

Nothing to Make a Shadow

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By Faye Cashatt Lewis M.D.

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NOTE: It is believed this chapter is about two sister workers named:

Miss Nystrom, who was probably Hannah Nystrum who entered the work in Nebraska in 1913.

Miss Gibbs, who has been identified as Emma Gill by her family members

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Chapter 15

THE PREACHER LADIES

The suddenness with which events often happen in childhood must be one of the reasons they are retained so sharply in memory. With no fogging indecisions beforehand, no prodromal warnings, no previously developed and recognized need, they appear like UFO's in the child's consciousness, and indent themselves upon his mind forever.

Such an event was the arrival of Miss Gibbs and Miss Nystrom in the middle of January to hold a series of religious meetings in our Schoolhouse; "protracted meetings," as they were called. I know now that these meetings must have been in the planning stage for several months at least. Someone had to have heard about these ladies and their work beforehand. Inquiries must have been made, committees appointed, letters written, arrangements completed, all with the slow goings and comings of the mail since telephone lines had not yet penetrated into the Rosebud Country. I suppose, also, that these ladies must have belonged to some organized religious sect, but I never heard the name of it. Their arrival was my first knowledge of them.

They came by train from somewhere in the East, and father met them at Carlock. Carlock was only eighteen miles away, but it was an all-day trip for father, with Duke and Barney and the bobsled. We had been having frequent snow storms since the middle of November, and there wasn't much left that could be called a road any more. The route was mostly a line of tracks impacted into the snow, going on top of the harder drifts and around the newer soft ones. In several places it even went over the fences. When father drove into our yard he had to get out of the bobsled and shovel a path from the gate to the door, so that his passengers would not get bogged down in the snow when they walked to the house. The boys had shoveled a path early in the afternoon but the snow had continued and drifted it full again.

The preacher ladies, as we called them, stayed at our house throughout the series of meetings. Since building the small addition to the house, we had more room than most of the other settlers. While we were all pleasurably excited at the prospect of having company – even mother, upon whom most of the extra work devolved – the twins and I were not completely happy over it. It meant that we had to give up our bed and sleep in the front room on the floor. This was not the hardship that we had anticipated, however, for mother spread down the old horsehide laprobe with plenty of comforters over it, and except for a mild protest from Marie, "This bed isn't very bouncy, is it?" We found the arrangement very acceptable.

In one respect, it was even a luxury. After the kitchen fire went out this was the only room in the house with any heat in it. It was pleasant to lie there and look at the glow of the fire through the isinglass windows of the hard coal burner a few feet away from us, almost like going to bed without blowing out the light. And for getting up in the morning, it was marvelous. It was the only time we could remember getting dressed in the winter without shivering, except on the occasions of our rare tub baths, which were taken in the zinc washtub in front of the open oven door of the kitchen stove. We learned, however, that our winter baths were not so rare as those of some of the other settlers. The Holland family in our neighborhood were noteworthy in the eyes of the rest of us for their neatness and cleanliness. Yet the father of this family was once heard to exclaim, when the subject of baths was mentioned, "Take a bath in the wintertime? I do that never!"

The ladies held meetings every night in the week, and on Sunday mornings. The boys in the neighborhood took turns going to the schoolhouse early to build the fire, so the room would be warm by the time the meeting started. Father insisted that Floyd take his turn with the other boys, although he was younger than the others, and mother worried about the danger of explosions. On school days there were apt to be a few live coals left in the stove under the ashes from the fire maintained for the school session. Since we had no wood for kindling, the fire had to be started with corncobs and kerosene and the addition of kerosene to smoldering coals is a hazardous procedure. Without saying so, father believed that Floyd was younger than the others only in years, not in capability, so he permitted him to go, after careful instructions about dipping the cobs in kerosene and lighting them before putting them into the firebox.

Entire families attended these meetings. Most of them came in bobsleds, an accepted mode of winter travel. We walked, as we always did to meetings at our schoolhouse, and the preacher ladies walked with us. Father's ideas of gallantry did not extend to making his horses stand needlessly in the cold to coddle a couple of able-bodied women. Sometimes mother did not go to the meeting. The ladies liked to have a lunch after they returned, and if mother had not had time during the day to fix something she would stay at home and do it in the evening while the rest of us were gone. There would be doughnuts, or pie, or hot cinnamon rolls, with coffee.

Miss Gibbs did the preaching. She was of a slight, rather angular build, and very trim looking, with her smooth dark hair, her plain white shirtwaists and black skirts, and neatly polished black shoes. She delivered her sermons with a vigorous intensity that left no doubt as to her own convictions regarding her mission in life. Outside the meetings she was reserved to the point of being aloof. She saved herself for our spiritual enlightenment alone. Clearly, hers was the dynamic force that moved these two women from one isolated spot to another on these Dakota prairies, through hardships enough to have provided hair shirts for a whole colony of Christians

Miss Nystrom was the musician of the team. She played the organ and led in the singing of several hymns at the beginning and close of each service. She was younger than Miss Gibbs, apparently by about ten years. We judged her to be in her early twenties. She was plump, blonde, and full-busted, and her voice poured out into the schoolroom in a soprano flood, making the punier voices of the congregation about as effective as raindrops in Niagara Falls. During the sermon she remained seated beside the organ, facing the audience. She would sometimes smile down at us in a friendly way, and toward the end of the sermon would appear rather fidgety, and leaf through her hymnbook or hold it up to her face to conceal a yawn. She liked all kinds of food, and I used to think she was wondering what we would have for lunch when we got home. She was always jolly and kindly in her associations with us, although proximity to Miss Gibbs never failed to have a restraining influence on her.

One evening after we had eaten lunch I helped mother with the dishes, then brought my book over to the table where the lamp was, to read for awhile before going to bed. The book was "*Martin Chuzzlewit*," and I was almost through it. I looked at the scant number of pages remaining, wondering if it would last until I could get back to the Smiths' house to borrow another one. It was like looking in the cupboard and seeing the likelihood of some unwelcome days of famine ahead.

Miss Nystrom was sitting across the table from me with some crocheting. "Aren't you glad when you get a book finished?" she said to me. "I always am."

That remark set an ocean between Miss Nystrom and me. I was stunned by it, and for a long time I could not thrust it out of my mind. It bothered me to realize how little I knew about how other people think.

I was overawed by the personal belongings of our two guests, and I performed many little services for them with complete willingness because of opportunities thus afforded to look at the things in their room. Their array of blouses – we called them waists – was something to gape at. They had more than I had dreamed any two women could own, requiring all the spare hangers we had in the house. Miss Gibbs's were plain and starched, but Miss Nystrom's all had lace or ruffles somewhere about them. Miss Nystrom had an enormous set of toilet and manicure articles with celluloid backs and handles, some of which I did not know the names of, or the uses for which they were intended. Miss Gibbs had only a few of these, but they were elegant ones. They all had silver backs, and the mirror and brushes had her initials on them.

It was Miss Gibbs's handkerchiefs, however, that impressed me most of all. I would watch her put away, in the box with the others, the newly ironed ones that I had brought in to her, and was amazed that any one person should own so many. There was never any graceful opportunity afforded me to count them, but I thought there must be as many as thirty. And they were all linen! She told me that most of them had come from relatives in England.

I had one linen handkerchief of my own, a white one, with a sprig of blue forget-me-nots embroidered in one corner. My Sunday school teacher back in Iowa had given it to me for reading a verse of the Bible every day for six weeks. I treasured it, carrying it only on very special occasions, and then I usually pinned it to the inside of my pocket for safety.

Seeing Miss Gibbs's store of beautiful linen handkerchiefs made me want to show her this one of mine. It seemed to me that it would increase my importance in her eyes, that she would be surprised that I owned such a one, in the same way that she had been surprised to see the Haviland china that Mother used to serve their evening lunches.

I tried to think of some excuse for showing her my handkerchief without seeming obviously boastful, but I could not think of any. So one day I just brought it to her without any introduction to the subject, and said as casually as I could, "I have this one linen handkerchief. Would you care to look at it?"

She told me she thought it was very pretty, but she replied in an abstracted manner, as though thinking of something else, without showing any of the surprise I had hoped for. She left me with the deflated feeling that neither I nor my possessions were very important in her eyes.

If there were any unsavory undertones to the circumstance of these two women living, working, traveling and sleeping together, I heard no mention of it. So far as I knew, the bond between them was considered to be the Lord's work, and I think they believed it themselves. None of us knew anything about homosexuality; nor, I believe, did either of these two women. It seems to me that each of them found in the other those complementing traits of personality that made her a more complete and satisfied individual, thus obviating the necessity of seeking them in the opposite sex, where they are more commonly found. If their feelings for each other rose to heights of passion, there was always their religion to sublimate them, make them pure and even more ecstatic.

I was able to sense, however, that something about these two women was troubling father. Perhaps it was only the length of their stay. One night after they had been with us about three weeks, I overheard father and mother talking in the kitchen. Father was saying that he thought these meetings had been protracted long enough, and mother was protesting mildly. Mother was never one to have feelings hurt if it could be avoided. I had forgotten all about it by the next morning, but father must have issued an ultimatum some time during the day, for at the close of the service that evening Miss Gibbs announced that the coming Friday night meeting would be their last; they must "accept a call" elsewhere.

On Saturday morning our guests packed their belongings preparatory to leaving, and mother hurried to get some ironing finished for them. She had laid all the handkerchiefs, as she finished them, in one heap on the kitchen table, and asked the ladies to sort out their own. Miss Nystrom selected hers first, and took them into the bedroom to pack them. Then Miss Gibbs sat down at the table and picked them over, one by one, laying her own in a neat little pile ready to put in her box. I sat down to watch her, enjoying one last look at the fragile squares, each with its bit of decoration – hemstitching, embroidery, lace.

Suddenly I barely restrained a gasp, as Miss Gibbs picked up my Linen handkerchief and laid it in the pile with her own! I watched her face in an agony of expectation, certain that she would see her mistake. Hers were all white, and mine had those little blue flowers in one corner. But she went on with her sorting, without noticing. She seemed to be thinking of something else, and identifying the linen ones by the feel of them, without really looking at them at all.

As she carried them away, I went into the lean-to that opened off the kitchen, where the boys slept and where the twins usually went to sew their doll cloths. The door was warped, and would not close completely, but I pushed it as far as it would go. I felt very queer and thought I must look that way, too. I did not want anyone to see me, not even mother. From this seclusion, I listened to the final noises of departure.

The ladies had more to pack than when they came. One woman in the congregation had knitted a sweater for each of them, and others had given them aprons and various other small gifts. They had a difficult time getting their suitcases closed, and finally brought them into the kitchen and asked father to help them.

"Maybe they can't get them closed," I thought to myself. "Maybe they will have to take out some of the things and pack them in a separate box, and then maybe she will notice that one of the handkerchiefs isn't hers."

But with father's help, the suitcases did close. I heard the snap of the locks

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About the Author, Faye Cashatt Lewis: In 1918 the Executive Faculty recommended to the University's Chancellor that women be admitted to the School of Medicine under the same conditions as men. Among the first women to do so was **Faye Cashatt**, who transferred as a third-year student in 1919. Cashatt had received her undergraduate degree from the University of South Dakota. Cashatt was listed in the Bulletin of the School of Medicine as a member of the regular class, and received her degree in June 1921. Cashatt married one of her classmates, William Benjamin Lewis, and together they worked in Webster City, Iowa. As Faye Cashatt Lewis, she wrote several books. The first, *Doc's Wife*, details her experiences as the wife of a country doctor. Though Cashatt had earned a medical degree, at first she only worked as her husband's office secretary and only occasionally as substitute physician for her husband. During the early years of World War II, Faye Cashatt Lewis reentered medicine full-time. She retired in 1970. Lewis wrote several other books, including *Patients, Doctors, and Families*, *A Doctor Looks at Heart Trouble*, and *All Out Against Arthritis*.

Above from: **The First Women to Attend the Washington University School of Medicine**

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