



In the Florence Crittenton Home of Philadelphia, social worker Mary L. Crockett interviews a mother-to-be.

I LIVED WITH GIRLS IN TROUBLE

By FRANCESCA LIBERTE

Posing as an expectant mother, this reporter spent two weeks in a maternity home for unwed girls to learn first-hand their problems, fears, frustrations—and their hopes for a normal, happy future

BLANCHE was trapped. She was in the kitchen with her mother when the doorbell rang. As usual, she dropped what she was doing, prepared to run upstairs to her room. But the caller was apparently on familiar terms with the household—the ringing suddenly stopped and the front door opened.

"Florence?" It was her mother's friend, Doris Robinson.

Mrs. Robinson was walking through the living room. This meant Blanche would be unable to get to the stairs unseen. She and her mother stared at each other, frozen in fear. The caller would be sure to see Blanche! For a second they panicked—unable to move. Then her mother whirled about and shoved her daughter toward the cellar door. It was the only place to hide and Blanche acted quickly—barely reaching the cellar in time.

And there in the cellar Blanche crouched for two hours, resenting her mother's friend who stayed on and on. Once she burst into tears—but even then part of her mind cautioned her to cry quietly. Again she thought about suicide, dully looking about the dark basement and wondering, "Why me? Why did it happen to me?"

The girl telling me this story was not a fugitive from justice, though she felt like one.

She was going to have a baby—and she was not married.

And for this reason she had to hide like a criminal for, as the months passed and her secret could no longer be con-

cealed, her frantic parents had told everyone she was away at college.

This scurrying for cover went on for two long guilt-ridden months. Eight weeks of not daring to step out into the clean Spring air, of scarcely breathing when anyone besides her parents was in the house; eight weeks to brood and despair—to hate herself, her parents, and life in general.

I averted my face as I listened to Blanche's story, lest she see that my eyes were moist and wonder at my undue sympathy. For was I not in the same boat with an equally unhappy story to tell?

She didn't know it, of course, but I was a reporter, posing as an expectant mother in a maternity home housing 25 girls. They ranged in age from 15 to 38, in various stages of pregnancy. Though I was not pregnant, I looked it. Because I have a broad-shouldered, full-chested frame, my fully gathered maternity overblouse fell so its hemline protruded far out in front, concealing my true hip and stomach line. I wore a full skirt, turned up and bunched at the waist to complete the full-in-the-middle look.

By this deception I hoped to study the true psychology of the unwed mother—to see her as she sees herself and allows only colleagues to see her. I had already gotten part of the picture from social agencies and caseworkers. Now, by living with these girls as one of them, I hoped to get the complete picture; for I suspected that a girl in such a position is tempted to color her

true feelings for the benefit of her caseworker, whereas with a friend-in-trouble she is likely to be more honest, more candid, and more relaxed in her revelations.

After almost two weeks of living 24 hours a day with the girls, I found this to be true. I gained fresh personal insight into the plight of this country's unwed mothers and learned it is worse in some ways than even sympathetic sociologists realize, yet not as bad in other ways.

WHEN INTRODUCED to the girls in "my" maternity home, I was amazed by what I saw. They were the typical American girl type, just like the one next door to you—clean-cut, smiling, friendly. I understand they were not an unusual group but representative of the 200,000 girls a year who find themselves in the same predicament in the U.S. All were "first offenders" and none were known as "bad girls."

There were several college girls, even one working on a master's degree; there were a student nurse, a young teacher, and a minister's daughter. There were a telephone operator, a bookkeeper, and a number of high-school girls—several of whom were daughters of "pillars" in their community.

All of us were known by first names only—some of them fictitious. We were cautioned not to reveal our last names, nor where we came from. We were also urged not to form any strong ties, so we wouldn't be tempted to make contact when back on the "outside."

Two factors seemed to apply to most of the girls in the group. Both their mothers and fathers worked, and had for a long time. The girls were forced to seek the sense of belonging elsewhere—and had many free hours to accomplish this.

The other common denominator wasn't nearly as obvious. Although not aware of it themselves, most seemed to have an inner conflict with one of their parents, usually the mother. One day a psychiatrist, who often counseled us to solve "our problems," told us that without realizing it we may have really wanted to get pregnant. He undoubtedly based his remark on the psycholog-

ical fact that it's the girl with an extremely domineering mother who often gets pregnant. Subconsciously she is trying to break away from her mother's ties by proving she is no longer a baby.

What do unmarried girls do when they first suspect they are pregnant? Here, too, they have much in common.

For months they refuse to believe the incredible situation. Then comes the day when there is no way to escape the truth. What happens next? I found out mostly after "lights out," when we talked far into the night. Girl after girl told me the same—"I thought of committing suicide." They were not talking for dramatic effect. It was calm, candid, straight girl-to-girl talk—except the subject was suicide.

In almost every case, the moment of greatest agony came at the thought of telling their parents. And the shame they had brought their parents seemed far greater than their shame at what they had done.

It is these same parents, after they've recovered from their initial shock, who come through for these daughters in trouble—providing money for the home and, even more important, the comfort these girls need.

After the girl is in the home, one of the most important moments in her life is when her parents first visit her. A girl can bear rejection by the father of her baby, by her friends, by society—but not by her parents. The first visit means her mother and father haven't abandoned her.

I see wide-eyed Elizabeth before me now—surly, hostile, and making trouble for her roommate. When it was announced on the intercom that her mother was there, disbelief was written all over her face. I watched them in the visiting room, the mother smothering her errant daughter's face with kisses. The girl didn't seem to respond—not at that very moment. But later on, when she went upstairs, she smiled for the first time there and told her roommate she was sorry.

Not all visiting days are happy, however. The mother of shy, petite Diane came repeatedly—but always alone. Where was the father? I gathered he and his daughter had been extremely

close. He had been so proud of her, and he couldn't take the catastrophe which had struck his household. For him she no longer existed.

WHEN GIRLS are first admitted to the home they are inwardly churning with emotion bordering on shock. Within hours, you can see a change. No longer do they feel critical eyes upon them, and they become carefree girls again, giggling over nothing at all.

There are moments of great seriousness, too. One of the first questions a roommate asked me was, "Are you going to see your baby?" and I overheard this question 40 times. Practically all the babies are given up for adoption; most of the girls do not even wish to see them—often on advice from parents.

I was also asked, "Will you tell your future husband?" I was deeply touched by the way they were plagued by this question of gnawing concern. The very young and idealistic blithely say, "Sure, why not? If he loves you he'll understand." The older girls are not so confident; they are more cynical of men's ability to take such revelation.

Anita, a raven-haired 26-year-old, put the question to our psychiatrist at our next meeting with him.

"It's your secret," he told us, and all sighed with relief. I have since learned that many pastors give the girls the same counsel.

One of my strongest beliefs was shaken within 24 hours of admittance. I had assumed these girls would be bitter against the fathers of their unborn children—an impression they often give caseworkers, perhaps to make it appear they were seduced or tricked.

But I found they placed little or no blame on the father. Any animosity they felt was more in the form of annoyance that "he gets off so easily while I have to go through all this."

It is amazing, too, how practical they are regarding the men responsible for their condition. Many of the girls could have married, but refused to do so. Naomi was wild about her fellow but knew he wouldn't do in the long run. "I need a strong man; one who'll make the decisions, and he can't. He'll always be what he is right at this moment—"

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Nighttime heightens the girls' pain, that often leads to suicide, candidly confiding their thoughts of suicide.