preferred that the step be postponed until the girl has entered the world and can determine for herself whether she was merely fascinated by the religion, which is seen under such spiritual surroundings in a convent, or whether she has been sincerely converted. The women placed at the head of these institutions are of the highest order intellectually; wise, judicious, and practical, and thoroughly conscious of the fact that proselyting would seriously injure the future of their schools.

THAT some girls are disastrously affected by a convent education I cannot deny. The sentimentalist of tender years, and, perchance, the youthful pessimist, who has shadowed the sunshine of her girlhood days with sombre literature, are more deeply impressed with the isolated lives by which they are surrounded than is the merry-hearted, blithesome maiden who breathes in the atmosphere of unalloyed happiness. The more sensitive minds and hearts look deeper into the secluded lives, and weave beautiful tragic romances about the sable-robed women. These girls are inclined to linger over such day-dreams to the exclusion of the more practical side of this existence, and their tendency toward melancholia is exaggerated. Then, when the books are closed and lessons are ended, instead of coming out into the world with minds filled with sensible, wholesome knowledge, they mope and pine and dwell on visionary possibilities. Sometimes these maidens, ere they have stood within the vestibule of the great wide world, already imagine it wearisome and unsatisfying, and announce, often publicly, their intention of entering the novitiate as soon as the wreath of white blossoms their goodness rewards, and the laurel-wreathed medal their knowledge proclaims. But when the world, in all its freshness, dawns upon them, it seems a fairly good place to live in; and as the years speed onward, and love has filled the emptiness of the existence, these same pensive maidens, now grown to noble mothers, bring their little daughters to place in the good Sisters' care.

It has been claimed by careful observers that a Protestant, educated with Catholics, either becomes an ardent advocate of her own belief, or develops a total lack of religious fervor, and sometimes becomes even skeptical. But as there are many skeptics in the world who have never been within the portals of a convent, this skepticism may not necessarily have been born of a conventual training. But even should her ardor cool, she never forgets that the utmost respect is due to all sacred things; and she always retains that veneration for them that was required of her at school. Convent girls, as a rule, are never guilty of levity or disrespect. That is a truth which no student of convent training can gainsay. Whatever a convent girl may fail to learn, she never fails to imbibe a wholesome religious spirit.

A CONVENT education can scarcely be called a thoroughly practical one, and if a girl wanted to study so as to be able to teach in an advanced school I would not recommend a convent as the place in which to secure such qualifications. The course of instruction, while differing widely from that offered by the fashionable boarding or day school, is yet far below the training of collegiate institutions.

If a girl is not naturally of a thoroughly practical temperament, school life at a convent will not make her so. Generally, the girls' wardrobes are cared for entirely by some Sisters who are in charge of that department, all the mending, darning and renovating of the garments being done by them. The bedrooms, too, are in charge of the working nuns, and though the older girls are given some slight duties, such as gathering up the stray books and shawls left about, or keeping the piano keys polished, they have no practical knowledge or experience of household affairs. Tuition, board and lodging are all paid for by the term, so but a scant knowledge of the care of money is possible. Each girl is allowed from twenty-five to fifty cents a week for palatable indulgences, all money being placed in the hands of the directress for distribution. But though she may be very inexperienced and incompetent when leaving the convent, the framework that she has been constructing out of the knowledge of what she knows to be right, after a little experience is ready for all kinds of additions, and before long the little school maid blossoms into noble womanhood.

THERE can be no life more regular in its routine than a convent, unless it is that of a military academy. From the rising of the sun until dark, every hour has its special task; and so intimately are these duties associated with the hours to which they are assigned that long after the school days are over the girls think of eleven o'clock as "mathematics," one o'clock as "drawing," and so on. Most of us enjoy a half hour's slumbering consciousness after a deep sleep, and lie abed indulging ourselves in this most delicious languor. Renouncing this bit of luxury is one of the trials of convent life. Immediate response to duty's call is one of the first principles instilled into the mind on entering the school; so when the bell arouses you at about six A. M., from a delicious dream of that far-away home which you now realize, if you never have before, is the dearest spot on earth, you are not permitted to awaken in a slumber, but must arise and put yourself together in the most presentable manner you can in thirty minutes. Then follows the morning prayer in the assembly room, where all the sleepy-eyed girls are gathered. If you are a Protestant you may repeat your own prayers privately. After a brisk run in the early morning air a bell calls you to breakfast. Then forming in line you file down to the refectory which, if you have not seen before, reduces the strength of your appetite for convent fare. Walls are bare of ornament, and the long rows of narrow tables contrast unfavorably with the cozy circle that recalls itself to your memory.

Grace is offered. A bowl of oatmeal mush, with the accessories of good milk, and all the sugar you want, a piece of beefsteak, bread and butter and coffee, is the menu for the morning meal. After your first home-sickness is past, you will find your breakfast, as all your meals, both palatable and wholesome.

From eight to nine you prepare for English recitations, which occupy the morning hours, after which comes the time for play in tennis courts or gymnasium. Just before dinner the mail is delivered, and this is the happiest moment of the day if the letter you have looked for comes. The afternoon is filled with the accomplishments—languages, music and painting; and at four o'clock you are off again for exercise. The last hour of study is from five to six, for there is no studying by gaslight. The evenings are very jolly, for dancing is not prohibited, and like all finishing schools, a dancing master comes regularly to instruct those who may care to learn the intricacies of the modern graceful attitudes.

At half-past eight evening prayers are said, and as each girl leaves the room she turns and makes a deep curtsy to the directress, who presides over the evening recreation hour. One finds this performance a bit agitating at first, but practice soon makes perfect.

Corrections for misdemeanors are often very dull in their character, and though during the time of their infliction one suffers keenly, the memories that are retained of them in after years are the source of much amusement. A time-honored custom at the Georgetown Convent (the oldest institution of its kind in the United States) is what is known as being "sent to the clock." The clock is one of the kind "too tall for the shelf, so it stood ninety years on the floor." And probably for more than a century it has been keeping in close relationship with old Father Time. To be sent to the clock one must be guilty of some serious offense, for this punishment is regarded as the most serious wound that can be inflicted upon the dignity of the insubordinate maiden. And when a girl has once been seated before that wise old time-piece, she is remembered always as one of the girls who were sent to the clock. The disgrace of being before it impresses you the more keenly if you are fated to be there while strangers are being shown through the building, when so curious a spectacle usually brings forth a query as to your occupation. In the muffled explanation of the accompanying nun you detect the faintest laughter, and then you wish to be anywhere but before that tall clock, and you almost cry in your anger.

EVERY day what is known as "interrogation" takes place. Each girl is questioned separately and publicly if she has transgressed any of the rules which she listens to every Sunday morning—talking in halls, whispering in ranks, carrying bits of sweets in your pockets, and numerous other offenses—and responds according to her conscience. If guilty she is given a penance, which is usually a page of her dictionary, to copy from one to ten times, according to the magnitude of her sin.

Sometimes a band of mischievous maidens, who can no longer restrain their youthful spirits, commit a series of depredations, raiding the "sweet press" (a pantry where the jellies, jams, cakes and cookies of the household are kept), having midnight processions, visits and similar digressions from the regular proceedings of the establishment. If the offenders are successful in evading the watchful eyes and eager ears of the prefects, the faculty, in despair at their vain and fruitless attempts to detect the disturbers of the peace order a general penance, and for several successive nights the entire school is put to bed at sundown. Other individual penances consist of solitary confinement during recreations, when you may employ the hours in meditation on the folly of indulging in forbidden pleasures, and in strengthening your irresolute soul against the invasion of future temptations. Expulsion is a rare occurrence in convents, and only takes place for really grave offenses, wherein the retention of the pupil would seriously affect the well-being of others. Now and then a girl surreptitiously leaves the convent; and should her parents urge a request for her re-admission, it is always refused.

ALL the vanities of this wicked world are discouraged, and all temptations leading thereto are removed as far as possible. That all-consuming desire of the feminine heart for dress is allayed by a uniform of black, made into the simplest of frocks, the sombreness of which may be relieved by a bit of bright ribbon. Any display of jewelry is prohibited; the only ornaments allowed are brooches and watches. Mirrors are of the minutest dimensions. A girl's mirror, indeed, is usually her neighbor, of whom she inquires the hang of gown or the becomingness of hair arrangement; for it is quite impossible to gain a correct idea of appearance in a six-inch looking-glass. After some months' seclusion in a convent the first time one beholds herself in a full-length mirror, the experience has, at least, the delight of novelty. Powders and cosmetics are also forbidden, and are sure to be confiscated if found.

AT one of the convents at which I was a student for a number of years, during a morning study hour we were surprised by a visit from the directress. Her appearance at this hour always portended trouble, and many a girl hastily consulted her memory to see if there were any rule she had wilfully transgressed.

"Young ladies," she commenced, "a convent is not the place for frivolity, though some of you, I am led to believe, regard it as such. From this date bangs, bustles and beaux shall be banished from this establishment." After this command we retired to her room, where we were individually searched and relieved of those hideous appendages which a few years ago were such prominent features of the feminine wardrobe; and as I survey from memory that ridiculous array of cast-off apparel, it seems to me that the minds bent on bustle construction must have been legion, for of the dozens condemned no two were of the same shape or make. Having passed through this trying ordeal we were next subjected to round combs, first preceded by a plastering of wavy and unruly tresses with soap and water. The movement must have been premeditated, and not the caprice of a moment, for a comb had been provided for each girl. This, of course, banished curl-papers and tongs, and one's night rests were, consequently, more peaceful. With palpitating hearts we waited for the command which should include in this wholesome banishment the third item in the catalogue of the directress—the beaux of our belles. But, fortunately, the attack and capture of the bustles and bangs seemed to satisfy, at least for that time, the conquering spirit, and the banishment of the beaux was reserved for a future occasion. But I doubt if, when it came, it was as successful in its accomplishment as the exile of the inanimate objects.

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