

Aug. 30, 1937
Hongkong

Dear Helen

What a time I picked for a China holiday. It started auspiciously enough. The incident occurred the night I arrived but no one took it very seriously. Life went on in the Sh[ang]ai quite unaffected. I didn't even book passage to Tsingtao feeling there was time enough. Before I had stayed a week the popping began.

In the meantime I had me a few Peking friends. George Pearson had us to dinner & bridge, Annett to tennis, but the bulk of the people were away. Katie was in Pai Ta Ho – also Pauline. Her husband has worked like a slave evacuating Americans. Friday, the thirteenth, the guns started to boom & a few fires broke out in Chapei but we went to someone's farewell cocktail party – were a bit excited but felt as safe as houses.

Next day I went to the consulate to register – wandered about the waterfront taking in the sights. Chinese refugees with their goods & chattels thronged the Bund. Poor things looked as though they had little sleep & less food, flopped down where they could find a space. I walked down to the Garden bridge to see the warships, in the Cathay for a paper, to the Palace Hotel for directions – in short round about the tourist haunts. By afternoon I was thanking my stars I had no business in town.

The bombing was in full swing by then. Perfect air-raid weather. We'd hear the drone of the planes, see them come out of the clouds to drop their bombs, then would follow the puff puff of the anti-air craft guns. It was quite a show & still not to be taken seriously. Then came the loud reports when the house would shake & the radio announcing where the bombs were dropping & the masses of people being killed. It was rather terrifying. But the papers at home must have done a job on it at the time making it worse if anything. To me though it seemed had enough, as the bomb killing most foreigners fell where I had been a few hours before.

I didn't go in town after that but was told the sights were appalling & took several days to clear. The irony of the whole things was that the Chinese lacked courage to fly low enough to get their target & wildly dropped bombs all over town instead. I believe both sides are improving now that the first heat of actual fighting is over.

We didn't get much sleep that night as the American used Ferry Rd to transport supplies & men, & they would roar by in the trucks at about half hour intervals. Dorice, Lordie's best friend is extremely nervous & kept us even more upset than we normally would have been.

Lordie is magnificent - the old days seemed to come back to her – after all a roof over her head was infinitely better than a mere tent during an honest-to-goodness raid. She peacefully slept through firing & raids. Booked passage with the rest to evacuate, but was told by the customs that if she left keeping her job was uncertain so she decided to remain in Sh[ang]ai. She has written two very cherry letters, the men run in to see that she is all right & has enough supplies - & I'm sure she has quite settle down & is enjoying herself. Tentatively offered her services to the Coventry Hosp[ital] but was told they needed no help at present.

I must say that after the first two days of bombing I felt much less nervous.

I was laid up with a Sh[ang]jai tummy about that time which perhaps accounted in part for my lack of interest. Ran a temp & became very dehydrated & had decided I would remain with Lordie – the Swedes were so slow in making any decisions as to what to do with their nationals.

Wednesday I made my daily call to the consulate & was told I should report at once at a certain address as Scandinavians were being evacuated. I dressed while the girls threw things into my bags & was on my way in 20 min. Afterwards I regretted my rashness, but at the time it seemed the only thing to do as they said they would run no more boats. Looking back I suppose it was my only course, but I came away with only summer dresses – no chance of collecting the rest of my clothes in case I must go back to American & at present it would be madness to go to Tsingtao to join my family. So here I am stuck in Hongkong & not knowing what the devil to do next.

But I'm rather ahead of myself. I must tell you about the trip down. We were all loaded on the tender & were escorted down river by Japanese. It didn't seem a healthy arrangement but the best the Scandinavians could do. Our last boat was anchored well out of Moosung but we got there without mishap. At Point Island fire opened just as we passed, it was a bit nerve-wracking but actually quite safe.

I wasn't much intrigued with our boat. It turned out to be a cargo boat, Tai Shan. I think the same line you travelled on from Panama. There were already 8 passengers & 240 of us refugees. You perhaps remembered how little deck space there is aside from the open iron decks – well we piled our luggage where we could find a spot & there we were to live for 3 days. That depressed me enough, but when I discovered I was supposed to have brought food & bedding the bottom dropped out of things. Had the tender been alongside I should have returned in it to Sh[ang]jai.

Still having my ailment, my breakfast had consisted of soup with a few strands of macaroni. It was then 4 pm & although not hungry I needed nourishment. A Danish woman circulating around must have seen me looking very forlorn – asked me if I had food, & took me down to share hers. Like a [] I burst into tears at her kindness. The food consisted of black bread, potted meat, tongue & cheese. All a bit hard in my condition, but then I couldn't eat much so it didn't matter. Later I was introduced to a Swede, who turned out to be an absolute dear & befriended me the rest of the trip. I shared a mattress with her. They rigged up a tarpaulin over the hold & we were fairly comfortable. She lent me a rug & fed me. What I should have done otherwise I don't know. I think the Captain resented us – quite right I suppose - & they made an effort of a sort to help us. We were given tea & bread & butter twice a day – served on deck. Few had utensils with them, so you waited until your turn to use a cup – the ship could provide so little. We went to the galley for water, but there was no way of cooking – the crews meals going out nice & hot were almost unbearable to see & smell. We kept on with our spiced meats & cheeses. I mostly starved & took anti-cholera mixture. The 'john' situation was very tense – only two on board & always a queue waiting – fortunately my conditions gradually improved. Oh yes, we did get one hot meal. We had a forced wedding on board, a Norwegian who made an honest woman of a Russian in order to land her in Hongkong. They had a 5 yr old child. Following that we feasted on Irish stew composed mostly of potato & pepper – at the time it seemed fit for a queen, & quite adequate for a wedding breakfast. Our dishes were novel to be sure, biscuit tins, cigarette tins, covers of almost anything, mugs – hardly a plate in sight.

When arriving here a wealthy Swede very kindly included me when inviting some of his friends to stay at his house. A very genial individual & most hospitable. I was there a few days until I found a girl I had known at Children's [Hospital?]. Kay Borrows, married to Robb a brother of a Dr. we once had there. She asked me to stay with her. Terribly lucky as rooms in boarding houses are almost impossible to get &

fairly expensive. They are very nice to me & for the time being anyway it has turned evacuation into a picnic.

I have no plans. Keep hoping the situation will improved but am afraid it will last a long time. Americans are filling up the boats homeward bound, feel that probably is the only course for me but hate to go without seeing my family.

I've been very long-winded & all about myself when your interest probably lies in opinions of people out here. I think they are quite as confused as anyone at home. Rumors fly. The one thing that is constant is the surprise at the magnitude of the war.

I can see it's Europe for your family this year & not Japan. Lots of love to all of you. Do pass the news on to Win. I have so many letters I must write. They are turning out to be group affairs.

Cheerio

Edith

Note at top of front page:

My address as long as it lasts
c/o D.S. Robb
1 Tregunter Mansions
May Road

Hongkong is very beautiful & the British have been superb. One expects them to have organized well but it's the kindness that one meets everywhere which is touching.