

The People on the Wall

A Study of the Point Where Imagination and Reality Meet

By EDWIN A. BURNS

THE tall monk in the red cassock slipped into the room quite un-noticed and stepped silently to the side of the dream man, who was sitting motionless beside a small oaken table.

"Why so dejected, friend?" he soothed, in a rich, full voice. "Come, be of good cheer. Some day everything will turn out even better than we can hope for."

The dream man shook his head sadly and sighed. A moment later he arose and turned to the monk.

"Come with me through the snow-covered country lane that leads to the distant twin pine trees," he urged. "There all is peaceful."

Together they left the room and plodded away through the glistening, spotless snow.

In reality there was no solemn-faced, stalwart monk wearing a brilliant cassock adorned with golden lace, and no snow-kissed country lane in which two shaggy oxen sauntered lazily. They were merely small framed pictures hanging upon the walls of the dream man's room.

For almost a year—ever since he had come to live alone—the picture people had been his only friends and had become constant companions. When he returned to his room each evening with a heavy heart he would seat himself beside the small, oaken table, rest his weary head upon his hand and gaze at the pictures on the wall. Then, presently, the people would seem to smile at him, and they would come out of their frames to talk and walk with him in the room. Or, perhaps, they would beckon to him and he would step inside the frames to his friends. Then life would be bright again. They were the most delightful companions and the dream man ever longed to be with them.

But there was one picture person who did not come to walk in the room with the dream man, and did not beckon to him, nor smile, nor even speak to him. It was a large photograph of a beautiful woman wearing a wedding dress. A light shawl was thrown about her shoulders, as though she had grown cool waiting. She reclined gracefully in a roomy, easy chair, and watched the dream man incessantly, her big, sad eyes—they were such sad eyes—following him, wherever he went. The other pictures were jealous of her beauty and called her proud because she never spoke to them nor came out of her frame. There was a tradition among them that if she once left her frame she would never again return to it.

The dream man and the monk reached the end of the snowy lane, turned and strolled toward the room. They advanced slowly, with heads bent in earnest conversation.

"And so our happiness faded away before the honey-moon had set," the dream man was concluding. "We did not know each other long enough to have married. We were engaged such a short time! It was her wish that it should be so brief. Soon after the wedding the trouble occurred. Some actions she misunderstood—she was so sweetly simple—a few words, spoken too hastily, perhaps, were sufficient to cause her to believe I did not care for her. We quarrelled. We were parted for a short space, and when I sought her to make peace she was gone. Shortly after I came here I found her in the frame that hangs above the book-shelf, but she refused to know me."

"WHY not go to her and explain all as you have just told me, and ask her to come back to you?" suggested the monk.

The dream man hung his head.

"Because I am a coward. Time has made it harder and now I have not the courage," replied he, despairingly. "You know, brother Lemont, that I have done all else in my power."

"Not all," the monk corrected, kindly. He stopped and held the dream man at arm's length, looking into his eyes. "Not all," he repeated, in a whisper. "You can pray!"

The dream man's face brightened as a new hope awoke within him. He raised his head and smiled, exclaiming: "That's so. I shall."

They passed into the room and the monk slipped away as silently as he had appeared.

The dream man glanced at the beautiful woman above the book-shelf. She was watching him intently—she was for ever watching him—but she did not move nor smile in recognition of his nod. So he sighed heavily and turned away, going in the direction of a wide, black frame in which squatted pretty, little Ki-ku-san, who, dressed in a red kimono, was pouring tea. She welcomed him with a sweet smile. She, at any rate, was glad to see him.

"Has Mr. Edward come to drink tea with Ki-ku-san?" she greeted, as he entered her frame, and she extended to him a cup of steaming tea. She spoke the English language really remarkably well.

The dream man made himself comfortable upon the floor—there were no chairs in the picture—and accepted the dainty, china cup.



"Your hot water," announced the landlady.

"The tea is good, but I came chiefly to see my little, dark Ki-ku-san," he replied, pleasantly. "Do you know, during the tedious day I often think about my little Jap girl who refuses to give up foreign customs and become an American woman!" He was saying this quite loud enough to be heard above the book-shelf.

"Mr. Edward likes to flatter Ki-ku-san," the little girl retorted, watching him over her tea cup. "During the day he has thought of drinking tea with lots of American ladies. He has not thought much about Ki-ku-san. Eh! I know!"

The dream man did not reply immediately. He had turned his head away and was studying the beautiful woman. He always did so on like occasions, as if saying to her, "You do not care any more, but see how much other women think of me." She was watching him calmly as ever, but he thought her eyes had become a trifle sadder.

"Ki-ku-san is right. That's so!" the Jap girl giggled when the dream man failed to speak.

He turned, placed his cup on the tray and moved quite close to her.

"I am afraid you know too much, my little Jap girl," he smiled. He took her small, yellow hand in his. "Ki-ku-san," he began, tenderly, "you like Mr. Edward, don't you?" Here he stole another glance at the woman over the book-shelf.

"I don't know," mused the little ball in the bright kimono, casting her eyes to the ground.

"Yes you do," urged the dream man, his eyes still over the book-shelf. "Surely, just a little!"

Ki-ku-san nodded several times.

"Then," exclaimed the dream man, triumphantly, "suppose some day when you have grown a little older Mr. Edward should ask you to give up being a Japanese girl and become his wife, what would you say to that?" He patted her hand tenderly and turned to see the effect he had made on the woman over the book-shelf.

"Oh, oh, oh!" gurgled the little, dark girl. "You do not understand. I could not marry you, because I go back to Japan soon, also because—"

"Because why?"

"Because you know you do not care for me as much as the American ladies." She withdrew her hand, and, picking up a large fan, hid her face.

WHEN the dream man gained sufficient courage to look at the beautiful woman she had turned her head away, and, yes, he was sure of it, a big tear rolled down her cheek. Something swelled inside his throat.

"I believe you do not care for me, Ki-ku-san," he sighed, rising hastily. "You prefer to sit here in Japanese costume and pour tea all your life." He patted her upon the head and stepped out of the frame.

In the centre of the room stood a long, thin man, dressed in evening clothes. His cheeks were hollow and his face wore a hard, stubborn expression. This was the former self. His frame hung alongside that of the beautiful woman. He was one of only two persons to whom she would speak. It was whispered that he was about to marry her.

The former self and the dream man were the worst of enemies and seldom ever spoke. To-night, however, the former self stood motionless as the dream man advanced, an angry light gleaming in his eyes. The dream man nodded coldly and turned away. Feeling a tap on his shoulder, he turned sharply.

"I wish to speak to you," requested the former self. "Perhaps you are aware of what I am about to speak," he scowled hatefully.

"I have no idea what you want, what is more, don't care," retorted the dream man, crossly. "Kindly be brief, when we converse long trouble arises." He sat down and motioned the former self to a chair at the other side of the table.

"I came to speak about her," commenced the former self, sternly, as he raised his eyes to the woman over the book-shelf.

The dream man's face twitched, but he said, quite calmly, "Yes."

The former self leaned over the table, glaring horribly.

"I am going to marry her," he snarled between his teeth. "Do you understand, she has promised to become my wife!"

"You have allowed me to assume as much before," commented the dream man, his face colouring.

"Very well," continued the former self, his nose now within a few inches of the dream man's. "You have no right to pay her any attention. You must not smile at her. You must stop nodding to her. You must not look to her for applause. Do you understand?"

FOR an instant the dream man was confused. Then a stronger impulse grasped him and he leaped to his feet. He clutched the small table with both hands and leaned far over it, his face livid with rage.

"Sir, you forget yourself," he roared. "In future, sir, attend strictly to your own affairs!"

The other had arisen also and the two stood close together glaring into each other's eyes.

"Be careful," snarled the former self. "Say nothing you will regret."

"I shall regret nothing," returned the dream man, clenching his fists. "Since you take that attitude, sir, we shall settle this as men. I request you to apologize or leave my presence at once."

"Apologize, never!" hissed the former self.

"Then, by heaven, I'll make you!" shrieked the dream man, flinging off his coat.

At that instant there was a loud rap at the door. The picture people darted to their frames and the dream man found himself sitting quietly beside the