DREAMSTAR BOOKS

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YANGCHOW YEARS by GRACE HARVEY

Synopsis

Regular stamping of the Japanese guards, as they patrolled the camp walls, the clash of their long swords striking the scabbards; these sounds echoed through Yangchow camp. It held more than 600 British, Canadian & Australian prisoners-of-war, subject to Japanese authority in the last 3 years of the Second World War. As they awaited the war's outcome in the Pacific, the internees had to endure scanty food, much of it bad, and put up with serious water shortages. Each morning they had to parade outside, regardless of intense summer heat, or the harsh winds of snow-storms of the coldest of Chinese winters. Stoking the grimy fires, cleaning, cooking and garbage disposal were all tasks which the prisoners performed themselves. Despite these hardships, the children, a hundred of them, learnt their school lessons, sat, and for the most part, passed their exams. Eurasians, and White Russians all with British passports were among them. Many were sustained by a deepening Christian faith, just as the Jews observed their ancient rituals. Sports and games, debates, plays and music hall choruses lightened the tedium of their imprisonment.

This book weaves together the recollections of thirty-five survivors of Yangchow, as it tells the story of their experiences until their liberation by Allied forces in September 1945: a story of ingenuity, hard-ship & endurance, as the Imperial Sun of Japan faded from China.

Chapter One

HAROLD AND MARY

How was it that Harold and Mary Wickings, my parents, came to be in China at all? They married in Leeds after a long engagement, on July 30th 1930; there were to be two children of the marriage, Peter, my elder brother, born in March 1936, and me, Mary Grace, born some 20 months after, in November 1937. My father had offered his services to the London Missionary Society, of Livingstone House, at Westminster. The Society appointed both parents to the Chinese mission-field. Initially they were to learn Mandarin Chinese at language school in Peking in 1930/31.

Both parents were from Northumberland, my father from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where his father worked for Armstrong's, the great ship-building firm. On first leaving Rutherford College, his secondary school, Dad went into the Armstrong drawing-office, as a draughtsman, just as his elder sister had done. So he helped to design many of the fighting ships of World War I. The names of all the vessels in each class of destroyer were so familiar to him that he expected his children, Peter and me, to know them, too. He was immensely surprised when we could not chant "And there's Renown, and Repulse, and …" After the war ended, his decision to enter the Congregational ministry, meant four happy, if penurious years, at Edinburgh University, studying for his M.A. degree. Theological training at Yorkshire United College, Bradford, followed. Here he learnt New Testament Greek, and Biblical theology, as he sat at the feet of Professor C. J. Cadoux. From Cadoux, Harold absorbed a lifelong enthusiasm for the Bible, especially the New Testament. Ever afterwards, he was a scholar manqué. In Yorkshire he grew to respect the warm-hearted, if brusquely spoken, people, of Bradford and Wakefield. He also made friends – among them, Arnold Mee, who became a pastor in Keld, Swaledale, and John Marsh, whose career led him to Oxford, as Professor, and Principal of Mansfield College.
Meantime Harold had fallen in love with Mary Thorp, my mother. She was the younger of two daughters of the manse; her father, Rev. William Thorp was Presbyterian minister at Chatton, miles away from Newcastle, near the Cheviot hills. William Thorp was a widower; Mary, his daughter, kept house for him. Not till his death was she free to marry and, with her husband, embark upon the great adventure of China.

In personality they were a contrast: my father articulate, with an impish sense of humour, energetic in manner, able to make the party go, when he was not reading or writing in his study. He was a superb preacher, not afraid to use the dramatic gesture to enforce his points, or to vary his voice in pace or tone, if he deemed it appropriate. My mother was shy in company, never one to startle others with vivacious talk. But her gentle goodness impressed all who knew her, whether they were the Chatton folk who adored "Miss Mary", or later on, L.M.S. colleagues, and the Chinese people who came to love her. It is never easy to describe goodness, but her serenity shone through.

The atmosphere of their retirement home in Kent impressed Sarah, my daughter, as a small girl. "It's so lovely at Granny's house" she would say, through her tears, as we left.

Mother's face, seen at its best in profile, was beautiful when she was in her twenties and thirties. Once an intrusive landlady in Yorkshire asked my father why he had no photograph of his "young lady" for her to dust, as she tidied his dressing-table. This was when they were engaged, or rather, in the old-fashioned phrase, "had an understanding".

> "I can see my girl on every hoarding" Dad proudly replied. "She's the image of the girl in the Palmolive soap advert … !"

Back to Peking in 1930 … The newlyweds savoured their time there, making the usual expeditions to the Great Wall, and the Ming tombs, and learning to adjust to the harsh winters. My father taught my mother to ride a bicycle, as they skated through the dense Peking traffic, under the noses of the camels, used for transporting every kind of load – rice – cabbages – silks – through the streets. It was a carefree time.

Then my parents moved south to Central China. They soon had a mission-station of their own, at Siaokan, where an elderly couple, the Gellers, were about to retire. Siaokan, a

walled town, like Yangchow, had a leper hospital as well as the L.M.S. premises – a church and accommodation for the missionary family, and the nursing staff attached to the hospital.

Peter Ross, my brother, was born in 1936 in the Union Hospital, Hankow. His birth as a boy and the firstborn, was greeted with fire-crackers. By now my parents were due for furlough in England, so they travelled home by P&O liner to introduce their baby son to his grandparents, and to his two adoring aunts. I was born when they lived in a furlough house in Selly Oak, Birmingham; no fire-crackers for me. But Dad would tease me, on each birthday, on the brass plate outside the door:

"You'll be famous, Mei-Mei"

When I asked what the words on the brass plate were, he took the wind from my sails, by telling me they gave the name of the nursing-home in Moseley, Birmingham, were I was born.

In May 1938, my father returned to China alone, leaving Mary with us two little children. It was hard for my parents to be separated. Later in life they were reluctant to be parted from one another. We all met up again in Shanghai in 1940. My father met us on the quay. The story goes that I ran up to him, clasping him around the knees, as I exclaimed:

"You're my dear Daddy!"

He swung me up into his arms, and then Peter, too, for a hug. We travelled up the Yangtse in December 1940 with a halt at Hankow for my parents' missionary friends to greet Mary and the children. I learnt to chant my alphabet in a sampan – a Chinese fishing boat, half covered with reed matting – under instruction from my brother and father.

Our Siaokan home was a fine house, with green shutters, and a verandah, which had a swing, made specially as a gift for Peter. As in most Western households in China, there were servants: a cook, an amah, and a gardener, who served the entire L.M.S. community, including the English hospital staff, who were unofficial aunts to Peter and me. The garden seemed vast and beautiful to our young eyes. Both parents delighted in its trees and shrubs, its honeysuckle, which they called "gold and silver flower", translating the Chinese name for us. Shwenny, the son of the Chinese gardener, was our only playmate. All three of us were fascinated by aeroplanes, so we fabricated our own from spare bits of wood, begged from the carpenter. Peter was pilot, Shwenny gloried in the oil-can as engineer; as a mere girl I was air-hostess, my uniform a thin cotton playsuit, with a shoulder strap always halfway down one arm. My only girl friends were imaginary; they had girlie names, like 'Rosebud' and 'Violet'. One of them lived by the green wooden rainwater butt. I was heartbroken when we had to leave Siaokan, and I had to bid these friends goodbye. Worst of all, I had to leave my new dolls' pram behind, too. The Japanese took over our house, and all its possessions. I sobbed as I thought of some small Japanese girl playing with that dolls' pram.

Arriving in Hankow under Japanese guard in April 1942, we were confined to the Union Hospital grounds until we departed for Shanghai in August of the same year. The few months at Hankow were a difficult, confused period for all L.M.S. missionaries, considering the Japanese threat to mission property, and possibly, to their lives. Could anyone leave for England; if so, who should go, and who stay, as a nucleus for both the church, and for

Chinese patients of the hospital? Some wives were keen to return; others were affronted at the very suggestion. What would happen to the Chinese Christians? Could their church life survive? All these points were discussed, and prayed over, by the Box family, the Gillisons and our parents, and by other colleagues, as they were to be discussed later in Shanghai.
A Japanese sentry guarded the entrance to our mission compound. There was a complex system of permits for anyone leaving, whether to shop, or, if one of the medical staff, for consultation with other doctors in Hankow. The sentry demanded a rake-off on everything purchased, as his right. So the Chinese messengers would drop their goods over the compound wall, before they met the sentry's acquisitive gaze. [i]

Meantime Peter and I had other English children of our own age to play with: Walford Gillison was a year or so older than Peter, Phyllis and Eleanor Box some years older again. We were happy enough in the fine compound garden, so full of flowers, and only restive when the teeming summer rain forced us to be indoors. The adults feared a recurrence of the terrible flooding so frequent in Hankow. Our parents spent their free time in the evenings with impromptu concerts, or listening to gramophone music. Someone organised a tennis tournament, and my father bemoaned his lack of social skills to the pages of his journal. He was far more appreciative of the play-reading of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* which he thought very good. All the time, he and the others were saying goodbye to some of their Chinese friends; Chuffey – the nickname of one of his Siaokan close friends - was off to West China. Just then Dad was expecting to return to England, so he commented:

> "Sad to leave China. When shall I return?" [ii]

Leaving Hankow

Following Japanese orders, our party of mission-folk left Hankow for Shanghai in mid-August 1942, travelling by river. The river steamer, Hsing Yiin, had a Swiss flag painted on the boat deck, as protection. Our family was fortunate to be together in a good 2nd class cabin, unlike some others relegated to 3rd class quarters. The Japanese carried out a thorough inspection of all inoculation certificates, on two occasions during the four-day journey. Nanking my father thought was a melancholy spot, with memories of the Japanese excesses when they captured it at the start of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937. We journeyed downstream past Chinkiang till the vessel anchored off Woosung point at evening. With his eye always out for shipping, my father found it strange to see so few fishing boats on the Yangtse, almost no familiar Chinese junks, just a few Japanese steamers. A Swiss consular representative greeted us on arrival; then all were taken by bus to the Columbia Country Club just outside Shanghai. Here families were split up:

> "Mary and the bairns upstairs with others."

The men were to sleep in camp beds in the bar; my father's companions were Stuart Craig, Martin Shepherd and Jowett Murray, all L.M.S. colleagues. [iii]

"Bairns" is the Scottish term for children. Both parents were staunchly Northumbrian. It was the place where they had met, and courted; so Peter and I, all our young life, heard tales of Bamburgh on its black rock, of Hadrian's Wall, of my father's first bike ride from Newcastle to Otterburn and back, all of sixty miles. All we knew of England was filtered through a Northumbrian haze: the tragedy of Flodden field, the battle of Otterburn and the bitter fighting between the Percy and the Douglas, the birds of the Farne Islands, the

heroism of Grace Darling, the ballad of the Laidly Worm. All these tales we heard as we sat perched on Dad's knee. He could speak the broadest Northumbrian, and would chant:

> "Round the ragged rocks, the ragged rascal ran"

- then inciting us to copy the Northumbrian initial 'R' – so far back in the throat. Of course, both Peter and I failed miserably. "Hinny-bairn" – the equivalent of honey-chile – was a favourite endearment. Along with this saturation into Border lore, went a distrust of the Stuart kings – so by the time I was five, I had learned of untrustworthy Mary Queen of Scots, of Charles I, her grandson, and later of both Charles II and James II. So, however great the romantic appeal of the Cavaliers, I could never be anything but a Parliamentarian, even as young as 6. I had imbibed support for Parliament almost with my mother's milk. My mother was strong on nursery rhymes, chanted and sung. She brought us up to revel in Lewis Carroll, and *The Water Babies*; best of all, she sang, so that hot summer nights in camp when I could not sleep were soothed by her singing, as she waved a sandalwood fan to cool me down.

Dad loved reading aloud to us; there was always a bedtime story. Usually it ended on a cliff-hanger: would Ratty and Mole find the young otter, in *Wind in the Willows*? All the Pooh and Piglet stories of A. A. Milne, *Heidi*, some Arthur Ransome, Louisa Alcott. We began with *Little Men* – probably for Peter's sake. My father was an inveterate reader himself – whether of theology, of books on the archaeology of Hadrian's Wall, of Conrad and A. J. Cronin, or of biographies like George Seaver's life of Edward Wilson of the Antarctic. Both of us caught the disease of reading from him, as he first taught Peter his letters and numbers at Siaokan. To my parents' surprise, I learnt to read almost without knowing it. Dad's amazement when I could read to him from my book of *Snow White* shines from the page of his diary. Then he would tease me over the names of the dwarves, making up soubriquets like 'Dumpy' and 'Spotty', to accompany 'Bashful' and 'Dopey'.

Columbia Country Club

From August 1942, we lived with many other British people at the Columbia Country Club, in western Shanghai. This had begun life as an American sports club; now it became home to us and some 300 other Westerners, till internment proper began in March 1943. This was our first experience of living at close quarters with others, since the C.C.C. was intended to sleep 35 people. Families were split up, so that mothers and children shared the large bedrooms upstairs; single ladies slept in the corridors. My father slept in the former bar, other men in the erstwhile bowling alley – all on camp beds. Men were not supposed to go upstairs at all. This could be a problem, as Dr. Kenneth McAll discovered, when his wife, Frances, had to go into hospital. Young Elizabeth, their daughter, was just over a year old.

> "It was certainly impossible for Ken to have Elizabeth with him in the bowling alley. He often had to attend to her needs after the other family in the room had gone to bed, so had to feel his way in the dark. He then had to determine whether or not she needed changing. She invariably did and it is not an easy matter even for a more experienced mother to change a nappy by feel only …"

Meals were eaten in the communal dining-room, first of all in the disused swimming-bath; later when the weather turned chillier, we ate in the former billiard-room. Everyone at C.C.C. had to come to terms with those who snored and with those whose nights were marked by bad dreams. About half of those at C.C.C. were missionaries, from all the societies: Baptists (B.M.S.), Methodists (M.M.S.), L.M.S. like ourselves, China Inland Mission, S.P.G. and C.M.S., too. There were enough missionaries for a football team to play the non-missionaries; the score was drawn 2-2. [iv]

Being at the C.C.C. was not a bad time, though all the adults hated the loss of privacy. We children now had plenty of others to play with; my parents would take us together with other L.M.S. children: David and Ruth Murray, and Alison Craig, to Jessfield Park for picnics, or just to run about among the coloured leaves of autumn, catching them as they drifted down. Peter and I both went to school, at first to a private school. In January 1943 Peter was old enough to join the transition class at Shanghai's Cathedral School.

All enemy aliens were required by the Japanese to wear red armbands; American were marked 'A' while British people had a 'B' on theirs; each initial was followed by a serial number. Apart from this, there was little restriction on our movements in Shanghai. My father was concerned to further the book he was writing: a harmony of the four gospels; he was eager to get it in shape for publication, so would borrow a bike, and dash off to the printer's. Just before Christmas, his diary runs:

> "My one concern: to show Jesus to the common man." [v]

This "harmony" was a major preoccupation for Harold in the months before internment. His dealings with the Shanghai printer, his eagerness to view specimen pages recur throughout the entries for February and March 1943. He corrected proofs late into the night, and was overjoyed when he could compile a synopsis. Tom Allen, a B.M.S. friend, soon to enter Pootung, helped Harold check the index. The problems of translating the harmony into Mandarin were discussed with a Chinese friend. Harold felt he left it in safe hands, before we left Shanghai. Two copies of the harmony arrived in one of the parcels which reached us in Yangchow. Harold was critical of the binding, but wrote, with pride:

> "The first copy must go to Mary." [vi]

The Japanese questioned my father one November afternoon about his finances and property at the Club:

> "I have no property! Made out list of furniture etc. abandoned at Siaokan – but really no point in giving the list: there won't be any compensation."

After the war was over, my father with his L.M.S. colleague, Stuart Craig, returned to an overwhelming welcome at Siaokan, from both Christians and non-Christians alike. All the Chinese were eager for the hospital to be re-opened. The buildings had not suffered too much, but Dad's boxes, left in the leper hospital there, had been looted. He wrote to Fay Westwood:

> "I had left my best books, certificates, important papers and my camera … Alas! Everything has gone. I must not moan when so many people have lost homes and loved ones, but I had scraped ever since my student days to build up those treasures; some were college prizes. Never mind." [vii]

At this time, in 1943, my parents' relationship was under threat from the intrusion of a third person. Usually they were close to each other. Mother was acutely aware of how much she depended on unmarried friends in caring for us children. In Hankow, and now in Shanghai, my father felt one particular friend was too close to Mother. We could never leave Columbia Country Club – whether to shop, or to visit Jessfield Park for a picnic, as a family of four – without the company of this lady, making five. Dad was hurt by this relationship; he felt excluded by it. The problem solved itself, with internment in 1943. The lady in question was in another camp, not with us in Yangchow. My parent's relationship reverted to its usual even keel of affection and support. After the war, both Mary and Harold rejoiced, when their friend made a happy marriage.

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