

THE HEAVENLY BOOK LADY OF CHINA

By Ann Coleman

SCENE I

Excuse me, sir. My name is Charlotte Diggs Moon. I am here regarding your ad for a tutor for your children. You do have my school records, I believe. As you see I was born December 12, 1840, on the Viewmont, Virginia estate – my widowed mother still lives there with my youngest sister, Edmonia. I was educated in the best Virginia schools and graduated with the highest honors – well-uh-yes, sir – I did miss some chapel services – well, yes, twenty-six services since last semester – at the time I was under the belief that literary knowledge was of more importance than my spiritual knowledge. Yes Sir, I (*pause*) – my, they did include a complete report to you, didn't they – I climbed the bell tower on April Fools' Day and muffled the bell with sheets (*smiles*) causing everyone on campus to be late. (*Serious*) Sir, on my behalf – may I make a statement of my change of heart . . .

(*To audience*) I told him my friends were so concerned they held a prayer meeting. That night the neighbors' barking dog kept me awake. Unable to sleep, I couldn't get the condition of my soul out of my mind. The next day I went to church to inquire into the meaning of my restlessness. I returned home a new person and a believer in Jesus Christ as my Savior.

SCENE II

Let's see – does this sound convincing? – Southern Baptist Convention, Foreign Mission Board, Dear Sir, I am very interested in giving my life for the cause of missions, but it has been explained to me that single women are never allowed to go to the foreign fields alone. I have no prospects of marriage, so how can it be that I keep hearing the call of God so clearly? (*looks at it, places in envelope*)

(*To audience*) September 1, 1873. What a step of faith for the Foreign Mission Board. At age thirty-three I was on my way – not to Japan as I had earlier planned but by a “clear as a bell” calling to China. It was a rough trip – a hurricane nearly tore the ship apart.

SCENE III

Tengchow, your countryside is beautiful – but your massive gray stone walls – built before the birth of Christ – seems so forlorn. What history you could tell if allowed to speak – your people so suppressed, your women with their painfully bound feet, your famines and your strange customs of ancestral worship (*pause*) – what will you say of me when my life's work is done? Will you have made me welcome? Your people have called me “foreign devil” as I walk your streets. Your Chinese women constantly touch my clothes (*rushing lines*) asking me questions: who is my mother-in-law, what did I pay for my dress, who is my servant, how old am I (*slowly*) until I long for relief.

(*To audience*) I speak the Mandarin language with the many dialects based on the tonal system. It is very tiring to my throat. When it is time to go into the villages, I take my bedroll and supply of food – I must teach while seated cross-legged for many hours on the kang. The kang is a platform bed covered with matting. It is the only dry surface in the house of earthen floors.

SCENE IV

Mrs. Crawford, how nice of you to bring the mail – I'm expecting a reply from the Foreign Mission Board to send relief – people or money. I wonder which I will receive first – let's see (*disappointed*) no letters again today – only bills and the mission journal. (*Opens paper*) Mrs. Crawford, how is it you and Mr. Crawford have managed to stay in China all of these years with so little response from the people at home? Just listen to this – (*reads*) “The Hardships in China Are Over At Last.” (*puts paper down*) Now where did they get that news – when it comes to houses with dirt floors, sleeping on hard beds, eating only native food dripping in grease, dirt of the barnyard at our very door, the loneliness of not hearing English spoken for months when you are in the villages alone, the unwashed bodies, the threat of disease, and daily being followed by people crying “Kill, kill!” – if that isn't hardship, then what is? (*shakes head in disbelief*) Is it any wonder we cry out for help? At this very moment we have only one man and three women to witness to thirty million lost Chinese souls.

(*To audience*) But there is relief from the hardships – my schools are a joy to me – the delightful children with their bright shining eyes and comical pigtailed are so eager to learn. I have dipped into my salary until the funds have become quite low – so many supplies I must have for the class. You see, it is necessary to help support the girls who come to us. The families see no need to educate girls in China.

In early 1882 my request for help arrived – not the single women I requested to help with the school but – two bachelors. Mr. Pruitt soon found a bride from the Presbyterian appointees. It was delightful to have young people among us. And finally my eleven year effort to get a single woman was realized when Miss Mattie Roberts arrived in 1884 (*upset*) only to have Mr. Holcomb claim her soon afterward for his wife. I am writing to the Mission Board to please from now on send older women with no romantic ideas. (*Sadly*) Our love stories have an unhappy ending – the dreaded disease struck. Mrs. Pruitt contracted a typhoid-like fever and died in her husband's arms on their second wedding anniversary; and Mrs. Holcomb, married less than a year, died and was laid beside Ida Pruitt on Mount Hope, our little foreign cemetery. Over the next few years other missionaries arrived – a few returned home unable to survive in this climate, others died. Of eight new missionaries in these years only Mr. Pruitt and I remain to serve. It takes a firm grip on life to cope with sights of dogs eating human corpses, of finding babies thrown beside the road to die, by going without Western companionship and by living in Chinese-style dwellings and on the Chinese diet.

SCENE V

Mr. Pruitt – I think it is time I wrote Mr. Tupper at the Foreign Mission Board about some changes. Up to now they have left us alone to work until we break down or die. We will be of use to no one when we fall prey to illness from overwork. I think we should suggest money to be set aside to allow a missionary to be returned to the United States every ten years for furlough . . .

(*To audience*) Until now no one has been able to set up mission work in P'ingtu, an inland village – I am determined we will stay out until next summer. I will wear a Chinese robe and live by their customs to demonstrate a Chinese-style Christian life. Yes, I most assuredly will miss the comforts of my little Tengchow home – (*remembering*) my rocking chair, my small bookcase, Edmonia's little organ. Many a time in our early mission days we gathered around to sing familiar songs from the states. It was our escape from loneliness . . . But I must go if all of China is to know of Christ's love.

SCENE VI

(*Music: "Joy to the World" in background – fade as scene begins*) Everyone gather round – I have something to tell you! What is Christmas without good news? Remember I told you how I had read about the Methodist women planning to observe a week of prayer before Christmas and I had word that the Cartersville, Georgia, church has also made plans for an offering on Christmas Day for our work here in Tengchow. I wrote to the Mission Board and suggested they might like to promote this idea among all of the churches. What better way to observe Christmas than to "send the glad tidings." Well, here is the good news – it is – let's say – my gift to each of you and missionaries in the future.

The Mission Board liked the idea, so they asked a fine lady in Maryland to take it as her project. She wrote by hand 1,000 letters, wrapped 700 packages of literature, and with her own money mailed 3,000 circulars advertising the Christmas offering. While we are eating our Christmas dinner, they are taking offerings to send us new missionaries. I think we must write Miss Annie Armstrong a long thank-you letter.

(To audience) Word soon reached us the offering had been a big success and two new missionaries would soon be arriving. *(Pause, take a few steps)* My furloughs have often been delayed because of lack of funds for the boat ticket home, but this time it was because two men walked 300 miles to beg me to return with them to their villages to teach the “Heavenly Book.” How could I even consider leaving?

SCENE VII

Mr. Li, you are a very devoted Chinese pastor, and you know the customs better than I – so you are probably right to be anxious when your converts stopped worshipping their ancestral tablets. You may be called on the face the persecutors for the cause of Christ.

(To audience) And indeed he did. They dragged him by the hair, and tore his scalp from his head. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” (Matt. 5:10, KJV). *(Pause)* I was home in Virginia in time to attend the annual Southern Baptist Convention. What a surprise awaited me there . . .

SCENE VIII

(Very emotional) Oh my – ohhhh my – just look at that red silk banner – it’s enormous. My dear Shaling Christians sent that for me – and this precious note: *(reads)* “We thank God that he gave his servants wisdom to choose and send so good a missionary as Miss Moon whose heart is filled with love like that unto the ‘Son of God.’” *(Wipes away tears)* I am so blessed to have a people as loving as my Chinese Christians! China is truly my home.

(To audience) Back in China, 1892. Oh , I do feel the effects of old age. So much work still to do – my school, the nervous problems of some of our missionaries, the Pruitt’s baby dying just hours before the doctor, arrived, the shortage of funds, the beggars at my door. War is close. I must remain calm. I feel confident God will protect me and keep me immortal till my work is done. Oh, that I had a thousand lives I might give to China.

SCENE IX

Mr. Hartwell, you may be the senior missionary in China, but I feel I must defy your wishes and go to the P'ingtu Christians . . . Yes, I am aware my life would be in danger – Empress Dowager is to be feared by each of us. The Boxers have full control of the roads, but someone must give our Chinese Christians support.

(To audience) I called for a long Chinese robe and coat. I wore big rimmed glasses, slicked my hair back, and put on a cap with a bright red button. I had them bring me a sedan chair like the Chinese officials rode in ; and, seated with the curtain flaps open, I rode to P'ingtu looking from side to side. I knew if I was discovered I would be put to death – but – no one even noticed me. I must say, I prayed every inch of the trip. I didn't know I had that much nerve left in me. Our homes, churches and schools in P'ingtu were demolished. We were told to slip quietly to the nearest port – a Chinese boat was waiting to take us to safety.

Two years later I returned to Tengchow. We now had our first nurse; she had heard me speak when she was only a child. Dr. Ayers came to build the first foreign hospital for the Southern Baptist Convention. Back in the states my sister, Edmonia, begged me to return home to stay. I am very tired now and find myself quoting a well worn saying: “Go on joyously as much as you can, and if you do not always go on joyously, at best go on courageously and confidently.”

SCENE X

Well, Mr. Adams, how are you today? I understand you received a letter this week from Floy – how is she?

(To audience) Just when things seem to get me down, God sends a special blessing with my name on it – he did when he sent Mr. Adams our way – so in love is he with his soon-to-be-bride, they bring back deeply buried memories of my own romance. You didn't know about that, did you? Crawford Toy was my Hebrew Professor at school. We wrote many long letters over the years, and I even told the Mission Board of my intentions to resign and sent a letter to my family to prepare for a spring wedding – but the young missionary girl I once was in Virginia and the seasoned missionary I had become were two different people when it came to saying yes. The Lord had first claim on my life, and since the two conflicted there could be no question about the results. Well, enough of the romance of my life – the Adams' made a fine addition to our group.

SCENE XI

No – really – I will be fine. (*Turns away, talks to herself*) I can't share the sad news of my letter – not now anyway. My little sister Edmonia took her own life on November 19. Mr. Adams, I think if you will excuse me I want to go for a long walk by the seashore and take out and dust off a few sweet old memories.

(*To audience*) There are so many changes taking place in China – only a few feet are bound, the old pagan temple is being replaced with a school building where Western subjects are taught. Within a few years revolution will be the way of life. Our Chinese Baptists have formally organized – 1000 students in our schools, over 50 native evangelists and 2,000 church members. As I walk the old milestone streets, the strangers speak pleasantly to me as I pass by. (*Becomes serious*) But all is not well. Sad, disturbing news has reached us that the Foreign Mission Board is gravely in debt. No more help can be sent this year for the poor starving people. Sometimes I don't think I can go on . . .

SCENE XII

(*Standing*) Mr. Adams, I've called you here to ask you to become executor of my will. You need to know that I have paid my bills to the famine relief fund, the coal for the winter, loaned enough money to feed some of the missionary families, and rented the children's chapel. But we need more books or we will have to close the schools. I want to turn my checks over to the Mission Board to help with the debt. Where will it all end? (*Turns away*) I pray no missionary will ever be as lonely as I have been.

(*Sits in chair – hold head in hands*) I cannot eat when Chinese children are starving to death on the streets – I will not eat. (*To Mr. Adams*) Are the Newton's seven children going to starve to death? I must not eat – my heart hurts . . . leave China? No, not just now when I am so needed . . . Did Mr. Hartwell die? Why haven't I heard from Edmonia? So alone. (*Sits up*) Where are you taking me young man? Tengchow is my home. Oh, Chinese Christians, do you know I love you? (*Turns a little in chair*) The ship is so big. Miss Miller, you are so kind to travel with me. I must trust God. (*Starts singing softly "Trusting Jesus." Turns to Miss Miller, smiles faintly*) Do you see him? (*Points to heaven*) He is coming – coming for me. (*Weakly raises fist together in the fashion of fond Chinese greeting, bows head.*)

(*Stands*) Go on joyously as much as you can, and if you do not always go on joyously, at best go on courageously and confidently.

Monologue based on Catherine B. Allen's book, The New Lottie Moon Story (Broadman, c1980.)