

MANNA DOES NOT GROW ON RUBBER TREES

As a young doctor, Father had adventured in Nanyang — South Seas — practising medicine in Indonesia and Penang. He told us of head-hunting Dyaks in Pontianak and people living in tree houses. In Penang, he used to do house calls by horse-drawn carriages. Those were the good old days before highways got choked by motor cars. Regretfully, he told us little more, unless those things he told have escaped our memory.

With an eye on the future, Father had acquired a 73-acre rubber plantation in Senai, South Johor, a piece of God's land blessed with a rippling stream of crystal clear water flowing through the estate. Father called the property "*Peach River Garden*." He loved fishing and had dreams of retiring there one day. Whatever his plans, he had thought that the rubber would provide a good retirement fund one day. At that time rubber fetched near \$100 a picul — good money.

In the providence of God, our family left China for good in 1926. Having been delivered from his near death experience, Father resolved to wash his hands of dirty Chinese politics, and head south to start life anew.

In December of that year, our family said Good-bye to the fatherland and set sail for Nanyang. Settling into Father's dream house in *Peach River Garden*, Senai, we were one big happy family — Father, Mother; four children, Grandfather, a couple of aunts and one uncle.

We arrived when rubber was enjoying a boom of almost \$100 a picul.

In the nineteen-twenties, after the first World War, America had emerged as the world leader in finance, commerce and industry. Building on the ruins of the World War, which had left Europe decimated and shattered, American industry took off with unprecedented vigour. Construction and manufacture led the way in a buoyant market, while mass production and booming consumer spending gave a semblance of great prosperity.

On the New York stock exchange, everything looked bright and rosy. Trading was bullish, buying and selling proceeded at a feverish pitch. More people buying than selling. Prices kept rising and everybody was making money. The stock market indicator rose higher and higher. By 1929 the Dow reached an all time high of 381, simply because people had been bitten by the “get rich quick” bug. Then someone decided it was time to sell and take profit. Suddenly everyone decided to do the same. When everyone wanted to sell, panic selling set in and the bubble burst.

Tuesday, October 29, 1929 came to be known as **Black Tuesday**, as the New York Stock Market crashed. Overnight millions of dollars took wings and flew away leaving many a millionaire with only the air and no million. In America thousands of banks collapsed. The Dow plunged and some desperate investors plunged with it to escape their sorrows.

This crash signalled the start of the Great Depression which dragged on into the nineteen thirties, lasting for most of the decade. Factories shut, manufacturing ground to a halt, nobody was buying or selling, unemployment mushroomed and

businesses closed everywhere. At the depth of the depression the Dow fell to almost one-tenth, to 40 in 1932. A pall of gloom descended over the world.

Our family, within a short time of arrival from China, was caught in the Great Depression. Father's dream of having a comfortable time, living off the rubber trees, was rudely shattered. When the Dow fell, rubber price fell with it. I well remember Father's words. "*We stopped tapping when rubber price fell from \$100 to \$10 a picul. With that money, we couldn't even pay the tappers.*"

Overnight rubber became rubbish. We woke up to the stark realisation: manna did not grow on rubber trees. But the God who had fed the Israelites forty years with angels' food, during their wandering through the wilderness, was no less our God. We too were His children. *Will He not feed us?* Father's "Peach River Garden" was not yielding any peaches, and the rubber estate bore little semblance to a garden. The outlook was grim.

In times like this, we looked to the Saviour. When the outlook was gloomy, we looked to the Lord; the uplook was bright — it always is. Did not our Lord promise: "*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee?*"

Father and Mother prayed as never before; not forgetting Grandfather, the great prayer warrior. We all cried to the Lord. Thank God we were not like the faithless Israelites who for every little setback, murmured against Moses and against the Lord. How sad that it is recorded, "*.. the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness ... Would to God we had died ... in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we*

did eat bread to the full" (Ex 16:2,3).

Thank God, Father and Mother did not lose their faith in the Lord, neither did they look back and long for China. The Lord who had saved us out of China — our Egypt — would surely not allow us to starve in Senai — our Sinai.

So we prayed and made supplication unto the Lord. We learned to look to the Lord and His promises, and to know that *"man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live"* (Deut 8:3).

The Lord then sent us a very good and true friend, a certain Mr Lee. He was a Senior Nursing Officer in Johor Baru General Hospital. One day he said to Father, *"Dr Tow, you are a western trained doctor. Why don't you apply to the authorities for a licence to practise. That will be your lifeline. You will then be able to support your growing family."*

Father and Mother were much buoyed by the idea. *"Yes, Mr Lee, what shall we do?"*

Mr Lee kindly offered, *"I will accompany Dr Tow to see the Principal Medical Officer (PMO) in Johor Baru, and be your interpreter."*

It was a great day when Father got dressed in western attire, necktie and full suit, and made the short trip from Senai to Johor Baru, accompanied by Mr Lee. The Principal Medical Officer was a tall and impressive Englishman, Dr George

Herbert Garlick. He welcomed Mr Lee whom he knew well as one of the Hospital staff, and Father, who spoke no English.

Father produced his diploma from the English Presbyterian Mission Hospital, Swatow, China, and signed by the Principal Tutor, a Dr Alexander Lyall, MB, CM, certifying that Father had successfully undergone a six-year course of instruction in the various disciplines of medicine, surgery and midwifery, etc.

“I shall give your request further study and consideration,” was Dr Garlick’s reply. *“You will hear from me in due course.”*

It was neither *yes* or *no*, but *wait*. When Father returned home to *“Peach River Garden,”* he told Mother the outcome of the interview. *“We thank Mr Lee, and thank God for giving you the opportunity of making our case known to the authorities. Our God is able, we keep praying. He will certainly hear us.”* Mother was full of faith: *“Surely our God who saved Father’s life, and delivered us all out of China to Malaya will not leave us to perish with hunger. He who fed His people once will surely feed us now.”*

So we prayed, day after day.

A week later, an official letter arrived by the post, under registered cover. Excitedly, Father slit it open. No licence, but a rejection of the application. (Father had to take the letter to Johor Baru for Mr Lee to translate, although Father could guess from the one line reply that it was negative.)

Thank God, Mr Lee did not give up easily. *“Dr Tow, there is hope! We must go to Singapore and see an officer higher than Dr Garlick. He is Dr Fitzgerald, the Principal Chief Medical Office (PCMO).”* Mr Lee, with difficulty, managed to get an appointment with Dr Richard Desmond Fitzgerald at his office in Singapore.

Mr Lee furthermore told Father, *“Thank God we are able to see Dr Fitzgerald. He is retiring next month. We are just in time!”*

As Father prepared for the great day, the meeting with the PCMO, the most powerful official in the entire Medical Services of Malaya and Singapore (under the British Administration), he remembered something. Perhaps that may help. He discussed with Mother and they agreed.

When Father led a delegation from Swatow, China, to raise funds for the building of the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) Headquarters in Swatow in 1922, he had called on the Governor Sir Laurence Nunns Guillemard and had obtained a testimonial from the Governor in his autograph book.

“Perhaps the PCMO will consider what the Governor of the Straits Settlements wrote for me?” Whatever the thinking, Father took with him his autograph book besides his medical diploma.

On that fateful day, Mr Lee came from Johor Baru to accompany Father to call on the PCMO. Dr Fitzgerald was an elderly Englishman. He kindly received the two visitors at his office. Mr Lee presented the case on Father’s behalf, together

with Father's diploma and testimonial from the Governor.

"Very interesting, Dr Tow, that you met the Governor. You don't speak English?"

"No, not at all."

"Do you know French?"

"No French, sir, but some Latin. We were taught to prescribe in Latin."

"Supposing you write me a prescription for a common medicine which you often use for your patients."

Father gladly complied. He wrote out with consummate ease his favourite prescription for "*Dyspepsia*." It was a mixture he often used for his own gastric pain. With steady hand, and in perfect Latin, Father wrote out a complete recipe for a mixture for the relief of dyspepsia.

Dr Fitzgerald read the prescription with obvious approval. Then he turned his attention to the Governor's testimonial. *"You met the Governor in 1922 at Government House. What caused you to see him?"*

"It was only a courtesy call. I was in Singapore to raise funds for our YMCA Headquarters building in Swatow. I thought it was respectful to do so."

"You know, Dr Tow, you have come just in time. I am due to retire next month."

It is good you came today. You will hear from Dr Garlick in due course. Good-bye.”

All the way back to Johor, Father and Mr Lee talked about the interview and gave thanks to God for making the meeting with Dr Fitzgerald possible, just before his retirement.

Back in Senai, Mother anxiously awaited Father’s return. “*How was the interview?*”

“Dr Fitzgerald was friendly and encouraging. But with these Angmos, you can never tell.” (Angmo is the Teochew nickname for Europeans who appear to have “red hair”).

Two weeks later, came another official letter from Dr Garlick. It was a “***Licence to practise in the State of Johor.***”

Praise the Lord, His manna had come, not by way of the rubber trees, but a licence for Father to use his skill and training received under Dr Alexander Lyall and his team of doctors at the English Presbyterian Mission Hospital, Swatow, China.

God’s manna lasted until the Israelites were safely in the Promised Land (Josh 5:12). Father’s licence lasted till Eldest Sister had graduated as a doctor, and was well established in her practice. Then the Johor authorities withdrew the licence — God’s lifeline for twenty years.

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Through the trials of years, through days of hunger and uncertainty, God taught us hard lessons, learned the hard way. I am reminded of the wonderful promise of God in Psalm 37:3 *"Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."*

Postscript

1. **Sir Laurence Nunns Guillemard** was Governor of the Straits Settlements 1920 - 27. Named after him are Guillemard Road, Guillemard Crescent, and Guillemard Lane, in the Geylang Area.
2. **Dr George Herbert Garlick** was Principal Medical Officer and Registrar-General of Births and Deaths, Johor in the 1920s to the 1930s. He retired to Singapore and built a residence in the Bukit Timah-Holland Road Area. Garlick Avenue is named after him.
3. **Dr Richard Desmond Fitzgerald** was Acting Deputy Director, Medical and Health Services, Straits Settlements for a short period in 1932. (This post was previously known as Principal Chief Medical Officer, PCMO).