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ACROSS THE ISLAND

The Karl Fletchers Have Unusual Story

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ONE OF the many unusual stories that came my way concerns Karl Fletcher who was born at 16 Brighton Road, Charlottetown and his lovely wife "Midge", the former Marjorie Andros, Victoria, B.C. His father, C. Pope Fletcher, who operated a music store in this City came from Orwell.

The late Charlie Williams first brought the story to my attention – Charlie's wife was Karl's sister – when he brought me a Victoria, B.C. magazine. Late last summer Mrs. Lyman Davison, City phoned to tell me the Fletchers were in Charlottetown, and I was able to arrange for an interesting interview with two charming people.

I should say now that this story will run over into next week's column. I find it too interesting to chop it up, just to get it into one edition.

One of the first events in an unusually colorful career came when Karl just happened to be in Halifax at the time of the tremendous explosion – a ship loaded with munitions was blown up in the harbor in December 1916. He had served overseas, been invalided home and charged with the mission of recruiting British nationals in the United States.

The recruiting mission was a success. "We ran a full train from New York to Halifax each week. Many were Jewish recruits who were headed for Allenby's army that was moving into Palestine."

Following the Armistice, in November 1918, Karl travelled to New York, went into the foreign service of the National City Bank, headed for Caracas in Venezuela, was sent several hundred miles up the Orinoco River to where gold had been discovered. It was jungle country and he purchased gold from prospectors amidst pumas, jaguars and other unusual animals.

Big Bank Deposits, For One Day

KARL FLETCHER next was with the American Foreign Bank Corporation and was sent eventually to China where they were creating a new bank branch in Tsiananfu. And this leads me to one of the unusual facets of the Fletcher story.

When the bank opened its doors for business the Chinese brought huge amounts of silver. "They came with carts and rickshaws," he told me, "and deposited large sums with us." J.H. Thomas, vice-president of the bank was there and he was so delighted he wired back a colorfully optimistic story of how the Chinese had filled the vaults to overflowing with silver. It was a most auspicious beginning.

Next day, though, the Chinese came back with the same vehicles and carted all of their silver away. Mr. Fletcher was worried, he just couldn't understand it. He asked through an interpreter "What in H— is going on?"

He found it was an example of Chinese courtesy. They brought their money to get the bank away to a good start, Mr. Fletcher told me with a grin. It's easy to smile about it now. It was most disconcerting then.

Soon after, he left the bank where he found the real decisions were taken by the Chinese co-managers, and headed for Fien-Tsin in Manchuria, where he managed a cotton plant. There he became friends with "General One-Arm Sutton" who had co-invented the Stokes machine gun. At the time Sutton was Chief of Staff of Chang-Tae-Lin, governor of China's three northern provinces. China was torn by civil war – the time was the early 1920's – but I'm going to skip the Fletcher-Sutton part, because I think other facets of the story are more interesting here, though I'll mention that the two returned to Canada and formed the firm of Fletcher and Sutton in Vancouver, B.C.

Helped Chinese – Then To Macao

THE BUSINESS melted away when the crash came that heralded the great depression of the Thirties and Karl returned to China. After a turn at helping the Chinese fight the Jap invader, we find Karl Fletcher in Macao, a Portuguese colony, founded in 1557 and some 40 miles from Hong Kong.

Karl managed a British-held electric light company, a British concession. Macao was not an internment camp, for China was not at war against Portugal, "but it was similar, for we were completely surrounded by Japanese", Mr. Fletcher recalled.

He had married his "Midge" in 1938 and she was with him through the troubled times that developed when the Far Eastern war developed into a world conflict.

In Macao they had been "completely surrounded by Japanese" who put pressure on the Portuguese to close out the British-owned light company. Karl had received orders from London to hold on, not to surrender – it was easy to wire orders from remote England.

The man who was born in Charlottetown resisted all pressures brought against him, until finally the Portuguese governor said they would take the possession "by force". That was a different thing – they had a warship in the harbor, and Karl surrendered – it was the only thing he could do.

It will be understood that his defiance of the Japanese had not made him popular with the Japanese army officers. "My wife and I were in a dangerous position," he recalled. "They might kidnap us or even shoot us." They had to get out, or else.

Perilous Route Through China

THE ONLY escape route involved was a long, difficult and hazardous journey across the huge Southwest area, into Tibet, across the Himalayas – but let me tell you about it, as Karl and Midge Fletcher told it to me.

First of all they virtually had to get through the Japanese lines, before they started on the long, tortuous road to eventual freedom. With the couple was their son Donald, who had been a university student in Hong Kong, had been captured by the Japanese, but escaped when he hid in the hold of a cargo ship which was coming to Macao. The students had been forced to load the ships. Donald is Karl's son by his first wife.

The Japanese were in all the lowlands, the Fletchers told me. "We had to keep to the mountains. We travelled by night and hid during the daylight hours."

Thanks to an old German friend, they had money to pay for most of their real needs. The German had warned Karl that war was coming. Buy up all the gold you can afford to get, he warned them, currency will be no good when the real trouble breaks, he had warned.

"We sewed the gold coins into our clothing", the Fletchers told me. Finally, as their funds dwindled, Midge sold her diamond engagement ring. She had had it tied in her hair.

There were many scares as the Fletchers made their perilous way to Assam. Danger was never far away at any time; they never knew when it might develop disastrously for them.

They had good guides; Chinese smugglers were adept at running blockades, they had to be to survive. They spirited the Fletchers away at midnight.

The Fletchers had helped others escape, now they were trying the same thing themselves. They realized their way was filled with perils, but they entrusted themselves to the canny smugglers and their methods of getting through.

Knives Cut Japanese Nets

THE SMUGGLERS used long, sharp knives to cut their way through nets that had been placed strategically to stop them. Finally they left the smugglers boat and headed inland.

The Fletchers finally fell in with a British convoy; they were actually able to ride for a part of the journey. The riding was on rough trucks, military lorries, but it beat walking, especially when the shoes were wearing off their feet. And they did just that.

It took 28 days to get from the Japanese lines to free China. Those 23 (?) days were the worst. Certainly they were the most fearsomely perilous, Mrs. Fletcher recalled for me. The entire journey took 73 days.

But the going was still rough; the unexpected often happened. Often they were sidetracked into small villages where they felt no white man had ever been seen previously. The adventuress travelers pedaled on old bicycles for almost a week, then went forward on foot.

Finally, though, they made it to Assam "where Tibet and China and India meet". Ahead was perhaps the most difficult part of their trip, across the fearsome Himalaya mountains. But luck was with them. There they met one of the Yank "Flying Tigers" who were flying supplies over the mountains regularly.

Sat On Floor Across Himilayas

A RESPONSIBLE officer told them they could be flown across the Himalayas if they would sit on the floor, and without oxygen. It meant flying at 25,000 feet in places. The lack of oxygen didn't interfere with their breathing, they told me, but they had no strength. "You just couldn't lift your arms, "for example", the Fletchers explained.

Next week's column will tell the rest of the story of the Fletchers. Friends tell me they may return to live here, but of that I know nothing.

