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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Karl Fletchers' Tale Concluded

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LAST WEEK I told you about the Karl Fletchers and their flight across China during the days of World War Two – actually they were forced to flee the country because of the Japanese Army operations. I had them as far as Assam when I ran out of space.

They were still 200 miles from Calcutta and they were broke. Karl had paid out all of the gold sovereigns and other coins he had sewed into his clothing, his wife had even sold her diamond engagement ring. They had nothing left to sell. A British Army major loaned them enough money to take them to Calcutta on third-class railway travel. They left the train two weeks later, dirty, broke and with the same shoes that had worn through the soles from their long trek from Macao, the Portuguese colony close to Hong Kong.

“We arrived in Calcutta on a Saturday afternoon looking like absolute beggars”, Karl told me, and Midge nodded a vigorous assent. She explained, though, that Karl and Donald, their son, were not so badly off for clothing, as the British army had given them khaki shorts and pants. But there was no army outfitting for Mrs. Fletcher, I gathered.

Good Food But No Money

SATURDAY NIGHT the hotels were full of army officers from Burma, on weekend leave. They walked the streets for hours, and “finally one hotel operator took pity on us! ‘You can stay here for the night, but the military are taking over the hotel tomorrow’, he told us,” Karl recalled.

The weary trio got to their room, ordered up the best food in the place and Donald asked his dad “How are you going to pay for it?” They were still without money, though Karl had money on deposit and could raise funds on Monday if he could get somebody to identify him.

“Dammed if I know but we’re going to eat” was the father’s reply to his son’s question.

“Sunday afternoon we had to check out. I couldn’t get to the Hong Kong–Shanghai bank until Monday,” noted Karl who observed the money was no good to him there where he was a total stranger.

He went down to the lobby of the hotel wondering just how in blazes he was going to pay the bill. Suddenly he spied an old acquaintance.

The man ‘Roachie’ had once worked for Karl in China. “The Lord must have sent him . . . we were completely broke. How we would have managed without him, I’ll never know”, Karl told me.

Roachie had no funds but he knew a Greek who dug up enough money to tide the Fletchers over until Monday. The first, and most necessary chore was to pay for their nights lodging and the fancy eats.

Bridal Suite - - - 'We Want The Best'

THEY HEARD there was a vacant room in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta and they made their way there as quickly as possible. "There's nothing left but the bridal suite, observed the manager.

"That's for us," enthused Karl who had had quite enough of misery, privation, discomfort, hunger and all the rest of the ills in a trek that must have stretched some thousands of miles across several countries.

"I still didn't have a cent in my pocket, but I knew I'd get funds on Monday." The Greek had given them enough to pay the overnight bill in the hotel they had just vacated.

THEY HAD not been actually starving, Mrs. Fletcher told me. But the eats were often low, and they were Chinese food. I'm not pitying the Fletchers for eating Chinese food. I regard it as a treat, and so do the rest of my family. But there's a tremendous difference between the tasty Chinese dishes we get at our favorite Chinese restaurants here, and the stuff the Fletchers had to dig up and cook as meager facilities allowed, during the long and wearisome trek through spacious Chinese territory.

I asked Midge how she felt walking into the Grand Hotel with all of its swank and her with the soles worn out of her shoes, and her clothing not far from tatters and rags.

She had just told me that the ladies there wore evening dress to dinner at the time. But Karl Fletcher's charming lady can see the pleasant side of a situation – perhaps it's easier to see the pleasant side now – as she told me of the 73 days it took them to get from Macao to Calcutta.

Easiest Travel – Just One Rig To Wear

"IT WAS the easiest travel in one way, I ever had in my whole life," she told me. For 73 days I never had to worry about what I was going to wear. There was only the one outfit, there just wasn't any choice."

That fact, and the sense of accomplishment, they had finally made it after overcoming unbelievable hardships, probably did more than anything else to ease, or indeed wipe out the embarrassment they otherwise might have felt as they slipped through the posh hotel, past the ladies, and others dressed in the height of fashion.

Good clothes, the best that money could buy, was ahead of them, just a day away. I believed the Fletchers when they told me with a smile they hadn't worried about the style, or the lack of it. They had finally reached their objective.

Their final objective was home, across the sea to Canada. But that had to wait for a time. There was a war on, you'll recall.

Next morning Karl cashed a cheque at the Hong-Kong-Shanghai bank, paid off his obligations, and then outfitted the family in the first real clothes they had worn for weeks.

That's the part of the Fletcher story I wanted to tell you. But I may as well summarize the rest of it. In Calcutta Karl met an army officer friend who offered him a commission in the Indian Army. Because "I was run down too badly" he had to turn it

down. But Karl was a security officer in the Punjab and Central Indian provinces from 1943 to 1945. Donald joined the Indian Navy.

When peace came the Fletchers sailed on a boat which was headed for California, via Australia. They arrived at San Pedro in January 1946.

Soon afterwards there was a call back to Macao and his post as manager of the British-owned electric company. "I was welcomed back like 'the prodigal son' Karl recalled. "Even the Governor put his arms around me." Karl was made a director of the firm.

Back To Canada To Stay

IN 1950 the Fletchers came home on a six-month's leave – Donald had graduated from the University of British Columbia. But the leave trip became a permanent thing when the Korean War broke out, and armed strife returned to that part of the world.

For five years Karl and Midge Fletcher travelled over a great portion of North America. This interesting couple, with so many colorful reminiscences, are living in Victoria. They're in the Beacon Towers on Douglas Street. May they have many happy years together in their well-merited retirement.