

special day as we were living in a country which only observed the special days of the Moscow circuit. Behind the Metropole Hotel (where most of us lived — Indians and Poles as well) was a small protestant church, the doors of which had been locked against any wandering or wandering soul. However, through the efforts of our liaison officer, arrangements were finally made with Hanoi officialdom to permit the opening of these doors for a Xmas morning protestant service. The Administrative officer worked hard making all the necessary arrangements. The British and Canadian Ambassadors were to carry the main part of the Service; a member of the forces was to read the Lesson; and a talented young man from the British mission was to provide all the ecclesiastical music on a piano which had been obtained for the purpose and placed in the church the evening before. Enough copies of the "Order of Service", as well as the appropriate hymns, had been mimeographed for the expected congregation.

Everything was working out wonderfully well. A small dining room in the hotel had been decorated in Xmas motive and our canned Canadian Xmas dinner was to be served hot from the kitchen under the capable surveillance of one of our girls.

With an air of festivity, several of us went in search of flowers from the market near the Petit Lac with which to decorate the church. Having made it as attractive as possible and with a final look to see that everything was "just right", we left to ready ourselves for the Xmas Eve Reveillon at the French Mission.

On Xmas morning we stepped forth, the girls honouring the occasion in dainty hats, gloves and pretty print frocks, and the men equally well turned out considering the small amount of personal effects one could carry to Indochina. The armed forces personnel added that little extra touch of 'spit and polish'. The church bell was tolled, perhaps for the first time in years, thanks to one of our Canadians. This was to be a memorable church service — and so it was, but in quite a different way to that which we had expected.

As we arrived at the church with a "Merry Xmas" greeting on our lips the response was, "there is no piano, and the flowers have disappeared" and, as we peered through the doorway to confirm this unbelievable story we saw a lone figure, the Canadian Ambassador, sweeping up the few odd leaves, twigs and petals which lay scattered near the improvised pulpit. The church was barren.

However, by the time the congregation had foregathered, the shock was beginning to wear-off and the decision was, "the Service shall proceed". The only thing to do, without the piano, was to have the pianist hum the note before each hymn and response. The rest of us would pick it up from there. Fine — it was all arranged. But, where was the pianist! He was not to be found and, in fact, no one

had seen him since the previous evening. Being a happy, independent type, he occasionally crossed swords with the local authorities, choosing to drive his car through the streets of Hanoi in the wee small hours of the morning when all citizens were supposed to be abed. Under such circumstances, his explanations being unacceptable, he would be politely escorted to the appropriate place to await the morning sun and the appearance of his superior officer. The latter always managed to make the necessary representation for his early release.

Our hearts sank. Undoubtedly the spirited young man had not been successful in reaching his home from the Reveillon the evening before and would now be impatiently expecting momentary intervention. Our Administrative officer, being more optimistic than the rest of us, decided that something must have happened to his car and therefore volunteered to drive over to the Englishman's residence. As he approached the villa, he found the person in question kicking the front tire of his car in sheer desperation. He explained that he had just started out, in haste, when the tire had blown. As he had all the copies of the "Order of Service" with him, the morning devotional could not have been held. The two men, much relieved at having averted a crisis, jumped into the Canadian staff car and proceeded with much haste. But, just before reaching the church the penny dropped! The famous copies of the "Order of Service" were still reclining in the back seat of the broken-down car.

After a seeming endless delay, the ceremony commenced and the small congregation partook in a very heart-warming manner. An amused, interested and quizzical audience of small and not so small Vietnamese peered through the open church door or peeped through the broken windows.

The retreating tip-toeing steps of a tall, handsome man, trying to leave the church inconspicuously, confirmed our suspicion — there was no one to read the Lesson — and a quiet search was being conducted to find the custodian of this pleasant duty. He was found, later, sound asleep in his Metropole Hotel room. Upon being awakened his explosive remarks were, "that darned alarm clock — it was for ever ringing hours ahead of time, so much so that the other day I tossed it out of the window. And now look what's happened — I have over-slept!"

In spite of the unexplainable disappearance of the flowers and piano, leaving the church in its accustomed state of barrenness with only sad, dusty pews to grace it and no instrumental music to waft through its rafters, and in spite of all the attendant delays, this particular Xmas morning service conveyed a wonderful message. Adversity had confirmed one's faith that there were better things to come.