Missionary Childhood

IN APRIL, 1899, six-year-old Pearl Sydenstricker wrote a letter from Chin-kiang, China, to the editor of the Christian Observer, in Louisville, Kentucky. It was her first published writing, and it appeared under the headline “Our Real Home in Heaven”:

I am a little girl, six years old. I live in China. I have a big brother in college who is coming to China to help our father tell the Chinese about Jesus. I have two little brothers in heaven. Maidie went first, then Artie, then Edith, and on the tenth of last month my little brave brother, Clyde left us to go to our real home in heaven. Clyde said he was a Christian Soldier, and that heaven was his best home. Clyde was four years old, and we both love the little letters in the Observer. I wrote this all myself, and my hand is tired, so goodbye.

Clyde, barely out of his infancy, was a brave soldier in Christ’s army, gathered into his “bestest” home. This sad little allegory came directly out of six-year-old Pearl’s fundamentalist upbringing. She may have written her letter all by herself, as she said, but she used the language she had been hearing every day of her brief life.

As an adult, she would completely reject the religion in which she was raised, but it was the source of everything she learned about values as a child. Living in a small Chinese city, she was separated from her own country and its culture almost from birth. She had heard Chinese children make fun of her blond hair and blue eyes, and call her yang kwei-tse, a “foreign devil.” Four of her brothers and sisters had died, and she had few companions of her own age. Like many lonely children, she depended on her parents for talk and friendship. Her childish Christianity was natural enough, but it had nothing to do with doctrine or belief; her pious enthusiasm brought her closer to her mother and father.

Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker had journeyed to China twenty years earlier as Presbyterian missionaries. Absalom came “to tell the Chinese about Jesus,” as Pearl rather sweetly phrases it; for over fifty years, he labored to spread his alien revelation among people he regarded as heathens. He was part of the missionary
enterprise, one of the strangest and most compelling episodes in the history of relations between China and the West.

In the nineteenth century, Americans knew almost nothing about China. It was a blank on the map — vast, distant, exotic. Only a handful of merchants, soldiers, and diplomats had set foot in China or in any other Asian country. If Americans thought about China at all, they relied on a cluster of stereotypes. Some were favorable, but most were generally insulting: the Chinese were dishonest, cruel, inscrutable; China was a place of strange costumes and customs. Literally and morally, China was at the opposite end of the earth. Bret Harte’s “The Heathen Chinee” (1870) may well have been “the worst poem that anybody ever wrote,” as Harte himself said, but it was tremendously popular, and its sly comic hero, Ah Sin, was one of only two Chinese characters — real or fictional — that most Americans had ever heard of. The other was Confucius, who was “known,” if that is the right word, only as the author of a number of fairly silly aphorisms.

Devout Christians were not better informed than other Americans, but China had a special importance for them. Because it was the most populous nation on earth, China offered the greatest scope for redemptive effort. Many Protestant Christians in fact believed that the decisive battle with infidelity would be fought in China.

Protestant missionaries began arriving in the 1830s and 1840s. They came, typically, from the small towns of the Middle West, equipped with little more than religious fervor and the degrees they had recently earned at the modest sectarian colleges of Ohio and Michigan and Illinois. They represented all the major Protestant denominations: Congregationalists, Methodists, hardshell and softshell Baptists, several conventions of Lutherans, Northern and Southern Presbyterians, a few Unitarians and Episcopalians, a handful of Christian Scientists.

It is virtually impossible to reconstruct the mixture of attitudes that led thousands of young men and women to China, or even to imagine the unlikely combination of provincialism and daring that defined them. Many of them kept diaries and journals, all of them wrote letters home, some of them published autobiographies. The testimony of their various accounts constitutes an absorbing group portrait, in which piety, fatigue, ambition, illness, disillusion, hope, discovery, homesickness, fundamentalism, and secularism alternate by turns. They uprooted themselves, left behind everything they had known, and lived for years and decades in a society they found inhospitable and utterly incomprehensible.

For most evangelists, the missionary calling satisfied a deep personal need for significant action. Some were attracted by the undeniable glamour of foreign adventuring, and the occasional but real dangers that lay in wait in the Chinese countryside. Many were humanitarian who believed they could improve the lives of the Chinese even as they saved them from damnation. There were un-
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doubtlessly opportunists and hypocrites among them, but most were driven by the conviction that they were bringing light to people in darkness. They believed that their exertions would ultimately defeat Chinese heathenism and usher in the Second Coming.

Absalom Sydenstricker embodied the best and worst in the missionary vocation. He was a man of high intelligence and unyielding commitment, indifferent to his own welfare, fearless in the face of danger. He had only one motive. For a half-century, he traveled across central China, from one village and market town to another, relentlessly trying to persuade Chinese men and women to accept Jesus. From his arrival at Hangchow (Hangzhou) in 1880 to his death in Nanking (Nanjing) in 1931, he remained steadfast in his calling. He made few converts among people who found his version of the truth bewildering and often absurd. Nonetheless, despite fifty years of frustration, he clung to the conviction that China was an immense heathen territory ripe for salvation.

When she was a child, Pearl tended to see her father in heroic terms. As she grew older, she decided that he was a simple fanatic, touched with an apocalyptic fever. He had exhausted himself in the service of a futile ambition. He had spent decades in an ancient, complex, and dignified civilization and had seen only a stronghold of Satan. Pearl came to believe that her father was an unfortunately representative figure: “If his life has any meaning . . . it is as a manifestation of a certain spirit in his country and his time. For he was a spirit, and a spirit made by that blind certainty, that pure intolerance, that zeal for mission, that contempt of man and earth, that high confidence in heaven, which our forefathers bequeathed to us.” He was insensitive to beauty, to human weakness, to the needs of his family, even to his own suffering. Pearl acknowledged that Absalom’s tenacity and sense of purpose had a kind of grandeur. However, his great gifts, his energy and undeniable courage, his sincerity, merely made the waste of his life more poignant.

The person most wounded by Absalom’s misdirected idealism was his wife Carrie. She had accompanied her husband to China, where she was homesick for the remaining forty years of her life. Pearl regarded Carrie as the generous victim of Absalom’s commitments, a woman whose life was embittered and shortened by her husband’s single-minded and ultimately destructive devotion to his evangelical Work. (When Pearl later wrote about her parents’ lives, she often capitalized Absalom’s Work, for ironic rather than reverent reasons.) Carrie’s emotionally impoverished marriage and exile provided Pearl a tragic example of the price that women pay for loyalty to codes and customs that oppress them. It was the most important lesson Pearl would ever learn. Carrie Sydenstricker had died in the knowledge that her lifetime of self-denial had brought only suffering; her daughter would not, as Carrie had done, collaborate in her own defeat.

Wherever she lived in China, in Hangchow, Chinkiang, or Nanking, Carrie
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always made a flower garden. These were places of beauty and refuge, walled off from the Chinese streets that surrounded them. Carie’s gardens, to which she was passionately devoted, and to which Absalom was utterly oblivious, stood for Pearl as a symbol of the distance between her parents. Significantly, throughout the biographies she wrote of both Absalom and Carie, Pearl referred to herself as “Carie’s daughter.”

In the end, Pearl was inevitably shaped by both her parents. She rejected her father’s religious beliefs and his narrow-mindedness, but she inherited his evangelical zeal, his sense of rectitude, his passion for learning. Though she stopped believing in Christian ideas of salvation, she became, in effect, a secular missionary, bringing the gospels of civil rights and cross-cultural understanding to people on two continents. She adored her mother, and took from her a belief in compassion, a stubborn antagonism to abstract creeds, and a commitment to the supreme importance of the family. But she turned away from Carie’s conventionally female habits of deference and self-sacrifice. For better and sometimes for worse, the adult Pearl would combine much that was distinctive in both her mother and her father.

Like most missionaries, Absalom Sydenstricker was a marginal man. Born in August, 1852, on a farm in western Virginia, he was the second youngest of nine children. The family’s ancestors had come from Germany, settling first in Pennsylvania, then moving south at about the time of the Revolution. The homestead was large, though steep hills and thin soil made it difficult to cultivate and unprosperous. There was always enough food, but rarely any money. ⁶

Absalom’s mother was a quiet woman who became increasingly detached from her large family as she grew older. In her later years, she communed with ghosts. Her husband was a fiercely religious man, always lecturing his family about God and the Devil. He recited aloud from Scripture in all his spare moments, and boasted that he read the entire Bible through every year. He was violent and quarrelsome, with a dangerous temper that drove his children off the farm as soon as they were old enough to move out. After they left, he would curse them for ingratitude.

Absalom was one of seven sons, six of whom became preachers. As a boy, he did his farm work diligently — one of his chores was taking grain to the local mill — but he resented the daily labor and his father’s discipline. He loved the Virginia landscape and the changes of season, but he was often lonely and unhappy. His childhood seemed to him mainly a time of fear, anger, and self-doubt.

His earliest memory was a scene of humiliation. When he was six or seven years old, he heard himself called exceptionally ugly by a neighbor woman. The
woman consoled his mother by cheerily reminding her that there is usually a runt in every family. This episode loomed over Absalom’s life as a symbol of his isolation. He spent his life bitterly insisting that virtue was more important than beauty or talent. Even in old age, he recalled his father as a man who frightened him, and his mother as a woman who seemed to love him less than his brothers and sisters. He retreated into books, partly as a way of escaping from his family, but partly because he had a real talent for learning. His boyhood attachment to reading would eventually lead to a career of modest distinction as a scholar and linguist.

During Absalom’s adolescence, the Sydenstricker family was swept up in the turmoil of the Civil War. Four of his brothers, David, Hiram, Isaac, and John, fought for the Confederacy; two were wounded and Isaac suffered for months in a Union prison. Absalom was too young to enlist, but he mourned the Confederacy’s defeat, and he maintained sympathy with the South’s lost cause throughout his life. Because he missed the great testing of the war, he had further reason to doubt his adequacy. Foreign evangelism allowed him the compensation of lifelong combat against an enemy even more implacable than the Yankees. Fundamentalist Christians have always luxuriated in a rhetoric of constant strife and bloody battle. During his years in China, as he struggled to free pagan souls from Satan’s grasp, Absalom would find those images especially appealing.

Absalom’s childhood also defined his attitudes toward race. Though his family was poor, they had owned a couple of slaves, and they were untroubled by the moral evil that slavery involved. Absalom was taught to regard racial hierarchy as part of the natural order, which may explain his assured sense of superiority to Asians. He had been made to feel outcast and unattractive among his own people; when he went to China, he knew that he was the agent of a higher civilization.

Aside from fighting with each other and ridiculing abolitionists, the Sydenstrickers apparently had few habits or rituals in common. Religion was their one bond. Each Sunday, they marched dutifully off to the Old Stone Church in Lewisburg to hear the gloomy wisdom of a provincial Presbyterian preacher. Sometimes the service was conducted by a visitor, occasionally a missionary on home leave from China. Following one such service, when he was sixteen years old, Absalom decided that he had heard the call. He kept his vocation secret for several years to avoid conflict with his family. He knew that their conventional Christianity would be affronted at the idea of his going to China. Piety was acceptable and even admirable, but foreign evangelism was considered a form of extremism.

Like his older brothers before him, Absalom was obliged to stay on the farm until his twenty-first birthday. Then he enrolled in Washington and Lee College,
in Lexington, Virginia. He was older than the other undergraduates and far more serious in his work than most of them. Tall, red-haired, and extremely thin, he was easily noticed. However, he felt physically and socially awkward, and his habitual reserve was accentuated by his poor eyesight. He was nearsighted, a condition that Pearl eventually decided was symbolic. In any case, in college he kept mostly to himself. He made no friends, but he won “a drawer full of honors,” as Pearl later described them. He had no money, and supported himself through the four-year course by working at a series of part-time jobs and living on short rations of bread and cheese. By denying himself any social life at all, he was able to accumulate a small library of books, most of them in history and theology. These were virtually his only possessions. On the day after his graduation, during his last night in the dormitory, a fire destroyed every book he owned.

Absalom returned home penniless. He tried without success to earn a living selling Bibles door-to-door, then announced his missionary intentions. As he had expected, his father found the idea outrageous tomfoolery. His mother, on the other hand, was more conciliatory, in part, apparently, as a way of defying her husband. She promised Absalom her support, but only on the condition that he marry before leaving for Asia. As he later told the story, he had never until that moment thought of marriage, but he agreed to find a wife.  

He went about the business of courtship by methodically inspecting the religious convictions of each of the young women he knew. He assumed, sensibly enough, that he needed a wife who shared his beliefs. He was attracted to a woman named Jennie Hustead, who had sent him a letter warmly applauding his first sermon, which was published under the title “The Necessity of Proclaiming the Gospel to the Heathen, with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Predestination.” Absalom eventually passed over Hustead, in spite of her theological good taste, and proposed to twenty-two-year-old Carie Stulting.

Carie was the descendant of Dutch immigrants. Her grandparents had come to America in the early nineteenth century, refugees from a rare outburst of Dutch religious persecution. Johann Stulting had been a prosperous Utrecht merchant who sold his business and led a band of three hundred pilgrims to the New World in search of religious liberty. The group included Johann’s youngest son, Hermanus, and his French wife – Carie’s father and mother. After passing for a season in Pennsylvania, the larger portion of the immigrants eventually settled in Virginia. City people from birth, they learned how to do farm work and eventually prospered.

Carie was born in 1857, and lived with her family in a large white three-story house in what is today Hillsboro, West Virginia, a little town set in the foothills of the Shenandoah Mountains. When she was older, she loved to recall the big
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maple tree that stood in the front yard and the apple orchard in back, the shelves of round Dutch cheeses and homemade berry wines. The rooms of the house were furnished handsomely, and the walls were decorated with etchings and drawings that her father had made. Bookcases were filled with volumes of poetry, fiction, and biographies. A piano in the front parlor brought the family together for song and laughter in the evenings. Carie learned to play quite skillfully; years later, she lightened the burden of her Chinese exile by coaxing music out of a small organ.

Unlike Absalom, Carie remembered the first few years of her childhood as a time of almost uninterrupted happiness. She was once punished – unjustly in her opinion – for breaking a serving dish when she was three years old. Aside from that single unpleasant episode, however, her early years moved in an agreeable round of play and easy chores. She grew up secure in her parents’ affection and confident in her own talents.

In fact, there was a deep flaw in the Stulting family arrangements, but Carie only recognized it after she had grown up. She had especially admired her artistically gifted father because of his attachment to beautiful objects and his scrupulous personal cleanliness. However, because he didn’t do his share of the farm’s hard work, he doubled the labor of his oldest son, Carie’s brother Cornelius. He was, furthermore, the only man in his community who changed his white shirt and collar every day. When she was much older, Carie realized the hardship that Hermanus’s fastidious habits had implied. She told Pearl: “It did not occur to me until years later that, after all, there was something cruel about those white collars. Someone – our mother as long as she could and then one of the older girls – always had that collar and shirt to wash and iron every day, no matter how much canning or churning there might be on hand.” Carie came to believe that her mother’s poor health had been caused in some measure by the charming Hermanus’s demands.

The Civil War brought an end to the family’s prosperity. Their farm was perilously exposed, lying just a few miles from the border between secessionist Virginia and the new state of West Virginia, which remained loyal to the Union. In a hopeless effort to stay out of harm’s way, Hermanus announced that his family would simply remain neutral. Cornelius, who was old enough to fight but refused, spent the war years hiding in a cabin on nearby Droop Mountain. The Stulting farm was ravaged by North and South alike, repeatedly stripped of its food and supplies by hungry soldiers. At one point, the family was reduced to eating a soup made of dandelion greens and a handful of dried beans. Carie acknowledged the violence on both sides, but she was convinced that the Yankee troops were particularly savage. Though she was only eight when the war ended, she never forgave Lincoln or his field commanders. Decades later, in 1900, when
the Boxers murdered several hundred foreigners in China, Carie likened them to the armies of General William T. Sherman, who had burned a wide avenue of destruction across the South.

In an important sense, Carie’s childhood ended with the war. She had seen bloodshed, starvation, and hate sweep aside the security of her early years. She was old enough to share in the pain and deprivation that settled on her region, but too young to play a part in the task of rebuilding. In particular, she was frustrated by her lack of schooling. All the schools had closed for the duration of the war, and she had received little formal education. She could barely read, and she could not write at all. In the war’s grim aftermath, her brother Cornelius began a small school in which she quickly became the best pupil. She read every book she could find, and she also did well in the rudimentary science that Cornelius made available to her.

In the end, the pinched circumstances of the postwar years did not subtract much from Carie’s sense of well-being. She had grown into a dark-haired, handsome young woman, an inch or two over five feet tall, ready to laugh, admired by most of the other people in her small community. She enjoyed her studies and felt that poverty was teaching her valuable lessons in self-reliance. Her principal anxiety was for her soul.

Carie spent a good deal of time worrying about God and salvation, and in this she was typical of the young people of her time and place. Some version or other of Christianity was inescapable in nineteenth-century rural America. Children sat through long church services at least once on Sunday, and they recited prayers and heard the Bible read two or three times each day at home. They were subject to continuous interrogation by parents and ministers who probed the state of their souls. The social life in their small communities revolved around the church. In short, young Americans grew up in a culture of piety that reached into every corner of daily life.

Carie would never embrace Christianity with Absalom’s immense and solemn finality, but she was an earnest seeker. She wrote in her diary: “During the years between twelve and fifteen I used many times a week to go out into the woods behind the barn and creep into a little hollow in a clump of elderberries and throw myself down and cry to God for a sign – anything to make me believe in Him.” Carie thought the sign might have come when her mother died in 1875, at the end of a long illness; she was half-convinced that God had entered the sickroom and eased her mother’s last moments. In gratitude, she vowed to devote her life to God’s service. She began to think of the foreign missions simply because such a vocation would require the greatest self-denial. Like many ardent young people who experience transports of high religious excitement, Carie instinctively equated personal discomfort with theological perfection.

At this rather precarious emotional moment, she met Absalom Sydenstricker,
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now an ordained minister of the Southern Presbyterian Church. He had come to Hillsboro with one of his older brothers, who had been installed as the town’s new Presbyterian minister. Carie was immediately attracted to the shy, studious younger brother, who kept himself detached from the visiting and gossip that made up Hillsboro’s modest social life. She noted that he lacked a sense of humor, but was undisturbed since she regarded her own tendency to laughter as a warning that she might be morally frivolous.

Despite her growing affection for Absalom, Carie did not at first alter her own plans. She wanted more education than her brother’s school could provide and, in 1877, she left Hillsboro to spend two years at the Bellewood Female Seminary, near Louisville. Years later, Pearl found two of the essays Carie had written at Bellewood. One was a commentary on Queen Esther that applauded the heroism of self-sacrifice. The other, which won a prize, was a compendium of religious dogma called “The Moral Evidences of Christianity.” The light-hearted girl was trying to turn herself into a pious woman.

Like Absalom, Carie had kept her dreams of foreign evangelism secret. Like him, she also met the unequivocal opposition of her father when she made her announcement after returning from Bellewood. Hermanus’s resistance only stiffened her own resolve; within a few months, she and Absalom were engaged, mainly on the basis of their shared commitment to a missionary career. If Absalom was capable of passion, Carie never saw the evidence, not even in these early days of their relationship. For her own part, she deliberately suppressed her passion in order to prove her religious sincerity—to herself as much as to God. In place of the more domestic expectations that most nineteenth-century women brought to marriage, Carie was elevated by an apocalyptic vision: she looked forward to “a harvest of dark, white-clad heathen being baptized” as a result of the good work she and Absalom would do together.

Carie and Absalom were married on July 8, 1880, and almost immediately began the journey west to California where they would board a steamer for China. There was a moment of confusion at the train station because Absalom had forgotten to buy a second ticket. The little episode was comic, but it foreshadowed Absalom’s behavior over the next four decades. As Pearl later wrote, he had obeyed his mother and found a wife, but he could never quite remember it.

Absalom had been given no help in preparing for his great undertaking: “Not a word had been said about the importance of being vaccinated; nothing was said about the currency used in China; nothing had been done . . . to secure reduced rates on railways or steamer; no passage had been secured for us.” The young couple had to make their way on their own.
They traveled across the Pacific on the City of Tokyo, which docked in Japan in mid-September. From there they transferred to an old sidewheeler that carried them over the Inland Sea and East China Sea to Shanghai. Carrie was seasick through the entire voyage, as she would be each time she crossed the ocean. Absalom spent the trip studying Chinese. The Sydenstrickers, who were the first Presbyterian reinforcements to arrive in China in seven years, received a warm greeting from the small Christian community. They were initially assigned to Hangchow, a hundred miles southwest of Shanghai. They remained here for less than a year, living in a single room. The first of their children, a boy they named Edgar, was born in Hangchow in 1881.

A few months later, they moved to Soochow (Suzhou), where Absalom replaced Rev. H. C. Du Bose, who had gone back to the United States on home leave. When Du Bose returned, the Sydenstrickers were reassigned to Hangchow, where they spent the next year or so. They lived on the upper floor of a small but fairly comfortable bungalow in the missionary compound.

Like most foreigners, the Christian evangelists kept themselves separate from the native populations. They built their houses behind tall brick walls that also