

The Moon in the Mango Tree

Pamela Binnings Ewen

Also by Pamela Binnings Ewen

Fiction

Walk Back the Cat

Nonfiction

Faith on Trial

To
Barbara Jeanne Perkins Binnings
and
June Perkins Anderson



And in memory of
Muriel Carol Austgen

*Perhaps her faults and follies, the unhappiness she had suffered,
were not entirely vain if she could follow the path
that she now dimly discerned before her . . .
the path that led to peace.*

W. Somerset Maugham
The Painted Veil

Prologue

At the mouth of the Menam—the Chao Phraya River—fireflies covering mangrove bushes at the edge of the water sparkled in strange unison through the dusk, creating beacons of light that were seen for miles. The river flows to the Gulf of Siam from Bangkok. It is the key that unlocks the mysteries of Siam to weary travelers arriving by sea. As Harvey and I peered from the deck of the *Empress of Asia*, we saw each bush glimmer with light from the fireflies then quickly disappear into the gloaming—on and off together as if they were one, light, then dark.

Siam, as I knew it then, has disappeared as the light of those fireflies. Today it is known as Thailand, the land of the free people. It smolders beneath the white-hot glare of the sun, just a few degrees south of the Tropic of Cancer. When we arrived at the end of the year 1919, Siam was laughter, music, color. Many years later I fled the country and the rage of darkness that howled within me.

This is our story, my child—Harvey's and mine. These are the years that you can't recall. Sift for the truth. But look to the light and learn what those fireflies taught, what draws the moth to the flame and flowers to sun. It is this that I want you to know:

Darkness is only the absence of light.

Part One

Chapter One

Siam
December 1919

I sat naked before a tarnished, old mirror in the middle of the jungle and contemplated the situation, letting my anger cool. Sunshine streamed through a window on the right, lighting my hair to a copper haze, burnishing my skin. Still damp from the bath, I patted beads of water on my neck and shoulders with a towel, trying to ignore the question that had begun to gnaw at my thoughts: Have I made a terrible mistake? I turned my eyes to the window. Across a clearing and past the little mission church, a ragged line of tall, twisted trees encroached. Dark shapes seemed to dance in slender bamboo that advanced before the forest, undermining the discipline of the mission, but I knew it was just the undergrowth that made those shapes – fern, creeping vines, and waxy dark-green banana leaves.

Downstairs, waiting for me with the force of morals and religion, were the missionaries, and, as of just two months ago, I was a missionary wife. Turning back to the mirror, I brushed back the damp, tangled curls with a flick of my hand, reliving the scene.

Harvey and I had only just arrived at this place, hot, tired, and hungry. After the two-month journey that began in Philadelphia on October 26, we had emerged this morning from the higher terrain of the forested range of mountains that circled the Nan Valley and rode our ponies across the rice fields in the blazing sun. When we arrived at our destination, the missionary house in which I now sat just outside the ancient walls of Nan – known as the Jungle City of Siam – I slid from the pony and whipped the hot, heavy sun helmet, the *topi*, off my head, reveling in the freedom from its weight. The motion loosened my hair,

tumbling it across my shoulders, and the missionaries sitting on the veranda above had stared.

After a brief hesitation, a plump, elderly woman, followed more slowly by a dignified gentleman of about seventy years, descended the stairs to greet us. Reverend Ruckel and his wife, Dora, were the senior members of the mission. A young woman about my age, and a pale, thin man dressed in an immaculate white suit rose to wait for us at the top of the stairs. Emery and Amalie Breeden wore stiff smiles as Mrs. Ruckel introduced them, and Mr. Breeden's eyes strayed to my disheveled hair.

As Mrs. Breeden took her seat, Harvey and her husband went off with the *syse*, the horse-boy, to see to the ponies. Mrs. Ruckel took my arm to show me to our room.

"Perhaps it would be best to tuck your hair into a braid or some such thing, Mrs. Perkins," Amalie Breeden had murmured from her chair, raising her thin eyebrows and giving me a cool look as we turned to go inside.

I stared back at her, bewildered.

"Ladies don't take down their hair in public, you know. At least, not in this mission they don't." She then lifted a cup of tea to her lips and lowered her lids, dismissing me.

I frowned at the mirror and shook myself from the rumination. Well, here we are, I thought, and like it or not, this would be our home for the next few years.

The past is gone, closed up behind you now, warned my inner voice with a note of alarm. Turn your thoughts to the future, to action. Actions have power. Smile at the inevitable. A smile can turn regret to anticipation, to pleasure.

The sound of voices drifted through the window, and I looked out to see Harvey striding across the clearing toward the house with Emery Breeden. Harvey's step was jaunty. As I watched, he laughed at something Mr. Breeden said and the sound contained all his hope, his great expectation for our future

here at Nan, his intoxication with the country of Siam, and his new work as a missionary doctor. This is my husband, I thought with a surge of love and pride.

“That which is necessary,” Nietzsche has said, “does not offend me.” I took a deep breath and, holding every muscle taut, forced myself to smile while I thought of something pleasant, like Harvey. I closed my eyes and for just one minute . . . I let the past emerge.



On a crisp, cool day in Philadelphia three years before, a shout from the crowd drew my attention to Harvey Perkins.

“The vote won’t help you clean out your sink spout!”

The taunt was accompanied by a pebble that landed in front of me and rolled under my foot, breaking my stride. My head snapped around and I glared at the gray wall of stern men in bowler hats wearing neat, dark suits, and workmen in baggy pants and loose shirts that jeered, their faces red with anger and disdain. They lined the narrow streets as we marched past, four columns of ladies straight as arrows. Streamers of yellow ribbon from our sashes fluttered in the breeze, and our white muslin skirts whipped around our ankles as we walked. Music played ahead of us, echoing against the tall buildings, two trumpets and a drum. The little band marched under a banner held high proclaiming, “The Vote For Women – NOW!”

This was the year 1916. The right to vote was long past due.

I scanned the crowd and my gaze fixed on an uncovered head of sandy-colored hair ruffled by the wind. Below, a pair of clear green eyes looked back in frank admiration. With a flicker of excitement and surprise, I recognized Harvey. Then I glimpsed the face beside him frowning in disapproval – his father, Penrose Perkins. I groaned and missed a step.

An elder of our little church in Germantown, Penrose was known for his stern views on temperance and the place of women in the home. Naturally, he and my father were acquainted. I would hear more of this, I knew.

But Harvey's wide, true smile dissolved the angry crowd. His father disappeared and all I saw was Harvey. I smiled to myself and, with a surge of new confidence, lifted my chin and marched on down the golden line with the other Suffragettes.

"What are you going to tell Dad?" hissed my younger sister Evie, who walked beside me. She had spotted Harvey and Penrose standing in the crowd.

"I'll think of something," I answered with a shrug, still tingling from Harvey's smile. My eyes swept over the crowd to the wedge of bright blue sky visible between the buildings just ahead. Now my step was sure, the air sparkled, the banner blew in the breeze, the trumpet blared.

My father was not at all happy after Penrose Perkins spilled the beans. "Suffragettes!" he scowled. "You're so impetuous. And now you've created a spectacle." He shook his head. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that it's past time for women to have the vote."

He continued to glare at me. I started to argue the point, but his lips twitched, then he rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You've always had a mind of your own." I heard him chuckle as he ducked behind his book.

The following Sunday I watched from the choir loft as Dad and Mummy and Matilda and Charles Otis Bond entered the cool, dark Summit Presbyterian Church, followed by my younger brothers, then my sisters. My father, confident and sure, an Annapolis man with a strong jaw and stern mouth, a man who tipped his hat when he spoke of Valley Forge, led the way down the middle aisle between the high brick archways, now holding that hat in both hands. He stepped aside for our mother just as he reached the family pew, number four on the right, behind the Melchiors. She tilted her heart-shaped face upward and gave him a warm smile that made apples of her cheeks before gliding in to take

her place, followed by my four younger brothers in order of age, then by my sisters, Evelyn and Alice. I was the eldest daughter.

Harvey sat with his family on the opposite side of the aisle. His father stared up at me with puzzled eyes. Penrose was not fine-tuned; he saw things in the simplest light, black or white. No vague gray clouded his thoughts. As the choir stood to sing, his wife, Marion, put her hand on his arm, a gentle touch, but he started and began turning pages in the hymnal.

The service seemed to drag on for hours. I repeated the familiar prayers automatically and stifled a yawn, letting my idle gaze roam over the congregation while Reverend Bennett's voice droned through the long sermon. My eyes met Harvey's and I threw him a bold smile, then ducked my head when I felt Dad's look. I studied the prayer book as I mused on this new development.

Harvey came calling that afternoon. I watched from the front porch as he negotiated the walkway up the hill with care, stepping over spots where the tree roots had shoved through the bricks. When he reached the gate, he removed his hat. Our house, set off Greene Street by a narrow lawn behind a low iron fence, was in Pelham, the most pleasant part of Germantown. Old and snug, warm in winter and cool in summer, the small, two-story stone house was almost indistinguishable from those of our neighbors.

"How's the sink spout?" he said in a dry tone.

I gave him a sideways look and smiled when I saw that he was teasing. "There's not much chance that I'll be spending a lot of time in front of a sink spout when I leave school," I answered cheerfully.

"It's nice to see a girl who has beauty and spunk." He stood at the bottom of the steps and looked up at me. "You're not afraid of much, I imagine."

"Oh well," I said, pleased at his words. "Women mean to have the vote. There's no point in being timid when you want a thing." I smoothed my skirt with the flat of my hands. "Besides, I guess I can take care of myself."

A glint of amusement flickered in his eyes, and I invited him up. We sat on a slat-board swing that hung on the front porch and whiled away the time in the midst of a steady procession of brothers and sisters racing in and out of the house, shrieking, laughing, quarreling. Pale yellow sunshine slipped through the leaves of an apple tree nearby and we watched phantom shadows shifting shapes on the floorboards in the cool fall breeze as we talked and laughed.

Then Dad strode through the door and nodded and sank into a chair nearby. Harvey straightened, sitting upright as I braced the toe of my shoe on the floor, bringing the swing to a shuddering halt. Dad said hello and settled comfortably with his hands folded over his stomach, gazing with a pleasant expression across the street in front of our house.

"Studying medicine, are you?" he asked, knowing full well that Harvey was a student at Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia.

"Yes sir." Harvey looked Dad straight in the eye as he answered.

"Well, that's a fine thing," Dad said in a polite tone. "There's nothing in this world so interesting as science." Dad was an illuminating engineer for the United Gas Improvement Company in Philadelphia. "Some of my happiest times are in the laboratory."

"Dad's an alchemist," I interjected. "He turns coal into heat and light instead of gold."

Harvey leaned forward. "Is that so?"

Dad nodded. "It's a whole new world."

"You're right – we live in a very modern age," Harvey said. "Yesterday I saw pictures of the actual structures of molecules."

"You saw what?" Dad sat straight up and stared at Harvey. "You've actually seen *pictures* of them, have you?" he asked in astonishment.

Still leaning forward, Harvey gestured, demonstrating with his hands. His elbows were braced on his knees. "Yes, sir. They're done with x-rays – the

molecules crystallize, like sugar, then the x-rays reflect off the crystals and create a picture of the structure of the cell.”

“You don’t say!” Dad thought about that a minute, then he bent so that his head was just inches from Harvey’s. They began speaking in a language foreign to me – long scientific words with no vowels and just a smattering of English.

I leaned back in the swing with satisfaction while they talked, reflecting that Harvey would probably be around for a while. For years I had watched older girls flush and their mothers smile when Harvey Perkins passed them by and tipped his hat, tall and lean and self-assured.

Over the next few months we became inseparable and Harvey’s quiet reserve gradually peeled away to reveal new facets of his personality, like stripping old varnish from a picture to expose complex and vibrant brushwork underneath – a kind word and a coin slipped to an old man in rags on the street when he thought no one was watching; a baby bird carefully slipped into his handkerchief to be returned to its nest with no human scent; a surprising sense of humor.

Medical studies absorbed most of Harvey’s time while I attended Germantown High School, skipping mathematics and science and concentrating instead on the music that I loved, especially voice, and philosophy and poetry as well – Tennyson, Dickinson, Shelley, and Keats. Harvey’s world was made up of tangible things, instruments and books read for instruction, not pleasure, and patients and blood and diseases, problems that could usually be resolved by hard work. Mine was full of melodies, trills, and scales, a world of gauzy dreams.

Grand opera was my passion. Every afternoon I spent two hours in the private studio of Miss McGregor learning the technique required to one day sing the great arias. I relentlessly practiced cadenzas and scherzi, controlling my breathing to release the simple, rounded tones – exercise the jaw, the mouth, open the throat, lower the larynx, let the sound come naturally, use the eyes, the face, the entire body. Sometimes Miss McGregor grew impatient and drew close

enough to touch me, fixing her sharp, bird-like eyes on my throat, reading my expression, mouthing the words as I sang.

Like sympathetic vibration between two instruments, Miss McGregor sensed when I grew tired or bored, and I quickly learned to hide this, fearing that she'd lose interest in teaching me to sing. "Your voice is not yet made, Barbara," she warned at these times with a disappointed sigh. "You're young and music is hard work." Then I'd double my efforts as I was in awe of Miss McGregor, who'd had conservatory training in Europe and sang with Melba and Ponselle—small parts but on stage with the great divas. I wanted everything she had to offer. I wanted an opera career. I wanted her to shout to the world that she'd found a new silver voice. But dedication and discipline comes from the student, not the teacher.

And what of Harvey? Sometimes thoughts like ghosts crept in, dissolving images of things that, years from now, could turn into what might have been. It didn't occur to me then that Harvey was nowhere to be seen in those dreams of singing. But those were fleeting thoughts, and unwisely, I let them slip away.

At home I accompanied myself on the piano and sang songs to drift on, tunes like "Melancholy Baby" and "You Made Me Love You." As I played, the scents and sounds of old Germantown breezed through the window: the fragrance of bluebells and roses, of fresh-cut grass, of velvet green moss on damp old stone; the hollow clop of hooves on the proud new asphalt street as draught horses pulled their wooden carts, and the vendors' sing-song calls—"Vegg-a-te-bals! Got-ch'er vegg-a-te-bals! Fresh, sweet melons, apples, and pears"—and urgent tones—"Ice! I-i-ice!"; shrieks of laughter from children hurrying home from school; soft, expectant cries from the new baby next door as he woke from his nap.

This small village was a refuge from the city, linked to downtown Philadelphia by the Pennsylvania Railroad that the men rode to work each morning, Monday through Friday, to sit at desks or teach or sell dry goods while

their wives and children stayed behind. Entire families were born, grew up, and died within sight of the white peaks of Summit Church just up the hill. Even as a child I knew that change was in the air, that the world was on the cusp of something new and free. Possibilities stirred things up, like leaves on the breeze before a storm. But new ideas never took hold in Germantown, and the breeze never gathered more strength than a soft current moving through otherwise still water. Bohemian poets in Paris and New York, careers for women instead of love and marriage that lasted until death – these things were strange and remote, not really a part of us at all.

At times like these I thought of Harvey, not of opera. Harvey and I were the same note, just pitched in different keys. In the music of life Harvey picked out each chord one by one, until together they formed the melody, while I tended to hear the whole thing at once. But it made no difference to me; in the end, we both heard the same song. Harvey seemed to always know what I was thinking even before I told him. I adored this serious, gentle man.

When Harvey wasn't studying, we were together, skimming across frozen ponds in the white mist of winter on silver skates, lounging at picnics in parks that bloomed with small children and new spring flowers, going to silent pictures, riding the electric trolley up Carpenter Lane for ice cream. My youngest brother, David, who was eight years old, had formed a strong attachment to Harvey and often tagged along on these expeditions. But when we were able to slip away, Harvey's kisses lit a flame that warmed me long after he had gone.

Chapter Two

The sun was already dropping toward the horizon as I dressed and hurried down the stairs for tea, feeling refreshed from my bath and more cheerful now. We were guests of Reverend and Mrs. Ruckel until minor repairs could be completed on a house, I had learned. Thrilled at the idea of our own home, I resolved to see it as soon as Harvey was free.

The Ruckels were already comfortably seated on the veranda with Harvey and Mr. Breeden. Reverend Ruckel and Harvey rose as I appeared, but Mr. Breeden seemed distracted, looking off into the distance. Mrs. Ruckel's eyes lighted on my hair, neatly twisted into a knot, and she greeted me with an almost imperceptible smile of approval.

Reverend Ruckel and his wife both had hair the color of old iron, kind eyes, and warm smiles. He was a sturdy-looking man, about middle height and fit for his age, his skin was brown and weathered, whereas Dora Ruckel was plump, with a pale complexion and rosy cheeks. Her eyes crinkled at the corners; her smile ended in soft folds of skin.

Amalie Breeden floated about, arranging cups and saucers on a small tea table set up next to Mrs. Ruckel. I took a seat and watched her, masking my annoyance as her earlier remonstrance still rang in my ears. Mrs. Breeden had a deceptively delicate appearance. She was small-boned and petite, with pale, translucent skin like fine porcelain. A gauze dress fluttered as it hung from a frame that had a fragile, almost brittle look. Her plain features combined in a way that made her rather pretty, I admitted to myself, and her brown hair displayed glints of gold in the sunlight. She wore it braided and coiled neatly around her head.

She caught my eye as I studied her, then shifted her attention to Harvey. "How is it that you arrived ahead of your carriers this afternoon?" she asked.

“They were about an hour behind us,” Harvey answered. “They’re taking the road. Should be here any time.”

“We took the shorter route and left them on the edge of the plain,” I added.

“Oh?” She slanted her eyes at me. “Do you mean that you rode directly through the rice paddies?” She turned her attention back to the tea table. “That’s a little foolish, you know. The ponies could have been hurt on the soft ground.”

“They were brave little things,” I said. “They’ve earned a reward, I believe.”

“They’ve done what was expected of them,” she answered in a crisp tone. “Out here, you’ll find that rewards aren’t so easy to come by.”

Mrs. Breeden turned to Harvey. “There are no motors in Nan, I’m afraid. The ponies and a surrey are at the disposal of the hospital, however.” She wore a bright smile for my husband. “So they’ll be yours to use. Mind your wife doesn’t spoil the ponies, though.”

I bit back a quick retort, but Harvey chuckled, as though she had said something amusing. “Babs has a tender spot for animals,” he said, and I softened at the look he gave me.

Emery Breeden knitted his brows. His face was long and his close-set eyes were ringed with shadows. Round glasses with thin, black rims gave him an intense, serious look. Hair of an indeterminate shade, somewhere between brown and dark blond, was parted in the middle and slicked back from his high, shining forehead. His mouth curled down at the corners in a slight pout, giving him a dissatisfied expression.

“It’s easy to be soft, of course,” Mr. Breeden said. “But I’ve found that trait sometimes indicates a certain weakness of fiber that we must guard against and tamp down.” His voice was low and brusque. He leaned toward Harvey as he spoke. “The local people suffer somewhat from a lack of discipline. Our mission

sets an example at all times. Keeping a firm hand on things is what the scriptures require.”

“Ah, well,” I said. “I don’t suppose a pony needs such a firm hand.”

Mr. Breeden sat back, raised his chin, and gazed at me with an icy look. “The pony’s not the point. It’s really a fundamental question of character, Mrs. Perkins,” he said.

Harvey, engaged now in conversation with Reverend Ruckel, had turned away and didn’t hear his words. This is Harvey’s work, I reminded myself, the beginning of his career. And first impressions are everything. I managed to curve my lips into a polite smile that took the reverend by surprise. He quickly glanced away.



As the afternoon wore on, the air grew oppressive and fatigue made me listless. Through the haze I watched a constant stream of people moving past on the river road: farmers, vendors from the market outside the walls of Nan, women with babies on their hips. Two children strolled by pulling a water buffalo behind them.

Finally the carriers began to arrive with our baggage, straggling from the direction of Nan in twos and threes. Harvey rose to direct them and he, Mr. Breeden, and Reverend Ruckel disappeared around the back of the house where our things would be stored for a few weeks. Mrs. Ruckel rose after a moment and bustled inside to see to the preparation of tea, leaving me alone with Mrs. Breeden.

I spoke first, to break the uneasy silence. “How long have you been here?” I asked. From the interior of the house I heard Mrs. Ruckel giving instructions to her cook.

“About two years,” Mrs. Breeden answered, covering a yawn with the back of her hand as her look traveled over the river road. “My husband is the pastor and also the headmaster of the school. Mission headquarters in New York asked us to take things in hand when Dr. Pitters became ill.”

“Dr. Pitters is the physician that Harvey will replace.”

“Yes. He and his wife founded the Nan mission about twenty-five years ago.” She gave me a bored look. “The Ruckels joined them a few years later. But they’re all well on now and couldn’t continue handling things alone.”

“Ah,” I murmured, “to stay so long! That’s encouraging. I suppose they must like Nan.”

She pursed her lips. “Like?” she said in a brisk tone. “Yes, well . . . that’s not really the point, is it?” She curled her hands and studied her nails. “They’ve accepted the burden that the Lord has laid upon their shoulders.” She hesitated, then added, “As have my husband and I.”

“I don’t understand.” I was puzzled. “Don’t you enjoy living here?”

Her hands dropped to her lap. “I’ve never given it any thought,” she said with a shrug. “We have food to eat, a place to sleep, a job to do.” Her eyes wandered past me again.

“That’s quite a sacrifice, I must say.”

A faint smile flicked across her face, then disappeared. “Yes. I expect the home office will be grateful. It’s difficult dealing with the Siamese, however. We’re certainly giving them our best years. To tell you the truth, it seems as though we’ve been here a hundred years.”

A small bamboo fan lay on a table nearby. I picked it up and fanned myself. “You certainly don’t look that old,” I said, smiling.

She shifted her look to me with an expression that was curiously blank. Minutes passed. Cicadas buzzed in the blazing heat. A large black bird circled lazily overhead.

“What is it you do for the mission?” I finally asked, straining to bridge the gulf that seemed to stretch between us.

“I teach the girls’ classes at school. Everyone is expected to do their part. There’s no room for idleness here.”

“Well, I expect that I could teach music . . . or give singing lessons to the children.”

Her smile was cold. “You’ll find that this is a very practical place, Mrs. Perkins.” She dropped her eyes and folded one hand over the other. “*Music*,” she gave the word an odd emphasis, “is not likely to have a high priority in the curriculum anytime soon.”

“Oh.” I paused, at a loss for words, then added, “Perhaps hymns?”

She sighed with patience, gathering energy to speak. “This is a poor country. Here in the north, you must understand, we’re more concerned with things like medicine and food. The mission ladies *here* are not merely decoration for their husbands.” Her look slid to my hair then flicked away.

“Why, that’s wonderful!” I said, thinking that perhaps I had misjudged her. I leaned forward. “That modern view is causing changes long past due back home. In fact, you’ll be happy to hear that it looks like the Nineteenth Amendment will soon be law.”

“The Nineteenth Amendment?”

“Suffrage.” I leaned back in my chair and smiled. “The woman’s vote . . . the constitutional amendment is going to be adopted.”

She looked startled, then laughed, a short, snorting sound. “Oh that. Heavens, that’s not what I meant! Why in the world would women want to vote?” She drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair and her eyes again reflected boredom. “I was speaking of our duty as wives. The whole voting thing is nonsense, if you ask me.”

I stared and reminded myself not to smudge the copybook so soon. “I suppose,” I said amiably, while the former Suffragette inside me cringed with each word.

“Women don’t need to involve themselves in government matters,” Mrs. Breeden went on with startling new energy. “We should concentrate our efforts on creating good Christian homes. Our power is to set the example.”

Her words stopped me. The silence grew. From inside the house I heard Mrs. Ruckel humming as she clanked and rattled plates and glasses and pots and pans. Mrs. Breeden’s eyes roved lightly over one thing after another in a preoccupied manner. A group of boys kicked a woven rattan ball back and forth across the clearing in front of the church, and Mr. Breeden and Reverend Ruckel, rounding the corner of the house, stopped to watch.

I was relieved when Mrs. Ruckel arrived with a tray that held tea and bread and sweet jam made, she told me with a proud smile, from local mangoes.

“The best jam you’ll ever taste.” Mrs. Breeden’s voice took on a surprising lilt as she jumped up, reached for the tray, and set it on the table. Mrs. Ruckel gave her a grateful smile.

Reverend Ruckel walked slowly up the stairs to the veranda, seeming to pull himself along step by step on the railing. Mr. Breeden followed close behind the old gentleman.

“Where’s Harvey?” I asked.

“Still explaining to the carriers where everything must go,” Reverend Ruckel answered, sinking into a rattan chair with a sigh. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. Mr. Breeden took a seat beside him, sitting stiff-backed, forearms braced on the arms of the chair.

As Mrs. Breeden poured the tea, a hearty voice hailed us from the river road where two ladies on old, worn bicycles careened toward us. The first to turn in the drive was somewhat stout, not overweight but built with heavy bones. Her face was round, but with a determined square jaw, and her hair – a mixture of

brown and gray – was pulled back into a tight bun. She parked her wheels as her companion lagged behind. I rose and had to laugh when she stomped up the wooden stairs and stuck out her hand in greeting.

“This is Emma Mamsey,” Mrs. Ruckel said by way of introduction, “one of our mission teachers.” She nodded at the second cyclist, just parking her bicycle. “She and Lucy Best share the little cottage at the edge of the mission property.”

I watched as Miss Best carefully removed her wide, ribboned hat and walked up the stairs, slapping the hat against her leg in an absent manner. She looked at me with open curiosity. Her face was narrow and plain, framed by limp brown hair tucked behind her ears and hanging straight and loose to her shoulders. Miss Mamsey had begun to butter a piece of bread from the tea tray and, reaching for the jam, introduced us with a wave of her hand. Miss Best nodded and, with a furtive look, took a seat without speaking.

As voices hummed on the veranda and the sun sank below the trees, the sky turned slowly from blue to lavender to violet. At first I felt rather than heard the drums, low and rumbling in the distance. Then the tempo quickened as the volume steadily grew until at last the sound seemed to envelope us.

“The evening temple drums,” Reverend Ruckel said when he saw my puzzled look. “This is a nightly greeting to the rising moon.”

“It’s lovely.”

Mrs. Breeden gave me a sharp look. “Nonsense,” she snapped. “It’s a pagan custom.”

But I ignored her as the drums brought to mind a deserted temple in Nan that Harvey and I had ridden past that morning. “We saw some interesting ruins on the other side of Nan-town, near the far gate,” I said to Reverend Ruckel. “The building was shaped like a cross and looked as though it was built over carvings of two huge serpents.”

“The shape is cruciform,” Mr. Breeden corrected. “Buddhists don’t honor our cross.”

“That’s the oldest temple in the area,” Reverend Ruckel said. “*Wat Phumin*. The serpents are known as *nagas*. The local people believe that *nagas* are deities, an influence that’s crept in from Laos. Inside are four large Buddha images, each facing one side of the building . . . representing the four directions in the universe.”

“I’ll ask Harvey to take me back to see it,” I said, fascinated. “I’d like to go inside.”

Mrs. Ruckel looked up abruptly at my words. Miss Mamsey’s eyes widened and her gaze swung to Mr. Breeden.

Mr. Breeden spoke in a preemptory tone. “That wouldn’t be a good idea, Mrs. Perkins.”

I turned to him. “Why not?”

Reverend Ruckel shook his head. “It’s probably not safe, the building is deserted. You could get hurt.”

Before I could respond, Mr. Breeden added in a curt tone, “Explanations shouldn’t be necessary. It’s a house of idol worship. That’s enough reason for anyone in this mission.”

I felt a chill at his words and shivered despite the heat. Just then the rumbling drums were joined by the chanting of temple monks inside the ancient walls of Nan. Across the field, the little mission church stood sentry.



As I curled into the crook of Harvey’s arm that night, our first at Nan, I could feel his body moving gently with each breath. He had already fallen into an exhausted sleep. We lay together in a four-poster bed made of dark wood.

Mosquito netting hung from a brass ring on the ceiling directly above, and I had pulled it back on one side, hoping for a breeze.

In the moonlight I gazed at his fine-boned face – his straight nose and firm mouth, his eyes that turned down slightly at the outer corners – and smiled to myself, remembering how handsome he had looked at our wedding a year ago, standing strong and confident in his uniform in the little walled garden behind our house on Greene Street. Harvey had just graduated from medical school and immediately enlisted when the United States entered the Great War in Europe.

I did my best to keep him with me, but everywhere we went young men were called to duty, stirred by the flags that pulled them along in the draft, by the call of the bugles, the brass buttons that flashed in the sun. I clung to his arm as uniformed soldiers filled the streets of Philadelphia, singing as they marched, bright-eyed, excited, full of energy. *“Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun . . . show your grit, do your bit.”*

“The suffering never ends,” he had written from Base Hospital Number 120 at the battlefields near Tours, France. *“As far as the eye can see, the ground seems to smolder. The grass, what’s left of it, is gray, like ash, and dry, and there’s no horizon. The sky is gray as well. Sometimes we have to operate without chloroform, Babs. Some of the wounded are just boys and some are older, but when there’s nothing for the pain they all cry out for their mothers, or their wives. Then, we stiffen our spines and have to bury the pity, otherwise we couldn’t go on.”*

Streams of soldiers, tired and wounded, bandaged, missing limbs, bruised inside and out, began to return to Philadelphia. The excitement was gone from their faces now, eyes dulled and haunted, their steps slow. *“Hoist the flag and let her fly, like true heroes do or die,”* we sang as they returned. It seemed to me that the men who made it back were harder. Even their smiles were grave. But those were the lucky ones. Our own Summit Church lost six and gained six gold stars.

“I tell you, Babs,” Harvey wrote again. “You have no idea of hell until you’ve seen war. I miss you so. But it could have been worse, I suppose. There might have been no doctors or medicine or base hospitals over here at all. It certainly makes one think.”

While Harvey was gone I waited for him in our house on Greene Street, trying not to think of that savage, ashen place on the other side of the world. Evie, Alice, and I shared a bedroom. Mornings were spent helping Mummy with ordinary chores and doing volunteer work with the Red Cross. But every afternoon from three to five was spent with Miss McGregor.

One day I arrived to find her thumbing through some old music scores. I took off my hat and coat and gloves, hung them on the peg near the door, and turned to find her watching me with a sly smile. My heart skipped a beat and I paused, looking at the music in her hand.

“What’s that?” I asked.

She shrugged and continued flipping through the scores. “We’re going to try something new. Ah! Here it is.” She pulled a slim, brown booklet from the stack in her hand and dropped the others to the floor by her feet, then flipped her hand in my direction. “Come, come! This will suit you. Let’s get started.” She walked to the old piano that dominated the room, then, realizing that I had not moved, turned back to me and raised her eyebrows. “Are you coming?”

“Cara Nome.” It was Gilda’s song from *Rigalitto*.

“Now, don’t get carried away,” Miss McGregor said, reading my face. “This will be hard work.”

Lessons were stretched to three hours every day to provide time for the basics as well as practice. Miss McGregor said that vocalizing is the only way to master the music, to discover what a singer can be capable of. Careful repetition of a single sound would strengthen and train the muscles of the mouth. Day after day we worked, first on the vowels, gradually learning to blend the sounds into words, then into harmony. We worked relentlessly, developing a sense of timing,

of contrast and control. Although I was learning only one aria, Miss McGregor insisted that I must understand the entire role. I must learn how to stand, how to move when singing, how to express the music with every part of my body.

“Here, like this,” Miss McGregor said one day, and breathed a high note that was tremulous, fragile, like wind blowing glass against glass. I strove for that sound, labored for it. While we worked I was exuberant, but when we stopped each day I longed again for Harvey, torn between the sheer exhilaration of singing, of perfecting the music, and terror that my husband would never come home. *Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun.* The words echoed in my mind.