

THEY LEFT ALL

My aunt, Jeannette Barbour, went to China in the 1930s as a missionary with the China Inland Mission. There she met her surgeon husband, Dr Rupert Clarke. They came to visit us in South Africa in 1946 when I was nine.

“How did you meet Uncle Ru?” I asked.

“Oh, I nursed him,” she replied. “He was in hospital with hepatitis and was the WORST patient I’ve ever had!”

It was very hard to believe! Uncle Ru was kind, friendly, quietly humorous and long suffering. He just laughed. I think Aunt Jeannette, nicknamed “Bossy Barbour” by her two naughty younger brothers afforded Uncle Ru much amusement.

They brought my sister Jeannette (named after my aunt whom my parents thought would never marry) and myself lovely presents - satin slippers brightly embroidered (mine were red) and tiny China teapots with delicately painted patterns. I still have my little teapot, displayed with other precious china, in the kitchen.

Uncle Ru was very popular in our church where he preached occasionally and spoke about the China Inland Mission’s work. Jeannette and I basked in reflected glory! He loved Dickens and reread all his books during that furlough. We were too young to be impressed. What we enjoyed was the huge store of funny little poems he taught us. They made Jeannette, with large blue innocent eyes, and me, with pigtails ending in huge bows, the star turn at our church concert!

When they were on the mission field, after spending long hours in the operating theatre (Aunt Jeannette was Uncle Ru's theatre sister) they told their patients about Jesus, for that is what they went to China to do. They used scrolls with pictures and told the Bible stories in Chinese which they both spoke fluently. They showed us one scroll about the narrow road that leads to eternal life and the broad road that leads to Hell. It was brightly colored, full of Chinese people in strange clothes, dragons, pagodas and fire. It scared the life out of me!. I was terrified the Lord would send me to China one day!

Uncle Ru and Aunt Jeannette were great walkers. They discovered a hidden lake near our house and a magical stream overhung with leafy trees through which sunlight filtered. We sat beside the lake. Uncle Ru read, I stared at dragonflies darting above the water, and Aunt Jeannette pulled out a cheap sketchbook, dipped her brush in the lake, and painted a charming watercolor.

They returned to northwest China and, after being married for six years, Humphrey was born.

In 1948 they opened a hospital for Tibetans on the border and a year later General Mao Tse Tung established the communist People's Republic of China and persecution of the Christian church and missions began. After eighty-five years in China, over 600 China Inland Mission missionaries had to leave. But the six missionaries in Hwalung, including the Clarkes, were not allowed to go. After some time Aunt Jeannette and Humphrey, then eighteen months old, were forced to leave. They arrived in South Africa, Humphrey covered in sores from what they had been through.

Uncle Rupert was given a public trial and accused of killing some of his patients, many of whom had arrived at the hospital at death's door having travelled for weeks to get there under appalling conditions. Of the 1000 people at his trial not one accused Uncle Rupert. He was well known for the wonderful, caring work he had done. But suddenly, the Chinese mayor shouted "Kill him!" So Rupert was put in a tiny cell with

forty other people. They couldn't move. Some days later he was sent back to the mission compound which was now deserted and placed under house arrest. Nothing was heard of him for many months.

Meanwhile for Aunt Jeannette it was a time of great anxiety but she showed the courage and faith she was to show later when, back in the east, armed soldiers pointed their guns at her in the mission hospital.

During this time Uncle Rupert lived on a diet of bread and soup made with rotting cabbage leaves. He was all alone but occasionally Christians, at great risk, brought him a little food. In order to keep fit he walked around the mission compound until he had walked three miles every day. There were a few books left and these he read over and over. One book he read fifteen times! And of course he prayed much for his family and the church in China. He also trusted God for everything.

Eventually he was put in jail and imagine his delight when he found a fellow missionary, Arthur Matthews, in the opposite cell! They were brought to trial facing strange accusations and as punishment were immediately expelled from China forever. They were the last two missionaries to leave China. Uncle Rupert was later awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE). What joy there was when he arrived, emaciated, in South Africa to find Humphrey now a sturdy little boy!

When I was eighteen I went to London with my family to study piano and, when they started touring, I stayed with the Clarkes in a large flat (which had been the children's nursery) in a charming Regency house belonging to generous Christians. Uncle Rupert worked as a Registrar in the Royal Surrey County Hospital doing mainly orthopedic surgery. Aunt Jeannette was just a housewife. How she loved it, looking after Humphrey, walking in the nearby woods and fields, and buying crispy bread at a little farm store!

"Rupert," she said, "would have loved to be a consultant."

I went with her to London one day in a tiny, quaint old car. We left early. She was not a good driver and it was quite exciting! Neither was she sure of the route.

“Why’s everyone hooting?” she asked.

We eventually got to the CSSM Bookstore in Wigmore Street right in the center of London, loaded a small collapsible pedal organ into the car and returned unscathed and triumphant. She sat pedaling away playing hymns with a blissful expression on her face.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Rupert,” she said, “now we can really sing at our meetings!”

They went back to the East in 1958 to Java, Indonesia, to work and preach, this time in an exotic, tropical area, so different from the perpetual snow of Hwalung in China. But persecution of the church started there too. Christian workers were martyred and they were forced to leave in 1972.

They had put their hand to the plough and not turned back. They had given up everything, especially the joy of seeing Humphrey grow up because he was at school thousands of miles away in England. They missed all his special days and many of his achievements. But Jesus said, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” (NIV Mt 19:29)

Merle Lamprecht

www.christian-life-poetry.com