

LETTER TO YOUNG GIRLS.*

BY J. RUSKIN, LL.D.

I HAVE promised an answer to the following pretty little initial-signed petition ; and will try to answer fully, though I must go over ground crossed often enough before. But it is often well to repeat things in other times and words :—

“ 16th March, 1876.

“ Sir,—Being very much interested in the St. George’s Society, we venture to write and ask you if you will be so kind as to send us the rules, as, even if we could not join it, we should so like to try and keep them. We hope you will excuse our troubling you, but we do not know how else to obtain the rules.

“ We remain, yours truly.”

My dear children, the rules of St. George’s Company are none other than those which, at your baptism, your godfathers and godmothers promised to see that you should obey—namely, the rules of conduct given to all His disciples by Christ, so far as, according to your ages, you can understand or practise them. But the Christian religion being now mostly obsolete, (and worse, falsely professed) throughout Europe, your godfathers, and godmothers, too probably, had no very clear notion of the Devil or his works, when

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they promised you should renounce them; and St. George hereby sends you a splinter of his lance, in token that you will find extreme difficulty in putting any of Christ's wishes into practice, under the present basilisk power of society.

Nevertheless, St. George's first order to you, supposing you were put under his charge, would be that you should always, in whatever you do, endeavour to please Christ; (and *He* is quite easily pleased if you try;) but in attempting this, you will instantly find yourself likely to displease many of your friends or relations: and St. George's second order to you is that in whatever you do, you consider what is kind and dutiful to them also; and that you hold it for a sure rule, that no manner of disobedience to your parents, or of disrespect and presumption towards your friends, can be pleasing to God. You must therefore be doubly submissive: first in your own will and purpose, to the law of Christ; then in the carrying out of your purpose, to the pleasure and orders of the persons whom He has given you for superiors. And you are not to submit to them sullenly, but joyfully and heartily; keeping nevertheless your own purpose clear, so soon as it becomes proper for you to carry it out.

Under these conditions, here are a few of St. George's orders for you to begin with:—

1st. Keep absolute calm of temper, under all chances; receiving everything that is provoking or disagreeable to you as coming directly from Christ's hand: and the more it is like to provoke you, thank Him for it the more; as a young soldier would his general for trusting him with a hard place to hold on the rampart. And remember, it does not in the least

matter what happens to you,—whether a clumsy schoolfellow tears your dress, or a shrewd one laughs at you, or the governess doesn't understand you. The *one* thing needful is that none of these things should vex you. For your mind, at this time of your youth, is crystallizing like sugar-candy; and the least jar to it flaws the crystal, and that permanently.

2nd. Say to yourselves every morning, just after your prayers: "Whoso forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple." That is exactly and completely true; meaning, that you are to give all you have to Christ, to take care of for you. Then if He doesn't take care of it, of course you know it wasn't worth anything. And if He takes anything from you, you know you are better without it. You will not indeed, at your age, have to give up houses, or lands, or boats, or nets; but you may perhaps break your favourite teacup, or lose your favourite thimble, and might be vexed about it, but for this second St. George's precept.

3rd. What, after this surrender, you find entrusted to you, take extreme care of, and make as useful as possible. The greater part of all they have is usually given to grown-up people by Christ, merely that they may give it away again; but school-girls, for the most part, are likely to have little more than what is needed for themselves: of which, whether books, dresses, or pretty room-furniture, you are to take extreme care, looking on yourself, indeed, practically, as a little housemaid set to keep Christ's books and room in order; and not as yourself the mistress of anything.

4th. Dress as plainly as your parents will allow you: but in bright colours, (if they become you,) and

in the best materials,—that is to say, in those which will wear longest. When you are really in want of a new dress, buy it (or make it) in the fashion: but never quit an old one merely because it has become unfashionable. And if the fashion be costly, you must not follow it. You may wear broad stripes or narrow, bright colours or dark, short petticoats or long, (in moderation,) as the public wish you; but you must not buy yards of useless stuff to make a knot or a flounce of; nor drag them behind you over the ground. And your walking dress must never touch the ground at all. I have lost much of the faith I once had in the common sense and even in the personal delicacy of the present race of average English women, by seeing how they will allow their dresses to sweep the streets, if it is the fashion to be scavengers.

5th. If you can afford it, get your dresses made by a good dressmaker, with utmost attainable precision and perfection: but let this good dressmaker be a poor person, living in the country; not a rich person living in a large house in London. 'There are no good dressmakers in the country'? No: but there soon will be if you obey St. George's orders, which are very strict indeed, about never buying dresses in London. 'You bought one there, the other day, for your own pet!' Yes; but that was because she was a wild Amorite, who had wild Amorites to please; not a Companion of St. George.

6th. Devote a part of every day to thorough needlework, in making as pretty dresses as you can for poor people, who have not time nor taste to make them nicely for themselves. You are to show them in your own wearing, what is modestly right, and graceful;

and to help them to choose what will be prettiest and most becoming in their own station. If they see that you never try to dress above yours, they will not try to dress above theirs. Read the little scene between Miss Somers and Simple Susan, in the draper's shop, in Miss Edgeworth's 'Parent's Assistant'; and by the way, if you have not that book, let it be the next birthday present you ask papa or uncle for.

7th. Never seek for amusement, but be always ready to be amused. The least thing has play in it,—the slightest word, wit, when your hands are busy and your heart is free. But if you make the aim of your life amusement, the day will come when all the agonies of a pantomime will not bring you an honest laugh. Play actively and gaily; and cherish, without straining, the natural powers of jest in others and yourselves;—remembering all the while that your hand is every instant on the helm of the ship of your life, and that the Master, on the far shore of Araby the blest, looks for its sail on the horizon—to its hour.

I told you, at first, that you would have great difficulty in getting leave from English society to obey Christ. Fors has just sent me, in support of this statement, a paper called 'The Christian,' for Thursday, May 11, 1876—an article on young ladies, headed "What can they do?" from which I take the following passage:—

"There have been times of special prayer for young men and women. Could there not be also for the very large class of young ladies who do not go out into society? They have no home duties to detain them, as many in a humbler condition; they have hours and hours of leisure, and know not how to spend them—partly from need of being directed, but more so from the prejudices and hindrances in their way. Their hearts are burning to do something for Christ, but they are not allowed, partly because it is considered 'improper,' and for a variety of reasons."

Now, that it is 'considered improper' by the world that you should do anything for Christ, is entirely true, and always true: and therefore it was that your godfathers and godmothers, in your name, renounced the "vain pomp and glory of the *world*," with all covetous desires of the same—see Baptismal Service. But I much doubt if, either privately, or from the pulpit of your doubtless charming church, you have ever been taught what the "vain pomp and glory of the world" *was*.

Well,—do you want to be better dressed than your schoolfellows? Some of them are probably poor, and cannot afford to dress like you; or, on the other hand, you may be poor yourselves, and may be mortified at their being dressed better than you. Put an end to all that at once, by resolving to go down into the deep of your girl's heart, where you will find, inlaid by Christ's own hand, a better thing than vanity—pity. And be sure of this, that, although in a truly Christian land every young girl would be dressed beautifully and delightfully,—in this entirely heathen and Baal-worshipping land of ours, not one girl in ten has either decent or healthy clothing: and that you have no business, till this be amended, to wear anything fine yourself; but *are bound to use your full strength and resources* to dress as many of your poor neighbours as you can. What of fine dress your people insist upon your wearing, take—and wear proudly and prettily, for their sakes; but, so far as in you lies, be sure that every day you are labouring to clothe some poorer creatures. And if you cannot clothe, at least help, with your hands. You can make your own bed; wash your own plate; brighten your own furniture,—if nothing else.

'But that's servant's work'? Of course it is. What business have you to hope to be better than a servant of servants? 'God made you a lady'? Yes, He has put you, that is to say, in a position in which you may learn to speak your own language beautifully; to be accurately acquainted with the elements of other languages; to behave with grace, tact, and sympathy, to all around you; to know the history of your country, the commands of its religion, and the duties of its race. If you obey His will in learning these things, you will obtain the power of becoming a true 'lady'; and you will become one, if while you learn these things you set yourself, with all the strength of your youth and womanhood, to serve His servants, until the day come when He calls you to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

You may thus become a Christ's lady, or you may, if you will, become a Belial's lady, taking Belial's gift of miserable idleness; living on the labour and shame of others; and deceiving them and yourself by lies about Providence, until you perish with the rest of such, shrieking the bitter cry, "When saw we *Thee*?"

You may become a Christ's lady if you *will*, I say; but you *must* will vigorously—there is no possible compromise. Most people think, if they keep all the best rooms in their hearts swept and garnished for Christ, with plenty of flowers and good books in them, that they may keep a little chamber in their heart's wall for Belial, on his occasional visits, or a three-legged stool for him in the heart's counting-house, or a corner for him in the heart's scullery, where he may lick the dishes. It won't do, my dears! You must cleanse the house of him, as you

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would of the plague, to the last spot. You must be resolved that as all you have, shall be God's, so all you *are* shall be God's; and you are to make it so, simply and quietly, by thinking always of yourself merely as sent to do His work; and considering at every leisure time, what you are to do next. Don't fret nor tease yourself about it, far less other people. Don't wear white crosses, nor black dresses, nor caps with lappets. Nobody has any right to go about in an offensively celestial uniform, as if it were more *their* business, or privilege, than it is everybody's, to be God's servants. But, know and feel assuredly that every day of your lives you have done all you can for the good of others. Done, I repeat—not said. Help your companions, but don't talk religious sentiment to them; and serve the poor, but, for your lives, you little monkeys, don't preach to them. They are probably, without in the least knowing it, fifty times better Christians than you; and if anybody is to preach, let *them*. Make friends of them when they are nice, as you do of nice rich people; feel with them, work with them, and if you are not at last sure it is a pleasure to you both to see each other, keep out of their way. For material charity, let older and wiser people see to it; and be content, like Athenian maids in the procession of their home-goddess, with the honour of carrying the basket.

Ever affectionately yours,

J. R.

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