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Unusual Siamese Twins

God first placed a burden for the Indians in the Province of Imbabura (pronounced Eem-bah-boo'-rah) upon the heart of Homer Gail Crisman. He was one of the first missionaries to enter Ecuador in 1911 when the doors were thrown open by the adoption of a new constitution that guaranteed religious liberty. This constitution and the liberty it espoused would become, as we shall see, a critical factor in the evangelization of Imbabura.

Crisman had heard that there was a large tribe of Indians—over 100,000—living in the high Andes up near the Colombian border. They had no gospel witness and there was no road to take him to them. The high mountains and deep ravines between civilization and the inhabitants of Imbabura would necessitate a grueling, two-day horseback ride.

Crisman headed out. Bouncing along hour after hour, he prayed: "Lord, lead me to the right man who will lead me to the right spot where we can establish a church in Imbabura."

This prayer would be answered sooner than Crisman could have dreamed.

Night was closing in fast. It always does at the equator. Crisman booked into a tambo (inn). That night also, an Indian, enroute to his thatched-roof, mud-walled home near the town of Otavalo, was registered at the inn. Crisman deposited his meager baggage in the crude accommodation. Pulling the door shut behind him, he headed out in search of the "right man." The cool, mountain air felt invigorating.

The Indian from Otavalo was leaning against the mud wall of the tambo. Long, braided, shiny, black hair trailed down his bright red poncho from beneath a felt hat. His calloused feet were bare.

"Buenas tardes," Crisman began as he squatted beside the Indian. "I'm looking for a place in the center of Indian territory where we can establish a Mission station—a place where we can tell people about God, where we can hold reading and writing classes, where we can work together toward a richer life on this earth."

The Quichua* (pronounced Key'-choo-ah) Indian studied the white man's face. Finally, after what seemed more like minutes than seconds, he replied, "I know just the place for you!" His enthusiasm was uncharacteristic. "Agato (Ah-gah'-toh). There is a piece of land

*Quichua is the correct spelling in Ecuador.

you can buy in Agato.”

Even Mr. Crisman didn't realize what a miracle was being performed at that moment. The Indians were not normally of a mind to relinquish their land to white men, and most certainly not to the hated evangelicals.

The next day, the two men headed over the rugged mountains and around the shores of Lake San Pablo. The trail led up the slopes of Taita (Father) Imbabura, a towering, snow-capped peak. Finally at Agato, the Indian stopped abruptly and pointed to a rocky knoll. Crisman climbed to the crest of the knoll.

What a spectacle greeted him! In every direction, as far as the eye could see, Indian huts, surrounded by patches of farmland, dotted the landscape.

“This is just the place I am looking for,” Crisman said to the Indian. Then he breathed skyward, “Surely You have led me here!”

The land, knoll included, was immediately available. This was God's provision. Crisman purchased it. Yes, Agato would be the place where the missionaries of The Christian and Missionary Alliance would challenge the reign of Satan in Imbabura. And what's more, they would emerge victorious. The spiritual seed that would be planted and scattered from this rocky knoll would be unlike any that had ever before germinated on the slopes of Father Imbabura, as the Indians reverently called that magnificent mountain.

It was not until the year following the initial purchase that the Mission decided to send the first missionary couple to Agato. Howard Cragin, his wife, Clara, and one-and-a-half-year-old Rebecca became the talk of the area. What a stir their arrival created! Norte (Nor-teh) Americanos were as rare a sight in this part of the country as the giant condor birds. Dark, piercing eyes stared out from every doorway as the Cragins walked the trails that crisscrossed both the mountain towns and the countryside surrounding.

One day the Cragins stopped to refresh themselves by Lake San Pablo. Indian women were pounding out their wash on rocks by the stream that flowed from the large blue lake. One of those ladies, Rosa, chatted shyly but amiably with Clara Cragin.

To Rosa, it was almost inconceivable that this gringo family intended to live among them in one of their huts up in Agato. Others, like Rosa, were also intrigued by the prospect. Still others were infuriated at the thought of white people building on "their" property.

Rosa finished washing her clothes. Hurriedly tying her little *niñita* on her back, she adjusted the load so that both she and the baby would be comfortable. Rosa guided the Cragins further up the slopes of Taita Imbabura to Pedro Arias, the owner of a house that had recently been vacated. That windowless hut with the thatched roof became the home of the Cragins while

they built a two-storied, adobe Mission house. Though constructed of hard-packed mud and with walls three feet thick, the Mission house was nevertheless somewhat crude by today's standards. But in the eyes of the Indians it was a mansion. There was no other building quite like it in Agato. Only in Otavalo, a few miles down the trail, were there houses that could even compare with it.

Bitter opposition flared as news of the Cragins' arrival spread through the area. The foundation and the walls of the house continued to rise. The construction laborers on their way to work each day carried axes to discourage attacks by bands of Indians angry at the laborers' apparent support of the Cragins. Religious leaders, too, stirred up hatred against the "white heretics." Other locals resented the ignominy of losing a piece of their precious land to gringos.

While the house was being constructed, the Cragins established a small clinic where the many maladies of the Indians could be treated. In the annual report of 1918 Howard Cragin wrote: "At the same time of the construction, we were careful to use every opportunity to give testimony of our Christian love, establishing a little clinic for curations of wounds, burns, extraction of teeth and to give simple remedies for curing the common ills. We always accompanied each curation with prayer in Spanish or Quichua."

The Cragins' loving help was welcomed by the Indians, at least by those with sufficient courage to put aside their fears of these "devils." Despite strong warnings against the missionaries, the Indians kept coming to the clinic. Desperation, it seemed, had a way of overcoming prejudice.

Unable to stop the incursion of these evangelicals, the religious leaders down in Otavalo incited an uprising.

"You must get rid of the Cragins," the priest told his followers, "peaceably, if possible; and if not, by means of clubs and stones."

One morning, by 10 a.m., a crowd of 150 Indians and whites (Spanish origin) began their march toward Agato, eager to carry out the priest's orders to "get rid of the Cragins."

"Down with the heretics!" the advancing mob shouted angrily. "We want to kill them all!"

As the procession arrived at the Mission house, Howard Cragin reached for his Bible and headed outdoors. Standing on a mound of dirt, he faced the frenzied crowd. He knew that the very life of his entire family was being threatened by this drunken horde. God was also at work. While the religious leaders had been instilling hatred in the minds of their followers, God had been building into the hearts of some of the people of Agato an appreciation for the compassionate "heretics" who bandaged their wounds, put salve on their burns and

helped deliver their babies.

Rosa and her husband, Nicolas, were already definite converts. They, along with other sympathetic Indians, heard the approaching mob and hurriedly gathered together their own group to defend the Cragins. God was on their side, for what could have turned into a nasty confrontation gradually dissolved as the Otavalan crowd retreated.

Another uprising erupted three years later on May 29th, 1921. Once again the priest from down in Otavalo led the angry, half-drunken band of 150 or more. However, this time there were soldiers in the crowd who had been enlisted to produce even more fear.

As the group gathered in front of the Mission house, Howard Cragin took advantage of the opportunity and boldly preached Christ to them. Once again the mob retreated without major incident.

In the spring of 1921, George LeFevre came to join the Cragins in the work. How happy they were to have a reinforcement. But only four months after arriving in Agato, Lefevre contracted a deadly fever. Young George breathed his last on July 9th, 1921.

Howard Cragin tried to get permission to bury the body in the local cemetery. Permission was denied by the religious authorities who controlled the cemetery.

"His body would pollute our consecrated soil," they said.

Finally a carpenter was found who agreed to build a casket for the decaying body. A grave was dug in the front lawn of the Mission property. George's body was placed in the crude wooden box and lowered into the earth. It was a dark hour for the embryonic work of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Imbabura.

Nicolas and Rosa's father also succumbed to the same dreaded fever. Their grief was accentuated by the fact that the religious leaders once again would not give burial permission. A grave was finally dug for him in his own small field.

Animosity intensified. Many Indians considered it a disgrace to have this "boil" (presence of the evangelicals) festering on the chest of Taita Imbabura. Some openly cursed the day the Cragins had arrived. The fledgling evangelical church in Agato irritated the feared, but not respected, religious leaders. But this embryo had been planted by God Himself. Slowly and painstakingly He was bringing together its parts. Although there would be desperate attempts to abort it, there would be no stopping the growth of this embryo.

Simultaneously, 4,000 miles to the north, God was knitting together another embryo in the womb of a woman who did not yet even know Him. The woman, Emma Reese Rychner (pronounced Rich-ner), desperately wanted a baby girl. She already had two boys whom she

loved dearly, but it would be so much fun, she thought, to have a little girl around. Emma had not the slightest inkling that the God of heaven planned to use the tiny, developing embryo in her womb in ways that would be eternally significant.

Suppose you had been God. Suppose you knew, as He did, all you planned to accomplish through this little life your fingers were knitting together.

Suppose your mind leaped into the future and you realized that one day you would transplant this person into lofty, thin-aired territory high in the Andes—a territory virtually controlled by Satan and his wretched demons.

Suppose you were to meditate upon the assignment to the arduous task of transforming the heart of Imbabura into a symbol of your love. Suppose you pondered the difficulty of turning a rainbow inside out, defeating the powerful forces of hell itself and helping to establish a significant, aggressive, living church. What kind of child would you elect to make?

With a flair of infinite, beautiful wisdom, and perhaps even in defiance of man's puny thought processes, God's nimble fingers selected two Y chromosomes and declared with unchallengeable firmness, "It shall be a girl!"

Her parents named her Evelyn.

On February 4, 1919, God's achievements in Pierz, Minnesota, and in Agato, Ecuador, were no doubt linked in His own mind. Two

embryos were now breathing and moving. One day He would weave the exquisite tapestry of His eternal purposes both for a baby girl in Minnesota, North America and for a baby church among the high-mountain Quichua Indians in the province of Imbabura, South America.

Strange, isn't it? Siamese twins are joined when they are born and are surgically separated afterward. These twins were separated by 4,000 miles at birth and joined 31 and a half years later.

The Making of a Servant

In 1932, Evelyn finished grade school in a little-house-on-the-prairie-style, one-room school. There were 30 children in all eight grades, but only one teacher. Evelyn was already in her early teens when people from the little mission church at the crossroads dropped by to invite the Rychner family to church.

"It's too far for us to come," Evelyn's father said. Mr. Rychner was right. It was six miles to the little church, a formidable distance in the 1930s.

The visitors from the church had an alternative proposal. Would Mr. Rychner, as a school board member, allow them to start a Sunday school in the school house?

It was all right with him, he said, but he couldn't speak for the other board members. Some were Catholic and he doubted they would approve of a Protestant church coming to the community. However, to everyone's surprise, the board unanimously agreed to allow the

group to hold services in the school.

Pastor Clarence Swanson, a Covenant pastor, led the Sunday meetings. Evelyn began to attend.

The following summer, a Vacation Bible School was conducted in the nearby Swedish community of Freedhem. Once again two women came to the farm to ask if the Rychner children could attend. Evelyn's father agreed, but only after the women promised to send a car to pick them up.

One day at the meetings, in response to the invitation to receive Christ, Evelyn raised her hand. Her brother Edwin, who was sitting beside her, poked her in the ribs.

"There could be trouble at home!" he warned.

Evelyn did it anyway. In her own words, she was "thoroughly converted." Her life changed dramatically. Hers was no half-hearted commitment. Even then, in her early teens, Evelyn threw herself unreservedly into serving the Lord.

One by one every member of Evelyn's family came to Christ. God changed a pagan Minnesota family into a dedicated, supportive group who would one day commit themselves to stand solidly behind Evelyn in the years of her ministry that followed.

The consuming desire of Evelyn's heart was to reach others for Christ. Her attempts to witness did not satisfy her. She felt so inadequate.

Willis Alfors, the student pastor at the little church, suggested that Evelyn might benefit from attending Bible school. But how, she wondered, could she get there earning only \$2.50 a week doing housekeeping?

An opportunity came for Evelyn to work as a maid for a family in Evanston, Illinois. There she received \$8.00 a week plus room and board. Within one year Evelyn had saved enough to pay for her tuition at the St. Paul Bible Institute (now Crown College).

It was while Evelyn was in her third year at St. Paul that the Rev. Alexander Kowles, a missionary to China, came to Simpson Memorial Church as speaker for the annual missionary convention. He challenged the students to invest their lives in reaching the lost around the world. That night Evelyn dedicated her life to God, not only to reach the lost, but specifically the lost among the high mountain people of South America.

Within days Evelyn submitted her application for missionary service to The Christian and Missionary Alliance. The process would turn out to be a testing both of Evelyn's patience and her commitment.

The response to her application, when it finally came, was not the one Evelyn wanted or expected. There was no way, the letter said, that she would be accepted for foreign service without a high school diploma.

Evelyn was somewhat incensed. Why, she

had taken an extra year at St. Paul in order to qualify for further studies. Didn't that count for anything? And after all, she *had* graduated from a Bible school. Why hadn't they told her when she enrolled at the Institute that this training would not be enough? It was, for Evelyn, a disturbing turn of events.

Evelyn went to Ruth Jones, an Institute teacher whom she highly respected. Wisely, Miss Jones counseled her, "Evelyn, you can't look back. You have to go forward."

Evelyn decided to acknowledge God's sovereignty. She went ahead with her plans to minister that summer in Montana with Sue Schmidt, another St. Paul student. She and Sue had sung together as part of their Christian service assignment at the school. The ministry of the summer was enjoyable and fulfilling, an encouragement to Evelyn's somewhat discouraged heart.

Evelyn tried to complete high school by correspondence, but she found algebra too difficult. About at the point of desperation once again, she heard that the University of Minnesota offered courses leading to a high school diploma. She enrolled in the nursing course, with some electives in typing, bookkeeping and office practice. How could Evelyn foresee then that not one of those skills would be wasted in Imbabura?

In 1945, Evelyn finally earned her high school diploma. With that behind her, the major obsta-

cle to Evelyn's vision of getting to the high mountains of South America no longer existed. However, another hurdle lay directly ahead. It was the requirement that all missionaries of The Christian and Missionary Alliance had to take at least one year at the Missionary Training Institute at Nyack, NY. So, once more, Evelyn was off to school—this time to Nyack.

Through all these unpredictable turns in her life Evelyn was learning valuable lessons that would benefit her in the future. It was a preparation custom-made to mold Evelyn Rychner into a servant of the Lord with a heart for Imbabura.