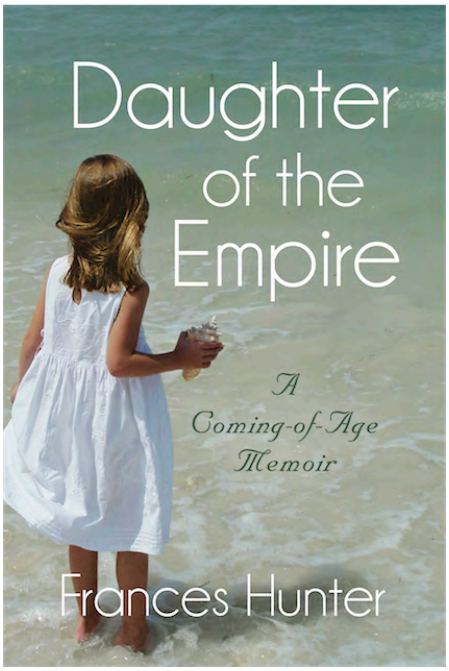


*This memoir is a compelling evocation of another time and way of life as experienced through the eyes and voice of a growing girl. After early years in New York City, she travels to various parts of the far-flung British Empire and copes with her disruptive life and bewildering parents.*

# DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE:
# A Coming-of-Age Memoir

by Frances Hunter

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**Memoir**

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## *Chapters*

At lunch-time Miss Fisk took me to the principal's office and told her what she saw me doing and that I had denied it. The principal made me stand in front of her desk while she answered the telephone and wrote things.

At last she said, "Are you ready to admit that you changed the answer?"

"I didn't change it, Miss." I didn't know her name.

"You will stay here until you tell the truth," she said.

Time seemed to crawl until I heard the bell ring and footsteps in the hall, and then it was quiet until after another while the bell rang again.

"I can expel you," she said, "if you don't tell the truth."

It would be shameful to be expelled, but I couldn't go back on what I had said.

"I told the truth, Miss," I said.

She leaned forward and said, "I am going to beat the truth out of you." Her face was white and hard. I saw that she could keep me there and could do whatever she wanted, and I would have to go on saying I hadn't changed the answer. I didn't want to go on repeating the lie, but I couldn't tell the truth. My legs started shaking. I tried hard not to cry. I couldn't go back to before it happened. It was hopeless. She watched me sobbing. Suddenly, she said, "You may go home now."

I walked home, feeling sick, and went to bed. In the evening, Mother and Father said they needed to have a serious talk with me. Father said he wanted me to listen carefully to him. I needed to be very sure I had told the truth. I could tell them I had lied, and that would be all right. If I said I had told the truth, they would believe me and tell the school that I had. But if I said I had told the truth when really I had lied, I would always remember I had betrayed their trust.

I said to Father and Mother, "I told the truth."

All night long I heard to the grandfather clock chiming the hours and quarter hours, and I tried not to think about school and betraying my parents' trust. I would never tell another lie ever again.

In the morning I felt hot, my nose was running and I was coughing. A doctor came and said, "She has measles. The rash will come out in a day

or two. See, her eyes are red. Don't let her read, and keep the blind closed. Your house will be quarantined, of course."

"But we're supposed to move out of the house," Mother said.

"You can't."

Mother's eyes lit up, and she tried not to smile.

I slept or dozed in the daytime and then lay awake all night again. Only when I heard the first trolley car and the horses pulling the milk cart or the ice cart past our house could I doze and sleep again. Nights and days went on like this.

When at last I could get out of bed, all my toys had been burnt to stop my germs spreading, but it didn't stop Jill from having the measles right then, so the yellow quarantine notice stayed on our front door, and the owners still couldn't move back into their house.

Our having the measles was a good thing because it gave Mother and Father enough time in the housing shortage to find another place to live.

When the quarantine notice came off, we left the Halifax house and moved to Dartmouth, across the harbour. There was no bridge to Dartmouth. We went by ferry boat, chugging smoothly across the gray water. I couldn't believe it was only three or four months since we had come to live in Halifax.

On the ferry to our new home, I hugged myself hard to hold and keep my chock-full happiness that I didn't have to go back to Gottingen Road School.

*

When Jill and I were watching the pigs at nine o'clock, I wondered if the blond boy would really come to the pigsty, but he did. He walked up to us and said, "My name's Ralph, and I'm eleven." I told him my name then said, "This is my sister Jill. I'm eleven too, and she's seven. We're staying at the hotel."

"I'm in a camp with my family. I have four brothers. Let's go."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

We walked up the road and came to a meadow behind rows of corn. We crossed the meadow through its grasses and wildflowers. The smell of earth and bent grass rose up around us. A gust of wind lifted a cloud of dandelion seeds.

"Fairies!" I pointed at them.

"No. Parachutes."

We ran in circles in and out of a cloud of midges, closing our eyes and holding our breaths. Then we stopped in front of a barn to watch a man in dungarees and a frayed straw hat milking a cow. We went close to her head, and Ralph said, "Stroke her. Like this." She felt warm and soft, and her breath smelled like grass. Her eyes were large and liquid, her nostrils flared as she chewed, and she chased flies away with her ropey tail.

Ralph boasted, "I know how to milk a cow." I was about to ask him if he lived on a farm when the man said, "Lookee here," then squirted warm milk at my mouth from the cow's teat. It tasted like warm cow. I spat and wiped my face with my hand. They all laughed, and I forgot to ask Ralph how he learned to milk a cow.

"Let's go," Ralph said again. The three of us picked our way through steaming cowpats and dried out cowpats and found a clear patch of grass to sit on.

Ralph picked a buttercup and twirled it by its stem as we sat in a small circle in the rich humid smell. He asked, "Do you know how to tell if a person is jealous?"

I shook my head.

"Look. I'll put it under Jill's chin. If her skin turns yellow, she's jealous."

Jill's skin glowed above the sunlit waxy petals. Ralph and I laughed. Jill said, "What's jealous?" We laughed again, and Jill said crossly, "I'm not." She got up and went to pick clover to make a bouquet.

"Now, you," he said to me, putting the buttercup under my chin. Then he shouted, "You're jealous! You're jealous!"

"Why should I be jealous? There's nothing to be jealous about."

"Well, the buttercup says you are."

"Now, you."

"I'm not jealous. Never." He held the buttercup away, out of reach. I stretched for his arm, and we struggled until he let me move the flower up to his chin. He lay in the soft grass, laughing with his eyes shut. His face was close to mine, and I saw the freckles on his nose and his cheeks and little motes of sunlight dancing on his eyelashes, and I saw that he was beautiful. He opened his eyes and looked closely at me too. I smelled the moist earthy animal smell of the meadow and the sharper smell of crushed grass under us and felt the world turning slowly around with just the two of us at its center.

Ralph stood up and put his hand out to pull me up.

The three of us walked slowly through the woods on the road to the lake. He pointed. "That's my family's camp." It was a cabin in a row of cabins. He didn't seem to want to take us there. "Will we meet your brothers?" I asked. He looked away. "One day."

At the lake he said, "This is the public part of the lake shore. Anyone can swim or paddle a canoe from here." He pointed to the best places near the cottages and the edge of the lake to find empty bottles to take to the general store or the stationmaster for deposit money. And he pointed to logs the right size that could be tied together to make a raft and then paddle it to the middle of the lake.

I looked up and saw by the sun that it was nearly lunch-time. I wanted to stay, but we'd have to hurry not to be late. Ralph said, "I'll meet you on the shore in front of the hotel tomorrow afternoon. At about two o'clock. The men will be catching tunny."

What was tunny? I hoped fiercely that we wouldn't have to pretend to nap after lunch again.

I asked Mother, “May Jill and I go and watch the fishermen in the bay at two o’clock? They’ll be catching tunny.” She said, “Fine, but don’t go near the water.”

A nursery rhyme that didn’t make sense sang in my mind: Mother, may I go and bathe?/Yes, my darling daughter./Hang your clothes on yonder tree,/But don’t go near the water.

I could hardly wait for two o’clock. Ralph was already on the beach. I helped Jill down the bank to the narrow shore of coarse sand and jumbled stones, too bumpy to sit on.

We stood watching and waiting for something to happen. Ripples glittered in the sunlight, and out in the middle of the cove small wooden boats formed a wide circle. Two men in bright yellow oilskins sat in each boat. Their voices came thinly across the shimmering water. Ralph told us the boats were called dories. “What’s tunny?” I asked. He said, “That’s what they call tuna fish. They can’t do much cod fishing now because of the war. It’s too dangerous to take boats out to sea.”

While we stood, the boats began drawing closer to each other, and the men, now sitting, now standing, shouted and scrambled from their oars to the ropes of their nets and back again to their oars.

The sun beat down, the shifting waves flashed, and the boats closed in. The men sat still and faced the center of the ring of boats that swayed and bobbed. No voices came across the water. The only sound was the hissing of the little waves near our feet. Jill began to make a village with loose stones from the beach.

Everyone was quiet as if the afternoon was waiting.

“They do this every year,” Ralph said.

“Do what?”

“You’ll see.”

The men hauled on the net strung between the boats, hauled lengths of net into their dories. The dories drew closer to each other, and the circle of net in the water grew smaller. The men stood up in their boats, facing the center. Again, for a long time there was no sound from them while small waves danced and sparkled all round.

All of a sudden, a huge dark arc-shape leaped from the ring of water in a great splash. The men roared together, and a harpoon attached to a

rope sailed through the air and pierced the side of the fish. The soaring tunny flew high, curving over a boat and the men looking up, and it flashed into the waves out beyond the circle of boats. Then there was only the tumbling sea in the gap between the green outer banks.

After a long moment, the water churned with many silvery-black fish leaping and weaving. Fish and harpoons with ropes attached tangled in the air. The bright blue sky filled with harpoons flying and crazy fountains of blood. The sea around the boats turned red. More men threw harpoons, more huge fish leaped in arcs high over the men looking up.

I cried out for the fish. "They have to do it," Ralph said, looking at me. "It's their living."

I turned at the sound of his voice. His face was like the face of a stranger. He didn't care. Angry with him, I said, "I know."

I went on watching, although I didn't want to see more. A huge fish could have crashed down on a boat and the men in it, but none did. It was real and also like a movie as if it wasn't actually happening.

The circle of water grew still, and I heard the three of us breathing. There were no more tuna left to catch. The wounded fish that had fallen lay on their sides in the water while the life went out of them, and the men began to pull them toward their boats.

"It's time to go," Ralph said. Jill would rather have stayed and played with her village of stones, but she got up and we each took one of her hands to help her up the slope to the road. Pink from the heat, she leaned backwards and smiled up at us. On the way back to the hotel, Ralph said, "My family is leaving tomorrow. Our vacation is over."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'll try."

*

We didn't see him at the pigsty in the morning. Mother and Father went for a drive in the taxi down the coast toward Halifax. They had been talking together about looking for a house to rent.

Jill and I had lunch by ourselves and pretended we were orphans. I went on eating Father's way, so I wouldn't have to think about which

way to eat anymore. Lunch was meat pie with vegetables and gravy under a nice big piece of pastry crust. One day I would cook a delicious meat pie like that.

We went to our room after lunch the way we were supposed to. I had a Nancy Drew book I had borrowed from the little hotel library that I was going to read. Instead, I was seeing again tunny leaping and falling and the fountains of blood and the churning red water when a light tap came at the door.

He stood outside. “I came up the back way.” He smiled the slow smile that spread and crinkled his eyes. “Come,” he said.

We went to the landing at the top of the stairs at the back of the hotel. Rambling roses on wallpaper bloomed in the reflected light from the afternoon sun and enclosed us.

“We’re leaving soon. We’re all packed. Here’s my address.” His last name was Smith, and he lived in New Brunswick. He gave me a stub of pencil and a coupon torn from a newspaper with space for name and address. “Write yours now.”

I wrote my name and the name of the hotel on the coupon.

“Now,” he said, “close your eyes. I want to give you something else. Don’t open your eyes until you’ve counted to twenty. Promise.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. What would he give me? I held my hands out, slightly cupped, in front of me while I counted and listened hard. He was near me, not moving. Then I felt his warm breath and his kiss moist on my cheek and heard the clatter of his feet at he went down taking several steps at a time, then his running feet on the back road growing fainter. I wanted to open my eyes but went on counting as I had promised. At twenty, I opened my eyes and searched for him. The road toward the woods and camps was empty.

I walked to a swing in front of the hotel and sat on it and listened to the hum of drowsy insects and the sighing of the wind. I was all mixed-up: happy and sad at the same time. I decided not to wash my cheek where he had kissed it until I saw him again whenever that would be in the future.

Mother came up to me. “What have you been doing?” Could she tell that I was different? What would I tell her? I had forgotten that she had forbidden me to be with a boy.

Since I had promised myself that I would never tell a lie again, I said, “I made a new friend. His name is Ralph. He has four brothers, and they were staying in a camp in the woods.”

“Must be Catholics,” she said with a sniff. She would be thinking only irresponsible people have five children. “What does his father do?”

“His father knows a lot about pigs and probably cows.”

“Hmph!” She walked away with her shoulders stiff.

Mother wasn’t right about everything. I didn’t need to tell her that Ralph lived in another province and was not like other boys and I would probably never see him again and I was sad and happy at the same time because of him.

I put the piece of paper with writing on it in the little jewelry box that held my other treasures.

Four days later I forgot and washed the place I was never going to wash. I was sorrowful for a few moments until I realised his kiss would always be there. The new surging light and warmth inside me was still there. And all that had happened in my time at the hotel in Hubbards was there for keeps.

## Coming of Age in Mauritus, October 1946–November 1950
### *In the Beginning*

I stood at the rail squeezed between other passengers. After five days on the Indian Ocean, all of us were eager for the distant hazy coast of Mauritius to come into focus. A book in the Durban public library had said that Mauritius was six hundred miles east of Madagascar and not a big island. Its longest part, from north to south, was only thirty-five miles.

We drew nearer and long stretches of beautiful white sand edged by palms, tamarinds and casuarina trees appeared. White-capped clear sapphire-blue wavelets rolled toward the shore, and the white sails of small boats lazily followed the coast. It was so lovely that all at once I couldn't wait for my new life to start. I would have jumped up and down with excitement if I wasn't too old for that at fifteen.

Twin forts flanking the harbour entrance came into sight. After we passed between them, the city of Port Louis, capital of Mauritius, where Father would work, appeared behind ships at anchor and tall cranes lining the dock. Out beyond the city buildings, dark mountains loomed large against the sky.

The pilot came on board, walked over to us and said, "Welcome to Mauritius, sir. I'm Captain Booker, your pilot." I was proud that my father would be Port Captain here and Captain Booker's boss.

After Father introduced us, Captain Booker said, "Welcome to all of you. We've been looking forward to your arrival."

"Thank you. I hope you'll fill us in about Mauritius. We haven't been able to find out much, I'm afraid," Father said.

"Well, to start with, the forts you see behind us are Fort William and Fort George, built by the British, but most of the public buildings in Port Louis date from the days of the French. The island was settled by the French in 1715 and known as l'Ile de France. Nearly a century later Britain recaptured it. At the time Port Louis was an important victualling station on Europe's trade route to the Far East, but of course the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 changed all that. Nowadays Mauritius is important mainly as a sugar exporter."

I could sense Mother's growing impatience with this history. She said, "I was told the climate was good and there are good schools."

"It's hot from November to April but not too bad the rest of the year. Cyclones are a big problem." He told Father, "You'll need to be on duty day and night sometimes."

He turned back to Mother. "About the schools, there's the Royal College and other colleges where boys are educated in the French tradition, and there are the Loreto Convents for girls, where they prepare for the Cambridge entrance exam."

"Only the convents for girls?" asked Mother.

"Yes," he replied. I didn't smile, hoping Mother wouldn't guess I was gloating. I hadn't dared hope I might go another convent school.

"You might also be interested to know," Captain Booker went on, "that the British allowed the French to keep their language, laws and religion. That seemed generous, but, in fact, has prevented them from participating in their own administration."

"Is that still the case?" asked Father.

"It is, and you'll find that people speak French and the laws and way of life are French. The old French families, the sugar barons, consider themselves aristocrats and superior to the British officials. They live up in Curepipe mostly and don't mix with us socially."

So we weren't welcomed in this place we had come to. The mountains appeared darker, full of foreboding, and a chilly feeling took hold of me, growing colder as he continued.

"One day I'll take you to see the mountain called Pieter Both. It's cone-shaped, and balanced on its summit is a huge boulder that looks like a human head. A cherished local legend has it that the day the head rolls down into the valley will mark the end of British rule."

The excitement I'd felt on seeing the lovely beaches completely melted away. It was awful to think we had come to a place where we were so unwanted. Maybe Father got this job partly because he spoke French fluently. His mother Alice Thuasne and her relatives had spoken to him in French, and his father William Crosse in English, so he grew up speaking both English and French. I had taken French at school but hadn't practiced with Father when he suggested it because he wanted

me to speak with a Parisian accent, pursing my lips and sounding prissy. I could speak a little French with a Canadian accent, mostly phrases such as *La plume de ma tante est dans le jardin de mon oncle*. "My aunt's pen is in my uncle's garden" wasn't going to take me far in a French-speaking country. I'd have to start speaking French, and I should really try to get over being shy.

We were all silent while Captain Booker drove us through Port Louis on paved streets lined with old buildings, some weathered and stained, others white-washed and blinding in the bright sunshine.

At the outskirts of the city, tumbledown shacks gave way to rolling fields of sugar cane waving in the breeze. It always amazed me that cane fields could look like grassy meadows. Occasionally, streams ran beside the road, where people who looked like Indians were washing clothes, soaping them and then thrashing them on rocks. Cloth would wear out quickly like that.

With a firm hold of my intention not to be shy, I took a deep breath and asked Captain Booker if many Indians lived in Mauritius. He said, "Yes, a great many, and other inhabitants, not so many, are from China and other parts of Asia."

That wasn't so hard. I was feeling pleased with myself when Mother commented with a sour face, "Port Louis is the dirtiest city I have ever seen." Could she already be making up her mind to be miserable? It would be miserable for the rest of us if she did.

When we rounded a corner onto the driveway of the boarding house in Vacoas, it turned out to be a long low tree-shaded L-shaped building with a screened verandah. At the front desk, Mother asked who the other guests were and was told, "They're all young bank clerks out from England on a tour of duty." Mother looked displeased; I wondered why.

All the rooms opened onto the shaded verandah, and the shadowy room I shared with my sisters was cool. Mother came into the room and said, "You are not to speak to those young men." Just as I was about to ask why not, she added, "It's quite unacceptable: they work with money."

That didn't make sense: what was wrong with money. As usual Mother didn't explain. Anyway, I thought the bank clerks looked too old

to want to speak to me, except for one, younger than the others and not bad looking. A plan was born in my head: one day when Mother and Father were out I would go to the verandah near the entrance and pretend to be admiring the view at the time he came back from work.

A great hullaballoo followed the discovery that Father's trunk containing his dress uniforms hadn't been unloaded from the ship but had sailed on to the Far East.

"Damn!" Father said, his face reddening. "This is bloody awkward. I won't be able to present myself and my credentials to the governor. I can't attend functions at government house and be introduced to the other officials. I'll be a pariah! God knows how long it will take that trunk to get here."

That was silly. Why couldn't he just go in his everyday uniform and tell the governor what had happened? I knew better than to say that. I'd be told I didn't know what I was talking about.

Mother telephoned the Loreto Convent School in Vacoas and made an appointment to take Jill and me there to enroll us. We sat in the nuns' parlour, which had pictures of the Sacred Heart and Pope Pius XII on the walls and a small statue of Mary standing on a column. Mother avoided looking at them. She and the head Sister talked, and Mother showed her our last report cards, then the Sister smiled and said, "We'll be happy to have you two fine young girls as pupils."

Mother said, "The Ursulines are famous as a teaching order. I had no idea that Loreto nuns were educated to teach." She left a slight pause after the word "educated."

The Sister simply inclined her head once.

Then Mother said, "I want it clearly understood that my daughters are not to receive Roman Catholic religious instruction."

I was so embarrassed I could die. Mother was fighting with her before we were even registered.

"Very well, Mrs. Crosse, but you should know that Religious Knowledge of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles is part of our curriculum. It's one of the subjects our girls are required to take for the Cambridge Junior and Senior Certificates."

Mother said, “I’ll have to agree to that then.” She had no choice since there were no other schools for girls on the island but convents.

The nun hadn’t let Mother fight with her. She was dignified with that calm inside her that some nuns had and I wished I did. If I had that calmness, like her, I wouldn’t get so irritated with Mother.

A dressmaker was asked to make school uniforms to fit Jill and me. Like the Ursuline Convent rules, the edge of hems had to be modestly not more than two inches above the floor when we were kneeling. The uniforms were hot: layers of cloth, navy blue with three box-pleats, front and back, on a yoke and worn over a long-sleeved white blouse. It made us look like dark blue sacks of potatoes, appropriately unattractive.

While Jill and I waited for our uniforms, I took a bus ride to explore the island. Crates of chickens were loaded onto the top of the bus, and as many more native people crammed inside, the air smelled increasingly of sweat and curry. The bus careened down unpaved roads, lurching sideways when it turned corners, scattering children, dogs and chickens and leaving dust and dark oily fumes in its wake. I couldn’t fall out of my seat because I was squeezed against the window by a large woman in a coarse cotton sari. Terrified, I held on to the top of the seat in front of me and prayed the bus wouldn’t crash. When we passed a sugar refinery, the stink was nauseating. How could something as sweet as sugar come out of that smell, I wondered, as the stench joined with the pungency of sweat and curry on the bus. I hoped I wouldn’t throw up on the lap of my seat companion. Back in Vacoas, I realised I hadn’t seen much of the island in my bus trip because I had been too busy staring at the crowded road ahead, willing an accident not to happen.

When I started school with the last couple of months of the year remaining, I found that my class was small, only eleven girls. Three of the other girls were English, Sylvia Opper, Ann Bacon, and Ann Tottenham. Gladys Oxenham was a Mauritian, whose home language was English. Sylvia’s and Ann Bacon’s fathers worked for the Department of Education. The other girls were French, and because they didn’t really mix with us socially the five of us formed a group.

Gladys was the first to make friends with me at school, and she invited me to her home, where she had an older brother and sister,

Nutcombe and Dorothy, and three younger brothers, Clifford, Vivian, and Edward. Her family was easy-going and warm, and their house enclosed me like a comfortable hug. Their father made and bottled a wine called either Pruneau or Pruno; I didn't see a label. He asked me to taste it and say what I thought. I wondered if it was made of prunes but didn't ask. I took a sip and said, "I like it. It's sweeter than other wines I've tasted." He seemed to value my opinion. It tasted like compote and was syrupy too. Wines I had sipped at home were not at all like it, so it was likely that people like my parents who preferred dry wine would look down on it.

I started preparing to write the Cambridge Overseas Junior Certificate exam next year in December and the Senior Cambridge exam the following year, at the end of 1948. The only new subject was physiology, not difficult. The others were much the same as they had been in British Guiana: English language and literature, English history, French, Geography, Mathematics and Religious Knowledge (the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles the head Sister had mentioned).

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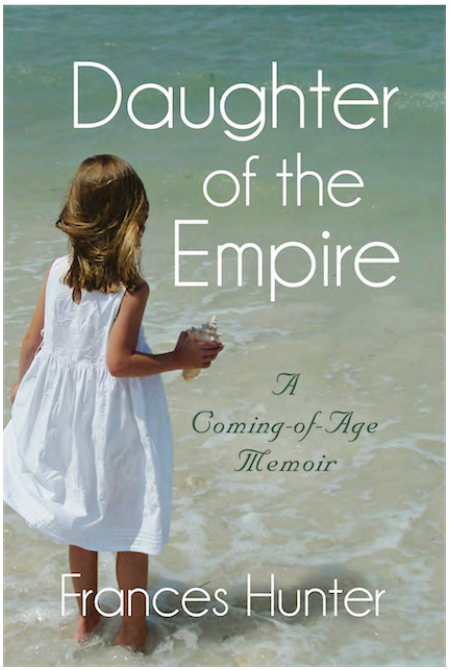


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