

## *Chapter 12*

**I**N the summer of 1952, Reverend Dawson, after five years as our minister, left our island for a larger parish. He urged all of us to be on hand to welcome his replacement. It was an unnecessary request because each and every plane and supply boat that came to the island was greeted by hundreds of Indians milling about on the river bank. There was not much else to do on the island.

In fact, when the supply boats came during the late summer months, bringing a year's supply of food, clothing, lumber, and oil, the women and children started out early in the morning with great sacks of food to watch the Indian men unload. Sometimes the unloading took four or five days, but

the women and children were there every day from dawn to dusk, the women exchanging the latest gossip, and the children sliding down the steep river-banks or tearing off chunks of soil to throw at each other.

So, when the small four-seater plane landed on the river and taxied up to the shore, most of the island's population of seven hundred Indians had turned out. Only the aged and sick had stayed home.

The pilot stepped out onto the pontoons and threw a rope to the men waiting on the beach. They pulled the plane in as close as they could to the shore before securing it to the posts which were firmly anchored into the sand for that purpose. The landing dock, which was disassembled every fall to protect it from the winter ice and the spring break-up, had not yet been rebuilt because the river was still too swollen from the thaw. We waited breathlessly as the pilot went over to the co-pilot's door and opened it. Out stepped a lean, young man wearing a navy-blue trench coat and black fedora.

"Oooh! Aah!" the admiring women gasped. Nudging each other, they whispered, "What a handsome man! He can't be our new minister. He doesn't look like one." And indeed he didn't. Reverend Dawson was old, short, fat, and bald.

The new minister stood tall and proud on the top step and waved majestically to his captive subjects. He descended the steps regally, stepped gracefully onto the pontoon, then eyeing the distance from the plane to the shore, he sprang like a gazelle from the pontoon right into the river.

The spell was broken. The children broke out into hysterical laughter. The adults, their faces red with suppressed laughter, frowned at us. "It's not nice to laugh at a minister," they admonished.

The blushing minister dragged himself out of the river and slipped and slid drippily up the steep, sandy bank. We followed him, giggling, as he dripped and sloshed all the way to the school. We hadn't had such entertainment in a long time.

It was soon evident that the new minister's main interest was in our morals rather than our souls. Reverend Montgo-

mery became more and more of a dictator, trying to govern every phase of our lives, which thrilled our parents no end. They were extremely lax when it came to disciplining us, preferring to leave that part of child-rearing to the minister or the chief.

While they might click their tongues, shake their heads sadly, or occasionally threaten, our parents were never very strict with us. We were completely free from rules and regulations at home and set our own schedules for eating, playing, and sleeping. (This probably is the reason why Indians have such difficulty adjusting to white society, a society whose every phase of life is governed by rules and schedules.)

It was no wonder then that our parents welcomed Reverend Montgomery. They were even pleased when he started spying on the girls who went out at night for a walk. We could do nothing without him interpreting it as evil.

He even went so far as to appoint himself judge and jury of the island. "Next Sunday is going to be very special because I am going to hold court and try two of our people who have been very sinful," he announced in church one day. "You all know that—is going to have a baby and that she claims—, a married man, is the father of her unborn child. I am putting these two evil people on trial to teach all of you a lesson. You *cannot* go around breaking God's Commandments without being punished! This sort of thing must stop! I want everyone on this island to be here at the eleven o'clock service next Sunday to see how we handle these situations in the outside world."

The church was packed more so than usual the following Sunday. Very few people ever dared to miss a service because the minister always used those who did as examples of evil in his sermons. The two on trial sat by themselves in front pews, the man in the right section reserved for men, and the woman in the left.

Reverend Montgomery started the court proceedings by imploring the Good Lord to help him be fair and just in this great task and test that had been set before him, beseeching Him to forgive the two miserable sinners. Raising his hands to heaven, he used Christ's words on the cross, "Forgive

them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

Then turning to the woman, he said, “Step up here and stand in front of me. Put your left hand on the Bible; raise your right hand and repeat after me: I swear by the Almighty God,”

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“that what I am about to say,”

“that what I am about to say,”

“shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

“shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

“Keep your hand on the Bible. Is—over there the father of your unborn child?”

“Yes,” whispered the shame-faced woman.

“That is all, you may go back to your seat.” Turning to the man, he said, “Your turn.”

The man stepped up, put his hand on the Bible, and repeated the oath after the minister.

“Are you the father of—’s unborn child?” the minister asked.

“No.” he answered firmly.

Reverend Montgomery’s face turned crimson and the veins on his temples popped up. He kept opening and closing his mouth, but no words came out.

“Do you know what you have done!” he shouted in a voice that was suddenly several octaves higher. “Both of you swore on the Bible before the Almighty God and me, but one of you is lying! *May God strike you dead for your unforgivable sins!*”

I waited fearfully for the thunderbolt that would strike me down for my part in this degrading and humiliating spectacle. Both sinners were related to me. Nothing happened.

Reverend Montgomery continued with his verdict. “We have made such sacrifices to bring the word of the Lord to you unappreciative people! We have left our homes, our friends, and our families for you! We have spent years trying to teach you how to live properly, but you are still no better than your heathen ancestors! There is no hope for you! You are all doomed to a life of hell and damnation! You are all

equally guilty in this horrendous crime! I hope God can find it in His heart to forgive you all!

“I am going to exercise one of the powers that God gave me when He reached down from heaven, touched me on the shoulder, and told me I was chosen to spread His word among the sinners of this world.” (Most of the white people who came to the island made this same claim, which convinced us even more that they were superior. None of us knew a single Indian who had seen the hand of God reach out and touch him.) “I am going to bar these two sinful people from Communion for as long as they live. They will not share the joy of drinking Christ’s blood and eating His flesh. They will not be allowed to step inside this church for one year because we do not want them defiling the house of God.” (I could not help thinking of what the ministers were always preaching to us, “Let him among you who has not sinned cast the first stone.”)

“When this child of sin is born, I will not allow it inside this church, nor will I baptize it to cleanse it of its parents’ sins. You all know that we cannot enter into the Kingdom of God without being baptized.”

I scrunched down in my seat, trying to make myself invisible, because I too was a “child of sin”, and if an innocent baby had no hope of getting into heaven, then there was no hope for me.

“Maybe this will teach you people the lesson you need to stop your evil ways and listen to the word of the Lord. Now, let us pray.”

The baby, a girl, was stillborn, and she was fortunate in never knowing the unforgiving Reverend Montgomery. He told us, “It was God’s punishment to this sinful woman that her child be born dead. And the child, without the cleansing of its sins by baptism, is doomed to eternal hell for the sins of its mother. This is a lesson for all of you. Repent now that you may be saved and that you may sit on God’s right hand in the life everlasting.”

Reverend Montgomery became progressively worse as the Indian adults refused to speak out against him. The white men on the island, particularly the ministers, were treated

like little gods, and the Indians were afraid to criticize their sometimes unrighteous behaviour. Yet it was his god-like attitude which made me begin to doubt and question the white man's saintliness and infallibility.

His campaign to save the morals of the children toughened as we got older. Even the songs we learned from the children who had returned from the sanatorium were now censored. One song in particular, a song about a back-street affair, was absolutely forbidden. None of us had any idea what a street was, much less a back-street affair, and we sang the song for its melody, not for its words. We did not even know what they meant.

The song got me into more trouble. I hummed and sang constantly, a habit I had developed before I entered the school, a habit that irritated the teachers, staff, and sometimes the other children. Nobody could start a song without me finishing it for her. I was not conscious of this annoying habit—annoying because I sang the same song over and over again, driving everyone around me crazy.

“Janie! What song are you singing?” the supervisor would demand.

Unaware that I had been singing, I would stop and think. “Back-Street Affair?”

“You know you're not supposed to sing that song.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Then why did you sing it?”

“I forgot.”

“Well, don't you forget again. Stand in the corner until the bell rings. If you're not careful, you are going to have a baby one of these days.”

I was beginning to realize just how complicated it was to have a baby. I gathered it had something to do with boys, being disrespectful to the staff, and singing love songs. When I asked my family about babies and life, all they would say was, “ah! gahmah-mahjee!” (Translation: “Ah! Be quiet!”)

The supervisor was no help either. When I reached puberty—a dreadful process because I did not have the faintest idea what was taking place—she took me aside to give me the “facts of life”.

“You realize that this means your chances of getting into trouble are greater than ever,” she whispered. “Each month you will report to me so I can keep a record and give you the things that you need.”

What a degrading experience it was! It was difficult to say who was more embarrassed when I slunk away from her in shame. I felt as if I had just become a member of some repulsive organization.

When I discovered that my friends had not yet experienced my “shame”, I began to feel like a freak. Because we had no privacy whatsoever, our Friday-night baths became a nightmare. I felt that the other girls were staring at me and making fun of me behind my back, and one Friday evening I absolutely refused to climb out of the tub.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the impatient supervisor asked.

“Could I please have a towel?” I asked timidly.

“A *towel!* Well, lah-dee-dah! Her majesty wants a towel.”

“Please?”

“Look at the little baby crying,” she taunted. “*Get out of that tub right now!* Who do you think you are anyway? You’ll get a towel after you’re out of the tub, the same as everyone else—you’re nobody special, and don’t you forget it!”

As I climbed out of the tub reluctantly, one of the girls threw me a towel. The supervisor gave her a dirty look, but said nothing. When the other girls who were my age caught up with me, I felt slightly better, but the damage had been done. I never got over my self-consciousness; I became an absolute fanatic about privacy, treasuring it even more than my freedom.

Any request to be treated as an individual was met with sarcasm from the staff. Their favourite comment was, “Who do you think you are? Queen Elizabeth?”

With all the respect and awe I had for the Queen, there were times when I wished I had never heard of her, but I quickly put these sacrilegious thoughts out of my head. To me, the Queen and the minister were in the same category with God, the Queen being only slightly more important than the minister. However, my esteem and respect for the minis-

ter was dwindling each year as my eyes were gradually opening to his faults and short-comings.

My belief in the Queen being God's overseer here on earth was so complete, however, that once when our teacher asked us why England had a warmer climate than Canada, I promptly answered, "Because the Queen lives there."

The teacher looked at me blankly for a second before bursting into laughter. Clutching her stomach with one hand, she doubled over and banged on her desk with the other, tears streaming down her cheeks as she laughed and laughed.

I was completely shocked by her reaction to my sensible answer. When she finally caught her breath, she gave us some answer about how "the Gulf Stream warms the air", which only proved to me that white people weren't always right. My answer made more sense than hers. I firmly believed that if the Queen someday decided to retire to our frozen island, the climate would miraculously change to a more temperate one to make her comfortable.