

Chapter 12

Sidetracked!

January – March 1954

We felt a real sense of the Lord's leading as we decided to leave Tadmor, but where did He want us to go? A fine Christian magazine lay on my desk, and as I read it, an advertisement hit me forcibly. As I remember it, the wording of the ad went like this:

“WANTED: A man to serve as Assistant Youth Camp Director and Superintendent of an orphanage near Montreal.”

An address followed this brief ad, and it immediately appealed to me. It certainly seemed like a logical step forward, but I failed to spend time looking to the Lord for His clear directions. I had never learned the importance of finding the Lord's will in every decision. Just a few days after I answered the advertisement, I received a letter from Dr. George Martin, at “Wildwood Homes” in Vaudreuil, Quebec. He sent one or two pictures of the beautiful, spectacular property, and made it look more than inviting. A camp on those gorgeous grounds in Canada! Wow! While we had neither training nor experience in an orphanage, I felt we could handle the situation and learn as we went.

We loaded up our little trailer behind the '49 Oldsmobile and made one or two trips to House Springs where Bernadine's parents had moved. We stored some of our possessions in their home and spent Christmas with them. On January 1, 1954, we had dinner with my Aunt Essie in St. Louis, and the following day we started towards Detroit where we would cross the border into Canada. As we drove northeast with our heavily loaded trailer behind us, we were very much aware of a furious snowstorm pushing down from the northwest. We drove along the bank of the scenic Maumee River, frozen solidly from bank to bank. We hurried in our effort to beat the storm. Approaching Napoleon, Ohio, still an hour or two from Detroit, we felt a slight

jolt in the car, and we slowed at once. Then we saw the wheel from our trailer rolling along beside us just off the pavement. Stopping, we saw at once that we needed a new wheel. The time was about 4:00 PM. There was no way we could move the trailer, but I knew I had to get into the nearest town quickly and find a wheel. So we left the trailer on the side of the road and headed toward town. Stopping at the first farmhouse we could see, I went to the door and knocked. A lady answered the door, and I explained our problem and asked if I could use her telephone. She said her brother operated a wrecking yard in town, and in just a few moments we had him on the phone, and he promised to help us out. Graciously the lady (I've forgotten her name) invited the girls into her home, while Bernadine and I drove to town, and in a very short time we were on our way back with a wheel. When we got there the State Patrol was starting to move the trailer and impound it. Fortunately they allowed us to replace the wheel and move on. We picked up the girls and climbed back into the car, and were on our way again. We thanked the Lord for providing the help we needed. The lady told us that she made it a practice never to open her door to strangers, but somehow had felt she should help us. And how grateful we were for her help! We kept in touch with her for a year or so but have long since lost contact.

While trying to keep ahead of the approaching storm, we wasted precious hours with that wheel. When we reached the Canadian border, it was ten o'clock at night. The customs officer delayed us for two long hours, and it was midnight by the time we pulled out of Windsor, Ontario. I don't remember stopping at a motel, but we must have done so. We arrived at Wildwood Homes just before dark on the next cold January evening.

While we were riding that day, Bernadine read again the literature we had received from Dr. Martin, and noted how often his name appeared all through his writing. He was obviously proud of the fact that he had graduated from Moody Bible Institute and during the war had

served as a chaplain in the Royal Canadian Air Force. We had not noticed this telltale characteristic of pride before, but now we became aware of some red flags. Clearly it was too late to turn back. In a letter, Dr. Martin had told us we would live in an “apartment above the stable.” I don’t remember what was in “the stable,” but the apartment above it, where the Martins lived was the most luxurious home I had ever seen. We saw immediately that Dr. Martin lied to us when he promised us the “apartment above the stable.” We could not imagine the family choosing to move out of that lavish home for the sake of accommodating us. Instead, we were shown to some rooms in the main building.

Dr. Martin, tall, dark and handsome, presented a striking appearance in his fine, dark suit. He obviously possessed a smart, or possibly even a brilliant mind. He could hold us spellbound as he told his stories and had a great sense of humor. He had what seemed to me a strange idiosyncrasy in that he delighted in wearing an out-of-style bowler hat but managed to look quite distinguished with it. Surprisingly, he bought all the food and supplied us generously, but later we came to believe the reason he chose to do any shopping was that he did not want us to make friends with folks who might warn us about his shady dealings.

Margie and Ruth Ann rode a bus to a school every day and seemed to enjoy everything but having to learn French. They also enjoyed skating on the ice. We readily understood how ice hockey had become the national sport. Living two miles out from the town of Vaudreuil (rhymes with Oh Boy!) we sometimes found the roads completely blocked by snow. On one such occasion Ruth Ann developed a painful kidney infection, but getting her to a doctor or getting a doctor to her were both impossible. But she survived the ordeal and in a few days was as good as new. The next day after the snowstorm, the sun came out brilliantly, and Bernadine and I decided to walk to town to pick up the mail. We borrowed snowshoes. My shoes were a little too small to

carry my weight, and where the snow was a little soft, I sank to my hips. I remember the tops of the fence-posts looked like brown plates lying in a row on the snow's surface.

Every day we were more and more certain that we were in the wrong place, but being of a stubborn nature it took me years to connect our situation with a verse in Joshua 9:14, "The men took of their provisions, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord." In retrospect it is clear that I had eagerly jumped at the opportunity offered at Wildwood Homes and had failed to ask the Lord for His specific guidance. We were about to learn an important lesson.

The house where we stayed had been the palatial summer home of the owner of Seagram Distilleries. The 400-acre property, located at the confluence of the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers, one of the outstanding beauty spots of Canada, exuded an air of opulence far beyond anything we had ever experienced. The magnificent, two-story, main building sported sixty-five huge windows, and Dr. Martin made it clear that Bernadine would be responsible for keeping them all clean. In addition she would keep the building neat and clean (*including the five bathrooms*) and would be responsible for cooking for our family and three other men who worked there. These three men lived in the "Servants' Quarters" which along with the kitchen stood in striking contrast with the rest of the property, in that they were crudely furnished, perhaps forty years out of date. Clearly they represented a two-class system. When I objected that Bernadine's assignment was too heavy, he agreed to hire a maid for six hours on Mondays. He put us in a comfortable bedroom, seventy-five feet up the hall from the girls' room, which measured about twenty-five feet by thirty feet. Everything about the grounds and buildings would match anything in Better Homes and Gardens, from the maple grove we drove through on the way in to the boat house with its two-foot-thick stone walls, big enough to accommodate 10 boats at a time.

Almost at once it became obvious that our flashily dressed employer was far from the person we had been led to imagine. We quickly discovered that aside from the five Martin children, the only “orphans” were the two children of a television actress in Montreal who paid \$25.00 per week for their board and room. One day when the father of seventeen children came asking for help because of the death of his wife, Dr. Martin flew into a shouting rage, utterly indignant that such peons would call on him for help.

Somehow an orphanage in India heard about Dr. Martin and contacted him. Dr. Martin promised to raise money for them on the condition that they would name their organization, “Wildwood Homes.” Very soon we were told to work in the office, and our first job was to mail 3,000 letters begging for money for the orphanage at Wildwood Homes. When he sent out letters with pictures of this orphanage and money started to come in, he handled it adroitly. If the check was designated to “Wildwood Homes in India” he forwarded it, but if it was designated to “Wildwood Homes” it went into his own fund. With my own eyes I saw one page of his receipt book showing three receipts. The top one on that page was for \$1,000.00. The bottom one was for \$1,000.00. I have no idea how much money came in, but as Bernadine and I sealed envelopes we felt extremely guilty. We were helping a clever thief!

A neighbor with whom we became friends warned us that Dr. Martin was simply a crook, and it became clear that this was true. One day he received word that I had made some inquiries about his honesty. At once he ordered us to leave Wildwood. Gladly we headed south to Philadelphia where my folks were staying at the China Inland Mission headquarters. All the way to the U. S. border I kept my eye on the rear view mirror, wondering if we would get out of Canada without him chasing us and causing serious harm. He had warned us, “I have your mailing list (*which he had stolen!*), and if you say one derogatory word about me, I shall

immediately write a letter to all your friends, telling them about your ingratitude and explain how you have lied about me!”

A solid bank of gray clouds made for a gloomy day as we drove south, and I kept worrying about what our friends might think about my quitting a job so quickly. But when we reached the border, the sun shone through a small hole in the clouds, spotlighting the United States flag! What a relief to be back on American soil! And when we arrived at the CIM home, people were delighted to see us. “We’ve been praying for you that somehow you might get out of that place!” A few years earlier Dr. Martin had caused the mission considerable trouble, though we never heard the details.

I was still worried about what folks might think when we reached St. Louis. We had left Camp Tadmor, and now just a few months later we had quit another job. What kind of people were we, anyway? The Sunday after we arrived in St. Louis, we went to Hope Church with considerable anxiety concerning what folks might be thinking. But the pastor, Norman Forge, greeted us warmly. “Harold Martin?” he said, “I’ve got a file drawer half filled with material about him. I’m glad you got out of there!” We never had to explain our departure from Canada to anyone! We learned that Dr. Martin had been forced out of Alberta, that he had moved to Manitoba and Ontario before settling in Quebec. In just a few months we would receive a copy of McLean’s Magazine with a center page story about Dr. Martin, entitled, “How to Make a Million Dollars in the Charity Game.” About that same time we heard he had been driven out of Quebec and had started a school in northern New York. From there he went to Florida, and we heard no more of him.

This time we went back to House Springs and lived for a while with Bernadine’s parents. I found a few miscellaneous jobs, and then somehow I heard about a Bible Church in McClure,

Illinois, that was looking for a pastor. Even though I had missed the Lord's directions when I took our family to Canada, He now let me start all over again in the tiny village of McClure, with a population of four hundred, across the Mississippi from Cape Girardeau, Missouri. A full twelve years had passed since I graduated from Prairie, and five years since being ordained, and here I was, about to commence a pastoral ministry. Apprehensive? Definitely! But there in that southern Illinois town we saw a desperate need, and we were willing to meet it with the Lord's help.

We still marvel at God's graciousness in spite of my bull-headed stubbornness. I am a slow learner, and not many years later I would find myself repeating the same mistake. A job looked inviting; I saw no need to ask God for His leading, and jumped at the glorious opportunity, though strongly advised not to do so. But that's another story.

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