

The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

FLOWERS IN HER HAIR

MISS BURTON WAS PLAIN, staid, and frankly forty-odd. She had always been that way. Her age had changed, to be sure, but not her outlook on life. But Miss Burton accepted herself at face value and had become accustomed to being the sort of person she was. Sometimes when life seemed extra drab, she would examine the bright treasures she hoarded for such occasions, the amulets against a hum-drum world.

Once a 7-year-old had remarked, "Why Miss Burton, you're pretty when you smile." True, it had been said in a tone of amazement, but Miss Burton forgot the tone and clung to the words.

And people frequently used phrases such as "so dependable," "so very capable." These were used on occasions when Miss Burton was asked to do something not so pleasant, such as to plan the refreshments for the faculty picnic, or to collect funds for the community chest. Miss Burton was not unmindful of the motives which prompted these compliments, but the words could be remembered while the less pleasant implications were rigidly barred from her mind.

Moreover, Miss Burton knew she was a good teacher. She understood boys and girls. Maybe it was because she had never had a childhood of her own, not a real one, and thus had so much of her childhood spirit still to be spent. She knew when to be gay and when to be serious to fit the moods of 7-year-olds, something many teachers never learn.

Thus, in life's bleak moments, Miss Burton could say to herself, "I'm pretty when I smile (at least one 7-year-old once thought so). I'm capable. I'm dependable. I'm a good teacher." These sentences bounded the shining glory of a teacher plain, staid, and frankly forty-odd.

Miss Burton found in these treasured



words great comfort and satisfaction. That is, she did until Marg Taylor came to teach at Watson School. Not that there was anything wrong with Marg. Quite the contrary. She had a zest for life, and life seemed to have met her more than half way. She was young, gay, lovely to look at. And she wore flowers in her hair.

Those flowers in Marg Taylor's hair fascinated and repelled Miss Burton. She *hated* them! They made her feel sad, restless, and annoyed all at one time, and she didn't like any of these feelings.

She recognized this strange mixture of emotions, however. She had known it before. Once, long ago, there had been a doll, a beautiful doll with blue eyes and yellow curls, so near and yet so far, behind the thick plate-glass window of the store. She had stood nose-to-glass, pouring out all the anguished longing of her young heart, until finally she had learned to hate that doll as the symbol of all the wondrous, lovely things that somehow didn't seem to be meant for the Agatha Burtons. And there was lamp light on snow, the circle drawing warmth within itself and shutting out those



Nose-to-glass

who were outside looking in. And lazy laughter drifting through a summer's evening. Colorful travel posters. The sleek women in fashion magazines. And delicate perfume in rich furs.

Miss Burton understood why she hated the flowers in Marg Taylor's hair. She understood, and hated herself for hating.



The flowers were on the floor

Miss Burton wanted to like Marg in spite of her flowers. Miss Burton always wanted to like everyone, for she wanted, desperately, for everyone to like her. But when Marg was around all she could see was that horrid bouquet that gave the lie to the dull business of living. So when the other teachers were giving Marg friendly advice, and encouragement or sympathy, Miss Burton pretended to be very, very busy.

Then came that fateful Tuesday in late November. To most people it seemed like any other Tuesday, but to Miss Burton it was haunted by gay flowers in a young girl's hair. To get the unpleasantness out of her system, she decided to stay late at school and plan for next week's work. ("I'm capable. I'm dependable.")

It was almost 5 o'clock when she finally decided to go home. She tried to avert her eyes as she passed Marg Taylor's door, but

it was no use. Some force stronger than she, seemed to make her look in. What she saw made her gasp and stop. The flowers were there, yes, but on the floor, and, head bowed on the teacher's desk, was Marg, sobbing.

Miss Burton didn't hesitate a moment. Marg, laughing, with flowers in her hair, was more than she could face, but a young teacher crying was quite a different matter. In no time at all she had Marg pouring out her troubles between sobs. She was saying, "You wouldn't understand, Miss Burton. You're a good teacher. You're charming and successful and everybody loves you. But I just can't seem to make a go of it. I envy you!"

There was more, much more, but Miss Burton wasn't listening . . . "charming; successful; everybody loves you." Marg Taylor envies *me*."

Afterward, Miss Burton couldn't remember what she had said to Marg. It must have been the right thing, for soon the girl was comforted and smiling, but she remembered quite clearly stooping to pick up the flowers from the floor and helping Marg arrange them in her dark hair, gently and carefully.

As she walked home she kept turning over and over in her mind the bright words, "charming; successful; everybody loves you." Marg Taylor envies *me*." Amazing and wonderful world!

She was on the corner of Vine and State when the idea struck her. The audacity of it took her breath. Did she dare? "Why not?" she said to herself, "I'm charming!" She



At the corner of State and Vine an idea struck her

glanced at her watch. Yes, there was just about enough time if she'd hurry. Still a bit breathless with her bold daring, she marched into the five-and-ten-cent store. Without a glance she passed the tooth brushes and the soap, which usually fascinated her. At the lipsticks and perfumes she almost faltered. Maybe a bright new lipstick would be wiser than what she had in mind. "No indeed.

Nothing less than the most important for the charming and envied Agatha Burton!"

She was smiling to herself, a shy, wondering smile, and anyone, 7-to-70, would know Miss Burton was pretty when she smiled. On she went and made her purchase hastily.

The next morning, there they were for all the world to see. Miss Burton wore flowers in her hair!



MORE ABOUT SKILLS FOR MODERNS

To supplement your thinking about basic skills as discussed in this issue of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*, we should like to suggest four recent DSCD publications which deal with skills in the areas of personal growth, group activity, intergroup understanding, and effective teaching techniques. Perhaps these publications are already among your professional books. If they are not, you may wish to order your copies at once. They may be obtained from the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington 6, D.C. Suggested books and pamphlets are

Discipline for Today's Children and Youth. Practical discussion to help teachers and parents think straight about classroom discipline. Fritz Redl and George V. Sheviakov. 50 cents.

Group Planning in Education. 1945 DSCD Yearbook. Discussion of theory and practice of group planning in the classroom, in curriculum development, in teacher education, and in the community. Paul J. Misner, chairman. \$2.

We the Children. Discussions by boys and girls of intercultural understanding. Reprint from March 1945 *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*. Published jointly with Bureau for Intercultural Education. 25 cents.

Education in the Armed Services. Descriptions by educators now in uniform of programs in the Army and Navy which are of significance to schools. Lieutenant William Brown, USNR, chairman. 50 cents.

An order blank for these publications appears on the last page of this issue.

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