

CRISIS AT NOON

by

Alney Allbritten Norell

"The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." James 5:16.

In today's world, "permissiveness" seems to be a failing in the training of a child. There is a tendency to allow the child to argue, throw fits of temper, whine about obeying. Respect for the word of parents and teachers is derided, authority resented. But discipline is essential from infancy on. Gently, gradually done, this can prevent disasters and much unhappiness, not only in childhood, but all through life.

In my own case, being taught early to obey when spoken to literally saved my life. I shall always be grateful to the grandmother whose loving care, gentle guidance, and words of wisdom taught me to understand why there are rules of conduct; why discipline and obedience are necessary adjuncts to a full and useful life.

The shock of my father's death was so great that my mother was in poor health for a long time afterward. She and I, a small girl-child, lived with her parents on a farm in western Kentucky.

Life on a farm entails much work and long hours. More so then, for this was prior to modern electrical appliances; before radio or television. There was electricity in our town, but power lines had not yet been strung to reach three miles out. We did have a telephone on a party line; news was gathered and exchanged this way.

My grandmother did all her cooking on a big old black, cast-iron range with nickel trim. This wood-burning stove was kept going winter and summer, always with a large vat of boiling water at the back, ready and handy for use.

I had firm but loving care from my grandmother, and so "the twig was bent." Though busy and often tired, my grandmother tried to answer my many questions. She explained things, giving reasons. I was never threatened or coerced into obeying. When she gave directions or admonitions, I knew she meant it. I heeded her words, for she never lied to me. I loved her and wanted to please her.

I was three years old when this story took place; a sultry summer, a sweltering day. So vivid was the experience that the memory has lingered always. My mother had gone into town with her father that morning, and grandmother Lou and I were home alone.

Sheltering limbs of an old oak tree provided a wide area of cool shade. I was in the side yard, near the front porch, with my doll and little chair. How lovely the grass felt under my bare feet. A large Calladium, or Elephant's

Ear, grew in a tub by the porch post. This plant was taller than I, with wide strong leaves.

There I sat, gazing past the white picket fence and the gate out to the road, wondering when my mother and grandfather would return. From the gate to the front steps, a red brick walk laid in herring-bone pattern had tiny sprigs of overgrown moss. This walk was always cool and damp, even on hottest days. I noticed how bright the blossoms were which bordered the walk. I felt happy, humming to myself, enfolded in my childish dream-world. 'Way off, the tinkle of a cowbell was the only sound.

Looking up, I saw my grandmother on the porch. It must be noon time. I had not heard her step, she walked so softly, and there was no screen door to bang. She looked down on the walk, then drew back quickly, her face white and tense. She put her finger to her lips for me to be silent. "Don't move! Stay still!" she whispered, and vanished into the house.

Yes, I stayed still, but I looked! What I saw, beyond the Calladium leaves, was a horror. I was literally frozen to the spot. There were two large snakes coiled on the damp brick walk near the steps. They were the ugliest things I had ever seen; wide mouths, with forked tongues flicking out! The plant leaves had blocked me from their sight, but I could see them! I was petrified.

Suddenly there was my grandmother carrying a big pot of boiling water, which she doused quickly over the things. They rolled and twisted and heaved. Such an awful sight, I began to cry and scream, as she flung the emptied pot which resounded on the walk. I could not get my breath for screaming . . . screaming . . .

She jumped from the side of the porch, grabbing me in her arms, then running round the house into the family room through the south door. Breathless, she sat down in her rocker still holding me. My arms were tight around her neck. Gently she took them down. As my sobs lessened, I leaned my head on her shoulder while she was smoothing my hair with a trembling hand. Dry gasps came from her throat, forming the word, "Oh, God! Oh God!" over and over.

I could feel her whole body shaking; feel the accelerated beat of her heart; see the throbbing of a vein in her neck. I touched her soft cheek. With that, she started to cry. The tears rolled from her lovely blue eyes down her cheeks in little rivers. She struggled to regain her voice, but still could only whisper, "Oh Lord, oh Lord! I thank Thee!" We sat there some time, not moving. Spent.

When she could, she wiped her eyes and got up. She placed me back in the chair, giving me a picture book. "Look at the pictures, honey. I'll come back soon. There is something I must do now."

She was gone a long time, and returned to awaken me from an exhausted sleep. My hands and face were washed, and I was given a glass of milk and a cookie.

About two o'clock my mother and grandfather drove in. As soon as I saw them I dashed out, crying. I grabbed hold of my mother's skirt. She knelt, kissed me, and held me close. I was too small to tell what had happened, or to say how glad I was to see her home again. Grandfather picked me up, telling me he had a little present for me, if only I would stop crying.

Grandmother met us at the door: "Jim, we've had quite a day here! Come with me, I want to show you something."

With that, they went round the house to the back yard. I ran indoors fast, to look through the kitchen window. There, hanging on the garden fence, were those awful things! My grandfather seemed quite excited. Soon he ran to the tool shed and came back with wheelbarrow and shovel. He took the snakes down, put them into the barrow, then took them to the back of the orchard. He then dug a deep hole and buried them.

Years later, my grandmother told me the end of the story. After she had left me with my picture book, she went to the kitchen, knelt down and prayed, thanking God for having given strength for right action on her part. And gratitude to Him for holding back the snakes from me, while she was gone for the boiling water. She said it had taken the better part of an hour before her "backbone stopped jerking, so I could go out and finish what had to be done."

She had gotten a hoe, dragged the snakes to the fence, and hung them there. It was no easy task, as they were long and heavy. She always maintained that she saw and knew the Power of Prayer that day as never before.

My grandfather had said then, "Lou, I measured those snakes. One was over four feet long. They must have been old ones from way back in the woods. It's a good thing that child was taught to mind, for when you told her to stay still, she did! Otherwise if she had moved, or a leaf of that Calladium had moved, they would have struck like lightning. She would have been a goner!"

"And you did right to use boiling water, instead of the pistol. Had you shot, you would not have hit both at the same time. One would have gotten away. Yes, it was a near thing. They were cotton-mouth Water Moccasins. Their bite, deadly!"

How grateful I have been for having such a family, for having learned early the value of discipline. Those lessons gave me fortitude to carry on through life, able to cope with conditions as they came, and not "fall by the way-side."

In Faith I do believe: "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might, He increaseth strength." Isaiah 40:29.