

PART ONE

He waits, we write, he shifts to left foot, we write, he shifts again then gives up and goes. Just when we had settled down for the night, he reappears.

'You no move?'

We feigned sleep

'I take you ticky you no can get out station,' he threatened.

Thrilling as a dime novel, eh wot?"

Apparently the girls held onto their "tickies" and encountered no problem disembarking in the morning, for the rest of Dorothy's letter simply describes the gifts they bought for family and friends: jewelry, picture frames, stationery, fabric for curtains and skirts, ribbons, books, a box of American apples, chocolate mints, gingersnaps and books. "I bought myself poor on modern verse and sheet music, three wonderful collections," she reported. "I wish, O wish you were here to play and practice them with me."

Thanking her sister for the Christmas present sent from Baltimore, Dorothy wrote, "You know I'd rather have hope chest junk than any thing else, and this little my-blue breakfast set is so precious! You were extravagant, you dear!"

Mother Rowe gave her eldest daughter a dozen silver teaspoons – clearly another hope chest item, but no wedding date had been set.

Dorothy had accepted a marriage proposal from Hosmer Johnson, a distant cousin who was "very keen on" her. The round-faced, sandy-haired, bespectacled young man had given her an engagement ring before leaving to study in America. During the next two years, he rarely wrote which both annoyed and disappointed her. Longing for romance, she began to have serious doubts about marrying the uptight, straight-laced young man – doubts she confided only in Louise.

In the spring of 1921 Dorothy's whole household was quarantined for two months when youngest sister Caroline came down with scarlet fever. Mother Rowe stayed confined to the delirious patient's room during the whole frightening period. After her fever broke, the child had to continue to be kept flat in bed for an extra eleven days – "to make sure that her heart will keep right."

That summer, Dorothy, her cousin Paula Simmons and their friend Clem took a cottage together near Tientsin at Peitaiho Beach, a northeastern summer resort. Freedom from the family, swimming in the ocean, eating

whatever and whenever they felt like asking the faithful Chinese servants to provide, loafing in cool sea breezes, dancing to jazz records on “the Vick,” constituted what she characterized as “marvelously lazy life-gorgeous doings of busy nothings.” By adding excursions such as exploring a remote Confucian temple, she had “the most perfect summer of my life.”

Dorothy was furious when a letter from Louise addressed to her was delivered to her parents by mistake. “Damn the luck!” she told her sister. “The family, dear and trusting, opened it. Only the dinner dance they ought not to know of, but it makes it hard to ask you things. I perish for your comments about Hos, but don’t mention anything you don’t want the folks to read.

“I love writing to you,” she said. “In a way I make you a safety valve for all my feels. You and I are lots nearer than we ever were before. Someday we will be inseparable old maid sisters known as the Rowe Girls. Dost have longings to travel? I’d give my neck to meet you somewhere and then embark together as stewardesses or whatever to get to Europe and India and Africa and Penang. Gosh! I can’t settle down yet!”

In another letter she reports: “We have gotten into a bunch of books this week. I read Henry James’ Daisy Miller and I re-read aloud The Light That Failed. How we laughed when, on the evening we planned to finish it our lamp ran out of oil!”

Knitting became Dorothy’s new passion. “Clem reads to me the while, so I have many lovely thoughts knitted into the garment. Have you read Main Street by Sinclair Lewis? It is worthy of all the talk it has aroused I think.”

She wrote that after attending the summer’s only obligatory “tea,” at a neighbor’s, “I got into my worst old rags and made for the country and hiked until dark. The sunset was a glorious mantle of flame over the western mountains, and the sea, ever adaptable, took all the rose and gold of the sky and beautified it in the mirror of its breast.”

Before going back to work, the three girls spent a week in Peking, visiting all the celebrated sites popular with tourists then and now. As Dorothy described it to Louise: “From the wall of the Tartar City, it fascinates and allures as the gold dust of sunset and the grey smoke of chimney fires combine to form a gauze above the yellow and green tiles of imperial roofs and the weird cosmopolitan buildings of legation quarter.”

“The next day we got some rolls and olives and a thermos of ice water

and went by rickshaw for two hours to the Summer Palace. It is a place of desolate beauty. The succession of palaces stretches along the border of a lotus-grown lake at the foot of the Western hills. Each building is perfect, and within is dust-covered furniture of lacquer and walnut, cloisonné inlaid. The most beautiful view is from a little artificial island connected to the mainland by a marble bridge of seventeen arches. Against a background of green forest and grey rock the imperial artists splashed all the colors of the painter's pallet framing it in yellow tile and white marble paving. In the water it looks as if the artist, weary, had thrown his paint box among the lotus pads."

On a train ride through wild and rugged Nankou Pass, she thought of the many ancient battles between Chinese and Tartar hordes at this northern gateway to China. "All along the Pass the Great Wall crawls over impossible slopes, standing out against the sky at marvelous heights and squirming over the roughest ridges. We walked up a stoney gorge, climbed onto the Wall and hiked up until we stood on a distant watch tower perched precariously...It seemed as if the Wall had been poured indiscriminately from each summit and had trickled down, so coiling, winding and purposeless it seems...the most daring, careless, bold feat I ever saw. Never does its huge dragon-like body writhe around a mountain or try to take any easy way...always over the highest peaks and the roughest way. It seems a superhuman task, but it was done, as all China does its tasks, by masses of men."

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Back in Nanking, Dorothy lamented the "fearful narrowness of missionary life."

"They seem to have no tolerance for any ideas but their own. Their concepts of religion, of duty, of friendship and most everything else are utterly repugnant to me. I sang a solo at prayer meeting, but my soul rebelled every minute. I felt so sorry for the folks who had to find their God in the hot stuffy fullness of that room instead of out in the moonlight adoring sleeping ponds and the silver ecstasy of leaves in the wind."

Throughout her life Dorothy resented the whole thrust of missionary work. She could never understand why Westerners thought they had the right to come into "foreign" lands and strive to convert the inhabitants to

