

St. Columba Mission

Ruth Moore

Miss Peterson seemed stranger and more eccentric as she grew older. Perhaps she was. Solitude and loneliness do queer things sometimes. It didn't occur to us that it might have been these which were responsible for her last and most outrageous piece of stubbornness. Her everlastin' pigheadedness, we called it.

The church on the island was Methodist—a small, cold little building, with straight-backed seats and a naked pulpit rearing at the front. The organ was of the pedal variety which laments rather than plays. There we were accustomed to hear, on one Sunday a month, which was as often as the Methodist Conference could spare a minister, sermons of hellfire and brimstone. It was, all in all, a pretty bleak proposition, except I do remember that the bell in the belfry had a singularly sweet mellow tone.

The oldsters in the village were proud of this church, for in their young days they had worked hard to get it. Our grandfathers sometimes took us up into the belfry and showed us the nails that they had hammered with their own hands into the timbers. It seems a pity that their young could not have shared their pride, for their church was a symbol of a fine thing, a kind of unity that held the village together. Perhaps the times were already changing and our religious constitutions were not so tough as theirs. As for me, I know the sermons scared me.



Methodist Episcopal Church, Gotts Island,
c. 1910 (courtesy M.T. Davisson)

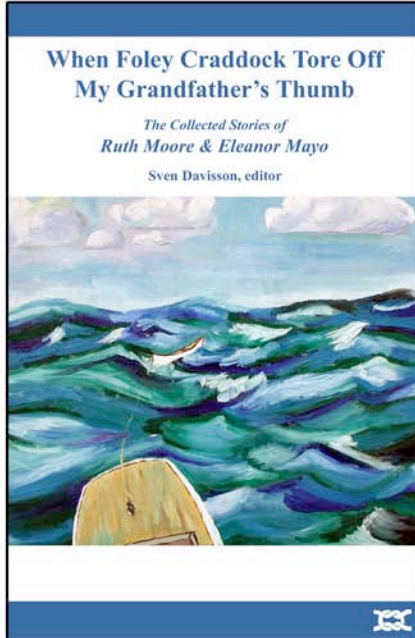
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Miss Peterson had always gone to the Methodist church; and so the village was incredulous and mad when she came right out one summer and said her own people had always been Episcopalian. She said she needed something more now than the Methodists had to offer; she said she was going to build an Episcopal chapel.

“Well!” we said to each other. “The Methodist’s always been good enough for *us*” and “What can you expect of them summer people?” (Miss Peterson had then lived among us for twenty years.)

Nobody believed her. We knew that outside of her living expenses she didn’t have two cents to rub together. “Aunt Pete’s as crazy’s a loon,” we said. We should have known better.

For two years she scraped and she scrounged. She wrote to Episcopalians in the mainland summer resorts. She talked people into giving a penny here and a dollar there, and somehow, by hook and by crook, she got a Movement started. The wealthy summer people in the resorts, all at once, thought it would be lovely to give a little church to the fisherfolk on the remote island. A neighbor of ours, with his tongue in his cheek, sold Miss Peterson a half-acre of land near the main road in the village. And one summer morning we were thunderstruck when a lumber scow delivered a load at the island and carpenters came to start building.

We were still fairly easy-going about it. Our minister wrote the Episcopalian rector on the mainland and offered him the use of the Methodist church for his services; it seemed a waste, he said, two churches in a town of fifty people. Might not the money be better used for Missions?

The rector wrote back and said, a little coolly, that no, he was sorry, but a place where Episcopal services were held had to be consecrated to them alone. And as for Missions, why, the new church was to be called St. Columba Mission.

And the fat was in the fire.

So our church wasn’t good enough for them; so they were so darned holy that they had to be all by themselves. So we were no better than a lot of naked heathens, to be sent a mission to. Well, then, let them build their church and let their so-and-so missionary come. He’d see how many people he had to preach to. Nobody was impolite to Miss Peterson, but some of the elderly people were pretty cool.

We would have been all right if somebody hadn’t started the argument as to whether it was idolatrous to get up and kneel down during a service. It stood to reason it was, some said, it was the next thing to the Catholics. Honest wholesome worship was sitting down to a good sermon, maybe standing up once or twice to sing a hymn. All that bobbin’ up and down was conspicuous in the sight of God. Church warn’t no place t’ make a holy show of yourself.



People took sides and tempers rose. The Bible was quoted—“Thou shalt set up no graven images,” for such, some contended, the furnishings of an Episcopal altar were. It was surprising that good Methodists should know so much about the Episcopalian service, but many seemed to.

My father said it wasn't as if the Methodists *or* the Episcopalians amounted to a damn as long as it was religion; it was just that we hadn't had a good row for years and were ready for it. But that didn't prevent old friends from passing on the other side of the road with their noses in the air, half for the Methodists and half for the Episcopalians.



St. Columba Mission, Gots Island, c. 1918
Photo by T.C. Moon (*courtesy M.T. Davisson*)

The day the new church was consecrated, a crowd of summer people came over from the mainland, and they had three bishops.

“*Three* bishops!” we said, knowing that the Methodists couldn't have raked up that many to save their lives. “Now ain't that some old holy for you?”

Some of the Methodist faction went to the ceremony out of curiosity. I was dying to go, for it looked pretty colorful, but my grandmother put on her oldest housedress and took me cranberrying. She did, however, peek from the bushes to watch the bishops make a procession down the road in full regalia from the neighbor's house where they had dressed. She sniffed and muttered, “Idolaters!” but I thought they looked lovely.

Miss Peterson was in a seventh heaven for weeks after her church was built. When the novelty wore off and the summerpeople went away, she had very little congregation. Often, when the rector could get over from the mainland, which wasn't



often, he and she held services alone. Then, one by one, the children began to go, out of curiosity, and because, on the island, there was nothing else to go to.

The little girls, alas, generally appeared without their hats. Their mothers didn't insist on their dressing up for the Episcopal services the way they did for the Methodist. We sneered a little, too, at the seemingly unbreakable rule of the Episcopal Church that ladies couldn't come before the altar without a hat. We wore hats quite automatically to our own services, but we didn't doubt that if we appeared without them, the minister would let us in. The rector, it seemed, wouldn't.

So Miss Peterson kept a box of paper napkins and some pins on a shelf by the chapel door. As each hatless child appeared, she would patiently pin a napkin to the top of her head. I can see now that row of kneeling little girls, with the ruffled paper askew on their bowed heads like so many drunken white butterflies.

After a time, one or two of the children and finally a few younger grown-ups were baptized by the rector, and the Episcopalians were in. But the Methodist diehards never forgave Miss Peterson. They said they hoped God would strike them dead if they ever set foot inside her church door. They never did; but God has struck them dead, long since, just the same.

Miss Peterson's church was, in the beginning, quite an ugly little building, rather like a new garage. Inside it was raw with new yellow wood. The day the carpenters moved out, she moved in. She spent her daylight hours planting cuttings from her rose bushes along the foundations, and in front of them bulbs and sets from her own magnificent garden. She wheeled her lawnmower across the island and cut the stiff fieldgrass again and again until the lawn came up fine and green. For three years she worked to make a hooked rug out of silk scraps in tiny delicate loops. It made a rich stream of color up the middle aisle of the church and across in front of the altar. In some curious way it brought mellowness out of the wood and out of the thin, amber-stained glass of the windows. Over the altar she laid lengths of colored cloth embroidered with millions of perfect stitches.

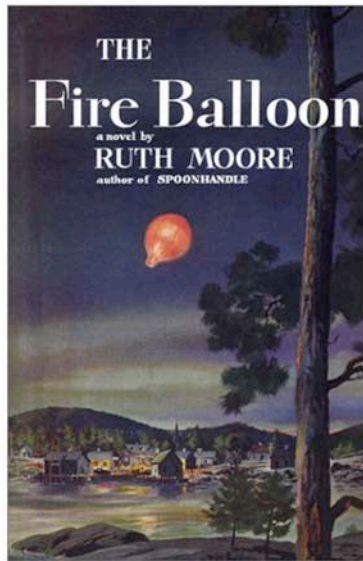
It took her years to finish the church. The new wood darkened in time into a pleasant background. The whole had dignity and quietude, but more than anything else, warmth.

Even now, twenty years after, with the door collapsed on its hinges and the floor rotting away, it is a pleasant place to go. The rug, rainstained, is still on the floor; one of Miss Peterson's priceless embroideries, faded almost white lies across the crumbling altar. Not even the souvenir hunters among the summer people have ever taken any of these things away. The lovely colors are gone, but you can still see the perfection of the work. Spruces have choked out the rosebushes that once grew level with the window



sills, and the swallows who live in the rafters make a quiet twittering on a summer afternoon.

Through those years we said Aunt Pete had gone fanatic on religion. Why, we knew for a fact, she spent three-quarters of her time on her knees. At Easter time, so said our neighbor who seemed to know, she fasted and prayed from Good Friday until the next Monday morning. She'd wasted all her money on that church, and the reason she was so thin was because she couldn't afford enough to eat. If that ain't fanatic, went the talk on the sewing afternoons, we didn't know what was.



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