

# One



ONLY MY FATHER SAW ME TO THE ASHEVILLE STATION THAT SUNDAY morning in 1912. Mother had gotten up early to fix us a hot breakfast. It was one of those moments that would be as sharp and real in my mind years later as it was that January morning: that particular look of love and longing in mother's eyes; the smell of the starch in her crisp white apron; the hissing of the pine resin in the big iron stove; the lake of melted butter in the steaming mound of hominy grits on my plate.

Then father had called from the front room, "Time to start!" And my brother George, hearing the announcement, had stumbled out of bed and down the stairs to the landing, where he had stood leaning sleepily on the banister, tousled hair in his eyes, to tell me good-bye.

"Have to go," father repeated from the doorway. "The engine's running. I had a time cranking the car in this cold."

In the gray light before dawn, the railroad station had a wraithlike look. I saw with a strange leap of heart that the train was going to be pulled by Old Buncombe, a favorite engine on the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad. The engine was painted green with gold trim and lettering and there were big brass ornaments on its headlight. The billows of smoke pouring out of Old Buncombe's smokestack looked blacker than usual against the background of new-fallen snow.

As father carried my bag on down the platform, he was trying to be jovial, teasing me as if I were nine and not nineteen. He still considered me too young to go off alone, especially on a wild adventure like teaching school

in a mountain cove of which no member of our family nor anyone in Asheville, as far as he could discover, had ever seen or even heard.

I had battled long and hard with him and mother for the chance to do this. All of us Huddlestons have a stubborn streak, no doubt inherited from our Scottish ancestors. How well I knew that it was this quality in father which had earned him so many business successes. And yet this time it was I, not he, who had gotten my way.

But walking along the platform that January morning, the elation I felt at this victory over my parents struggled with other feelings. Father was too heavy now with iron-gray hair. Tenderness for him welled up in me. Impulsively I stuck my right hand into the pocket of his overcoat.

“My hand’s cold,” I said as if a childish gesture needed an explanation—but he knew. His left hand covered mine in the coat pocket.

“Girlie,” he asked suddenly (that was what he always called me at sentimental moments), “do you really think you have enough money to get you through till payday?”

“Plenty, father. Yes—thanks.”

“Well, twenty-five dollars a month isn’t going to go far.” His voice was gruff with emotion.

“Probably for the first time in my life there won’t be any temptation to spend money. It will be good for me.” I was trying to sound cheerful. “Right in line with your ideas, father. For all I know there may not be a single store in Cutter Gap.”

Then we were mounting the steps to the train. I was to ride the coach, for it was only a six-hour trip. There was that certain smell of coal dust that railroad cars had; grime in every crevice and in the corners of the window ledges; brass spittoons; a potbellied stove in the rear; sacks of grain and produce piled toward the back; a lot of people. I marveled that so many would get up to catch a train at six-thirty in the morning.

Father found me an empty space and I sank down on the scratchy red plush seat, with my suitcase on the floor beside me. The whistle blew shrilly. Father reached out for me; the tweed of his big coat was rough against my face. “Don’t forget now—soon as you get there, write us. Want to know you’ve arrived safely.” Trying to be playful, he pinched my cheek—and was gone.

I saw father standing on the platform talking to the old conductor. Once

he pointed in my direction, so I knew from long experience what he was saying. "My daughter's in there. Take care of my girl." It was embarrassing: after all, I was too old to want father to do this, too young to be flattered.

Then the conductor was waving his arms and shouting, "All a-boarrd!" He mounted the steps and noisily clicked the guardrail shut. Old Buncombe sputtered and wheezed with the familiar chuff . . . chuff . . . chuff. Our car jerked forward, the one behind slamming into us. The door at the front of the coach swung crazily, but finally the jerking and the bumping smoothed out and the telephone poles were sliding past.

Across the aisle a country woman with a red-faced squalling baby jiggled the child up and down, back and forth, on her ample lap. Then when the crying did not stop, she opened up her shirtwaist to let the infant nurse. The man in front of me was lighting up a pipe filled with home-grown tobacco that stung my throat and made my eyes water.

After Budford, North Carolina, the conductor began moving down the aisle gathering tickets. The old man's blue serge suit was shiny at the elbows and knees. I fervently hoped that he would not mortify me before the other passengers by telling me that he would take good care of me, so I turned pointedly toward the window and pretended to look at the white fields and rising hills. What I actually saw reflected in the window glass was a figure so slender that it should have belonged to a much younger girl. I threw back my shoulders and took a deep breath, trying to fill out my new fawn-colored coatsuit a little better. The blue eyes beneath the piled-up dark hair stared back at me quizzically.

"Ticket, please. You're Christy Huddleston, aren't you?"

I nodded, hoping that if I managed the proper dignified expression he would notice that I was simply another adult passenger. After all, this was not my first train trip, not by any means. The past year and a half at Flora College in Red Springs I had taken the train both ways, a trip of three hours, and once I had taken the sleeper to my aunt's home in Charleston on the coast. But this worldly experience seemed lost on the conductor.

"I'm Javis MacDonald," he went on. "I've known your father a long time." He punched my ticket, handed it back. "So you're bound for El Pano, young lady. Your father said you were going to teach school. In El Pano?"

“No—in a new school—seven miles or so behind El Pano, back in Cutter Gap.”

Mr. MacDonald rubbed his chin whiskers reflectively. His eyes took on a wary look. He seemed about to speak, thought better of it, but then finally said impulsively, “That Cutter Gap is right rough country. Only last week followin’ a turkey shootin’ match, one man got tired of shootin’ turkeys and shot another man in the back. Well—probably I oughten to be tellin’ you, but you’ll be hearin’ the likes soon enough.”

Then Conductor MacDonald went on gathering tickets, and I was grateful to be left to my own thoughts. I was glad that I had not been forced to explain the reason for my trip. The old man would have thought me sentimental and girlishly impressionable to be basing my whole future on a talk given by a total stranger the past summer.

The scene floated before my eyes . . . the church conference grounds at Montreat where the Huddlestons had spent a part of every summer as far back as I could remember. The big semicircular auditorium with its rustic benches. The men and women in their light-colored summer clothes. The ladies in voile or lawn or crepe de Chine, some with long strands of carved ivory beads or jade brooches they had bought at the missionary’s shop on the hill. So many palm fans moving, and the cardboard ones that had been stuck in the hymnbook racks with their advertisements of religious publishing houses or HUMP hairpins or pulpit furniture. In the stillness before the service had begun, there had been the pleasant hum of whispering voices and, in between, the gurgle of the mountain stream that sang its way through laurel thickets and ferns to the left of the auditorium.

But then an elderly man with a neatly clipped white goatee and a resonant voice—such a big voice for a small man!—had risen and begun to speak. He explained that he was a medical doctor, and that he was therefore not going to preach a sermon, just tell his own story. He told the facts simply, almost starkly—how during the War Between the States he had ridden horseback through the Cumberland Mountains on his way to join the Confederate Army. Of course there were few inns in that area, so people in the mountain cabins had taken him in. He had been impressed with how poor the people were, yet how intelligent. Years later when he was a successful doctor in Arkansas, he had become desperately ill with scarlet fever. At a

crisis point in his illness, he had made a solemn vow that if he lived, he would go back to the Appalachians and help those people. He had sacrificed his fine medical practice to start mission work in Arkansas and Kentucky, and finally in the Great Smokies.

There he had met someone with as much passion as he to help the mountain people: Miss Alice Henderson, a Quaker of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, a new breed of woman, he said, who had braved hardship and danger to serve where she saw need. My heart beneath my frilled lace jabot beat faster. I would like to know that woman. On her own, he went on to say, Miss Henderson had established three schools: Big Lick Spring, Cataleechie, and the Cutter Gap school, the latter only a couple of years before.

Dr. Ferrand explained that a year ago Miss Alice Henderson had placed her three schools under the auspices of his American Inland Mission, believing that this unifying of forces would strengthen the work.

“How I wish this vital woman could be here today,” the little doctor said, “to stand beside me on this platform so that all of you could catch her enthusiasm. It isn’t for want of traveling that she isn’t here,” he chuckled. “She rides horseback all over the Great Smokies from school to school. Rather because she would not leave her work.”

Then Dr. Ferrand was painting vivid word pictures of individual “highlanders,” as he called them: of Minna Bess who had gotten married at fifteen; of Branner Bill who had been the feuding terror of Cataleechie Cove until he had heard the gospel story for the first time and had suddenly become a changed man; of Uncle Jason whose sole income was gathering and selling galax leaves at twenty cents a thousand; of Rob Allen who wanted book learning so much that he came to school barefooted through six-foot snows.

I could still hear Dr. Ferrand’s voice describing how such deserving people had inspired him to found the American Inland Mission with only one other worker and three hundred and sixty dollars. And then he talked about needing something more important than money: recruits. “Beyond the great mountains, outstretched hands and beseeching voices cry, ‘Come over and help us.’ These highlanders are your countrymen, your neighbors. Will you hear and help, or will you leave them to their distress and ignorance?” And with that, the little doctor had sat down.

It was a new experience for me to hear someone speak who had a Cause,

a mission in which he believed with every tissue and cell of his heart and mind. There in the auditorium I glanced down at my little pointed, buttoned white-kid shoes with the black patent tops, the ones that I had bought the week before, and I thought about the contrast between my well-shod feet and those of the boy who had gone barefooted in freezing weather. Of course I had always heard about need in places like China and Africa, but I'd had no idea that such awful conditions existed within a day's train ride of Asheville, right in our mountains. Why had not father or mother told me about things like that? Perhaps they did not know either.

As we sang the closing hymn, "Just As I Am," a feeling of exhilaration grew so strong inside me that I could scarcely sing the words.

After the benediction, I made my way slowly down the long inclined aisle. Dr. Ferrand gripped my hand warmly, looked directly into my eyes.

My voice shook a little. "You asked for volunteers," I told him. "You are looking at one."

The little man's goatee had bobbed up and down. "And for what do you volunteer, my child?"

"For the highlanders—I could teach, anywhere you want to use me."

There was a long silence. The man's eyes were penetrating. "Are you sure, child?"

"Quite sure."

So it was done. Then I had gone back up the hill to the Alba Hotel to break the news to father and mother and begin the long task of persuading them. And I had never wavered since—through all their weeks of pleas and arguments. After all, up there in the mountains were boys and girls who ought to have the chance at least of learning to read. I was not the best educated girl in the world, but I could teach children to read. Of course I could.

The screeching of the train lurching to a stop and the conductor's gruff voice broke into my reverie. "We're about four miles from Green Springs, folks. There's a snowdrift on the roadbed. It's flung two outsize rocks with it. I hope it won't delay us long, folks. Train crew comin' now. It oughten to take long to clear the tracks." He pulled a big gold stemwinder out of his pocket, scowled at it, then shut it with a snap.

The potbellied stove at the rear of the coach had been smoking. The acrid smell of the baby's diapers, which the woman had been stuffing into a

paper bag, had begun to permeate the coach. A breath of fresh air was what I needed. So I got to my feet, buttoned my coat, picked up my little moleskin muff, and walked down the aisle.

Outside I saw that the road crew had already arrived and were putting iron levers under the rocks. The airy snowflakes, as big as goose feathers, were slackening off now. Still I could see nothing but mountains and more mountains, peak piled on peak, shrouded in whiteness. There was a feeling of vastness that went on and on into the infinity of that somber January sky, with wisps of clouds trailing off the tallest peaks, streaking here and there like banners into the gray sky. And below the summits, time—space—substance were swallowed up in tons of billowing white. It was a lonely, formless landscape. I wondered suddenly if I was going to be homesick even before I got to El Pano.

Now the snow was beginning to fall again with the wind rising. It was a strange wind, a whimpering, sobbing wind, with pain in it. Yet gales were nothing new to me. Asheville had always been known as a windy city. I had always had to hold onto my hat as I rounded the corner onto Grant Street, sometimes using physical force to push, push against the invisible yet mighty wall of wind.

But there was something different about this wind. It was not a single note, but many notes playing up and down the scale, harmonizing at one moment, discordant the next, retreating, advancing. It caught at my nerves. And through it all, that sobbing sound. I wanted to shut it out, to flee.

Smoke was now puffing rhythmically out of Old Buncombe's smokestack. The two boulders had been sent crashing down the mountainside. The men on the road crew were standing to one side, preparing to tramp on down the tracks to look for other slides. With the other passengers, I climbed back into the coach. But we were hours late.

As I took my seat, I suddenly realized that I was hungry. It had been a long time since breakfast. I lifted the lid of the little wicker basket mother had given me. There was chicken breast and some thin buttered slices of salt-rising bread. There was an apple, several slices of spice cake, some Nabisco wafers, a small bottle of fresh buttermilk. As I munched on the chicken and bread, memories of home which had already crowded dangerously close came sweeping over me.

I thought of the big old kitchen—the stove with the warming oven above; the sink under the double windows; the tall spice cabinet with its pierced metal doors, some sort of peculiar design in the piercing. All of my childhood I had delighted in opening the doors of that spice cabinet just to whiff the wonderful fragrances. Why had smells—pleasant and unpleasant—always been so important to me? Sometimes the bad ones were torture, as on this trip. But then the nice ones more than made up for it—like the honeysuckle on the fence behind our house in late May; or in August the grapes hanging in heavy clusters on the trellised arbor-archway leading from the back porch to the coal house; or the fingers of fragrance that reached to every crevice of the house while mother’s bread was baking.

I reached in the basket for the buttermilk and a cup. To my surprise, instead of the tin cup that I expected, I brought out a pink lustre one, part of my favorite childhood tea set. I found myself turning the cup over and over in my hands. It was beautiful. Thin, translucent pink. How had it ever survived my awkward child’s hands? Perhaps because I had always loved it. Then I realized I was seeing the pink through a blur. So mother had wanted the cup to say something to me. Well, perhaps I was being foolish to leave my wonderful home. Or was I? I only knew that it was an experiment I had to make.

For in spite of the homesickness, I felt elation about being turned loose to make my own way in the world. I had sense enough to keep it strictly to myself, but secretly I was certain that I was about to take the world by storm. Not even father’s disapproval of teaching school in a place like Cutter Gap had lessened my enthusiasm. After all, those other men and women down through the centuries who had accomplished things must have had to shrug off other people’s opinions too. For no reason at all, those lines from Lord Tennyson that I had memorized for a high school literature course came into my mind . . .

*Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’  
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use!  
As tho’ to breathe were life. Life piled on life . . .*



It was odd that I had had to find my clue as to how to get on with that life from a stranger on the Montreat platform rather than from my family or the preacher in our church back home. The family would be there about now in the Huddleston family pew, probably standing to sing the Doxology. No doubt my brother George had asked to sit with some friends of his on the back pew. Father had not yet discovered how often the boys slipped out before the sermon, then reappeared at the end of the service.

The First Presbyterian Church of Asheville with its blue carpets down the aisles, the memorial plaques around the walls, the great pulpit chairs with their tall carved backs . . . Sunday after Sunday I had sat there as long ago as I could remember. Our preachers had all been good men, nice men, kind men. Of course, I had seldom been able to keep my mind on what they were saying. But I had always thought the trouble lay with me, not with them or their preaching.

It was only at Montreat last summer that I discovered that my attention was not so hard to get after all. Now I guessed that somewhere—out there—there was something exciting about religion which had not come through to me in my church back home. And I sensed that I could have sat in the Huddleston family pew every Sunday until I was an old lady, and it would not have been any different. That was why I had had to leave, explore for myself—“Life piled on life.”

And now with each turn of Old Buncombe’s wheels, I was being carried closer and closer to that new life. Already we must be crossing from North Carolina into Tennessee.

Suddenly the railroad tracks were running between the walls of a narrow valley. Here in this more protected area was a dazzling winter landscape. Everything was covered with ice, yet this was not the usual ice storm. Apparently fog floating off the higher peaks had covered everything with a gossamer coating of ice so fragile that every lineament of every object stood out from every other object sharply defined, highlighted, underscored—frozen lace.

Then the sun was sinking and every prismatic color was reflecting back from this ice-encased world. The valley had become like Ali Baba’s Treasure Cave that I had read about as a child. I found my eyes and throat aching with the beauty that blazed outside the train windows. Jewels seemed to glitter

from every bush, every withered blade of grass, every twig: sapphires and turquoise, emeralds and amethysts, rubies, crystals, diamonds.

The glow was dying as the sun dipped behind the hills rimming the valley. The winter twilight was coming now, coming fast. Darkness fell so swiftly in these mountains. The train began to slow down and the engineer blew a long warning whistle. Conductor MacDonald announced that we were coming into El Pano and began lighting all the railroad lanterns on the floor in front of the coach. Old Buncombe's wheels ground to a stop. Hastily I thrust my arms into my coat, buttoned it, picked up my muff and my suitcase, and started down the aisle.

"Let me help you with that, Miss Huddleston." Mr. MacDonald took my suitcase and swung it to the ground beside the train. "Easy, the steps may be slippery. The last one is high. Watch it. You're a mighty pert girl, Miss Huddleston," he said earnestly. "But land sakes—watch yourself out there at Cutter Gap."

"Thank you, Mr. MacDonald," I tried to sound confident. Already my eyes were searching the dusk. There wasn't much to see—just a tiny station building and four or five houses. I had hoped that someone would be coming toward me questioningly. How often during the last weeks I had pictured the scene . . . "Miss Huddleston?" they would ask. "Are you the new teacher for the mission? We've all been anticipating your arrival. How nice, how very nice—" And they would look me over. And their eyes would say, "We were expecting a young girl, but you're a grown woman." And I would be very warm and very gracious and would extend my hand in greeting, as mother and father did, and they would be more impressed than ever. But no one was approaching at all.

Several men came out of the station and began to unload crates and boxes from the baggage car onto a cart. From time to time they would pause in their work to stare at me. Deliberately I turned my back, my eyes searching the dusk once more. No—no one. Conductor MacDonald was giving me a quizzical look. I didn't want him to see how disappointed I was that there was no welcoming committee for me. Perhaps they were just late in arriving. My eyes searched the road beyond the houses. But as far as I could see, the snow-covered landscape was deserted.

Then there was the "All a-boarrd." The men wheeled the cart of crates

and boxes away from the baggage car. Old Buncombe began getting up a head of steam. I watched as the train got underway, at first slowly, then with gathering speed. It was smaller now, the smoke from the engine little white pulls against the somber, snow-filled sky.

I felt fear rising in me—a greater fear than I had ever known. That train was my last link with home. Everything dear and familiar was disappearing there, right there over that horizon with that train. What was I doing standing beside these train tracks in a strange village? I did not know a single human being in this desolate town. What would I do now?

In the still air Old Buncombe's whistle blew—far away. The sound echoed faintly in the valley between the mountains. The fear in my chest clutched at the sound, as if to capture that, if nothing else. Then even the sound was gone, and there was nothing, nothing but emptiness. I stood there wanting to move and yet not able to, staring at the spot on the horizon where the two tracks converged into one.

The men stopped the cart and I felt their eyes on me. They would think it odd my standing there alone. So I swallowed back the lump in my throat, took a firm grip on my suitcase, and blindly, scarcely knowing what I was doing, headed for the little station.