

Mrs. Twenty Questions

At noon, on the 11th October 1928, *The Empress of Russia* edged away from Vancouver Wharf. Bugle notes poured their farewells into the air from the bridge of the ship. And dozens of young women waved from the shore to another young woman, who stood on the deck waving back. Suddenly the group on shore burst into song which was only drowned out by the creak of the anchors rising. Paper streamers filled the air, falling down slowly in the noontide heat onto the tearful faces of those standing watching as the *Empress* left port and left Canada.

‘Who do you think she is?’ Charlotte Jackson asked her husband. ‘She must be famous with a send-off like that.’

‘How would I know that?’ he replied, in an American drawl. ‘But I’m sure you’ll nose it out.’

Mrs. Jackson winced. ‘I’m not nose!’ she announced. ‘I’m just interested in people.’

‘Same difference,’ he winked, and she ignored him.

Within forty-eight hours Charlotte Jackson had cornered her prey and discovered where she was going and why.

‘What makes a girl like you want to go to China as a missionary?’ she probed.

Isobel Miller looked far into the distance. She thought about all the reasons for going to China. She thought about her new husband, the new name she would have soon, Isobel Kuhn. But she wasn’t going out to China just to marry John Kuhn. There were other reasons, more important ones. The sea was calm and there was no land to be seen in any direction. Most of the other passengers were taking a siesta in their cabins.

Turning to her companion of the last half-hour, Isobel answered, ‘I’m going to China, not just because I want to, but because I believe God wants me to.’

The woman’s smile didn’t quite hide her detective intentions. ‘Well, I sure hope you know what you’re doing,’ she said in her Southern American accent. ‘But if you were my daughter I’d be mighty sorry to see you leave for a life of dirt and disease in some Chinese village that’s too small even to be in an atlas.’

Seeing the discomfort in Isobel’s eyes, she continued. ‘Isn’t that what your mother says?’

Feeling that this was too personal a question to answer without even knowing the questioner’s name, Isobel took refuge in finding that out.

‘My name is Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Charlotte Jackson,’ was the reply. ‘My husband and I are going round the world. We started off from Swannee in Texas three weeks ago. Mr. Jackson is something of an adventurer.’

But while he's having his adventures I'll be tucked up somewhere safe and comfortable.'

Isobel nodded, grateful to leave the subject of her mother behind.

'And that's just what a young lady like you should be, safe and comfortable, not missioning in the Chinese outback. I'm quite sure your poor dear mother would agree with me.'

'My mother is dead,' said the girl softly.

She was taken by the arm and led to a row of deckchairs. Mrs. Jackson's nosiness made her like a terrier sniffing out a rat.

'Sit down,' she demanded, 'and tell me all about it.'

Isobel swallowed hard. Well, she thought to herself, I've got a choice. I can tell her why I feel called to be a missionary in China or I can answer awkward questions about the family - and I'm not doing that.

Taking her companion's hesitation as sorrow, Mrs. Jackson took Isobel by the hand. 'Just treat me as an aunt, dear, and pour it all out.'

When she said that, Isobel may have looked serious but inwardly she was smiling. You've asked for it, she thought, now you'll get it ... now listen to the testimony of Isobel Miller.

'I was brought up in a Christian home and just accepted all that my parents taught me,' the girl began.

Mrs. Jackson nodded approvingly.

‘But when I was at university one of my lecturers challenged that, saying that people who believed that God was the Creator, only did so because their parents had told them that. I thought about that and decided that he was quite right. I stopped going to church, stopped reading my Bible and started doing all sorts of things I’d never done before.’

Isobel, noting Mrs. Jackson’s raised eyebrows, went on with her story. ‘I fell in love with another student and we became secretly engaged ... but he two-timed me. When I found that out I was devastated. It was as though my whole world had fallen apart. I couldn’t study, I couldn’t enjoy anything and I couldn’t sleep. One night, when I thought that everyone else in the house had been asleep for hours, Dad came into my bedroom, knelt by my bed and prayed for me. "Your prayers don’t go further than the ceiling," I told him. How that must have hurt him.’

Her companion opened her mouth to speak, but Isobel didn’t notice. She was reliving the events of that terrible time.

‘Just before Christmas that year I’d had enough. I decided to commit suicide. There was a bottle of poison in the bathroom, and one night I got out of bed and fully intended to drink it all. As I grasped the bathroom door, I heard three long groans from my parents’ room. Dad was moaning in his sleep. My mind raced. If I kill myself, Dad will think I’ve gone to hell. There’s no such place as hell, but that’s what he would think.

Could I make Dad that unhappy? Though I longed to die, I couldn't put that curse on my father. I staggered back to my bedroom. "God," I whispered, "if there is a God, if you will prove to me that you exist, and if you will give me peace, I will give you my whole life. I'll do anything you ask me to do, go where you send me, obey you all my days." And I laid my aching head on my pillow and pulled the blankets up to shut out the world.'

'My poor child,' gasped Mrs. Jackson, dramatically wiping a non-existent tear from the corner of her eye. 'I have two daughters myself and it would break my heart if I thought they suffered so.'

'But the wonderful thing,' continued Isobel, 'was that I slept! The first I knew it was morning. Now, that made me think. Was it just a fluke, or had God really answered my prayer and given me peace? And if he had, where did that leave me? I'd promised to serve him if he answered my prayer. What was I to do now? I decided to search for God through what was written about Jesus Christ in the Gospels.'

Her American companion's eyebrows arched.

'As far as my parents were concerned I was just the same rebellious daughter, not going to church and not reading my Bible. But one day Mum invited me to a meeting. I went with her and was glad I did. The speaker wasn't just preaching about Jesus, a man he had read all about. I knew from how he spoke that he was speaking about Jesus, his personal friend.'

‘I’m not sure we can go quite that far,’ objected Mrs. Jackson. ‘That seems a little presumptuous. But go on with your story. I’m enjoying it.’

Isobel smiled. ‘By then I was a primary school teacher and living in lodgings as my parents had moved away from Vancouver.’

‘You must have loved that,’ the older woman said. ‘Primary children are such cute little things. Why, I think I’d have enjoyed doing that myself!’

‘Cute they might be, but enjoyable they were not,’ commented Isobel sadly. ‘They ran rings round me! I felt I was such a poor teacher that I signed up for an extra teaching course in the school holiday. It was held in Seattle and I stayed with Mrs. Whipple, a friend of my father.’

Mrs. Jackson stifled a giggle. ‘What an amusing name,’ she said.

This is turning into quite a long story, Isobel thought, but my companion doesn’t seem to be tiring. I suppose she has nothing better to do for hours on end at sea.

‘Mrs. Whipple is one of the most comfortable people I know,’ Isobel went on. ‘She didn’t force her beliefs on me and only spoke about Christianity when I brought up the subject. Before I left, she invited me to The First Bible Conference which was to be held in the summer. However, I had already arranged to go on another teaching course, and said I’d be unable to attend. But in the end I was able to go, and my time there changed my world.’

‘I hope you’re not going to preach at me,’ cautioned the older lady. ‘That would not be ladylike.’

Isobel shook her head.

‘Mrs. Whipple didn’t do that to me, and I won’t do it to you.’

Mrs. Jackson laughed. ‘Well, I won’t get a better deal in town than that!’

‘At The Firs, it was in the summer of 1923, I shared a room with a woman called Edna. Edna and her husband were missionaries in China. When they were on holiday, he dived into a mountain pool to save a young man who had cramp. He did save his friend’s life, but it cost him his own. She made such an impression on me. Despite all her sadness she still knew the joy of the Lord. It was she who challenged me to go overseas to serve the Lord. And what could I say? Had I not promised to serve him when and where he wanted if he would answer my prayer?’

‘But aren’t there enough people in Canada who need to hear the Bible message, without you going to the other side of the world, and to places that don’t even have proper toilets?’ said Mrs Jackson, shuddering at the thought.

‘I had promised to go where the Lord wanted me,’ Isobel said, a little more firmly.

‘And how did you know he wanted you in China?’

‘I’m coming to that,’ Isobel assured her companion, ‘but our chairs are now in the shade. Shall we move to a sunnier spot?’

The two women walked round the deck in silence for some time before deciding on the warmest and most comfortable deckchairs and settling down on them.

‘Do go on,’ instructed Mrs. Jackson, whose nosiness had overtaken her politeness.

‘I taught for another year and went back to The Firs the following summer. Mr J. O. Fraser of the China Inland Mission was one of the speakers. I’d never heard of him before I went, but I’ll not forget him for as long as I live. He told us how the Lord had led him there, and he described the work he did. As he spoke, my heart ached to be in China, to be with the people he was telling us about, to tell the demon worshippers about Jesus, to teach the illiterate people how to read the Bible, to hold the children on my knee and tell them that Jesus loved little children. At the end of his talk, Mr. Fraser appealed for men to answer God’s call to go with the Gospel to China. Everything in me ached to go, but I wasn’t a man. Would a young woman be any good? Could God use me in China?’

‘And can he, I wonder?’ said Mrs. Jackson, quite sure that the answer was no.

Isobel ignored that comment, after all, she had still to find that out for herself. And Mrs. Jackson made no objection when she went on with her story.

‘In order to prepare for the mission field, I applied to Bible School. The one I went to was decided by a lady I’d met at The Firs, a dear and generous lady who paid my fare to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and

funded my first year's college and boarding fees!'

'You studied in Chicago! You went to America! Perhaps you're not the backwoods girl I took you for after all,' announced Mrs. Jackson, more than a little unkindly.

Isobel smiled at her directness. 'I'm being direct too,' she reminded herself.

'Yes,' she said, 'I studied in America and I visited Chicago's slums and prisons and hospitals with the good news that Jesus saves.'

'I hope you saw some of the beautiful places too,' the older lady said, sounding rather miffed, 'America is not all slums and prisons.'

'There wasn't time or money for sightseeing,' Isobel admitted, 'however, I did see a lot of lovely and exciting things. But,' she smiled shyly, 'the loveliest and most exciting thing of all was meeting a very special young man. His name is John Kuhn.'

Mrs. Jackson put her hand over her mouth to hide a yawn. 'This sounds like a happy ending,' she said, 'but may we keep it until tomorrow after lunch? I told my husband I wouldn't have a siesta and now I can't keep my eyes open.'

She rose. 'Until tomorrow.'

'Until tomorrow.'

Isobel smiled broadly. But her thoughts were not of Mrs. Charlotte Jackson, they were of John Kuhn. Isobel smiled as she remembered her first sight of John, busy in the Bible College kitchen. Memories flooded

back, of the instant attraction she had felt for him, of the months she had avoided John as she believed that she should remain single, and of God's goodness in bringing them together, allowing them to fall in love and calling them both to service in China. Isobel sighed. 'One day I'll tell our children about that', she thought, it's so romantic.

While Mrs. Jackson had nothing to do with herself on board the ship, Isobel did. For an hour each day an experienced missionary, Ruth Paxton, gave the mission's new recruits an hour of Bible teaching. When Isobel emerged from the cabin and went on deck the first person she saw was Charlotte Jackson.

'I've kept a deckchair for you,' the older woman said. 'And I can't wait to hear the rest of your story. But I've two questions I'd like to ask you first?'

Isobel waited for the questions. She wondered what the lady would want to know more about. But her queries were about something else entirely.

'I couldn't help but notice that you meet with all your friends for a while each day. I just wondered what you did behind that closed cabin door.'

The girl smiled to herself. Was there no end of this woman's cheek? she wondered.

'We meet for Bible teaching,' she explained. 'I'm learning such a lot there.'

Mrs. Jackson shook her head sadly. 'I've got to say this to you as you're a poor motherless girl ...'

Isobel wondered what on earth was coming next!

‘... but too much religion is not good for anyone, far less a pretty little girl. You’ll never find a husband if all you go to is Bible classes.’

The woman’s face was a picture when Isobel told her that she was engaged to John Kuhn, and that he also went to Bible classes, and that he was already a missionary in China!

‘I think you had another question?’ Isobel said.

For once Mrs. Jackson looked just a little uncomfortable. But her inquisitiveness swallowed her pride. ‘I couldn’t help but notice the long line of young women who were there to wave you off at Vancouver.’

Isobel turned to look out to sea, not because there was anything there to look at, but to avoid her companion seeing her grinning face. Now she knew why the grand lady was so interested in her!

Arranging her face in a suitable expression, Isobel faced Mrs. Jackson and explained.

‘Yesterday,’ she began, ‘I told you that I studied at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. When I graduated from there last year, I went to live with my father and brother in Vancouver. My mother died while I was a student. Although China Inland Mission provisionally accepted me, I could not go right out. Among other reasons there was an anti-foreign uprising at the time. For over a year I worked as superintendent to the Vancouver Girls’ Corner Club. The young ladies you saw at the wharf were members of the Club.’

‘Well, well,’ said Mrs. Jackson. ‘So that’s who they were!’

Having satisfied her curiosity, she rose from the deckchair. ‘I’ve so enjoyed getting to know you,’ she told Isobel. ‘Now I must go and find Mr. Jackson. He’ll be rising from his siesta I’m sure.’

The young missionary watched the lady go. What a disappointment that was to her, she said to herself. She thought she’d met a celebrity!

Isobel walked over to the rail and leant on it. ‘I must be facing east,’ she decided from the direction of the sun, ‘east towards China, towards John and towards the Lisu people.’