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“She was a Pennsylvania preacher’s daughter and I an uncomplicated Iowa farm lad.”

Virtuous Vagabonds

by Jerry Carlson
Agriculture Senior

TALL, TWENTY-YEAR-OLD Janey Thompson and I weren’t married.

That’s why most people along our 17,000-mile, three-month journey through Asia and Europe pegged us as shameless vagabonds. Traveling as man and wife would have caused less suspicion among those we met, but wouldn’t have suited Janey and me. Sadly enough, we shared not a drop of romantic interest. She was a Pennsylvania preacher’s daughter, I an uncomplicated Iowa farm lad.

We studied together as church-sponsored exchange students for eight months at Silliman University in the Philippine Islands. When Hong Kong, Calcutta, Karachi, Cairo, and Geneva loomed ahead, Janey pleaded, “Jer, please don’t make me go home alone. Something might happen to me.” What could I do? I promised to escort her.

I walked into my dormitory room and told my Filipino roommates. Benedicto Principe stared at me thoughtfully as he digested the news, then grinned. “Janey is the dark-haired, attractive one, isn’t she?”

My face reddened. “Men and women travel together every day,” I countered. I promised to escort her.

I walked into my dormitory room and told my Filipino roommates. Benedicto Principe stared at me thoughtfully as he digested the news, then grinned. “Janey is the dark-haired, attractive one, isn’t she?”

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Little Jun Vesagas touched my arm and spoke softly, “I trust you, Jerry.” He stepped away and snickered. “But nobody else will.”

Jun’s prediction proved sadly true. Janey and I landed in Hong Kong and went through our first hotel experience. We tried to explain, in our best Chinese, that we wanted TWO hotel rooms. But the manager saw no reason for more than one. After a short conference, I left Janey and trotted outside. She reserved one room and went in. Then I returned and asked for a different room. The befuddled manager looked sagely at me for a moment, scratched his head with his pencil, then handed me the keys to a single room.

Safely away again, we landed in Calcutta, India. Hindu boys and girls don’t date before marriage, much less wander around together without a chaperone. One of our biggest problems was to decide what to answer when a quizzical Indian asked, “Are you married?” If we answered “Yes,” we were lying and might slip up about where and when we were married—and how many children we had. If we answered “No,” we faced a barrage of presumptuous questions.

An Indian friend who met us at a station near the foot of the Himalayas and saw how we’d traveled told his friends about the “two intimate American students.” When we shook hands with the group and sat down in a little circle for tea and talk, one Indian raised his eyebrows and asked, “How is it that you two are—ah—traveling together?” Janey and I traded “You answer” signals. Neither of us answered.

“I say, how is it that you two are....” “Well,” I blurted, “We were together in the Philippines and decided to travel home together.”

“What Jerry means is that he’s been taking care of me on the way home.” Janey tried to help. The dark-skinned Indian students nodded understandingly. I thought we’d gained their confidence, so continued,
“You wouldn’t force a girl to wander halfway around the world alone, would you?” An Indian girl spoke, “Neither would we allow a girl to travel around the world — with a boy not her husband.” She placed her teacup on the table and sighed. “But you Americans are different.”

We flew to Bombay the next afternoon. Arriving shortly after midnight, the two of us found that almost every hotel was full. Our airport bus driver wheeled us from one hotel to another through narrow streets filled with poverty-ridden, sleeping people. At three in the morning, we found one tired desk clerk who said he had one room open. It was his best one, and the price was outrageous.

“Just one?” I asked. The clerk cocked his head to one side. “You have friends coming?”

“No, but you see, we’re not—” Janey cut me off by stepping very suddenly on my toe. She spoke in scathing tone: “All day long you waste time. Now look what you’ve done. You can’t even get a decently priced room. I told you this afternoon I wouldn’t put up with you any more today. Now you can go sleep on the street.” The tired little clerk might have been shocked to discover that we were unmarried, but evidently Indians have domestic problems too.

“Madame, you may have the room for half price. And I will somehow find your husband a place apart from you.” I fell asleep thanking Janey for getting us out of that spot.

We didn’t have to worry about it in Egypt. The Arabs seemed quite happy that Janey and I were unmarried. Cairo traders disregarded any moral suspicions and concentrated on selling us two souvenirs instead of one.

When our plane wheels screeched on Stuttgat’s runway in Western Germany, Janey phoned her serviceman cousin at a nearby American Air Force Base. I looked forward to comfort among fellow Americans. In a dimly lit Gasthaus clubroom filled with cigarette smoke and the aroma of German beer, four American airmen listened as I unfolded episodes of Janey’s and my travels. But I knew their imaginations were swimming in deep water.

“Alone wit’ a Frauline ’tousands ’a miles, Wow!”

“But, fellas, it really wasn’t . . .”

“Ya? Look, Jer. Y’ can be honest wit’ us. We unnerstan’ how it is outside the States.”

“Look,” I pleaded. “We’re all honorable Americans, aren’t we?”

“Ya.” The blue-uniformed airmen grinned and gulped another swig of beer.

About that time Janey and I decided we both needed a few days by ourselves. We had been together for more than two months, and we were tired of the raised eye brows and difficult explanations. I spent two carefree days in Copenhagen, Denmark while Janey went on to London. Then she visited friends in Scotland while I travelled through Stratford-on-Avon.

Back in London, I dozed in my room and recalled the troubles and misunderstanding that Janey and I had weathered. The understanding confidence of the folks at home looked promising.

We checked out of the hotel separately, a practice which had become habit. I fell asleep on the New York-bound plane, lulled by the thought that my fellow citizens would believe we really were virtuous vagabonds. But somehow I’ve learned never to mention my three months and 17 thousand miles with a college girl.