

A Tractable Tract

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Elders and Sisters by Gladys Clark Farmer. Provo, Utah: Seagull Books, 1977. \$2.95

Writing a book of short stories/sketches about a group of missionaries in France is picking a hard door to knock on—missionary work is surrounded with ideals, taboos, and nostalgia—but Gladys Clark Farmer makes it swing open. As a former French missionary myself, I wallowed shamelessly in the details—the affectionate appellation “Sis,” halfway between nickname and endearment, the French put-offs at the doors (“*ca ne m’interesse pas*”) that became part of our dreams, the warming of hands and stomachs with roasted chestnuts wrapped in newspaper cones, and purchased on street-corners, the panicky triumphs of trying to sight-read enough of the first line to tell which hymn we were looking at.

This book portrays in realistic and warm terms those universal “missionary experiences” that happened to our parents and will happen to our children: the “golden” family too deeply “Christian” to change, the woman who has actually read the Articles of Faith card and wants to ask intelligent questions, the hesitant contact who is transformed by an answer to prayer, the inactive woman who, in one of Farmer’s felicitous phrases, “couldn’t resist the ardent though just-les wooing of a pair of handsome elders who with holy water would make her clean again. But somehow rebirth didn’t bring back youth.”

The emphasis is not on the investigators and members, though, but on the “elders and sisters” of the title. The first story, “Beneath the Surface” contains a telling vignette in which the hardest-working (and runner-up for dowdiest)

sister in the mission meets her brand-new green companion:

She looked even more striking close up—high heeled shoes, a very light, easily wrinkled dress with colors guaranteed to turn the head of every man between here and the branch meetinghouse. Made up just right. *She’ll make a terrible missionary*, thought Sister Allen.

Hello, she could hear herself saying, I’m Sue Allen, your dumpy, sensible senior companion for the next sixty years. You must be Sister Palmer, my beauty queen junior fresh from the States. You don’t speak a word of French, and you’ll be no help to me at all. Oh, forgive me, she prayed, suddenly feeling very wicked. I must try to be kind.

Naturally there’s a happy ending—companionship emerges that is more than friendship. Mercifully for those of us who were dreading a glib reconciliation, it’s believable. It develops from shared blisters: Sister Palmer mothers Sister Allen through an illness, the green sister gives a discussion with only the moral support of two greener elders; they are led to Sister Durant, a sick member who needs them and needs the healing the elders bring. But the emotional and spiritual high that unites them is balanced by realism: there is a miracle, but it does not touch Sister Durant’s drunken husband. As the sisters ride away, they hear shouting and breaking glass behind them. More than joy, that shared grief is the bond.

The other situations ring equally true: there is the enthusiastic greenie, Elder Harper, who “had never been more ready in his life. He had waited nineteen

years for this moment. He had talked about going on a mission as long as he could remember, had gone with his dad to open a missionary savings account the day after he was ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. His older brother Dave had just returned from Brazil with 130 baptisms to his credit, and now it was his turn!" We see him coping with the inevitable discouragement and depression as he encounters the reality of only ten baptisms a month in the whole of France.

One memorable episode occurs in a district where he's simultaneously made district leader and branch president. While struggling against the enmity of a baptism-hungry elder who thinks two children are ready because "they really liked the flannel-board stories," he handles with limited success, a bitter feud in the branch. Finally, breathes to himself, "*What a wonderful leader I am . . . Maybe I can get a member to apostatize and my day will be complete.*" Sister Palmer, the missionary in his district who had reassured him that people are more important than statistics and that the authority of his stewardship outweighs his youth is now too terrified to open her mouth.

There is the fat and bitter sister who calls herself "naive to think I could change my life by going on a mission. But it seemed so romantic at the time . . . the first really independent, courageous thing I'd done in my life." There's the California elder with a tan, the inevitable case of diarrhea and the equally inevitable letter from his devoted Jeanie beginning "I don't know quite how to tell you this, but my first week here, I met this fellow . . ." There is the district that decides to initiate a greenie by pretending to live in a commune, call each other by first names, and pick fights with people they tract out; the greenie, instead of being appalled by their apostacy, cheers right up. There's the "trunked-out" senior, galvanized into effort by a dedicated—and angry—junior (Elder Harper again).

This is a book to read a slice at a time. Reading it at one sitting points out that its greatest strength, "missionary experiences," is also its greatest weakness. It covers too many situations too fast to capture the depth of the missionary experience, even though the vignette method is a fair representation of the complex clutter, the wearying and exhil-

arating busyness of a missionary's life.

And its upbeat strength sometimes edges into glibness. There are the investigators who turn away, but there are also the investigators who join—even Sister Durant's drunken husband. The lazy, frightened missionaries sooner or later discover what it's all about; the missionary whose member-tutor has fallen in love with him is saved by a wiser companion.

To some extent, the positiveness of the approach obscures the wounds that every missionary carries home with him, wounds that may cease aching but never disappear completely. There is occasional bad writing. The format and cover design make the book look regrettably like a manual. And perhaps most frustrating, there doesn't seem to be any way to avoid the trap: in Mormon culture things that are most deeply true are most inevitably trite. Farmer has not found a way to write about the daily miracles of spiritual experience without using the clichés of Mormon experience: Elder Harper realizes: "*No sir, old Dave with his 130 baptisms couldn't be any happier than I am with my one.*" Two elders part after a difficult few months together realizing "The Lord did know what was best for me. President Horne knew that Elder Brown and I needed each other." The elder who tells the Joseph Smith story and realizes "for the first time in my life—the very first time, Elder—that it's true."

And most gratuitously trite, a closing scene of Elder Harper and Sister Palmer sitting in a car in Pleasant Grove acknowledging, in a speech that cannot avoid coyness, "The rules are different now."

Yet in spite of the triteness, the "formula" construction of each chapter and the emphasis on situation at the occasional expense of character, there is the warmth of affection, the wryness of experience realistically remembered, the flashes of wit and charm illuminating dialogue and description. Neither solemn nor cynical, *Elders and Sisters* tells it almost "the way it was."