

Grace Tomkinson

“JUST THAT MUCH MORE TO MOVE!”

THE IDEA OF LIFE IN A PARSONAGE may never have been associated with luxury but it has always had a romantic and distinctly literary flavour—at least at a distance. Goldsmith tried to make it sound idyllic, but I wonder whether the Brontes or even Jane Austen would have minded exchanging some of the romance for a few of our modern conveniences.

After living in nine Canadian parsonages I feel myself something of an authority on the homes provided by the churches for the occupants of the pulpit. When I first became intimately acquainted with them, some fifty years ago, they did have their drawbacks. But being a bride I must have assumed that housekeeping anywhere had them, for I only occasionally felt that I was encountering more than my share.

Our first house was a large box-like building on a treeless, windswept hill overlooking a Nova Scotia harbour. It must have been as big as I remember it, for we sometimes had strangers march unceremoniously in at the front door and up the stairs, mistaking it for the hotel down the street. It was so new that its white plastered walls had never seen paper or paint, and most of the congregation felt pardonably proud of it. It was a very modern structure. It had a hot-water furnace instead of hot air. Besides having the bedrooms equipped with the usual quota of flowered crockery, it had a real bathroom. That was an optimistic note. The shiny white porcelain fixtures had been installed, but as long as we lived there all we could do was to cast admiring glances at them. Canso, being built on a foundation of solid rock, had no town water system. We had left before it was able to finance the extensive blasting operations needed to lay water pipes. For the same reason there were no wells. Our water came from the clouds and was collected in a cistern on the roof connected with an iron pump in the kitchen sink. I knew that my mother had once lived in a parsonage in Bermuda with a similar water supply, and it had sounded like the Dark Ages. But we soon got used to drinking rain water, slightly flavoured with coal smoke from the chimney. Like our neighbours, we used kerosene lamps until a year later when the town managed to afford the luxury of electric lights. None of us can forget the breath-taking

moment when they were first turned on and we really stepped into the Twentieth Century.

It is hard to realize that Canso was then practically an island. The railway stopped abruptly thirty miles away. Ancient records in fact describe it as an island. A chubby little steamer, the *Robert G. Cann* (one of Yarmouth's contributions to coastal shipping), made the three-hour trip daily to and from Port Mulgrave (except on Sundays, when the Captain and crew were in church). Everyone felt a personal affection for that boat. There were anxious days when, with a strong north-easter blowing, we watched the breakers crashing on the rocks and wondered whether the vessel would founder on her way across stormy Chedabucto Bay. It was a great relief at night to hear: "The boat's in! She made it!" Not that anyone actually doubted that she would. Captain Morris was a seasoned mariner of the old Nova Scotia school. There were very few days when he was not able to make the round trip and bring his sturdy little ship into port.

Telephones were not then plentiful in the town, nor were automobiles. Apart from driving two miles to the Commercial Cable Station at Hazel Hill, there was nowhere much to go. The new road connecting the town with the railway and making Guysborough, the county seat, a near neighbour, was to come later. There were settlements around the shore with interesting names such as Half Island Cove, Whitehead, and Coddle Harbour, but they were reached mostly by water and we never saw them. Still, Canso was a busy little "island" and its people were not insular. It had two cable stations, four churches, and various industries connected with the fisheries. These processed such delicacies as finnan haddies, kippered herrings, and canned cod tongues. Pleasant fishy smells floated up from the water-front and the stores there did a lively business. The oldest had been opened in 1812 by the Loyalist Abraham Whitman and had been managed profitably by his family ever since.

Our big problem in that parsonage was to heat it in winter. Our coal bills were appalling and we were never warm. We realized that it was not diplomatic to complain about it. We had also discovered that this house, while a source of pride to half the congregation, had also been a bone of contention. The building committee had disagreed violently about everything from the original plans to the later details. One faction had succeeded in carrying out its ideas. The other, convinced that its money had been squandered, was waiting hopefully to hear that nothing was right and to say: "I told you so!" It was our job to heal the breach, not to widen it, so we refrained from suggest-

ing that the modern furnace was inadequate for the huge, draughty place, and supplemented it with small stoves in various places. And it might just be possible, as some of the committee rather tactlessly suggested, that we were not quite equal to the task of operating such a new and complicated piece of heating equipment.

That parsonage had its good points too. It was delightful in summer, but unfortunately the summers were short. The kitchen stove burned beautifully and we could huddle round it on the coldest days. The furniture in the two front parlours was not only comfortable, it was elegant. There were mahogany tables and chairs, and sofas with rose-carved backs, and the original indestructible horseshair upholstery, which would delight any antiques dealer today. They had, by an odd coincidence, been given to the church many years before by my mother's great-uncle, Reuben Hart, who was born in Guysborough, one of three brothers who had become prosperous "West India merchants" in Halifax. All were staunch Methodists, and Jairus Hart gave Hart Hall to Mount Allison University. One of Reuben's benevolences was to present new silk hats to the numerous preachers in his family connection whenever the annual Conference met in Halifax. Another was to see that the Methodist parsonages in his own county were well furnished.

I said goodbye quite cheerfully to that bleak house, but I regretted leaving the handsome furniture behind. And we never again had such a view. It was historic as well as beautiful. The place, called Canseau by the French and Cansoe by the English, was one of the early North American settlements well known to European fishermen in the sixteenth century. There are no authenticated references to it until 1604, but in 1700 the French considered it "of greater military and commercial importance than Port Royal". The English fortified it in 1720 chiefly because of the fisheries, which were reported by the Governor to be "by all acc'ts the best in the Universe". Two hundred men were needed to "raise the fort" and a hundred were to be left there to man the garrison. The next year the sum of ten pounds was entered in the military budget for cutting timber to build a church. The building was located, according to a map of the time, across the harbour on George's Island, and it may have been the earliest Protestant church in Canada.

Cansoe had high hopes then of being the chief seat of provincial trade, if not of the Government, and it was, in fact, virtually the capital when the Governor was in residence there for months at a time. It was there, in 1745, that William Pepperell and Commodore Warren met and drilled their troops while they waited impatiently for the ice to leave the harbour of Louis-

bourg. They sailed from there to attack and capture the apparently impregnable French fortress.

Any place playing so important a part in the dramatic early days of Nova Scotia was bound to have a stormy history. Canso was attacked repeatedly by Indians, raided by pirates, captured and re-captured by French and English. By the time the Revolutionary War was over it had suffered so greatly that the Loyalists who landed there found only a few families left. Standing on our front doorstep, with the harbour spread out magnificently below, it was easy to picture something of the stirring past. We never saw (as Governor Phillips did in 1728) "250 vessels in port and 1500 to 2000 men employed in catching and loading fish"; or the scene four years later when as many as seventy sloops put in "deeply laden with fourteen whales from the Banks". But we could imagine them there. We could shudder at the thought of the raids on the almost defenceless little town, the fires and pillaging, the prisoners carried off; and the panic as late as 1812, after the town had been rebuilt and the troubled days seemed over. That was the year John Paul Jones swooped down on the harbour, destroying fifteen vessels and a great deal of property in the place.

There were still ships coming and going, but the only time we saw the harbour filled was when the whole of the Lunenburg fishing fleet anchored there, waiting for the right weather to sail for the Grand Banks. Whenever that happened on a week end, our church was filled and the rafters rang with fine male voices joining in the fishermen's favourite hymn, "Eternal Father Strong To Save". That was not the only time we sang it, and it was frequently appropriate to pray "for those in peril on the sea". On stormy nights when the wind shook the house I remembered the ships that had been wrecked in the area, some within sight of the town. The hulk of one could still be seen across the harbour. We may have lacked the excitement of marauding pirates and Indian war whoops, but it was a privilege to have lived for a time in a place with such a richly coloured heritage.

Parsonages were then often large and cold. The explanation given for their size was that some ministers had large families, but it was not the only reason. An imposing house for the pastor was almost as much of a status symbol in the community as an impressive church. And the Methodists were reluctant to let the other denominations outshine them. There were back stairs and front stairs, back kitchens, butlers' pantries (minus the butler), sculleries and maids' bedrooms (not necessarily occupied by a maid) in the "kitchen chambers". There were always attics. Once we had two of them.

And a spare bedroom was essential, if only for visiting preachers, many of them on the retired list.

These elderly reverend gentlemen in shabby but dignified Prince Alberts could arrive without warning at any hour, often with their wives. Living frugally on their "supernumerary allowance", they had one foot in Heaven and the other well imbedded in the past. That took them back to the open-handed hospitality of circuit-riding days, if not to Elisha's little chamber in the Shunamite woman's home. They assumed that any parsonage would have a bed ready for them and feel honoured to serve them as well. Before retiring they might give explicit orders as to what they were accustomed to eat for breakfast and the exact time it must be on the table.

One of our big houses was in Halifax. It had been well, almost handsomely built in its day, and with the coal bin filled it was comfortably warm. The rooms, even some of the bedrooms, had rather elegant fireplaces and, ironically, bell-pulls to summon non-existent servants from the kitchen. There were wooden shutters inside to close at night instead of common blinds. The bathroom (we never had more than one) had a splendid marble basin, but the tub happened to be of tin or zinc. The Ladies' Aid had made a gallant attempt to paint it sky blue but the result was not entirely successful.

Since we survived the Halifax Explosion in that parsonage and our second child was born there, I have a special affection for it. In the disaster of 1917, when a munitions ship loaded with TNT blew up in the harbour, we were near enough to the devastated area to feel immensely thankful to be alive. Not all the clergy in the city were so fortunate. One whom we knew well lost his wife and his only son in that one terrible moment. Our house, like countless others, had all its windows broken and was so badly damaged that it was weeks before we could live in it again. In the interval, we were farmed out among generous and more fortunate friends. None of our injuries proved to be very serious, though we still have scars to remind us of that tragic day.

In the itinerant system, Methodist preachers never stayed more than four years in one charge. With that in mind, parsonages were supposed to be furnished with at least the necessities. The size and appearance of the house were matters for the church trustees. The responsibility for the interior fell on the members of the Ladies' Aid. When the pastor moved out it was their job to go into the parsonage and assess the damage, which—depending on the size and ages of his family—might be considerable. They then had to decide what was needed to make the place habitable for his successor and compare it

with the means on hand. They were a hard-working group not so much given to standing up and testifying in meetings or leading in prayer as to expressing their devotion by organizing pantry sales, bean suppers, or other devices to raise money.

What we might find in a new house was partly a reflection of taste, or the prosperity, of the congregation. It was also a matter of luck. No one expected the furnishings to be new. Often they had been given by church members at various times and for various reasons. Whatever they might be, they had to be appreciated. Donors were sensitive. Once when we had rashly banished a particularly uncomfortable rocker to the attic we found that we had offended a regular contributor to the budget and possibly driven her to the Baptist fold. Sometimes a benefactor died and bequeathed a valuable antique to the parsonage, but it was more likely to be some monstrosity that no one else wanted.

The haphazard methods of furnishing made for some interesting contrasts. We could find a pile of elegant Limoges dinner plates in the china cupboard and an odd assortment of cheap dishes to go with them; or a beautiful satin eiderdown on one of the beds and cheap coverings on the others. I ransacked attics hoping to come across something I could display proudly downstairs, like a piece of Sandwich glass or an ironstone sugar bowl, but I never found anything more interesting than an empty bird cage, a broken chair, or a pile of mouldy old books (no first editions and mostly theological).

Our personal treasures gradually dwindled. No pulpit orator ever had to exhort my family on the folly of laying up treasures on earth. With the spectre of moving-day always looming ahead we leaned too far the other way. Whenever we happened to acquire something new for the house one of us was sure to make the disheartening comment: "Just that much more to move!"

There were some things that we might have preferred to leave. An amateur artist in one of our congregations expressed his admiration for the preacher by presenting him with samples of his work. No one, in those pre-Grandma Moses days, was exactly enthusiastic about them, but the large oil paintings had to be prominently displayed and carried with us. Our former parishioners had a friendly habit of dropping in on us unexpectedly wherever we might be, and it was some time before we could safely dispose of those works of art.

The room in the new house which most concerned the minister was the study, but the kitchen was important too. We all had to eat. Perhaps because the Ladies' Aid had never tried cooking on them, we were not always

lucky about cookstoves. If the oven refused to heat properly or the stove persisted in smoking it must have been the fault of the cook, and it was sometimes easier for us to buy a small oil stove and drop the subject. Except for the stove, there were few pieces of what might be called kitchen equipment. One we never found fault with was the ice box. We were thankful to have one at all. We felt that it gave us standing on the street to have a card displayed in a front window indicating to the ice man how many pounds we would need when he made his rounds. And after being obliged to run up and down the cellar stairs with food in warm weather, it seemed the ultimate in luxury to have ice cakes carried, dripping, through the house twice a week.

The land around the parsonage was also of special interest to the minister. A large garden could be a desirable asset to a man who enjoyed tilling the soil, but that was not my husband's forte, and if he found that his predecessor had been a non-gardener he was greatly relieved. We always made a brave beginning, but there were so many more important things to be done. So we had to endure listening to tales of the superb carrots, tomatoes, and cucumbers that our plot had produced in happier days, and the dahlias and delphiniums which had been the talk of the town. There was only one consolation: some of the expert horticulturists had been tedious preachers.

In some of our earlier charges we found that we were expected to raise chickens. The other preachers had done this and it was reasonably supposed that they needed to supplement their salaries. My husband, being city-born, was quite taken with the idea. It sounded profitable as well as interesting, and he had visions of our own delicious roast, fried, or fricasseed chickens on the table, and fresh eggs in abundance. I had grown up on a farm and was unkind enough to mention that before they reached the table the creatures had to be killed, plucked, and cleaned. But when a well-meaning farmer presented us with a flock of newly-hatched balls of yellow fluff, our little girls and their father were enchanted. We were in the poultry business. We might have been in it longer if our chicks had not happened to belong to a particularly long-legged, energetic breed that needed unlimited space for foraging. As soon as they had grown a little, nothing could keep them at home. It was some time before anyone could muster courage to tell the preacher that his feathered darlings were scratching up every newly-planted garden in the neighbourhood. Just before we had made permanent enemies and possibly caused a serious rift in the church, we learned what was going on and the buccaneers were sent sadly back to the farm.

Genteel old ladies were particularly interested in everything about their

pastor: what time he went to bed, when he got up, what he liked to eat, and whether his family properly appreciated him. The answer to that was probably "No". When they had time to kill, which was frequently, they arrived to sit (sometimes for hours) and enjoy the uplifting atmosphere of their parsonage. We had a good many other visitors as well, and, though they were seldom openly critical, I had occasional spasms of guilt about my housekeeping. It seemed that parishioners might reasonably expect to find the front rooms, at least, presentable when they came to see us. But our family insisted on using the whole house, however large. I often had to clear several children out of the way and snatch up an armful of dolls' furniture, colouring books, cookie crumbs, and apple cores before the caller could find a place to sit down. Sometimes the clutter went beyond the parsonage limits. One morning I happened to glance round at the two girls in church and was horrified to see a row of paper dolls sitting primly in the pew beside us listening to the sermon.

Our peripatetic way of living had its trials, but there were advantages too. While we were often homesick, we were continually stretching our horizons and making new friends. Many of our inconveniences were only what everyone at the time had to contend with. We looked forward to going on indefinitely stoking coal furnaces, coaxing sulky kitchen fires, rationing our hot water, and doing endless tedious tasks without the help of electricity. What I remember mostly now is the shabby comfort of the houses which were provided for us and the warmth and friendliness which enwrapped them. That may partially account for my sentimental weakness for antique shops.

Recently at an exhibition of Maine art in the Whitney Museum it suddenly struck me that the now highly valued primitives were disturbingly like the masterpieces we had once found it so hard to get rid of. They had the same quaint disregard for proportion in the drawing, the same bright colours and minute attention to detail. For a moment I had a wild idea of going back home to try to recover ours, and when I walk down Third Avenue in New York and see in the windows what might be the identical pieces of ugly furniture that encumbered some of our parsonages I am not merely nostalgic. The charms of marble-topped commodes and brass bedsteads still elude me, but I cannot help wishing, for practical reasons, that I now owned some of the things I once considered an eyesore. Even at the staggering prices they now bring, the demand, I am told, always exceeds the supply. But one of the penalties of moving so often is that it is impossible to remember what eventually became of the impedimenta so blithely jettisoned along the way.