

幸运

PART ONE

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born— webs of heredity and environment, desire and consequence, of history and eternity. Haunted by wrong turns and roads not taken, we pursue images perceived as new, but whose provenance dates to the dim dramas of childhood, which are themselves but ripples of consequence echoing down the generations. The quotidian demands of life distract from this resonance of events, but some of us feel it always.”

—William Faulkner in Requiem for a Nun (Random House, Inc.)

CROSSING THE PACIFIC

Cuddling her nine-week-old baby, the young mother glanced down over the edge of the ship’s lower bunk, grateful for the reassuring sight of a little metal pan provided for seasickness. Despite her weakness and the ship’s continual pitching and rolling, Margaret Nelson Rowe had so far been able to fight her nausea and respond to the needs of her daughter.

The year was 1898. Margaret was the wife of a young Methodist minister, Harry Fleming Rowe. Pronounced “*Rau*,” the name was Anglicized when his German forefathers arrived in America. Harry had answered a calling to bring the light of his Lord Jesus Christ to the heathen in a foreign land and save them from what he saw as dark, empty lives without His Gospel. Soon after the birth of their daughter in upstate New York they embarked on a six-week journey aboard a Canadian Pacific steamship headed for China.

China! The image of smoky opium dens, fierce armored swordsmen, dusty poverty, acrid odors, inedible foods and unintelligible language, filled Margaret’s mind with dread. But her duty was to accompany and support her idealistic husband, who was as excited as she was fearful.

“If you’ll be all right my dear, I think I’ll just go up and take a turn around the deck,” said the Rev. Rowe.

“Of course, Harry,” Margaret answered softly, as he stepped out through the cabin door. “You go right ahead. The baby will be wanting to eat soon.”

Brave and silent, she unbuttoned her high-necked, starched Victorian

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shirtwaist, nursed the infant Dorothy. And prayed.

Harry was never seasick, nor was his daughter as she grew. Although she later rejected his religion, their shared love of far flung travels was central to the lifelong bond between them.

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Margaret never learned to appreciate the ancient culture and beauty of China. She furnished the rooms of her large Nanchang home with American horsehair sofas, long lace table cloths, heavy white curtains stenciled with Grecian designs, an Axminster rug rampant with cabbage roses, and a small oak organ – all of which she'd had shipped from New York. She planned to make a home in China as nearly like the beloved Utica farmhouse where she was born, and she did it with staunch determination, treading her feet on the small organ as she taught her children old Protestant hymns.

Lips set in characteristic firmness, she learned only enough Chinese to communicate with the servants. Throughout 38 years in "The Celestial Kingdom," she never stopped longing for Pennsylvania.

For her daughter, on the other hand, China was home. As she grew, Dorothy spoke Chinese first, because most of the people who cared for her spoke that language.

Her father found it daunting that just a slight variation in tone would completely change a word's meaning, but he studied hard to make himself understood in his sermons. Marveling at his child, he wrote to American relatives, "Dorothy is thriving here: talks all day long, always understood as she switches fluidly from English to Chinese as called for."

Dorothy adored her Chinese amah, a nursemaid named Chang Ma who was called 'Missy' by the family. Whenever she could, the child chose to toddle around after Missy or the other servants, rather than sit with her stiff and proper mother. In fact, according to the tale later told by her father, the tiny child's love for the Chinese people saved her life and that of her parents.

“CARRY ME”

During the 1800's, Western countries had increasingly interfered with China's way of life. Great Britain established an opium trade and fought to maintain it. After China lost the 1839-1842 Opium Wars, it was forced to give many more privileges to the West. The year the Rowe family arrived, China leased the port of Hong Kong to Britain for 99 years.

By 1900, the country was torn with the chaos created by a life-and-death struggle known as the Boxer Rebellion. A contingent of anti-foreign, anti-imperialist Chinese belonged to The Society of Right and Harmonious Fists. These rebels were called “Boxers” by the Western press due to the martial arts and calisthenics they practiced.

The dominant leader of the Qing Dynasty court, Empress Dowager Cixi, regent to the ineffectual Guangxu Emperor, had few modern armies for protection from Western guns. Conservative court factions won her favor by pretending that they had a secret magic to rid the land of all infidels, especially the missionaries who had come to replace native beliefs with Christianity. She was persuaded to issue an edict ordering the rebels to kill all foreigners on sight.

When the Boxers invaded Peking, the United States consul ordered all missionaries to move to Kiukiang, near the river, where a government gun boat would take them to Shanghai. The men and their families could carry only a few items of clothing and personal necessities.

Margaret Rowe was so sure death was near that she put on her best American clothes and dressed two-year-old Dorothy in a long white silk coat and ruffled embroidered bonnet, suitable to meet her Maker. Carried in a sedan chair by two native bearers, the mother held her child tightly on her lap, with Father walking alongside. As the day grew hotter and the journey long, the little girl grew restless at the slow measured pace of the bearers and squirmed for release.

When they entered the unnaturally quiet, boarded-up city of Kiukiang, suddenly ten Boxers sprang up. Bare to the waist, bronzed and hairless, they wore bright green pantaloons with wide red cummerbunds and carried great shining curved swords. Faces flushed with rage, the rebels yelled at the party to stop. Terrified, Margaret understood that her husband would be powerless to prevent a bloody death at the hands of these heathen devils. She prayed silently to her Lord.

A tall leader pushed the chair bearers aside and stood between the poles, facing the woman and the small American child. His sword, held threateningly over his head, shone brightly in the sun. The colors of his clothing delighted Dorothy, and she had no reason to fear any Chinese. Tired of the endless restrictions of sitting, she reached out her chubby arms and called out in Chinese, "Bao bao! Bao bao wo!" — "Up up! Carry me!"

At this sound, the other rebels rushed forward, ready to do their duty and kill the foreigners.

"Stop!" shouted the leader. "This little blue-eyed one speaks our language. Some mistake has been made. Surely our Empress did not desire the death of this small one who speaks our language and asks us to carry her. Let us consider this. We will decide this for ourselves and I say let us escort them to the river's edge where the boat of their government waits and they may go in peace."

And so they did, with the residents of Kiukiang aghast at the sight. The American Marines hung over the railings of the boat, watching as the mother stepped down, her baby in her arms. The great bronzed Boxer put his hand on the child's head and said, "Go now Small One, and do not come again until there is peace in our land. But do not forget our language, and forgive that I could not carry you when you were tired."

Thus saved, the family fled on this last gunboat to Shanghai and from there by steamer to Japan, where they stayed for several months, continuing to marvel at their miraculous escape. On their return, they learned that, while none of the other Methodists had been killed, several were wounded, many robbed, and seven missionary homes and chapels destroyed before a multinational coalition rushed troops to their rescue.

Reforms implemented by China after the crisis of 1900 led to the end of the Qing Dynasty and the later establishment of the modern Chinese Republic. Twice more, in his lifetime, Dorothy's father would have his home and all his possessions burned by rebels.

THE FAMILY GROWS

For four years after The Boxer Rebellion, the Rowe family was stationed in Wuhu. There, on May 30, 1902, a second daughter, Louise, was born, three weeks before Dorothy's 4th birthday on June 20th. Father managed to soothe