

The Mandarin's Pigtail

IN THE brave days of the Ming, there lived in Ping-hiang, in Kan-suh Province, a red coral-button mandarin, hi Sung-wei, who owned extensive lands and was loved by the people. In the summer, when the lotus blossoms ripened in the pool before the pagoda of Shang-ti, he journeyed to Peking. Passing along the Grand Canal he exulted in the greatness of the land and the dignity of the Emperor, and wished that they might continue so.

The Emperor held him in high esteem, and audiences were frequent, for his ancestors had been no less than he, strong and loyal, and no hi had ever caused the Throne to lose face. While paying his respects at the Great Within, pale men arrived from distant lands in the East, and asked for an audience; when they refused to kowtow and announced that they were not bearers of tribute, hi Sung-wei was troubled, and wondered whether there might not be lands as great as China, who in the future might be stronger.

When he returned to his province, the lotus blossoms had faded, and the willow trees bore no leaves, though the year was just ripe; and hi Sung-wei made a sacrifice to Shang-ti, and prayed lengthily for the Emperor and the people.

THE Ming fell, the Ch'ing rose, and, as the lotus in the autumn, withered and died. Sun Yat-sen came from the south, preaching a land of great promise; and many removed their pigtails, the sign of fealty to the throne, and swelled his ranks, until he broke into the Forbidden City, and caused the last of the Ch'ing to flee. In Kan-suh the pigtailed were uncut, for out of respect to their ancestors, the hi refused to revolt against the Emperor. hi-Ching-si kept his pigtail, and many followed him into the hills, where they rebuilt their houses.

The vision of hi Sung-wei was fulfilled, as the eighteen provinces groaned under the indignities and loss of face they suffered; and the little brown men from the islands descended from the north, crossed the Grand Canal and entered the Forbidden City and the Great Within. Thence they sent their armies south and east, and they burned and destroyed as they went, sparing none. They were repulsed at the mountains, for at Yang-tu the hi had stolen guns and used them well.

THE new China was weak, and groups strove against each other, and hi Ching-si longed for the return of the days of the Manchus. He sat one day by the lotus pool, reading the memorial of his ancestor Sung-wei, and noticed how, as Sung-wei said, the lotus comes in spring and dies in autumn; thus would the brown men die in the autumn, but not until the eighteen provinces were one united body. He sat there for a long while, and many of his retainers came and inquired concerning his silence, and he looked up and saw their pigtailed. It was now dark and he called for a lantern, and the eighth book of Kung Foo-tze, the Analects. He took the scroll they brought him and read by the lantern's light, while the moon rose high in the sky, and the shadow deepened beneath the temple of Shang-ti and crept over the still waters of the pool. There he sat, and his men waited, and the cool breeze blew from the hills and the water rippled to and fro. At last he arose, and watched the shadows dancing on the water, and the floating blossoms. Then, taking the scroll, he read aloud to those standing near: "And the master Kung answered: 'The people come first, the Emperor last;'" and he took the knife that hi Chi-ho had carried in the service of the Han and removed the pigtail from his head. A man ran into the courtyard and cried to him: "The brown men come, my lord."

"My name is hi," he answered, "let us go."

They went out, and the breeze died down, and the shadows lay still on the surface of the water. The tower loomed benignly through the dark, commending the action. The Manchu Pu-Yi might be for Japan, but China was for China. Soon the sun rose, and the first arrows of light fell upon the pagoda of Shang-ti, and the branches of the willow almost covered the discarded pigtail, which had fallen to the ground. SEPTIMUS.

A Fantasy

THE BIRTH OF A POEM

IDEAS in embryo,
Jostling one another
In a timeless, spaceless vacuum
Of imagination,
Unmeasured, scattered
Hither and yon,
Fighting abstractness.
Taking shape,
Forming phrases,
Sentences emerging,
Ideas that may kindle fires of revolution,
Or turn a man's
Or maiden's thoughts
To sweetest love.

It takes very little
To create,
And yet so few comply,
Agree to be urged from within,
There are so many other pleasures,
Attractions in a mad world
That goeth where
It knows not;
And who is to say
It should not?

DAVID L. VAUGHAN.



"Of course it's for a friend, you know."

Profane Letters ...

"Oh, to be banned in Boston,
Now that December is here."

NOW, as the year turns to its close, and American publishing houses shed their "Fall and Winter Lists", one ponders on the semi-annual problems of morality in literature. The problem is fortunately only semi-annual: in these sad days, the average person has only one friend or relative, who, already owning a book, will be genuinely glad to be given another as a gift on a birthday or at Christmas.

The selection of a gift requires careful thought; if the gift be a book there is a concrete problem of criticism to be solved. For shall one give from the great host of works that languish on the shelves in sound respectability, or shall one give a book that has been banned in Boston?

The Athens of America, around which New England flowered with transcendental blossoms, has in her long winter developed a faculty whose end product is criticism. Now, the whole western world depends upon Boston for the final word in criticism, so that what Boston rejects is wrapt to the bosom of Anglo-American culture. In the immediate past, two examples stand pre-eminent: "Strange Fruit", by Lillian Smith, and the encyclopaedia "Forever Amber", by Kathleen Winsor—both now part of the cultural heritage of the West. No one can ignore the role that Boston played in raising these works to their enviable position.

THE sales of "Strange Fruit" (a singularly apt title, when one broods on various connotations) leapt to best-seller levels only after the Watch and Ward Society of Boston forbade the sale of the book, on the ground that it contained a dirty word. The charges were not baseless: the dirty word is there, in black and white, on the rather trashy paper that is used for novels today. One wonders, in passing, how the purity of Boston managed to produce an intellect sufficiently prurient to recognize this word as being obscene. But speculation on that matter is pointless, and the result of the ban is, after all, our main concern. For when the reading public of the continent discovered that Lillian Smith knew and used a dirty word, enthusiasm knew no bounds. Young men and maidens, old men in their chimney corners, sewing-circles and sanctuary guilds, all revelled in that word. One cannot imagine Miss Smith weeping tears of either chagrin or contrition.

"Forever Amber", in its turn, was flung into heady success by the same machinery. Its versatile heroine (who could deal cards and spades to Mr. Heinz with his amateurish fifty-seven different varieties) was flung from Boston to the Antipodes, to be re-banned, and thus to have her glory enhanced, in stern Australia. "Forever Amber" has become, by all indications, the bobby-sockers vade mecum, and members of learned societies draw semi-anatomical diagrams in answer to fascinated queries from readers in middle-class suburbs.

Confronted with these examples, the autumn shopper is on the horns of a dilemma. Shall one give a book that has already been banned in Boston, and is consequently a classic, even at the risk of the recipient's having read it? Or should one read the new novels with an eye to words that will assure their being banned in Boston, when the Dorcas Society gives the high sign to Watch and Ward? There are probably six words that are seeds of immortality in contemporary literature, and some exercise like proof-reading ought to make the average novel-scanner reasonably adept at pulling them out of a context.

Of these two methods, the second is no doubt the more exacting, and consequently the more appropriate, means of selecting the gift book. How much more gladly is a gift received, if the receiver knows that careful selection and long deliberation have gone into its choice. And for the giver—what better indication is there of his knowledge of four-letter words, and his appreciation of morality, than the despatch of a gift that will be recognized immediately as unfit for Boston?

THAT the Boston, or Watch and Ward, school of criticism is the arbiter of literary taste, and that the ban of Boston is the novelist's accolade, can be witnessed by the immense success of a number of important modern works. "Ulysses", as long and infinitely duller than "Forever Amber"; "The Well of Loneliness", a novel twice as big and three times as stupid as "Strange Fruit"; "Studs Lonigan" and a good number of other pieces are sold to eager-eyed enthusiasts all over the world on this basis of selection. How much the weight of this criticism has affected the structure of the modern novel is rather more difficult to appraise. How successful can a novel be, if it is not forbidden circulation among the Cabots and the Lowells? Certainly it will never make the under-counter shelf that cherishes what Boston consigns to outer darkness. Nor will little maids from school deny themselves coca-cola and hoard their small change to buy an unforbidden book. No country clergyman will bother to damn what Boston tolerates, and, in a dozen small ways that in the end mean the sale of thousands of copies, that book that escapes Boston's ban is doomed to mere also-running.

Do novelists, as they take their pens in their damp little fists, cudgel their brains for those frank monosyllables that mean success? Do they, if memory fails them, make hasty notations on those entertaining graffiti found in public lavatories? One is intrigued by a consideration of these labors; one sympathizes with the writer as he debates the position and effect of his chosen gem. But this speculation is vain. As one picks up the average modern novel, there lies, between the lines of print, and almost as clear as they, the author's evening prayer:

"Oh to be banned in Boston,
Now that December is here."

—H. K. G.

To An Absentee

The following poem was awarded the \$200.00 first prize award in the Joseph Howe Poetry Contest of 1943. It is here published with the kind permission of the Dalhousie Senate.—Editor.

YOU loved the pale green froth of buds in Spring,
The woody paths that sent you forth to roam
In search of nests and many a strange wild thing
To swell your store of oddities at home.
I watched you tread beneath the open sky
To pools and creeks where muddied waters flow,
With rod and reel to while the sunburnt hours;
Wistful, I watched you go
And loved you for your careless swinging grace,
Your jaunty whistle tuned to far off hills,
And yet I loathed to lose you for one day
To distant nooks and rills.
Now grown, you have these many months
been gone,
And I am proud because you help retain
The freedom found while walking paths in spring,
The liberty I pray you'll know again.
And though I'm sad, because you will not see
The blossoming mists that veil our apple tree,
The sloping roof heaped high with petaled snow;
Somehow I know, as spring returns
And buds break into foam,
Your heart will trail familiar pathways home.

—KATHRYN BEAN.

Nocturne

A SHORT STORY

SHE came out of the crowded El train into the pink flush of early evening. The tremendous bulk of Manhattan soared into the evening sky in the distance. Through the glare of the setting sun the tall buildings looked like the monstrous black trunks of some primeval forest heaving above the hot, crowded city.

She walked down the iron stairway into the cool dark shadow of the street below. Her hand trembled slightly on the railing, and she moved cautiously, letting the crowd pass. Then she crossed the pavement, walked north for some distance, and climbed the cement steps of a narrow brick apartment house flanking the East River.

Inside, the hall was dark and warm. She heard a bottle crash somewhere in the rear of the building, and a door slam. The heat was like a tremendous, living weight. The perspiration stood out on her forehead in tiny beads of sweat, and her head ached violently. She climbed the stairs slowly, resting at the top to press her head against the cold wall. Then she took out her key and entered the tiny flat. She closed the door behind her softly, and then with the sound of a frightened, hurt animal, she sobbed quietly against the door-casing.

The pain in her head throbbed with sickening violence. She pressed her head fiercely against the sharp edge of the wood until the pain of the bruised flesh blotted out all sensation. The floor heaved beneath her, and the room suddenly went black. She breathed deeply, waiting for it to pass. Then she moved slowly back into the room, through the kitchen and into the bathroom. She opened the small medicine closet, and groped for a tiny bottle of morphine. She swallowed three tablets, and then bathed her eyes and forehead with cold water. In the kitchen she made a small ice-pack with a thin towel and carried it into her bedroom. She loosened her collar and skirt, and lay over the bed with the ice-pack on her forehead. It began to melt slowly, and the cold water ran down her temples and onto the pillow. She relaxed slowly, giving herself up to the heavy luxury of the drug. The room slipped away quietly. She counted the months again—July, August, September... March... March... March what? The first or the last? Possibly a year he had said. Next July then... a year at the most... no more...

She began to weep silently in the dark room.

SHE turned in her sleep restlessly. A few hours after midnight she awakened, and the clock in her living-room chimed three. Her clothes were soaked with perspiration. In the darkness she fought back tears of self-pity and discouragement. If only the pain would stop! She got up slowly and walked to the open window. The street was empty and quiet. A man passed below—a short, fat man carrying a parcel. He walked quickly, like a frightened thing. He turned the corner at the end of the street and disappeared. The trains passed less frequently now, and during the intervals it was quiet. The heat pressed down close and still. Far off she heard the rumble of thunder, and over the broken edges of the roof-tops she could see the distant flare of lightning.

A slight breeze entered the room, and she leaned over the window-sill to fill her lungs with the cool air. She was tired, more tired than she had ever been, and her heart longed for escape...

TOWARDS morning she stirred and shivered in the cool air of the room. Her head and back ached from the cramped position in which she had been sleeping. She buried her face in her hands, as if to push back the throbbing pain and crush it. In the street below a milk truck rolled up to the curb. The man jumped out with two or three bottles, and stood them in a basement doorway. She watched him until he disappeared in the darkness, and then got up herself and moved to the small kitchen. From the window overlooking the East River she could see the first flush of early dawn. The sky was livid, but a long, thin ribbon of burnt copper streaked the horizon.

She moved to the small gas burner in the corner of the room, and reached up for a match to light the flame. But she stopped in her action, and stared at the small star-like shape of the burner. She stared until her eyes lost focus—until it writhed with the hideousness of a tiny monster. Her heart began to pound. The pain in her head throbbed suddenly, sending a wave of violent nausea through her body. She moved back slowly into the front room. She closed the windows quietly, shoved the mat tightly against the door leading into the hall, and went back into the kitchen. The room was brilliant with the red glare of the sun. She moved towards the gas burner. With a trembling hand she opened the jet wide. Her heart was beating in a queer, excited way.

—MORTON NORMAN.

Who has seen
Floating down the stream
Rose petals?

Where waters meet,
The seven veiled sisters weep
Lethe's dream...

Cavernous dome
Of night, eternal and alone...
Wraithed sleep.

C. S. W.