

Chapter 4
Mother

As I began to think of how I could describe Mother, I found myself facing a real problem. Sometimes it seemed she had two completely different personalities. Some of the time she displayed surprising strength, and at other times she could not bring herself to make very simple decisions. As a young woman on a farm in Australia, she overcame real obstacles as she studied nursing and other subjects in preparation for missionary service in the interior of China. When she arrived at her mission station she must have found that merely living in North China presented a huge challenge: no electricity or gas or refrigeration, no telephone service, abject poverty and appalling sanitation and health conditions. The country had seen nothing in the way of material progress and had suffered terribly over the centuries. The Western Powers had earned the enmity of the Chinese government by forcing on them a series of humiliating treaties in the 19th Century. Just six years before Mother arrived in China, no fewer than 75 missionaries with the China Inland Mission had been murdered in the “Boxer Rebellion” of 1900. A large proportion of those murders had occurred in Shansi, the very province where she served. In fact, two lady missionaries were clubbed to death in the living room of the house that would be our home from 1921 until the last of us three boys moved to the States in 1939. Understandably, many Chinese people displayed an undying hatred for the “foreign devils,” Almost every time we went for a walk a small crowd of children would follow us shouting, “Foreign devil! Foreign Devil!” The endless filth and stench accompanying the utter lack of sanitation presented an enormous barrier to anyone who thought of going to China as a missionary, not to mention the repulsive poverty and disease. It was not extremely unusual to see a man on the street whose fingers or toes had been lost to leprosy or frostbite, or whose face showed two holes where a nose should have been. Every day people suffering starvation would cry out, “Help! Have pity

on me! These past two days I have not had a mouthful of food!” On top of the misery all around him, anyone desiring to serve in that land had to be willing to spend seven long years simply learning the language and ways of the people well enough to become proficient as a missionary.

In my Bible I have kept a note in Dad’s handwriting:

“Rev. Wm Milne who joined Dr. Morrison in 1813 said that
the study of Chinese required
bodies of iron,
lungs of brass,
heads of oak,
hands of spring-steel,
eyes of eagles,
hearts of apostles,
memories of angels, and
lives of Methuselah.

Unflinchingly Mother went through that process and served in difficult places. When epidemics broke out she nursed victims of typhus and typhoid fever, even when she had little or nothing in the way of medicine. There was a time when Mother and Dad parked their bicycles in the living room at night, loaded and ready to leave at a moment’s notice in case bandits infiltrated during the dark hours. Mother certainly knew what it was to go through difficult times and face serious danger.

Yet I remember that much later, as Dad lay in bed dying with cancer, he asked her to go out and buy a blanket for him. Bernadine was there at the time and went to the store with her. They found the blankets quickly but Mother could not make a decision as to whether to buy a blue blanket or a green one. Finally she came home perplexed and asked Dad. Without any hesitation he said, “Buy the blue one.” That settled it; she went back and bought the blue blanket.

In China Mother demonstrated a deep love for people as she persisted in serving the women around her. She lavished love and care on those women. I remember more than once seeing her in tears over the appalling conditions around her. My brother Cliff was born in

Sichow while a typhus epidemic raged. Mother got up from her bed to look after the sick and dying, desperately tired and fully aware of the danger to herself and her family. Not that she was indifferent to her family. She knew very well what it was to lose her first baby, and had come close to losing the second. In spite of all the trouble and danger, she continuously demonstrated her love for us three boys as well as for the Chinese.

Regardless of how unstintingly she gave of herself to the women she never felt that they fully accepted her. On one occasion I saw her on the brink of tears as she worked with a woman, Mrs. Yang, who had served Mother well in the home for 17 years. We loved Mrs. Yang and she showed a real affection for us. "I have been through all kinds of situations with her including the death of close relatives," Mother said, "but this afternoon she simply would not answer some simple questions and showed me she did not want me to get too close."

She invested many hours also in the lives of Chinese youngsters as she served both in the Christian school at Sichow, as well as in Sunday school in Siaoyi. There was the time when one five-year-old boy came to Sunday school in Siaoyi wearing a white cap. White is the color of mourning in China. But mourning for a family member couldn't account for the tears that had left their mark on his grimy face. When I asked Mother about him, she told me that the boy had received a beating at home because he wanted to come to Sunday school. He came anyway, and his presence told much about how Mother gained the love of children in the idolatrous homes around us. Only when we meet our Lord in Heaven will we know how many of these boys and girls received Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

And she certainly had love to lavish on us boys. I well remember how night after night she used to read to us youngsters and pray with us as we lay snugly in our warm bed. I remember the warmth of the reading even after 75 years. I still recall that our favorite stories were written

by Lettuce Bell who described Daniel in the lions' den. Never for a moment did we have any doubts as to Mother's love for us boys. She demonstrated her love for us by making pajamas, shirts and trousers on her old treadle-operated Singer sewing machine. She also knitted sweaters, scarves, gloves and socks, not to mention the warm woolen caps, which we would pull down over our ears in the freezing weather. She used a variety of steel, bone and ivory knitting needles of different sizes and shapes, some straight, some circular, some pointed on both ends, others pointed on one end with a decorative knob on the other end. I found it difficult to understand how she could use four or five needles at once as she made gloves for us boys. And when a sweater became too small for us she would rip it out and use the same wool as she added different colors to her design and knitted a larger sweater on her circular needle. She even taught a number of the Chinese women to knit.

Especially in those early years she was always in the process of either sewing or knitting, and when she was not sewing or knitting, she was busy canning fruit or vegetables, or cooking up some delicious food, or instructing our Chinese cook. While some missionaries found it difficult to keep a good cook, she treated our servant, Tong-Ruh, in such a way that he stayed with our family more than fifteen years, until Mother and Dad had to leave for a long-overdue furlough in 1940. I well remember how Tong-Ruh used to meet with Mother as she sat at her desk on Saturday mornings where they would settle the accounts for the past week. Because she had other things to do, Mother gave him money and he did the shopping during the week and settled the bookkeeping in those Saturday morning sessions. Although there was no way of communicating after missionaries were forced out of China, we are sure Tong-Ruh was murdered by Japanese soldiers.

Once every winter Dad would order groceries not available locally. The China Inland Mission would ship this order by freight from Shanghai. Included in the order would be a quantity of staples, but also perishable items such as butter, unavailable locally. These items could be safely shipped only in cold weather. When the shipment arrived, we would place the butter in a barrel of salt water in the cellar. Admittedly, by September or October the butter had lost its fresh taste.

In addition to her work in the home, Mother was an excellent Bible teacher. She always found time to teach the women who came for instruction. I have no idea how she found time for everything, but she prepared carefully for every session, reading from the fine library she and Dad had built up over the years, a library that the Japanese soldiers burned when they captured Siao-yi. When she finally had to move from China to the States, she found herself in demand as a Bible teacher in St. Louis.

Yet it always appeared that she lived in the shadow of her strong, outgoing husband. Dad made decisions easily, and Mother was content to let him do so. Dad had a tremendous sense of humor and laughed freely. But Mother found it difficult to cope with the circumstances around her Chinese friends. At best, the life of a Chinese woman with her bound feet was sheer misery. While we were small children our home was filled with laughter, but all the pain and sorrow around her gradually robbed her of her sense of humor. In later years it sometimes seemed that she was disturbed by laughter. *How could people laugh in the presence of so much suffering?* Only in the last few years of her life did it appear that she regained the ability to laugh.

Curiously, Dad through all his life was a “gadgeteer,” always interested in new things, and he learned to use all kinds of things in the service of the Lord, but Mother hated to have “things” cluttering her life. A favorite expression was, “Things are such terrible things!”

We boys feel that Mother and Dad made a serious mistake in not taking more time for furlough. Dad went to China in 1904, and Mother in 1906. Although the policy of the China Inland Mission was a furlough every seven years, they did not take their first furlough until 1915. They never told us what happened, but we sensed that a bad experience made them dislike the very idea of another furlough. Indeed, they took only that one furlough in forty years. I remember Dad once telling me that it was his desire to be “in the harness” on the field when the Lord called him home. Whatever the reason, they decided against leaving China to go on furlough. One unhappy result was that Mother would never see her native Australia again. I never heard her complain about it, but while I could not help admiring them for their commitment, I question the wisdom of their decision. During those twenty-five years between their furlough in 1915-16 and when they came home for their second furlough in 1940, tremendous changes took place in the homeland. American and British soldiers had gone to Europe in World War I. Her older brother Allan died “somewhere in France.” The Depression had devastated the United States, and now in 1940, when they finally came home on furlough, the nation stood on the brink of World War II. During those same years the United States had already embarked on a serious decline in morals. Mother, almost like Rip-Van-Winkle, found it extremely difficult to adjust to the massive changes in our society. Indeed, she suffered severe culture shock from which she never fully recovered.

The two of them planned to return to China in 1941, but their ship was delayed. If it had not been delayed, they would have been close to Hawaii when Pearl Harbor was attacked. With war breaking out, it became clear that a return to China at that time was out of the question. For a while Mother and Dad found an opportunity to serve in the St Louis Hebrew Mission, an

organization that endeavored to present the Gospel to Jewish people. Dad studied Hebrew and enjoyed a new field of labor. They did well there and gained new friends.

On August 14, 1945, five days after the atomic bomb destroyed Nagasaki, Japan capitulated, enabling General MacArthur to accept the formal surrender of Japan, which marked the end of World War II. Along with some other missionaries, Dad returned to China in 1946 for the purpose of making a survey to determine the practicality of resuming missionary work. Mother found herself leading the work at the Hebrew Mission without Dad's help, and she did a fine job for about a year. Then in 1947 she joined Dad again in China. Because of the Communist take-over of China, missionaries found their service seriously limited. By 1949 Mother and Dad were virtual house-prisoners in Beijing, unable to do much missionary work, and yet not permitted by the government to return to America. Anyone who was seen talking with them might be subject to serious interrogation or torture.

Then, in 1950 Dad found himself diagnosed as a victim of prostate cancer. At this point the Communist authorities were glad to get rid of them both and let them leave China. They flew from Beijing to Hong Kong, and from there to Philadelphia, where the China Inland Mission maintained its North American headquarters. This was one of the last flights of white people out of China. For five years Mother cared for Dad in his sickness. Then Dad died, leaving Mother very much alone in a country she could not understand.

After the funeral Mother moved to St. Louis to be close to us three boys. She quickly found herself once again teaching ladies' Bible classes and gained many new friends. We had feared that she would have a hard time adjusting to life without Dad, but instead she surprised us. When she could no longer lean on Dad for decisions she became much more self-confident. Cliff, who at that time lived in St. Louis, made it a habit for a considerable period of time to take

Mother out for dinner once a week. He commented that she displayed a healthy sense of humor, and “although she was disappointed at the way the world was going, she could still find things to laugh at.” He said, “I don’t know if I ever told you about one of my regular chores, and that was to dispose of the jars and bottles that she accumulated over time. With her frugal background in China where every bottle was precious, her conscience would not permit her to discard them.”

Cliff made another insightful observation: “I would like to add that Mother and Dad were adventurous people. I know that they were deeply committed to serving the Lord, but surely the love of adventure had some part in the decision to make the perilous voyage to that forbidding land back in the days when sailing ships still abounded; there are many less hazardous ways of serving the Lord.”

Meanwhile Bernadine and I were serving a church in Hillsdale, Oklahoma, a tiny village 18 miles northwest of Enid. On Monday afternoon, October 15, 1962 we received a phone call from St. Luke’s Hospital in St. Louis, telling us that Mother had died suddenly. She had planned to speak to a group of ladies on the previous Friday afternoon but had called a friend to cancel as she did not feel well enough to attend the meeting. The friend, a doctor who attended her Bible class, thought she was having gall-bladder trouble and insisted she go to the hospital at once where she would undergo some tests. She seemed to be doing quite well. Then on Monday while she was eating her noon meal in bed, she suddenly suffered a severe heart attack and moved directly from her sick bed into the presence of the Lord whom she had served so faithfully.

Like other missionaries before her, she had one driving passion. She could say with the Apostle Paul, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the [*upward*] calling of God in Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 3:13-14*). [go to next chapter.](#)