

A RETROSPECT

BY

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“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord
thy God led thee....” Deut. viii. 2.

THIRD EDITION

TORONTO

CHINA INLAND MISSION

CHAPTER XV

SETTLEMENT IN NINGPO

THE autumn of 1856 was well advanced before I reached Ningpo, one of the most ancient and influential cities on the coast of China. Opened to the residence of foreigners in 1842 by the treaty of Nan-king, it had long been the scene of missionary labours. Within its thronging thoroughfares the busy tide of life runs high. Four hundred thousand human beings dwell within or around the five miles' circuit of its ancient wall, every one a soul that JESUS loves, for whom He died.

As winter drew on I rented a native house in Wugyiao-deo, or Lake Head Street. It was not then a very comfortable residence. I have a very distinct remembrance of tracing my initials on the snow which during the night had collected upon my coverlet in the large barn-like upper room, now subdivided into four or five smaller ones, each of which is comfortably ceiled. The tiling of an unceiled Chinese house may keep off the rain—if it happens to be sound—but it does not afford so good a protection against snow, which will beat up through crannies and crevices, and find its way within. But however unfinished may have been its fittings, the little house was well adapted for work amongst the people; and there I thankfully settled down, finding ample scope for service,—morning, noon, and night.

During the latter part of this year my mind was greatly exercised about continued connection with my Society, it being frequently in debt. Personally I had always avoided debt, and kept within my salary, though at times only by very careful economy. Now there was no difficulty in doing this, for my income was larger, and the country being in a more peaceful state, things were not so dear. But the Society itself was in debt. The quarterly bills which I and others were instructed to draw were often met by borrowed money, and a correspondence commenced which terminated in the following year by my resigning from conscientious motives.

To me it seemed that the teaching of GOD'S Word was unmistakably clear: "Owe no man any thing." To borrow money implied, to my mind, a contradiction of Scripture—a confession that GOD had withheld some good thing, and a determination to get for ourselves what He had not given. Could that which was wrong for one Christian to do be right for an association of Christians? Or could any amount of precedents make a wrong course justifiable? If the Word taught me anything, it taught me to have no connection with debt. I could not think that GOD was poor, that He was short of resources, or unwilling to supply any want of whatever work was really His. It seemed to me that if there were lack of funds to carry on work, then to that

degree, in that special development, or at that time, it could not be the work of GOD. To satisfy my conscience I was therefore compelled to resign connection with the Society which had hitherto supplied my salary.

It was a great satisfaction to me that my friend and colleague, Mr. Jones, also of the Chinese Evangelisation Society was led to take the same step; and we were both profoundly thankful that the separation took place without the least breach of friendly feeling on either side. Indeed, we had the joy of knowing that the step we took commended itself to several members of the Committee, although as a whole the Society could not come to our position. Depending upon GOD alone for supplies, we were enabled to continue a measure of connection with our former supporters, sending home journals, etc., for publication as before, so long as the Society continued to exist.

The step we had taken was not a little trying to faith. I was not at all sure what GOD would have me do, or whether He would so meet my need as to enable me to continue working as before. I had no friends whatever from whom I expected supplies. I did not know what means the LORD might use; but I was willing to give up all my time to the service of evangelisation among the heathen, if by any means He would supply the smallest amount on which I could live; and if He were not pleased to do this, I was prepared to undertake whatever work might be necessary to supply myself, giving all the time that could be spared from such a calling to more distinctly missionary efforts. But GOD blessed and prospered me; and how glad and thankful I felt when the separation was really effected! I could look right up into my FATHER'S face with a satisfied heart, ready, by His grace, to do the next thing as He might teach me, and feeling very sure of His loving care.

And how blessedly He did lead me on and provide for me I can never, never tell. It was like a continuation of some of my earlier home experiences. My faith was not untried; it often, often failed, and I was so sorry and ashamed of the failure to trust such a FATHER. But oh! I was learning to know Him. I would not even then have missed the trial. He became so near, so real, so intimate. The occasional difficulty about funds never came from an insufficient supply for personal needs, but in consequence of ministering to the wants of scores of the hungry and dying ones around us. And trials far more searching in other ways quite eclipsed these difficulties; and being deeper, brought forth in consequence richer fruits. How glad one is now, not only to know, with dear Miss Havergal, that—

“They who trust Him wholly
Find Him wholly true,”

but also that when we fail to trust fully He still remains unchangingly faithful. He is wholly true whether we trust or not. “If we believe not, He abideth

faithful; He cannot deny Himself.” But oh, how we dishonour our LORD whenever we fail to trust Him, and what peace, blessing, and triumph we lose in thus sinning against the Faithful One ! May we never again presume in anything to doubt Him!

The year 1857 was a troublous time, and closed with the notorious bombardment of Canton by the British, and the commencement of our second Chinese war. Rumours of trouble were everywhere rife, and in many places the missionaries passed through not a little danger. In Ningpo this was especially the case, and the preserving care of GOD in answer to prayer was consequently most marked. When the awful news of the bombardment of Canton reached the Cantonese in Ningpo their wrath and indignation knew no bounds, and they immediately set to work to plot the destruction of all the foreigners resident in the city and neighbourhood. It was well known that many of the foreigners were in the habit of meeting for worship every Sunday evening at one of the missionary houses, and the plan was to surround the place on a given occasion and make short work of all present, cutting off afterwards any who might not be present.

The sanction of the Tao-t'ai, or chief civil magistrate of the city, was easily obtained; and nothing remained to hinder the execution of the plot, of which the foreigners were of course entirely in ignorance. (A similar plot against the Portuguese a few months later was carried out, and between fifty and sixty were massacred in open daylight.) It so happened, however, that one of those acquainted with the conspiracy had a friend engaged in the service of the missionaries; and anxious for his safety, he was led to warn him of the coming danger, and urge his leaving foreign employ. The servant made the matter known to his master, and thus the little community became aware of their peril. Realising the gravity of the situation, they determined to meet together at the house of one of their number to seek the protection of the Most High, and to hide under the shadow of His wings. Nor did they thus meet in vain.

At the very time we were praying the LORD was working. He led an inferior mandarin, the Superintendent of Customs, to call upon the Tao-t'ai, and remonstrate with him upon the folly of permitting such an attempt, which he assured him would rouse the foreigners in other places to come with armed forces to avenge the death of their countrymen and raze the city to the ground. The Tao-t'ai replied that, when the foreigners came for that purpose, he should deny all knowledge of or complicity in the plot, and so direct their vengeance against the Cantonese, who would in their turn be destroyed; “and thus,” said he, “we shall get rid of both Cantonese and foreigners by one stroke of policy.” The Superintendent of Customs assured him that all such attempts at evasion would be useless; and, finally, the Tao-

t'ai sent to the Cantonese, withdrawing his permission, and prohibiting the attack. This took place at the very time when we were asking protection of the LORD, though we did not become acquainted with the facts until some weeks later. Thus again we were led to prove that—

“Sufficient is His arm alone,
And our defence is sure.”

I cannot attempt to give any historical record of the events of this period, but ere 1857 terminated Mr. Jones and I were cheered by tokens of blessing. It is interesting to recall the circumstances connected with the first profession of faith in Christ, which encouraged us.

On one occasion I was preaching the glad tidings of salvation through the finished work of CHRIST, when a middle-aged man stood up, and testified before his assembled countrymen to his faith in the power of the Gospel.

“I have long sought for the Truth,” said he earnestly, “as my fathers did before me; but I have never found it. I have travelled far and near, but without obtaining it. I have found no rest in Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism; but I do find rest in what I have heard here tonight. Henceforth I am a believer in JESUS.”

This man was one of the leading officers of a sect of reformed Buddhists in Ningpo. A short time after his confession of faith in the SAVIOUR there was a meeting of the sect over which he had formerly presided. I accompanied him to that meeting, and there, to his former co-religionists, he testified of the peace he had obtained in believing. Soon after, one of his former companions was converted and baptized. Both now sleep in JESUS. The first of these two long continued to preach to his countrymen the glad tidings of great joy. A few nights after his conversion he asked how long this Gospel had been known in England. He was told that we had known it for some hundreds of years.

“What!” said he, amazed; “is it possible that for hundreds of years you have had the knowledge of these glad tidings in your possession, and yet have only now come to preach it to us? My father sought after the Truth for more than twenty years, and died without finding it. Oh, why did you not come sooner?”

A whole generation has passed away since that mournful inquiry was made; but how many, alas! might repeat the same question today? More than two hundred millions in the meanwhile have been swept into eternity, without an offer of salvation. How long shall this continue, and the MASTER'S words, “To every creature,” remain unheeded?