

Early in my career as Dean two new friends came into my life whom I grew to know well, two members of Barnard's Board of Trustees, Clara Spence and Charlotte Baker, Headmistress and Associate Headmistress of Miss Spence's School in New York. I frequently visited the school, where they lived and had a flourishing boarding department of some seventy-five girls from all parts of the country.

Miss Spence was a benevolent despot who ran her school with a firm hand. Her patrons, mostly rich and fashionable families, she kept relentlessly in line. But she had a warm and generous heart, and a personality that won love and allegiance. She saw the vision of their enterprises, while Miss Baker did much of the actual carrying out of the plans. Charlotte had been the eldest of a fairly large and wealthy family, had helped to care for them all, and was used to managing things. Shy and retiring, she was entirely willing to have Miss Spence take all the limelight.

Besides conducting their school these two women had another absorbing interest, - finding homes for homeless babies. They adopted a number themselves, and they were always ready to take in some forlorn infant, nurse it to health and strength, tie a pink ribbon on its hair, and find a good home to welcome it. I used to see these babies descend suddenly on the boarding department at the school on Fifty-fifth Street and be turned over to some of the teachers for temporary care. That certainly kept the school from having an old-maidish atmosphere.

Miss Spence told me once how she had happened to start baby adoption. She was a very young teacher at the time, on a small salary, living in the hall bedroom of a New York boarding house. A friend of hers asked her one day to go with her to visit another friend, a man who had come down in the world tragically, through illness and misfortune, and who was now dying in a tenement. They went together, climbed the dingy stairs, and found themselves in a squalid room where the sick man lay in bed. He had been a fine person, Miss Spence could see, but he was near the end, and terribly distressed in mind. He had no one in the world but a small son. The boy's mother was dead; there was no relative; there was no money. What could happen to his child?

excerpt from  
Mking a Good  
Crusade by  
V. Gilderstæve

Miss Spence had been standing quietly at the side of the room. She had never seen the child, who was at the moment out on the street at play. Suddenly she stepped forward. "I will take care of the boy," she promised. "I will bring him up as my son. So long as I have a dollar in the world, he shall not want."

When she and her friend left the tenement house a small boy, begrimed with dirt, walked solemnly between them. The three continued for several blocks, the friend talking to the child, encouraging, diverting him. Miss Spence remained silent. Then suddenly she spoke aloud. "Nevertheless," she affirmed stoutly, "I'm glad I did it!"

When she told me this story, it was the day after Christmas. "Yesterday morning," she concluded, "my telephone rang. It was a long distance call, and a cheery voice said, 'Merry Christmas, Mother!'" That small boy of long ago had graduated from a university, held an excellent position in a distant city, was married with children of his own.

When I came to know Miss Spence and Miss Baker, they had just adopted two small girls, followed in a few years by two small boys. In the summers they invited me to visit The Willows, Charlotte's house among the woods at Bar Harbor on the Maine coast. There I watched the adopted babies growing up and as I grew to know and love them, sometimes wished that I too could give a home to one of Miss Spence's waifs. But my long hours at Barnard, my accumulating international responsibilities would have made me at best a poor part-time mother.

Excerpt from MANY A GOOD CRUSADE by Virginia C. Gildersleeve