

Chapter 1

The First Touch

When I was a child, suddenly in the midst of a child's duties or pleasures, I would often feel the touch of a *hand on my shoulder* – a gentle touch but yet a firm one; the touch of a loving hand, but a hand that bespoke authority. Always I would turn to see who had touched me so, but I never found anyone there. The experience, frequently repeated, left me with a strange feeling of questioning. But I never told anyone of the hand on my shoulder, or asked a grownup to explain it to me, for it was a very private experience. Many a childhood hour was spent in wondering what it meant. Many a year was to pass before I found the answer.

There was nothing in my background, circumstances, or family that would account for so strange, almost supernatural occurrence. On the contrary, mine was a most normal childhood and way of life-unless great happiness and love would be considered abnormal. This love and happiness were spread about me like a warm mantle by the hands of my parents, and about my three brothers and two sisters, as well.

This capacity for love and their large and happy family were my parents' only real distinction. My father, Joseph Monville, was born in Port Huron of French and Scottish parentage. At the time of my birth in the late 90's, on December 9, he worked in a copper mill in Northwest Michigan, in the little town of Hubbell in the heart of the Copper country where we made our modest home.

My mother, Mary Margaret Harrington, was born in county Cork, Ireland, and came to American in her teens. Like my father, she was a devout Catholic. A few days after I was born, as with the Catholic custom, I was taken to the church to be christened. My mother had chosen an honest and classic Irish name – Brigadine or Bridget, for short! From the heavy responsibility of bearing such a cognomen, I was

at the last moment rescued by my aunt, who was acting as my godmother. She elected that I be called Myrtle, and I have been everlastingly grateful for her forethought.

As Myrtle Monville, then, I began my happy childhood. Though my parents' means were modest, by some magic we always had a sound home, plenty to eat, and nice clothing. The needs of the body neither overshadowed nor precluded the needs for the mind and soul, for my parents were also intent upon our having an education as well – an aim not too common among parents of comparable resources in those days.

Consequently, at the age of seven I entered St. Cecilia's Convent School under the splendid training of the nuns and the oversight of Rev. Father H. Zimmerman, a very godly priest. I have never ceased thanking God for my early training under these godly people, where I remained until I was 13 years of age. This was followed by attendance at the Lake Linden High School in Lake Linden, Michigan; and eventually by matriculation at Michigan State Normal College in Ypsilanti, where I was to train for teaching.

My school days were happy and exciting ones. With my brothers and sisters I played freely without fear, enjoying the wonderful sports, the great Northwest Michigan outdoors with its stimulating climate and broad, shimmering lakes. I also thoroughly enjoyed school, not merely in its academic phases but in the matchless opportunity to know and share life with my schoolmates. I was proud to be a member of my high school basketball team for a full four years – a team which won the championship of the entire state!

We especially enjoyed the wonderful northern Christmas season, when we would go to the hills to fell one of the pine trees which grew so profusely there. Though we could never afford the expensive, fluttering decorations some enjoyed, we were perfectly content stringing cranberries and popcorn, making popcorn balls, and hanging them with apples and oranges on the tree. Most important of all the decorations, my mother used to hang a large candy cane for each of us on the lower branches of the tree. We used to slip under and take bites off the sticks until little was left but the handle. I had a cousin, an only child who lived near us, whose Christmas tree fairly shimmered with costly tinsel

and ornaments, but he didn't like it. He preferred to visit our tree and take bites off his candy cane from underneath the boughs!

Yes, I always loved fun, and I had my full share of it. My brothers, sisters and I, like most normal children, played and laughed and capered sometimes to the point of boisterousness. There must have been many times when we were trying in our exuberance, but I never remember at any time my father raising a hand to any of us in chastisement. The worst I can remember was the time when my father was entertaining company, I disturbed him to the point at which he said to me quietly: "I've got my eye on you!" It is scarcely necessary to say that was as far as I went. I was crushed to think that I had hurt him – the best father in the world and the essence of kindness always.

Some of this kindness and thoughtfulness was no doubt inherited. My father's mother was a lovely and lovable person. She was called the "mother" of the village in which she lived. When she died at the end of a long and useful life, even the school bells tolled as her funeral procession wound slowly down the village street. Whenever my father or any of his brothers spoke of their mother, they did so in awed tones and with raised hats. From what I have gathered from those who knew her, she was a born-again Christian.

It was from his mother, that my father drew the love, goodness, and tolerant understanding that marked him through life and was reflected upon my mother and us children. A hard-working man, he never failed to come home and give his full pay envelope, unopened, to my mother who surely had enough to do with it. A good manager and a good wife, she nevertheless had her hands full and her purse near emptiness with six children to feed and clothe. I never had the privilege of knowing my mother's parents, who remained in Ireland when she immigrated to America, though by all reports they were good and God-fearing people.

Later in life, my maternal aunt died and my mother raised her oldest son, a baby just a few months old, Joseph Harrington. But in our home, and in my parents' large hearts, there was always room for one more. We never knew, by precept or example, what it meant to deny anyone a portion of what little we had. The guiding principles of my parents' lives were generosity and to help others in unremitting measure.

One incident is typical. After my mother died, we had a Holland hot air furnace in our home. One year when we children went Up North hunting, we found the furnace missing. When we asked Dad what had happened to it, he replied that he had given it to the widow down the street who had babies creeping on a cold floor. He said, "I can get along without it."

From this and many other occurrences which I could relate, it was evident that his Christianity was not confined to kneeling and praying, which was a common thing for us to see him do any time of the day or evening upon arising or retiring. But, surely his was a way of life that spoke much more loudly than oral professions.

Indeed, religion as a profession was not a feature of any of our lives, much less an expectation that a call to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ should be given to one of us. Yet, that call came to me years later at a time when I was myself the mother of three small children.

In recent years, the urging of my friends and fellows all over the country to tell the strange story of how this came about has grown until I can no longer plead lack of literary ability. And because God moves in miraculous ways to prove His faithfulness in enabling those He calls, I have at last been led to put down on paper the events that led to and followed my surrender to His plan of life.

What I write here, with sincerity if not with the inspiration of genius, is only what I have myself experienced, learned, and felt in these more than thirty years. It is written in wonderment that these incidents should be of interest to others, and I write it only in the hope that it may be a small tool of God for the accomplishment of good. Like Paul at Ephesus, I am in the deep debt of others, so many others that I find it impossible to list their names in these pages. Suffice it to say that those who have touched my life, for good or ill, constitute a great multitude.

And the first touch was the touch of an unseen hand on my shoulder as a child - a *Hand* that was not there when I turned, a *Hand* that shall guide mine as I write the pages to come.

Note: Patricia Beall Gruits recalls that her grandfather, Joseph, was a big, tall man with shock of thick, white hair. Her grandmother, Mary, was a very petite woman.