

CHAPTER THREE

Adopted—What Does It Mean?

Every member of the Gerard family had jet black hair and swarthy skin: due of course to their French-Indian background. Even strangers commented on how unusual it was that the little sister should be so fair and the brothers so dark.

LITTLE TOW-HEADED SWEDE

One day on our way to the country store, Harold, the youngest of my brothers, stopped the car and offered a woman a ride. No sooner had she got into the car than she inquired who the little blonde was.

"Oh, that's our sister," answered Harold.

"Well," said the woman, "She certainly doesn't look like your sister, she is so blonde and you are so dark. How did that happen?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders rather foolishly and said the only thing he could think of, "Oh, it just happened, that's all."

My ears always wiggled ambitiously whenever my name came into any conversation but this woman and her questions made no sense to me.

Of course I loved my brothers. They teased me unmercifully but I loved every minute of it except when they put me down the basement stairs into pitch darkness and yelled, "The boogie man is coming!"

They often called me "the little tow-headed Swede." I had grown to quite an age before I learned that it was nothing bad to be a Swede. The crew of railroad men who worked on the bridge near our house joined in with the rest. They talked to me in a strange language and kept saying, "Svenska?" Confused, I replied shyly in the negative. Whatever it was they thought about me, I was sure I was not.

RELUCTANT SANTA CLAUS

Gradually there came upon me the awareness that, because my Mother was dead, my position was one of disadvantage. The other children's Mothers used to get together at the meetings of the Parent Teacher's Association. They talked about their own children as if they were little angels, but I knew that one of them had said the little Gerard girl would never come to any good.

At one meeting they discussed the Christmas concert and the gifts to be given. One woman spoke up and said that she thought they should purchase gifts for all the children except the Gerard girl. The reason being that no one from the Gerard household belonged to the P. T. A. so there was no one to pay for her gift.

"But," objected another neighbor, "to leave one child out while the others got gifts would be most cruel. Anyway, the Gerard men are always generous in giving their share whenever a collection is taken to buy the refreshments for the twenty-fourth of May picnic."

When the night finally came for the concert to be presented in the school house, we all had reached

a high pitch of excitement. The teacher had appointed me mistress of ceremonies. The program went off very well and she told me she was proud of me. Then it came time for the gifts to be taken off the tree and given out. When they handed me mine, I was seething with resentment and called out in the same loud voice the teacher had told me to use for the announcing, "No thank you, I don't want your old gift. I heard that you didn't really *want* to give it." My angry reply had not made me feel one bit better but I was determined that if they did not care about me, I did not care about them.

MY FRIEND HELEN

What I really wished for was a Mother—especially at affairs like that. Every one of the children that attended the one-room school had a Mother, except Helen and me. Helen's Mother had died shortly after mine and her Father and brothers were also fishermen. Because of having so many things in common, including our ages, she and I were born to be pals. In each other we confided our childish hopes and problems and between the two of us managed to stir up an extraordinary amount of trouble. No doubt she told at home what I told her about the goings-on at our house.

"DADDY IS KILLING THE COOK"

On one occasion, during a brawl between my foster Father and our housekeeper, I was paralyzed with fear and hid in the yard behind big logs as long as I could, listening to the quarrel. When he began beating her

I could keep still no longer. Down the river road I ran screaming at the top of my voice, "Daddy is killing the cook. Help—please—help! Daddy is killing the cook." She had told me that due to an operation on her nose if she were ever struck a severe blow on the head it might mean her death. My screams had been heard by some of our neighbors but the only one that could have helped did not feel it wise to interfere. He was afraid the quarrelers would make peace with each other and turn on him.

SHE HAD SEEN BETTER DAYS

This particular woman, receiving low wages with much abuse for a bonus, was living much below her former estate. She had a fine English background and could tell fascinating stories of England and Spain. She also told me about Bluebeard and his murdered wives. When the rats went thumping across the floor in the attic of our house it always made me think of Bluebeard—probably he had hung his wives from just such rafters as showed in our upstairs.

In spite of the big crock of home brew she kept behind the kitchen door and the terrors I felt because of the brawls, I looked to this housekeeper as my protector. I knew that all the troubles were not her fault. After one terrible drinking party when I had been scared almost out of my wits, my usually tremendous appetite left completely. It stayed away three days! The housekeeper, realizing how upset I was, looked at my foster Father accusingly and said, "It is your fault." I went to her for the answer when I was faced with the biggest question that ever troubled me.

BLUE JEANS AND GUM BOOTS

During most of the year the road from our house to the school was ankle-deep in mud. The men used to complain that the politicians did not care about us except at voting time. Then they made big promises to do road repairs. Every school day I walked the three miles alone except for my dogs. To make the journey interesting I waded through as many mud puddles as possible. Quaint little figure I was! They sent me off in a boy's shirt and pants and gum boots. My favorite shoes were hiking boots but they could only be worn in dry weather. The leather hiking boots came three-quarters of the way up my leg and were ideal for playing football. Softball was my first love but the boys considered me a fair football star also. When spring came and the girls played jacks I changed my social circle and played football with the boys.

NATURE STUDY ON STURGEON

One particular day the road to school seemed shorter than usual. Sometime before, the teacher and I had agreed that the first time one of our men caught a little sturgeon in his net I would take the fish to school. Many of the children had never seen a sturgeon, an entirely different type of fish than salmon. It looked more like a shark. In preparation for eating it had to be skinned. When put in a hot frying pan the pieces jumped, giving the appearance that they were still alive. Smoked sturgeon was also very good. Many of the river dwellers had their own smoke houses, tall skinny buildings with a green alder-wood fire

burning continually, sending the smoke up to the fish hung above. One of the neighbors kept a few pieces of dry smoked fish in his back pocket and regularly reached for a chew as though it were chewing tobacco.

Government regulations forbade the fishermen to keep a sturgeon under three feet long, but much smaller ones regularly showed up on our dinner table. The little fellow I had in the pail was scarcely twelve inches long. Since sturgeon did not die as easily as other fish it seemed likely he would live through the walk to school and the nature study. It was hard work carrying a pail of water with a live fish in it all that distance. By the time we reached the school he was still giving lively swishes of his tail and I had a feeling of importance. After all was I not working in collaboration with the teacher? When a farmer's kid dipped the end of his pen in the dishpan that was the fish bowl and turned the water blue I felt he was trying to poison my best friend. Of course he got lectured on how to take care of a fish, the water was changed and the fish breathed on.

At our school anything different was interesting. To bring a live snake, frog or fish made one a hero for the day. In the spring many of us would show up proudly at the teacher's desk with lush bouquets of trilliums, wild bleeding hearts, lilac or dogwood branches.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ADOPTED?

Beside interest in the sturgeon the main talk of the school that morning was the dance that had been held the night before in the school house. One of my

brothers had come home with a black eye. In discussing the fight it was not long before the entire school was divided into two camps. Hashing over the events of the night before we felt it necessary to blame and justify. Henry, a small, skinny, freckled-faced boy said my brother got what was coming to him. I was sure my brother was right whatever he was doing and felt somebody ought to give the other fellow a black eye. Back and forth we haggled.

"My brother was right!"

"He was not!"

"Well, prove it then!"

"You don't even know what you're talking about!"

"I do so. My brother was at the dance last night and he saw every bit of the fight."

"Anyway," I said, as though bringing up some startling new evidence, "the other fellow used brass knuckles and that's not fair."

Then Henry struck the telling blow. He asked in sarcastic tones, "What are you sticking up for him for? He is not your brother. You are adopted—!"

Quickly I shouted, "I am not."

Defiantly Henry answered, "You are."

I screamed back, "I am not. Who told you I was?"

At this Henry's high pitched voice rang out, "My Father told me." This brought gales of laughter from the crowd. We had nicknamed Henry "my father"—because he so often said, "My Father said so."

I let him know I did not care two pins about what his father said or what anybody said, I was not adopted.

Hoping to prove his accusation false I asked,

"What does it mean to be adopted?" It was a word I had never heard before.

"It means," said Henry, "that your own Mother and Dad didn't love you; they just threw you out and let somebody else take you."

Now I knew for sure! That settled it! If there had been any doubt before it was gone now. With an air of finality I roared at Henry for all the world to hear, "I am not adopted."

Persistently I continued hoping for victory, "Alright smarty, you know so much, who else around here is adopted?"

The motley group of boys and girls were breathless. Things were getting to the place where it was hard to say whose name would be called next.

With the air of a man who really knew, Henry said, "Nobody."

He was making me out to be the only one. Terribly angry and upset I rushed at Henry with the intention of beating a little sense into his head. Henry decided retreat was the wisest so into the boy's wash-room he fled. Wanting to hurt him I stood outside screaming, "Come on out and prove it." The teacher heard the commotion, came out and took us in hand. Both of us were crying. Henry claimed bodily injuries. I was wild with anger and was hurting deep inside. In the physical combat I had been the aggressor. Henry had not been anxious for that. On top of all this I expected the teacher to get out the strap and whip me for fighting on the school grounds. She asked me what the trouble was—why the fight? I explained with no little sense of righteousness that

Henry said I was adopted, that it was a lie and I was trying to make him take it back. To my surprise she did not punish me but told me to sit in my seat until I was quiet and then to go and wash my face and straighten my hair. She then added that it was not lady-like for girls to fight, especially with boys. She must have seen my frustration and felt that the truth was hurting enough without laying on the strap as well.

EVERYONE WANTS THEIR OWN GRANDMA

For the next weeks I made an unconscious effort to ignore the facts of my life as disclosed by Henry. Not one word about adoption passed my lips. Once before I had argued with a girl about who belonged to whom. It was just before I started to school. The woman who was keeping me was mother of a large family and had several grandchildren all of whom called her "Grandma". Of course I called her "Grandma" too. Somehow we children got to quarrelling about whose Grandma she really was. In tears I burst into the house demanding to know if she was my real Grandma.

"You are my real Grandma, aren't you?" I pleaded.

She patted me affectionately and assured me that though she wasn't really Grandma to me the way she was to Myrtle, she loved me just as much as the rest. Triumphantlly I returned to the playground and assured them that though things were not quite the same with Grandma and me as with them, our relationship was every bit as good, if not better. When

my foster Father decided to take me home again I said, "Goodbye Grandma," with many tears. The parting would have been even more painful had she not told me that maybe someday I could come back and live with her.

AM I ADOPTED?

If the subject of adoption was taboo with me it certainly wasn't with the rest of the school. They had found my sore spot. In our frequent quarrels during the playground games they found that just the mention of the word adoption riled me terribly and set me off to great disadvantage. The final blow came when Helen, my best girl friend, carelessly added, "We all know you're adopted." I hurried home from school determined to settle the question forever.

I approached the housekeeper with the question, "Am I adopted?"

Very much surprised she asked in turn, "Who told you?"

I answered, "The kids at school are saying it and I want to tell them it's not true."

At that point she made some seemingly irrelevant remark. But there was only one thing I wanted to know, one thing I had to know so I repeated the question—"Am I adopted?"

She said, "Yes, you are adopted."

I objected, "No, I am not! It isn't true! I won't believe it!"

"Then," she said, "there is only one thing to do. Don't tell anyone I told you to do it but go to the spare bedroom and look in the bottom shelf of the

cupboard for a small wicker basket with a lid on it. Inside the basket are the adoption papers. You might as well see them for yourself and know the truth."

NAME HAD BEEN NEILSEN

At the first opportunity I stealthily approached the little wicker basket, took out the paper she had described and noted with horror that my name was on the front. What Henry said was true! Whoever my own Mother and Father were they did not love me enough to keep me. My name had been Neilsen and now it was Gerard. Whoever my own Mother and Father were—I hated them! Dramatically I imagined myself to be one of the last born into a large family like the Murphys. They had many children but poor as they were at least they had not given any of their babies away. If only I had my own Mother and Dad I would not mind being poor or even hungry.

CRUELEST WORDS OF ALL

The adoption papers went back into the little basket but things were never the same again. The housekeeper must have told that I now knew I was adopted. Whenever I was bad, which unfortunately was quite often, my foster Father would say, "We should send you to an orphanage. You really don't belong here anyway, we just took you in."