

Chapter 6.

Christmas Holidays

Just three more days till we go home! Boy! I can't wait. Only three more days! Sitting in the study hall, I raised the lid of my desk and looked again at the chart I had made two months ago, where I kept a precise count of the days left till school was out and we could go home. Mr. Martin, the master (*British for "teacher"*) on duty that morning, suddenly made an announcement: "We have to make a change in our schedule. The Northern Party, those going by steam-ship to Tientsin, will leave on Thursday instead of Friday. You will be sailing on the Butterfield & Swire steam-ship, the Tungchow. The Southern Party, those going to Shanghai, will go as planned on Friday." Was I excited? We would go one day early! *Boy! I get to mark off another day!* Quickly I raised my desk-lid once again to look at the chart taped to its underside, and checked off another day. *Now just two days!*

As a student, I never gave a thought to what was involved in the logistics of putting all those children on the right ships with all their baggage. Some sailed to Tientsin, some to Shanghai and still others to Dairen on their way to homes in Korea. Reaching those ports they broke up into smaller groups, taking trains, busses or other transportation to homes all over China, Manchuria and Korea. Indeed the logistics amounted to a monstrous job, made more difficult by the uncertainty concerning exactly what day a ship might arrive or leave. Although British companies owned most of the shipping lines, almost everything all over China operated on the basis of what seemed to be the Chinese motto, "Ch'a-pu-toh!" The phrase meant, "Good enough!" or, "More or less!" Schedules, if such things existed, paid little attention to minutes. An hour or two of variation must always be expected. Yet the business managers at the school faced the responsibility of putting their charges on the right boat at the right time, carrying the

right luggage, and making sure that every group would be met by a responsible person at the destination. As I look back, I marvel at the miracles achieved each year, as I never heard about any child ever being lost. And they achieved that success in spite of pirates and bandits who would have delighted in taking some of the children as hostages. Yes, there were problems. On one occasion pirates took possession of a ship carrying Chefoo children back to school from Shanghai. Another time one of the school-masters, Mr. Cyril Edwards, saw a Chinese man fall overboard. Mr. Edwards jumped in after him and kept him floating for two hours as the ship turned round to pick them up. For this brave action the British government honored Mr. Edwards with the Order of the British Empire.

When the day finally came for us to start our journey, eight or ten of us boys went to the harbor in rickshaws, each with a suitcase and trunk. There a group of girls from the Girls' School joined us as we boarded the Tungchow. I remember nothing about the girls, but I certainly remember the cabin where four of us boys were assigned. On opposite walls of the tiny cabin two narrow bunks, one above the other, filled up most of the available space. This would be our home for the next twenty-six hours. As long as I live, I don't expect to forget the stench in that cabin. On the deck just outside the porthole, a stack of dead fish proclaimed their presence *odoriferously*. To this day I am still squeamish about the smell of sea foods, and that was more than seventy years ago!

As soon as we sailed out of the relatively quiet waters of the lagoon, or gulf, that made Chefoo such a pleasant anchorage and hit the high seas, we knew we were in for a bad trip. I scarcely left my bunk the whole way. Some of the other kids seemed to enjoy the rough water. I kept watching the coats hanging from a hook on the wall. As they swung out from the wall every time the boat lurched into the grave between the waves I prayed, "Lord, please let those coats

swing out just a little more, and the boat will capsize, and it will all be over!” Sometimes as the miserable little boat climbed a wave and then dived down into the next trough, the propeller would gyrate madly out of the water shaking the whole ship, just as a cat might shake the life out of a mouse. Some smart guy in our group composed a song in remembrance of that journey:

I called to my comrade below me;
The bulk of his head did appear.
I gave him a breakfasty shower bath,
He did not much thank me, I fear.
Bring back, bring back
O bring back my breakfast to me!

As we approached the mouth of the river leading to Tientsin, we found that the tide was out, and we could not cross the bar till the tide came in enough for us to float over the bar. Just sitting there on that boat, rocking in the waves proved to be worse torture than sailing over the open sea. *I wonder if the gentlemen in the Spanish Inquisition ever thought of putting their victims on a boat anchored just outside the bar.*

Sailing up-river the few miles to Tientsin was quite an experience as the wake from our ship capsized some of the little fishing junks and sampans along the shore. Finally we drew up alongside the dock at Tientsin. I remember Arthur Parry shouting to his father who stood waiting for him, “Daddy, I was sick only seventeen times!”

In Tientsin Mr. Trickey, father of one of the boys in our party, met us and took us to the delightful China Inland Mission home, maintained for the primary purpose of assisting travelers. The next day he herded our group, now down to a total of nine rambunctious children, aboard a train to Peking, about four or five hours away. Next morning we transferred to the Peking-Hankow Railroad. This train always proved to be in worse condition than either of the other two trains. I suppose it was operated by Chinese, while the train from Tientsin to Peking was run by Belgians, and the third train, a narrow-gauge train that would take us into Shansi Province, was

under French control. I remember that on one occasion while we were on the Peking-Hankow Railroad, the best accommodations we could find consisted of a very old baggage car.

Fortunately the weather was moderately warm. I recall sitting on the wooden floor with my feet dangling comfortably through a hole. What I remember was how upset I was when I lost my harmonica through a hole in the floor. But it was not all bad. There was an exciting stop just an hour or two from Peking, the busy city of Bao-Ting-Fu, where the train stopped for ten minutes. Mr. Trickey and one of the older boys, Raymond, jumped out onto the platform where they haggled for roasted chicken and sweet potatoes still in the oven, as we prepared for a feast fit for a king. I remember Raymond bought a basket of pears that would make a fine dessert. We enjoyed the chicken and sweet potatoes as though we were in the finest restaurant in the world. But when Raymond started to hand out the pears, he found that under the top layer of delicious-looking pears, the basket was filled with stones and dirt. By the time he discovered the swindle, of course, the train was already pulling away from the station.

It was a long day before we reached our destination at Shih-Chia-Chuang. There we had hotel accommodations right at the end of the platform. Next morning we left Shih-Chia Chuang, bound for Tai-Yuan-Fu, the capital of Shansi Province. This was always the best part of the journey. Unlike the other trains, we knew that this train actually ran on time. We rode in comfort and found the scenery breath-taking. In six hours the train ran through twenty-seven tunnels and over bridges across raging torrents. In one place our train passed through a long tunnel and onto a bridge over a raging torrent and immediately into another tunnel. The French built this narrow-gauge rail-line before any engineers told them it was impossible, and maintained it remarkably well. We disembarked at Yu-Tse, just a few miles before the rails ended at Tai-Yuan-Fu. There our party, now down to six children and Mr. Trickey, went into a typical Chinese inn. Riding in

seven rickshaws with our luggage, we went through the big gate and into the yard surrounded by a number of rooms of different sizes. At the far end of the courtyard a foul-smelling stable accommodated the horses, mules and donkeys of other customers. Across the yard from our room the community toilet proclaimed its presence with a strong identifying odor. It consisted of a pit, five feet wide, nine feet long and several feet deep. A series of skillfully cut stones, each about eight inches wide and eight inches deep bridged this chasm. The stone mini-bridges were spaced about eight inches apart. The inn made no provisions for privacy. Hotel guests who needed to use the facilities could stand with one foot on each of two mini-bridges, as they relieved themselves. Needless to say, in winter weather, one had to be careful about ice on the bridges. I suppose the females had similar accommodations, though I have no recollection.

Although by the time we found our room it was dark and we were bone-tired, we could not go to bed till the police arrived to check on the weary travelers. They had to record the name and age of each person, and other vital data. It was not long before we boys went to sleep on the “kang,” the brick bed that was standard for sleeping accommodations, despite the attacks of hordes of hungry insects known as “China’s Millions.” In the morning, after a bowl of delicious hot noodles, we were ready for the next adventure, a “bus.” This vehicle turned out to be a dilapidated pick-up, protected from the sun by a straw mat over our heads. Two planks laid on blocks, one on each side of the bed served as seating. (I remember one occasion while I was riding one of these fine buses with Dad, I remarked as I looked at my watch, “Dad, we’re really making good progress; we have averaged seventeen miles per hour for ten minutes.” I had no sooner spoken that the truck hit something and came to a sudden stop. We had just plunged into a pothole that knocked off one of the front wheels.) When my brothers and I reached Kiehsiu we

left Mr. Trickey, his son Loren, and one other boy, Stanley Rowe, as they had another hundred miles to go.

At Kieh-siu Dad met us with bicycles, and we three boys rode with him the last ten miles home to Siaoyi for the holidays. Our baggage followed on a mule-cart that took four hours for those ten miles. We looked forward to the thrill of spending what was left of our Christmas holidays finally “*at home*” in our comfortable house in Siaoyi! Each year, depending on how quickly we made the trip, we might have Christmas and a whole month with just our family. Those thirty or forty days we were able to spend at home were filled with activity and excitement. Although both Dad and Mother found themselves extremely busy, they did their best to show their love. They sacrificially provided what they considered best for us in the way of books and toys. They took us out for walks along the dike that was built up to protect the city from floods that occurred every summer. Sometimes Dad took his big old 12-gauge shotgun, as he hunted for hares that abounded in that area. Those hares provided a treat for us at the dinner table. Mother demonstrated her skills cooking hares, ducks, geese, or chickens, and taught Tong-Ru well. Tong-Ru proved to be an excellent cook, and treated us to some of the best Chinese food I have ever tasted.

We foreigners were certainly strange people. One winter day we went to the river and cut some blocks of ice so that we could make ice-cream. As we brought the ice home, someone asked me what we were going to do with the ice. I had a very poor command of Chinese, but I tried to be polite, and I replied, “We’re going to use it to cook our dinner!” – *Foreign Devils!*

Sadly, we boys never made close friends with those Chinese around us. Even as children we unconsciously absorbed an abominable attitude of superiority over the Chinese, in spite of the fact that we were living in their country and yet were unable to speak their language. The net

result was that all our playing had to be between us boys, and we fought as much as we played with each other.

Mother and Dad kept us well supplied with toys for those days when the weather kept us indoors. Among our favorite activities was building some imaginative invention from our Erector or Meccano sets. One winter they gave us a stationary steam engine that ran on alcohol, and we learned to build machines with our Erector sets, and then harness the steam engine to drive them.

But we enjoyed riding our bicycles far more than any other activity. If we could not think of a place to go on our bikes, we would just ride around our yard till we got tired. Other times we would go to the river where we could ride a considerable distance on the smooth ice. The fun was enhanced by risk of falling on the slippery ice.

We thought we needed to keep moving all the time, I remember a well educated Chinese man who later taught me the basics of the Chinese language at a time when I was planning to return to China as a missionary. He was really puzzled by the way we foreigners were so careless in the expenditure of energy. “Don’t you realize,” he asked with utter sincerity, “that we are born with a certain amount of energy, and if we use it up too quickly we will die?”

If all else failed, perhaps Mother or Dad might try to persuade us to read some of the fine books they had bought for us. One of our favorites was The Children’s Encyclopedia, a set of some fourteen large books that included stories, poetry, descriptions of famous people and places and much more.

Our bicycles provided both exercise and excitement during the winter holidays. Like any other kids, we took chances and sometimes did things we would have avoided with just a little more maturity or common sense. I am reminded of our favorite teacher at Chefoo, Mr. Martin,

who with his exquisite Cambridge English loved to quote an old saying, “Common sense is so called because it is so jolly uncommon.”

One day when I was about fifteen years old we were riding around the outskirts of town, when we noticed perhaps one or two hundred soldiers drilling on a parade ground. We stopped to watch for a while. Suddenly an officer shouted at me, “That is not your bicycle!” Foolishly, I started to answer him but Cliff, who had more sense than I did, said, “Let’s get out of here!” We hopped on the bikes and went home as quickly as we could. For several seconds I was wondering if I would receive a bullet in my back!

It was another ordinary, cold, winter day. In order to have an excuse for riding our bicycles, we took advantage of every opportunity to visit our closest missionary neighbors, two middle-aged ladies who lived ten miles away in Kiehsiu. I cannot remember the reason for visiting them that day, but all three of us, Cliff, Ted and I, rode together as we arrived at Kiehsiu to visit Miss Lundgren and Miss Bachman. I suspect Mother and Dad were glad to get rid of us and have a little peace for a few hours.

Since I was the oldest, I was responsible for knowing where we were going and all about the details. But there was a problem that I hated to admit. All my life I have had a hard time with my sense of direction. Often I rely on others to guide me, but I try not to let them know this handicap, and then I try to cover up and act as though I knew all about where I was going.

That winter was a time of extreme unrest. Bandits, later known euphemistically as communists, were causing trouble all over the country, indiscriminately robbing anyone who had anything of value, expropriating and destroying property, and brutally killing anyone who stood in their way. To keep the bandits under control, soldiers almost as corrupt and cruel as the

bandits, appropriated homes wherever they could, with the excuse that they were protecting the populace.

We thoroughly enjoyed the ride through the frozen fields and along the cart-road, riding past three good-sized villages. We rode through the city gates of Kiehsiu and riding past surprisingly large number of soldiers. We turned off the main street and rode eastward up a narrow alley, no more than ten feet wide, to the missionary compound. I remembered that Dad had told me that soldiers were billeted in one half of the compound. *Did Dad say the soldiers were in the east half or the west half?* I couldn't remember, but neither could I admit to my two kid brothers that I didn't know where we were going.

The relatively spacious mission property of the China Inland Mission in Kiehsiu included several courtyards surrounded by brick dwellings. The soldiers had commandeered more than half of the buildings and the missionary ladies lived in very meager quarters as they attempted to carry on their work. The compound boasted two big black gates, the only ways into or out of the property. Each gate led into a somewhat spacious courtyard surrounded by several rooms. At the far end of the courtyard a small gate led to another courtyard surrounded again by several more rooms. The imposing front gates to the compound were designed to frustrate any undesirable characters. Each of the two massive wooden doors, about two and a half inches thick, swung on two solid wooden pegs set in heavy stone sockets at the top and bottom of the gateway. Under the doors a heavy plank served as a ten-inch high doorstep, making it difficult for a person to force his way in.

The gateway itself consisted of a room about ten feet wide and six or eight feet deep. In my mind I remember only an ominously dark space where the ceiling must have been.

The courtyard was protected from the gate by a blank wall just a little wider and taller than the gate itself. Since, according to religious beliefs, evil spirits travel only in straight lines, this spirit-wall would protect the inhabitants from any evil spirit that might enter the gate. Such spirits simply would be unable to find their way around the spirit wall.

Totally unsure of which was the right gate, I brazenly led my brothers to the first one, the western one, and banged on the big black door. I was surprised to see a soldier open the gate, but stupidly supposed that somehow this was a new addition to the security of the missionary ladies. Brazenly I lifted my bike over the threshold. Four soldiers, armed with swords and rifles, stood in the gateway, and talked quite animatedly to me. I did not understand one word. As my two brothers followed, lifting their bicycles over the wooden doorstep, the soldiers became even more animated. Suddenly one of them lifted a huge sword over my head, in an action that spoke louder than any words in any language. Cliff got the message, and said softly, “Let’s go!” Being gifted with the ability to know when to back down gracefully, I agreed, and we quickly backed out of that gate and made our way to the eastern gate, glad to be still among the living.

I marvel, as I think back to that cold winter day, how God took care of us in spite of my stupidity. Yes, certainly God brought us through!

All too soon our brief holiday came to an end, and we had to face the inevitable rigmarole in freezing weather, of bicycle or mule-cart, a bus, three trains (not to mention a vermin-filled inn, comfortable hotels, and the lovely Mission Home in Tientsin). Finally we would have to board that wretched little coastal boat to Chefoo, where we would ride rickshaws for the last mile or so back to school. Then we would start counting the days till the next Christmas Holiday.

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