

## *Chapter 21*

**I** had no sooner unpacked when Reverend Montgomery arrived to offer me a job. His wife needed a full-time maid to care for the three children they now had—all of them adopted, and all of them part Indian—and he offered to pay me the generous salary of five dollars a week if I accepted. I did, eagerly and gratefully.

My work day started at seven-thirty, just as the children were getting up. I fed them, made certain the two girls washed and dressed themselves properly, and bathed and dressed the fifteen-month-old boy, after which I put him in his crib with a bottle while I did the dishes and tidied the kitchen. When it was clean and spotless, I took the three children out for a walk until ten o'clock.

When we returned, I put the baby down for a nap, sent the two girls outside to play, then began the daily dusting, sweeping, and mopping of the living-room. All furniture had to be moved daily to make certain there were no dust particles floating around under it. Mrs. Montgomery was an extremely fastidious woman; she'd get upset over one grain of sand in the house. If I spent less than an hour in one room, she would inspect it to see what I had missed.

At eleven-thirty, she got up. She came down the stairs, yawning and stretching, moaning, "Oh dear! We have so much work to do today." While she had a leisurely brunch and mulled over my afternoon duties, I made the beds, dusted

the furniture, and mopped the floors in the two upstairs bathrooms.

Occasionally, she would come down before ten o'clock, and sip tea while bitterly complaining about the amount of work that had to be done. Just the thought of work, however, was too exhausting for her, and she would return to her bedroom after I had cleaned it, for a short nap before lunch.

After I had helped her start their lunch by opening cans and emptying them into pans, I went home for half an hour to eat my own lunch. When I returned at one o'clock, she read off my duties for the afternoon—laundering, ironing, polishing silver, washing windows and woodwork—while I washed dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Then she and all the children lay down for a two-hour nap.

About three o'clock, the baby woke up. After I had given him a bottle and a bowl of jello, I took him and the girls for another outing so that their mother could spend the next hour resting or writing letters. When we returned at four o'clock, I helped her prepare dinner. I went home at five o'clock for my own dinner, but had to return at six to wash the dishes and mop the kitchen floor.

I did this six days a week. In addition to working ten hours a day, I was expected to be on call for baby-sitting at night without any notice and without any extra pay. By the third or fourth exhausting week, I began to feel that the seven cents an hour I was getting paid was not quite enough for all the work I had to do and the treatment I had to put up with.

Mrs. Montgomery questioned me constantly about my dating habits in the city. Some of the questions were embarrassing and very personal. She seemed to believe that I led a very active sex life. She warned me about the white boy I was dating, one of the clerks at the Bay. "You know, Janie, there's only one reason that white boys date Indian girls," she would say.

Having listened to such idiocy for ten years and having finally realized that was all it was, I continued seeing the boy. I let her think what she wanted. I could have sworn on a stack of bibles and she wouldn't have believed me.

It was not her suspicious nature which bothered me so

much as the feeling that the Montgomerys thought they owned me just because they paid me five dollars a week. I was not supposed to have a life of my own. I was to be ready to serve them on a second's notice. My resentment mounted as the summer progressed, but it was not until a few weeks before I was scheduled to return to school that I finally decided I had had enough.

My mother and I were walking to church one Sunday evening when I heard the familiar call of Reverend Montgomery. I pretended not to hear. My mother, however, was terrified of what might happen if I did not go. "I know what he wants. I'm not going," I told her.

"wasa, Geniesh! He's the minister. Go!" she insisted, pushing me towards the rectory. I gave in reluctantly and took my time walking over to him.

"I was beginning to think you couldn't hear me," Reverend Montgomery greeted me. "My wife is going to church, so run inside and take care of the children, will you?" Without waiting for an answer, he dashed out.

"I'm so glad my husband caught you," Mrs. Montgomery panted, racing down the stairs. "Listen, when the children have finished eating, make sure they have a bath before you put them to bed. I promised the girls you would read them a story. The baby is still on the potty. Don't let him off until he's done something. And don't worry about the dishes; just let them soak. You can do them in the morning." With that, she was gone.

The girls squealed happily as I walked into the kitchen. "Mommy promised you would read us a story tonight," they said.

"Well, I'm not going to unless you hurry up and finish your supper," I snapped. I rushed them through their supper and their bath, then read them a short story before tucking them in.

When I came downstairs, the baby was toddling around with the seat of the potty still strapped around his chubby waist. He had done his duty all right. "Goo boy, goo boy," he said, pointing to the mess on the floor.

I laughed. "Yes, good boy," I praised him. "You know

something? I think I'll just leave it there for your mother to clean up," I told him conspiratorially. He laughed. I bathed him and put him to bed with a bottle.

When Mrs. Montgomery came home, she did not need to ask if the baby had done his duty. A whiff was all she needed to know that he had. She cleaned the floor without a word, but I could see that she was very displeased with me.

"I'm going over to the school for a while," she announced when she was through cleaning.

"When will you be back?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered. "I'm late now. I don't have time to talk." She rushed out the door.

While I sat fussing and fuming for the next three hours, I made up my mind that I was not going to spend another day being treated like some unthinking, unfeeling possession.

I slept in the next morning. At eight o'clock, I received a message that I was to start working *immediately*: Mrs. Montgomery was too tired to get up and the children needed somebody to look after them. I refused to go.

Ten minutes later, Reverend Montgomery came barging through the door. "Are you going to work right now?" he demanded.

"No," I muttered.

"Who do you think you are anyway? My poor wife is going frantic over there with no help. She was feeling miserable this morning, but she had to get up to look after the children just because you suddenly decide working is beneath you. Do you think you're any better than the other Indians just because you've had a few years of high school? Well, you aren't. Now, get off that bed right now and get to work!"

"I'm not going to work," I muttered, terrified.

Turning to my mother, who was cowering against the wall, he yelled, "That's gratitude for you! I offer her a job and what does she do? She thinks she's too good for it. I've heard of ungrateful people before, but she beats all."

He turned to me. "A lot of girls on this island would be thrilled to have your job," he continued. "If this is an example of what a higher education does for you, then I'm all for keeping Indians ignorant. If you ever get into trouble, and

that's where you're headed running around with white boys, don't ever come to me for help." He stormed out of the house.

My mother was horrified that I would think of rebelling against a white man, and a minister at that. She reminded me that he had been sent to us by God.

"That doesn't give him the right to treat people like dirt!" I yelled. "Who does *he* think *he* is anyway? He keeps saying he was sent by God, but God wouldn't send a person like that."

She covered her ears, refusing to listen to such talk about a man of God. I left the house disgusted with her refusal to see him for what he was—egotistical, supercilious, dictatorial, a man who used the church and God to justify his own condescending attitude and unfair treatment of the Indians.

I went to see the one person I felt I could trust, a staff member of the school who I had met through the Montgomery children. She was white, but she had always seemed sympathetic to my complaints and my problems. I told her what had happened, adding a few uncomplimentary remarks about Reverend Montgomery.

"He came here so he can feel like God!" I told her. "White people wouldn't put up with his attitude, but the Indians are foolish enough to let him do whatever he wants. It only makes him worse."

My trusted friend listened quietly, nodding occasionally, "He's only thinking of your welfare," she told me, then went immediately to the minister and repeated everything I had said. When I heard that, I decided never to trust another white person again.

When I approached the Montgomery children one day, they ran off. "What's the matter?" I asked, catching up to them.

The six-year-old girl kept on running, but her younger sister stopped. "Daddy and Mommy told us never to talk to you," she blurted. "They say you're lazy and no good."

"Oh, I see," I said sadly, and walked away. It did not matter to me what he thought, but losing his children's respect distressed me. I loved them dearly.

It wasn't one of my happier summers. Two men came to the house one evening as I was preparing to go out. We exchanged greetings and I left. When I returned home, everybody, except my mother, was in bed. It struck me as being odd because it was still early.

"I want to have a little talk with you," my mother said. "Do you know what those men wanted?"

"They asked you to cook for a feast?" I asked. She was always being asked to do such things.

"No—Ernest's son, Allen, wants to marry you. They were here to arrange the wedding. I couldn't give them an answer though because I thought the decision should be up to you. I know I should be the one to decide, but I don't want to decide anything that will make you unhappy. What do you say?"

I could not utter a word. My mind was a vacuum. I was in shock. No more school, no nursing career; only babies year after year, chopping wood and hauling water day after day. Wrinkled and toothless by the time I was twenty-one.

"I can't marry him!" I cried. "I'm only seventeen. I have two years of high school left, then three more of nursing school. You can't do this to me! I'll die!"

"I told you it's up to you," she said quietly. "I do want to see you married, not necessarily to Allen, just to keep you here on the island. I don't want you to leave again, but I know you'll never be happy until you've accomplished what you have planned, so I'll accept whatever decision you make. You're the one who has to live your life. Allen is supposed to come by and visit you tomorrow evening so the final arrangements can be made."

"The final arrangements have been made," I said. "There will be no wedding! Why did he have to go and do a stupid thing like that for? He's been going around with the same girl for three years now, and here he is asking me to marry him. Never!"

"What are your plans with Russ?" she asked hesitantly, referring to the boy I had been seeing all summer.

"None, if you're talking about marriage. I'm going to keep on seeing him though. I'm not going to be here when Allen

comes by tomorrow night. He's . . . he's so fat, and he uses so much hair cream. How can you think of marrying me off to someone like that?" I shuddered.

"Don't talk like that about my future son-in-law," she laughed.

"You and your future son-in-laws. I can't even go out with a boy without you hearing wedding bells and making plans for all the grandchildren you're going to have," I teased.

The effect my decision might have on certain members of my family—particularly my grandmother—worried me all night. I knew that she, like my mother, wanted more than anything to see me safely married off to some Indian boy before I left again. It was one way of keeping me on the island. I did not want to hurt my grandmother in any way, but I just could not bring myself to marry some boy I had never even spoken to.

What a relief when she came over the next morning and told me that she, too, would abide by whatever decision I made. She sniffled a little when I told her my answer, but she made no effort to try and change my mind.

When my suitor arrived that evening, I was waiting impatiently for Russ, my date. Allen picked up my brother's guitar and strummed on it patiently, waiting for somebody to greet him. Everybody had disappeared. The children were out. My stepfather had decided he just could not let another day pass without visiting his dear sister, whom he normally visited once a year. My mother had decided that the torn clothes she had set aside all summer just could not be ignored another moment. I paced the floor in the back room, wringing my hands, and urging my mother to give Allen the answer. She refused.

When I heard a knock at the door, I picked up my sweater and ran through the front room. Allen smiled expectantly and stood up. I opened the door and grabbed Russ's arm as I raced out.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'll tell you all about it while we walk," I said. We walked and I talked for several hours.

All he could say was, "How do you like that? How do you

like that?” Frankly, I had hoped he would come up with a solution. On the way home, he did. He proposed. I was congratulating myself on my fantastic luck when he added, “But if we *don't* get married, I want you to promise you'll never marry an Indian.”

“And what's wrong with marrying an Indian?” I asked when I realized what he had said. Three proposals in one summer and all of them worthless.

“I don't want that kind of life for you,” he said.

“I will marry who I want,” I retorted.

We quarrelled. He could not understand my attitude when he had only my best interests at heart, he said. I went home in a huff.

When I stormed into the house, Allen was still playing the guitar even though the whole family was in bed. “I thought you were going to get rid of him,” I whispered to my mother, who was pretending to be asleep. “Why is he still here?”

“It's up to you to get rid of him,” she said, “and the sooner the better. He's been sitting there all evening strumming away on that guitar. It's driving me crazy. I didn't want to be rude by telling him to stop. Go and tell him your answer so we can all get some sleep.”

I took a deep breath and walked determinedly into the front room. When I sat down, Allen got up and sat down beside me on the bench. I jumped up nervously and poured myself a cup of tea before I sat down again on the smallest chair I could find. I cleared my throat and coughed a number of times before I blurted out my answer.

He nodded his head sadly, then handed me a little box, which he said he wanted me to have anyway. I accepted the gift—a cross on a gold chain—to get him out of the house.

The next evening, his father and uncle came over to cement the deal. If Allen had given them my answer, which was unimportant anyway in these matters, they did not let on. However, when my mother told them I was not yet ready for marriage, they left with no hard feelings. My refusal created a rift in my family, though.

My mother had done everything wrong, according to some of my disgruntled relatives. Not only had she failed to discuss



this important matter with anyone other than my grandmother, but she had also allowed *me*, a mere seventeen-year-old “child”, to make the final decision. I was too young to know my own mind yet. However, I was considered mature enough to bear the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood.

My match-making aunt Edna, who didn't like being left out of such dealings, and who had always sworn that she would have me married off by the time I was sixteen, was furious that I had passed up such a desirable, eligible bachelor, whose desirability she based on the fact that he had a steady job and was earning almost twenty dollars a week. After predicting that I would either wind up an old maid—if I kept on being so particular—or married to some drunken, murderous white man, she refused to speak to either my mother or me again.

I felt trapped, never knowing when a long line of prospective husbands would be paraded before me. If I kept refusing, sooner or later my family would stop consulting me until they had made the final arrangements. So, at the end of August, I was only too eager to leave the island. I wanted to go back to the safety of the vast, impersonal world outside. When the plane roared off down the river, I breathed a huge sigh of relief and leaned back. I was free!