

# Unwed Mothers and Fathers!

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Unwed Mothers  
*and Fathers!*

*by Elizabeth Mulligan*

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## **SHE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN**

### **The Case of Mary Lou**

Mary Lou stands alone on the gray stone steps that lead to an unfamiliar door. She sets her suitcase down at her feet and raises her hand to the doorbell. She is pretty, and young . . . just 16. Her coat hangs loosely around her body and almost conceals the tragic evidence of her mistake. She is pregnant. The door opens and she steps inside. The door closes . . . and suddenly her world shrinks.

Mary Lou is one of thousands of pregnant girls who, every year, try to hide themselves in the shelters of large cities in order to give birth to unwanted babies.

The presence of an unwed mother is not something new in our society, nor is our attitude toward her new. She is no longer branded for public display with the Scarlet Letter of adultery, but within our social structure, within our schools, and often within her own home, she becomes an outcast.

The irony of the whole situation is that our culture tends to condone, and sometimes to encourage, sexual experimentation among the young. These acts are secretive and hidden and can be ignored. But a child, the natural result of sexual activity, cannot be ignored. An unwelcome baby becomes the "punishment" for its parents' sin . . . the sin of being caught.

## How Could It Happen?

What does an unmarried girl do when she is faced with the fact that she is going to have a baby? First, she doesn't believe it. She can't believe it. This is something that happens only to somebody else. And even though she is aware of the possible result of the sex act, that this is the way babies are created, she still doesn't seem able to associate the act with the result. She cries a lot, and sleeps very little. And unbelievably she asks, "How *could* what I did cause a baby?"

Having a baby takes time. It doesn't happen tomorrow or the next day or next week. She has time to think, to worry, and . . . to wish. But time passes. The days go by, and the weeks. Then the months. Something has to be done. What?

Sometimes the pregnant girl will follow her first panicky impulse and try to run away and hide. Perhaps she will confide in her parents and gain their support in carrying this overwhelming load. She may contact the father of the child and arrange a "have-to" marriage. She could arrange for an abortionist to take the life of her baby . . . or try to do it herself. She may take her own life.

All these things have been done, and are being done, by girls of all ages in answer to the question that follows a premarital pregnancy. "What will I do?"



## **There Is Help**

No girl should face such a trying time alone. Each state has a child welfare department that will provide the names of shelter agencies in any locale, and explain the services they offer. Any Community Chest organization or welfare council is also able to make recommendations.

Two well-known agencies that maintain maternity homes in scattered locations throughout the country are the Florence Crittendon Homes Association and the Salvation Army's Booth Memorial Hospitals. While these larger shelters are open to girls of all races and creeds, many smaller ones are maintained by welfare councils, and by Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant religions specifically to take care of their own.

Miss Anne Sullivan, supervisor of services to unwed mothers within the organization of Catholic Charities in St. Louis, states that the department offers complete services to the pregnant girl, but that she is free to use all or as many as she chooses.

"No single type of arrangement is best for all mothers," Miss Sullivan says. "That's why we feel counseling is the best and most important of the services we offer. During the counseling period, the girl can decide whether or not she wishes to use our living accommodations, our medical and hospital facilities, and our adoption center."

Seventy-five percent of unwed mothers give

their children up for adoption, but it is surprising how many girls want to keep their babies. The decision is made after careful and thorough counseling with the girl, with the father, and with the parents of both.

The girl cannot legally be forced to give her baby up, neither can she surrender the child without the signature of her parents if she is under the age of 18.

### **Sharing Her Secret**

Bringing all the involved people together is the weighty task of the assigned caseworker. The counselor's job is not an easy one. Illegitimacy is one social enigma for which there is no happy, permanent solution for all parties concerned, and the scars it leaves are always deep and lasting. Any girl in need of an unmarried mother's services knows only too well that no agency can *solve* her problem. But it can help.

Miss Sullivan says, "It is surprising how relieved a young girl can become once she has shared her secret. When she realizes she has help she can discuss her problem quite frankly, and she usually wants to assume responsibility for the decisions that must be made. Most girls grow up fast when they become pregnant."

Some girls refuse to have their parents involved in the counseling program, but if the parents do become a part of the salvaging process, the counselor's aim is to get them to realize

that even though their daughter has made a serious mistake, it need not be a fatal one.

## Parental Reactions

Case histories reveal that parents vary widely in their reactions to such an experience. Some accept the blame themselves in extreme guilt with the it's-all-our-fault attitude. Others push off responsibility for their daughter and themselves with "it's all *his* doing." But sadly, there are those parents who make their daughter feel, like Mary Lou, that "I can never go home again."

Mary Lou is one of the girls whose parents rejected her when it became obvious that she was pregnant. "Shame, shame on you," said her mother, pointing a shaking finger. "You will have to go."

"And don't come back till you're decent," added her father.

Mary Lou said of that horrible day, "They . . . my parents . . . kept my brothers and sisters away from me after they knew. They wouldn't even let them come near me, as if I had some awful disease.

"I had always felt that my parents loved me . . . in their own way," continued Mary Lou. "But they changed. Any love they had was crowded out by hurt and shame because I was bad. But I didn't mean to be . . . bad. I don't really know what happened, or how or why. And when it was over I tried not to think about it at all."

## Seeds of Trouble

Mary Lou was the oldest of seven children, and in speaking with her caseworker she said her mother always seemed busy with the younger ones. She also felt that her parents refused to allow her to grow up. They seemed suspicious of the boys who once in a while dropped in at her home, and this made her uncomfortable. She felt she could have a better time when she met boys away from her home. She especially liked going out with Al because he was older and had a car. She pretended to her parents that she was babysitting when instead she met Al and they drove to a deserted river beach . . . to talk.

Searching for a warm relationship, deprived of normal aspects of growth, unprepared for the forces of human emotions, Mary Lou let herself be swept away by intense feelings.

When asked if she knew how babies were created Mary Lou said, "Yes, but I didn't think about that then. I know it sounds dumb," she added, "but somehow I had it in my head that this could only happen to married people . . . getting pregnant, I mean."

"Trying not to think about it at all" did not prevent nature from taking its normal course. And when her mother said "you'll have to go," Mary Lou confided in a teacher who made arrangements for her to go to a shelter in a nearby city.

Shortly after Mary Lou's baby was born, her

parents were asked to come to the shelter. "It's all right if you want to come home now," said her mother. "But you can't go to school. They won't take you." Her father sat with his head down and refused to look at her. "We have to think about the other children," he said.

Mary Lou was sure she saw relief on her parents' faces when she found enough voice to say, "I'm not coming home."

"What will you do?" asked her mother.

"I don't know . . . I'll get a job," answered Mary Lou.

Her father took out his wallet and handed her a few bills. "I shouldn't pay you for sinning," he said, "but you might need this."

When Mary Lou heard the door open and close she got up from her chair and walked to the window. She saw a man and woman go slowly down the steps. She said they looked only slightly familiar, as if she had known them a long time ago.

## **Epilogue**

Less than two years later, a girl again stood on the gray stone steps that led to a door. She set a worn suitcase down at her feet and raised her hand to the doorbell. She still looked young, but much of her prettiness had faded. Her coat hung loosely around her body and almost concealed the tragic evidence of her mistake. The door opened, and Mary Lou stepped inside.



## **"I WONDER WHO HE'LL BE . . ."**

### **An Unwed Father Reflects**

The father of an illegitimate child has for too long been only a shadowy figure in the whole affair, yet the 600 illegitimate babies born every day during the past year in the United States is evidence enough that he does exist.

Such statistics provide only the reported agency cases, and there is no way of knowing how many girls from able-to-pay homes are protected by "visits or trips," or how many little brothers and sisters or nieces and nephews are actually babies born out of wedlock.

There are many cases in which the father never knows there has been a baby. In other cases, the girl and her family become extremely bitter toward the "guilty" one, and so, considered a heel, the father too often acts like one. Pursued for "damages," he runs. He balks at a have-to marriage, and resorts to the classic question, "How do I know it's mine?" because that is what our society has taught him to say. In nine cases out of ten he knows.

The boy in trouble may not previously have been familiar with the term, "statutory rape," but when it is applied to him he refuses to associate the term and its ugly connotations with his act, because, to him, that is not the way it happened. There is such a thing as rape, to be sure,

but the number of children born from such a condition is almost negligible.

There is a growing trend among agencies to reach out to the father of a child born out of wedlock, and if too much reluctance is presented, or if he and his family try to dissociate themselves from the situation, the agencies have recourse to court action. However, in agencies where consultations with the unmarried father are carried on, it is revealed that he often has considerably more feelings about his illegitimate child and its mother than was previously believed.

### **Assuming Responsibility**

The purpose of bringing the father into the picture is not a punitive one. It is simply an attempt to get him to assume part of the responsibility for the results of his act, and to help him examine life's problems and analyze his own sense of values.

"We try to make these young parents understand, both of them, that this is their baby, and that they must provide for it in one way or another," says Mr. Reuben Pannor, director of studies at Vista Del Mar, a pioneer agency in Los Angeles.

At Vista Del Mar, and at increasing numbers of other agencies, both the father and mother are encouraged to see their baby before it is given up for adoption. This often becomes a shattering experience for both of them but especially for the



boy. The girl has carried the child for a period of nine months, and she has become more or less aware of its reality. She has watched herself grow, and she has felt the child move. She gives birth. But the father has been alien to these experiences. Then, seeing the living reality of a baby as the direct result of his sexual behavior usually hits him with emotional shock.

"I can't believe it," is repeated over and over. "Is it really mine?" whispers another. Some want to know, "Is it all right?" And one boy, more farseeing than his years would suggest, posed a question with an answer that reached into the future.

### **Beside a Pink Bassinet**

Seventeen-year-old John Moran stood beside a pink bassinet and looked down at a five-day-old baby. "I can't believe that what I did . . . what we did . . . caused this to happen," he said.

"Yes, I know," said the social worker. "Most of the boys feel the same way."

John looked down at the child again, his and Julia's. Right now he felt as if he didn't even know Julia, but here was a baby that belonged to the two of them. Not a toy, not a plaything, but a real baby snuggled in a pink bassinet.

During counseling, John had discussed his first date with Julia, less than a year ago. He remembered how grown up he'd felt when the word got around that they were going steady.

He had never attempted sexual relations with any of the other girls he'd gone with, but he knew his friends had, and it seemed the expected thing to do when you're going steady. Julia had been a little upset when he suggested the idea, and she said, "What for?" But after the first time she seemed willing enough.

Afterward they were able to talk about it, about how they felt. Sometimes he wondered if Julia was pretending, too, about its being so great. You were supposed to think it was great, weren't you? That's what everybody said, and that's what worried him. Because he had to admit, only to himself of course, that it wasn't what he'd expected. In fact, he'd let the thought enter his mind that if this was marriage, what's so great about being married?

### **Realization Looms**

Then the real shocker came the night Julia told him she thought she was pregnant. He was stunned and frightened. Oh, sure, he knew what being pregnant meant. It meant a girl was in trouble and that some guy would be called a heel. He knew the words about everything but he suddenly realized he didn't know their real meaning.

When Julia began to cry he just took her back home. When she got out of the car he asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

"What are *you* going to do about it?" she

sobbed. "It's yours, too."

On the way home John felt sick, and he had to stop and vomit. Something had gone wrong with his world. All the brightness of being grown up had faded. He remembered hearing one of the older boys brag about getting a girl in trouble, but he didn't feel like bragging. Wasn't he, John Moran, in trouble, too?

John didn't call Julia, in fact, he didn't see her until the welfare agency wrote him and asked him to come in for an interview.

The next few days with his parents was a stretch of time he'd rather not have to remember. At first his mother seemed actually hysterical and kept repeating, "Didn't you know she was that kind of girl? John, how could you get mixed up with somebody like that?"

His father asked, "Are you sure you're . . . responsible?"

Why did his parents keep looking at him as if he were some sort of freak? They were grown up, they had all the answers. Why hadn't they let him in on it? Why didn't they plainly say, "This is wrong for you now, and this is why it is wrong . . . period." Why didn't they say, "You'll see a baby in a pink bassinet, your son. You'll see a baby with a little crinkly face but without a name or much of a chance." Why didn't they say, "There is punishment for sexual experimentation and the punishment is a baby . . . and what's fair about that?"

## Other People Involved

Once the initial shock of his parents' anger and pain had quieted, they agreed to go with him to the agency. John felt relieved to have their support and guidance, and he began to realize that what had happened was not just his problem but that it affected the lives of other people . . . his parents, Julia and her parents, and when it came, the baby.

The social worker had asked John about the possibility of marriage. "No," he objected with almost reflex action. He felt he was too young to marry, and his parents agreed. He would soon graduate from high school and there were plans for college. He couldn't give it all up, nor did he feel he could carry Julia along on his way to a bright career. And besides, when he did marry, it wouldn't be to Julia. She was all right for a date, even for going steady, but marriage?

It was finally agreed that the best solution was to put the baby up for adoption. Julia was to go to the agency for the last four months and his parents were to share the expense of whatever was involved.

Now it was all settled and done with . . . all except this visit the agency said he must make "to share in the realization of what has been done; to gain a sense of responsibility for your act." Those were mighty big words for shame and pain and regret.

And now John stood beside the pink bassinet

and he couldn't unglue his eyes from the little wrinkled face or from the unbelievably small fingers that were drawn into tiny fists.

"Keep those fists, kid," he said. "You'll need them."

Some impulse made him reach down and touch a little curled hand. When he did the fingers opened and closed around his. He pulled his finger away but knew that always, as long as he lived, he would be able to feel that moment when tiny moist fingers held his.

John Moran turned quickly and walked from the room . . . straight through the door and out to the car where his parents were waiting for him. They didn't look at him, but his mother's hand reached out for his. He gripped it hard, but all he could say was, "I wonder who he will be. I wonder who he will be."



## **“WE HAD TO GET MARRIED”**

### **One of Many**

When a teen-age girl marries, the chances are 50-50 that she is already pregnant. If she and her husband are both of high school age, the girl's pregnancy is an 80 percent certainty.

Child marriages are what we are conditioned to believe exist in India, but the truth is that it is a situation we have in the United States right now. In terms of the maturity it takes to cope with married life in our society, young teen-agers are still children. And yet, two out of every five marriages in our country involve those still in their teens. Many of these marriages crumble the first few months, and the majority of them don't last beyond the third year. They are doomed from the very beginning.

The problems these youngsters face in premature marriage are overpowering. Their shattered dreams and disrupted plans tend to create resentment toward each other, and it is usually the girl who bears the brunt of the oft-repeated, "It's all your fault," as in the case of Laurie and Phil, who are involved in a premarital pregnancy, and now find themselves facing a shabby woman in a less desirable part of their home town.

### **“For Rent”**

“We've come to see the apartment,” said Phil. As he walked behind Laurie and the woman,

up one flight of stairs and then another, he kept comparing the unkempt surroundings with his own comfortable home.

There were three small rooms. Phil had expected something bad, but not this bad. To him only one thing was missing . . . the bars.

Laurie turned to the woman, and in a voice that was trembly, she said, "We have a baby . . . three months old. Do you mind having children here?"

The woman looked at the young couple long and deliberately. She looked at Phil in his blue letter sweater with three proud stripes around the sleeve. She looked at Laurie who was twisting a strand of her long yellow hair around a finger. Then she cackled, "That'll make three of you . . . children, I mean." The woman handed the key to Phil. "Make up your mind," she said.

When she had gone, Phil muttered, "I guess we'll have to take it. We don't have time to look around. Your parents made that clear."

"That's not fair," answered Laurie. "They just said that when people are married, they should have a home of their own. And besides, Phil, they gave you a chance to graduate first and to get a job before . . ."

"Before they kicked us out," finished Phil.

"What about your own parents?" countered Laurie. "They didn't strain themselves trying to help us."

Mealtime was the worst time of all. As the



days went by, Phil and Laurie sat across from each other at a rickety table in awkward silence. For the first time Phil was faced with what he felt was the reality of marriage. He knew that getting Laurie pregnant wasn't marriage. The hurry-up ceremony that had made them man and wife wasn't marriage either. Seeing the baby for the first time was only a shock. Then, living with Laurie's parents in their big rambling house had scarcely changed his pattern of living at all. He continued to go to school, played football, and ate hamburgers after the games. Now he suddenly found himself locked up with Laurie. There she was, sitting across the table from him with a cold pizza between them. *This* was marriage.

Phil pushed the pizza away from him. "Can't you fix something else?" he asked. "I'm sick of pizza."

"You're sick of a lot of things," answered Laurie.

Phil raised his eyes and dared himself to look at the girl. Her face was flushed. Her hair was ruffled, and there was a yellow stain on her blouse where the baby had spit up. He couldn't imagine why in the world he had ever thought she was the prettiest girl in school. Suddenly his prison walls pushed in, and Phil jumped up from the table and groped for words that had to be said.

"When I graduated last June, they said the world was waiting for us. Well, it isn't waiting

for me. I wanted to go to college, to make something of myself, and now . . .”

Tears sprang into Laurie's eyes as she beat her fists on the table. “I know, Phil, I know. I've heard it all a thousand times. I wanted to go to college, too, but I couldn't even finish high school. I didn't plan all this anymore than you did, so why does it always have to be my fault?”

“Because it is your fault,” Phil shot at her. “For being that kind of girl.”

“If I'm so much worse than you are, then why did you marry me?”

“Because I was conned into it . . . by your parents and my parents, and maybe by my conscience,” retorted Phil.

“Then let your conscience con you into behaving like what you are. I happen to be your wife, and this baby happens to be your son.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” taunted Phil. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“Sometimes I wish . . . ,” began Laurie, then started all over again. “Phil, I know we're in a jam. I know it as well as you do. But this is our home and this is our baby. There isn't anything we can do but try to make it work.”

“Maybe,” said Phil. He walked toward the door that went out, out from the apartment and away from this sorry-looking girl and her baby. “Just maybe,” he said.

## WHY DO THEY DO IT?

Who are these young people so bent on pushing themselves into premature adulthood? They come from every economic group, from every educational level, and from every race and religion.

Through intensive case studies, psychologists have found that these teen-agers have certain traits in common. Many of the girls appear to be emotionally immature and unable to form normal relationships that are satisfying with their families and friends. Many have a compulsion to cause trouble in order to gain recognition, and some will go so far as to suggest that they wished to "get even" with their parents, so they "sleep" with boys, hoping consciously or unconsciously to get pregnant in order to punish their parents for injustices they feel they have suffered.

And, strange as it may seem, there are those girls who have "a thing" about a certain boy, and when their interest is rejected, they turn in frustration to another and almost wilfully get involved sexually in order to make the boy they like "sorry."

### **Need for Achievement**

Everyone needs the experience of achievement, and this points up another characteristic common to these people in trouble. Social success is of the utmost importance to youngsters,

and status itself is partially dependent upon reasonable achievement. Those students who cannot succeed scholastically are prone to substitute sexual roles in order to feel accepted. School counselors are alerted to help students gain some form of recognition, to be good at something, in order to satisfy this normal human want.

Social workers say it is almost unbelievable that so many girls, even in this enlightened sex age, still attribute their pregnancy to ignorance. One spoke sadly of a 14-year-old who said, "I thought it could only happen to grown-ups." Another girl who "felt funny" was taken to a doctor, and when she was told that she was pregnant, said, "Are you kidding? I'm not even married!"

But psychological conflicts and ignorance present only part of the background for our astounding number of babies born to unwed parents.

## **Early Socializing**

Our contemporary culture encourages early socialization. Children are pressured into early boy-girl relationships, and parents call it "cute." There is an early obsession to be popular, and being popular means having a lot of dates. Having a lot of dates leads to going steady, and going steady is a near-step to sexual experimentation.

This business of going steady, about which we hear and read so much, is something most present-day parents did not experience in their

own early teens. It is a trend that swept into popularity in the years since World War II, and parents make the mistake of associating today's going steady with their own experience at a more mature age. It is not the same. A 13-, 14-, 15- or 16-year-old girl does not have the necessary preparation to control the emotional tide that arises in today's dating environment, which includes automobiles, drive-in theaters, isolated beach parties, and homes without parental supervision.

The accepted moral code of behavior is simply not operational under the circumstances in which youngsters find themselves. And mothers who "trust" their daughters in these circumstances, or who say, "Jane would never think of doing anything like that," are deluding themselves, or are denying the ways of nature.

A permissive sexual code is less likely to be developed in casual dating, but by going steady, sexual experimentation is rationalized into respectability. To quote an expression used often by youngsters, "If you're going steady, there's nothing wrong in the sex act."

## **Relationship With Parents**

Psychologists have found that the problem of illegitimacy springs most often from teen-agers who do not have a close relationship with their parents, or with *a* parent, in the capacity in which each normally serves. For example, an overpro-

tective mother tends to influence her son away from the boy's father. When a mother becomes overpossessive of her son, to the father's exclusion, it usually implies that there is something amiss in the parental relationship itself. Seldom are youngsters from happy, well-adjusted homes caught up in the whirlpool of premature sex.

There are times when parents appear to be too demanding, especially of their sons. One boy complained of "never being able to satisfy my dad no matter what I did." He spoke of being constantly pushed, urged to excel in sports, to make better grades, to be more like somebody else. "He was never satisfied with just me," said the boy. "He always made me feel that I was a failure, and I had to prove to somebody that I wasn't."

Another boy spoke of his father as varying between extremely strict and lenient treatment, and as a result he never knew where he stood. Few of the boys interviewed stated that their fathers had ever made an attempt to discuss sexual values with them. In most cases it was "just something you don't talk about."

When one is in trouble it is human nature to search for a *reason* on which to place the blame.

"Some of these youngsters reach out for straws with which to pull themselves out of a hole," said a caseworker. "We have to recognize this when we are counseling them. It is no doubt true that many home relationships are poor, but it is also true that many conditions are exag-

gerated by these young people in order to remove blame from themselves. Then, again," continued the caseworker, "the situation as a youngster sees it may not be the way it really is, but if he feels it is, then to him it actually exists.

"Not all promiscuity can be related directly to home situations or family relationships," she continued, "nor must a young boy or girl stand alone, completely responsible in himself for what he has done, because he is what his environment and associations have made him."

### **Baby Is the Loser**

In whatever way an illegitimate parent's story begins, whether in ignorance, with too much knowledge of the wrong kind, with a craving for affection, with a desire to punish himself or others, or "if it just happened," the end result is the same. An unwanted baby is born into the world to leave its mark on its parents and on the succeeding generation.

Nature has equipped teen-agers biologically for early parenthood. They are capable of performing the physical function of marriage, but few of them are ready emotionally or economically for its full responsibility, or for the responsibility that follows the birth of a child. The sorry spectacle of children giving birth to children will continue unless young people are made clearly and frankly aware of the association between sexual relations and the creation of a human being.

Under the so-called *new* moral code, one going-steady period after another leads to a series of sexual episodes that is bound to undermine the fiber of personal morality, and endanger the family structure upon which our civilization is built. Irresponsible young people tend to become irresponsible parents. Irresponsible parents produce irresponsible children, and so basic shortcomings extend on and on into future generations.

“But there doesn’t have to be a baby,” the sex-educated youngster says. Let it be pointed out that in spite of the generally knowledgeable atmosphere around these young people, and in spite of the availability of The Pill and other contraceptive devices, the number of illegitimate babies born in our society is steadily increasing, and they are being born to these same people who think, “It can’t happen to me.”









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