

CHAPTER *No* 1



*“I cannot tolerate any more of this* behaviour from Millicent,” my mother said in the parlour below.

I sat very still on the top stair, listening, with my face pressed between the wooden banisters. They smelled of beeswax.

“Dinna fret,” my father’s voice replied soothingly. “She’ll be a young lady soon enough.”

“But yesterday there was that horrible—*incident*—in the alleyway. And today, she woke the baby with that wretched mouth organ,” my mother complained.

I tucked my cotton nightgown around my toes and waited to hear what my father would suggest. I'd been sent to bed early, with bread and milk for supper. When my father came home from his work as chief engineer in a Toronto shipyard, I'd crept out to the landing to listen. I knew my mother was angry, although she didn't raise her voice. That would not have been ladylike.

*Yesterday wasn't my fault*, I wanted to call down the stairs. Tommy from next door and I had been playing with his yo-yo. It was only when a gang of boys from another street came by and threw stones that we defended ourselves by hurling sticks. If Bertha, our housekeeper, hadn't come outside just then my mother would never have heard about it. And today, how was I to know that Louisa May was sleeping when I balanced on the back fence and played my mouth organ? And now my mother had confiscated it!

Louisa May was a pain. First of all, she was a girl and I'd wanted a boy baby to arrive at our

house, because boys were more fun. Then she was always either crying or asleep. *Hush, hush*, my mother and Bertha said to me all day long, all spring. The only time I wasn't supposed to be quiet was when I practised the piano every afternoon. I hated the piano!

I sighed. If only I was a boy, like Tommy, and could run through the streets chasing the iceman and the delivery wagons. Tommy's mother didn't expect *him* to sit still with his ankles crossed, embroidering straight lines of French knots. Tommy didn't have to learn to pour tea without spilling a drop or keep his clothes clean. If I was a boy, I wouldn't have to wear rag curlers in my hair, then stand perfectly still while my mother brushed my ringlets.

"Well, now, here's an idea," my father said in the parlour below. "Ye ken my brother Eddy?"

"Edward," said my mother, "that black sheep."

"He isn't a black sheep," my father said patiently. "He's a steady enough laddie. He and Mary might let Millie visit them up on the lakes for the

summer. It would give ye a rest. What do ye think?"

"Oh, I don't know," said my mother. "She'd be running wild with those Indian cousins. She'd come home worse than ever."

"When she comes home, 'twill be time for school," said my father. "Let her have some fun while the weather is good. She's cooped up in the city."

"Perhaps you're right. I'll think it over," said my mother, sighing. Her dress swished as she moved to the parlour door. Quick as a cat, I crept along the hallway to my room.

Under my blanket, I lay with pounding heart. Cooped up! My father understood perfectly. Would he really send me north, out of Toronto with its clanging streetcars and bustling crowds? I had never met my cousins, but I knew that their mother was an Ojibwa Indian. Would they dress in deerskin? Would they live by a wilderness lake in a wigwam? Maybe if I could find where my mother had hidden the mouth organ, I could

smuggle it with me . . . Thinking of this, I fell asleep.

Next morning, when I came down for breakfast, a letter lay in the silver tray by the door, waiting to be posted. It was addressed, in my mother's beautiful copperplate hand, to my uncle. I knew then that it was true: I was going to be sent away!



Several weeks later, my father and I rattled north on the plush green seats of a Grand Trunk Railway carriage. We'd been travelling since dawn when the milkman arrived. I'd fed his horse with sugar snatched from the dining table. My father had carried my grip, packed with dresses, and my mother and Bertha had waved goodbye from the front door of our big brick house.

Now hunger and excitement pinched my stomach. Outside the train window, a river glittered in the sun.

“It’s the Otonabee River,” my father said. “That’s an Indian name.”

“Is my Aunt Mary really an Indian?” I asked.

“Aye, she is. She’s a good kind woman. Dinna go causing her trouble,” warned my father, but his eyes twinkled above his beard.

“Your Uncle Eddy is a mate on the steamboats,” said my father. “Water is like roads up here, ye ken. The steamboats take city folks to their summer homes and carry freight and mail.”

I pressed my face to the window. On the far shore of the Otonabee, wooded hills lifted to a blue sky. I had never been so far from the city. Everything seemed clean and big.

My father pulled out his pocket watch. “One minute to noon,” he said. “Right on schedule for Lakefield.”

Soon we pulled into a station with a brown wooden building. While everyone was descend-

ing from the train with hampers and baggage, it was a busy place. My father and I climbed into a waiting democrat wagon.

“To the boat,” Father told the driver, who chirruped to the horse. It was a short trip to the riverbank. The steamboat *Empress* rested there, gleaming white in the sun, with her gangplank down and a black-striped funnel chuffing smoke. On her deck, wooden slatted chairs were lined up ready for passengers. She was like a wonderful toy that I was going to float away on over the bright water. I hugged myself with excitement.

My father led the way towards a man at the foot of the gangplank.

“Eddy,” he said.

When the man turned around, a huge grin lit up his weather-beaten face. “By the gosh!” he shouted. “My brother James! And this must be Millie!” His eyes, as bright blue as my father’s, beamed at me.

I waited while Father and Uncle Eddy chatted, then jumped when the boat’s whistle blasted.

“We’ll sail with the tide,” Uncle Eddy teased me.

My father handed over my grip and hugged me tightly. “You might want this,” he said and slipped my mouth organ into my hand.

I followed Uncle Eddy up the gangplank and leaned against the rail on the top deck. My father waved, then began walking to the station. He had to catch the train home so that he could work the next morning. I watched his familiar figure disappear in the crowd of buggies and ladies’ parasols. A lump blocked my throat, just for a minute. I was far from home in a strange place and away from my family for the first time.

Uncle Eddy’s hand pressed my shoulder. “Do ye want to come and help me collect the fares, lass?” he asked, and I nodded. The boat’s whistle echoed over the water. The crew cast off the ropes. With a tremor, the steamboat glided away, her bow pointing north between wooded shores.

After Uncle Eddy and I had collected all the passengers’ fares, he took me into the wheelhouse.

“Cap’n,” he said, “this is my niece Millicent MacCallum, who’s come to visit.”

“Welcome to the Kawarthas,” the captain said. Then he explained, “That’s the name for all the lakes joined together by river and canal in this part of the province. Newspapermen have called it ‘the prettiest locality in Canada.’ There’s fine fishing here. Corn roasts and swimming and canoeing . . . Oh, yes, you’ll have a great visit, young lady.”

The river widened into a lake. A boom of logs floated past, bound for the sawmills. Cottages nestled along the shoreline, where water lilies bloomed.

“Now,” said the captain, “we need more power in the engine room. Would you ring the bell?”

He pointed to the curved brass lever attached to a wire over his head. When I pulled it, he explained that I’d signalled the engineer for more power from the wood-burning boilers.

“How about a turn at the wheel?” he asked.

I gripped the polished wood tightly, and after a minute the captain let go. And there I was,

steering the *Empress* up the lake while ladies reclined in deck chairs and the captain puffed on his White Owl cigar. I thought of Tommy; his eyes would widen with envy if he could see me.

I knew that I was going to have a wonderful summer—a grand adventure!