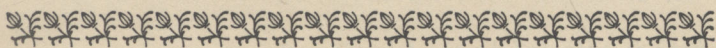


CHINATOWN
FAMILY



a novel by

LIN YUTANG

The John Day Company

NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1948, BY THE JOHN DAY COMPANY

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission.

The quotations from "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding," reproduced on pages 224 and 291 were copyrighted 1904 by M. Witmark and Sons. Copyright renewed. Used by permission. The quotation from "Solweig's Song" on page 281 is the English version by Dr. Theodore Baker. Printed by permission of the copyright owners, G. Schirmer, Inc.

This book is published by the John Day Company, 62 West 45th Street, New York 19, N. Y., and on the same day in the Dominion of Canada by Longmans, Green & Company, Toronto, Ontario.

Manufactured in the United States of America

CHINATOWN FAMILY

Chapter 1



I

TOM LAY IN BED, HIS LIMBS TIRED AND all the muscles of his body sweetly relaxed, ready to fall asleep on this memorable first night after his arrival in America. His mother had just clicked off the switch triumphantly, and the light of the globe hanging over the middle of the bed had gone out, leaving for a second a streak of liver red that danced across his eyes. His toes hurt slightly, pleasantly, a new sensation for Tom. He did not often have new shoes, whether leather or cloth, and his father had bought him that day a new pair that cost three dollars and twenty-five cents and had insisted on his putting them on. The nerves across his arches tingled, and his ankles felt stiff, but from the middle of his heel came a sensation that really hurt.

He was drowsy, as a boy of thirteen can be healthily drowsy after a day of excitement. He wanted to sleep. His sister Eva, one year younger, was lying beside him. As he turned on his mattress and let his fingers fall curled on the edge of the bed, he saw the moon above the jagged, square, unfamiliar roofs of the houses across the avenue. For a time, his bed seemed to rock as if he were still on the ship which had docked that morning. He had not been seasick, as Eva had been, but the swaying motion of his bed continued. The moon seemed to

swing in the sky, but when he opened his eyes wide, it stood still over the rooftops. Then he knew he was on land in a strange city in a strange country.

He had eaten too much that day, a Chinese lunch followed by a Chinese dinner, after being starved on the freighter for forty-five days. His mind was dim and a little giddy, and only the recollection remained of the swallowing of mouthfuls of inexhaustible rice, oiled by rich gravy and voluptuous hunks of bean curd fried in fat. The sleepy feeling crept over him, dark, sweet, and tender.

But Eva was awake.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am."

"No, you are not."

Eva moved to rise from the bed. The mattress rolled and rocked again.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked.

He saw Eva's shape tiptoe across the room.

Click, click! Click, click! The light over his head went on and off three times.

"Oh, Eva!"

Giggling and triumphant, Eva jumped into bed again and pulled the sheet over her.

From across the room came the old father's voice. "Children, stop playing with the light. It is electricity!" The Cantonese word, *tin*, had a heavy thumping tone—"Hai tinnn!"

It was electricity! Momentous word in Tom's mind, symbolic of all that was new and marvelous in this new world of miracles. The brother and sister had been playing with the switch in the afternoon. Tom had scrutinized the crisscross pattern of the filaments; he had known electric light in Canton and on the ship, but they had not had it at home and the wonder never ceased. He knew he was going to explore that incomprehensible marvel someday; just now he only wanted to understand that nice, neat infallible click. Tom was very im-

pressionable; he liked to puzzle things out for himself, things that didn't puzzle Eva. His father had said, "It is electricity," pronouncing the word with great respect. Electricity was lightning, and he had lightning over his bed. The thought was tremendously exciting.

Out of the silence of the night there had come at regular intervals a mad rushing sound that boomed and rumbled past the bedroom window and rocketed into the dark distance. As the sound approached, the rails wailed like demons in the night, the windowpanes shook, and he saw a succession of bizarre lighted train windows rush by in orderly procession, and then he heard the wheels of the Third Avenue El train screech to a halt at the Eighty-fourth Street station.

A train flying in midair before his window! Tom was fully awake now. The noise did not surprise him. He had had a few notions about America before he came to this country. America was a country made all of machines, and machines were of course noisy, and, Tom reasoned, America should be noisy and full of that rushing motion, speeding motion, going somewhere—click—stopping—click—progress—click, click! What puzzled him was something else, something that left him no rest. He got up and peered down from the window. It was unbelievable. How could a flying demon with carloads of people be supported on such thin steel pillars? That was the miracle for Tom. A flying train whizzing in mid-air supported on matchsticks. Tom scratched his head. He wanted so much to know.

As he looked up, he saw men and women in their night-clothes, men with bald heads and women with almost bare bosoms, leaning on cushions and pillows out of the windows across the street.

He went back to bed. It was hot, noisy, strange, and all tremendous and wonderful. Eva was asleep already. His head was heavy, and his stomach was full.

The next thing he knew it was already morning.

"What do you think of Father?" whispered Eva, at the first movement Tom made in his bed. Tom was still in slumber. She shook him. "What do you think of Father?"

"What?" Tom rubbed his eyes. Without thinking, he knew that something good, something wonderful and exciting had happened to him. Then the realization that he was in the United States of America, in famous, fabulous New York, darted into his consciousness. He jumped up. "I am in New York! I am in New York!" It was like saying he was in Wonderland.

"Do you like Father?" asked Eva again.

"I like him," said Tom. "Isn't it strange to have a father?"

"It is not strange. He is our father," protested Eva.

"But it is strange to have a father."

"Don't you like the feeling of it?" Eva always greatly respected Tom's opinions.

"Yes, the feeling is nice. It's like having a double roof. You've got a roof already, and you get another roof. It's nice."

"He works so hard for us," said Eva. "We didn't know."

Of the two, Tom was a little whiter and more slender. Eva, though still a child, had a more prominent jaw and cheekbones and a rather flat bony forehead above her little shining eyes. Her simple, direct smile and her queue made her look like a doll.

Tom had not seen his father since infancy, and Eva had not seen him since she was born. The "father" in their minds was a dream, a legend, a reality so remote that it was unreal.

In good years and bad, the father had sent them money. Family legends told that he had come to the United States with the Alaska gold rush. San Francisco was known to all Cantonese back home as Old Gold Mountain, and to the overseas Chinese in America as the Great Port. Their father had sent home what were called "gold dollars." What Cantonese

villager on the south coast—in Toishan, Sunwei, Fanyu—had not heard of the gold country? The plain fact was that villagers whose sons were in America received remittances, had savings and could buy farms, and those who did not could not. Some had built “foreign houses” in Canton.

Twice had Tom Fong, Sr., gone home to China, to stay for little more than a year, and then had returned to America to earn more foreign gold.

But ever since the children had known anything, their father had been in New York. The fact that New York was not Old Gold Mountain did not make any difference—across the fabled Pacific, the two points merged in the distance. There were village legends that the Chinese were mobbed, robbed, killed, and many were driven out of the West Coast, and it was a family legend that their father, Tom Fong, Sr., had escaped to the East Coast after some thrilling adventures. But that was long ago; these stories always sounded like pirate tales. The fact remained that Tom Fong, Sr., survived, and that, year after year, he and the other villagers’ sons continued to send gold dollars home to support parents, brothers, and wives and to send their nephews to school. It was a story of survival; it was success; it was struggle triumphant.

On and on the villagers’ sons came, and the immigration officials were merely obstacles Heaven placed in the path of men determined to achieve success with patience and persistence. The immigration difficulties were nothing to laugh at, but you laugh at them when you have nothing to lose.

Look at Tom’s second elder brother, Yiko. He had come as a seaman at the age of sixteen and jumped ship, and now he was Frederick A. T. Fong, Insurance Agent, representative of Cornelius United States Underwriters! The Department of Justice didn’t know. Why it should be the business of the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., to know his whereabouts, Frederick A. T. Fong never quite figured out. Frederick A. T. Fong always added Washington, D.C., when he mentioned

the Department of Justice. He was friendly to everybody, and when he met an American, he always said, "I am Frederick A. T. Fong," without waiting to be introduced.

So while Tom and Eva grew up in their village in Sunwei, their eldest brother Daiko and the second brother Yiko were living with their father in New York. The family was neatly divided into two halves, one earning and the other spending. The mother was one roof, a perfect roof, for Tom and his sister, and the father provided the other roof. Now the two halves were united, and the two roofs overlapped.

To the younger children, the father had been a mystical entity. From all the evidences—the family letters that arrived about once in six months, sometimes at longer intervals; the drafts that usually came with them, especially when the New Year was drawing near; and the trips Tom sometimes made to town with his mother when the letters arrived and the amazing fact that the bank gave them real money when presented with that not too elaborate piece of paper—from all these evidences Tom was willing to conclude that the mystical entity existed, as Christians conclude from the rain and snow and birds and flowers that God exists. His father's letters were always brief and not very communicative. It was either times were good or times were bad, and "enclosed you will find a draft for——."

There were other evidences of the existence of the father. In the first place, the mother believed in him. In the second place, her own brother, Tom's Uncle Chan, was in New York, too. Uncle Chan did not live on Olympian heights, hidden in the clouds; he made his presence felt in their home across the seas; his letters were more frequent and more chatty, even loquacious; real things were happening in New York. It was from one of Uncle Chan's letters that the people at home learned of the dramatic marriage of the eldest son Daiko to an Italian girl named Flora. Tom's father had not thought the fact even worth mentioning. In the third place, there was another old

man, also by the name of Fong, now over sixty, who had comfortably settled down in their home village after a lifetime in America and who told Tom, the inquisitive child, about things and customs in the United States, on which the old man was the unquestioned authority.

One of the unforgettable stories old Fong told was that in America there are restaurants without waiters where you put a nickel in a slot and, click, a whole chicken, roasted and brown, sprang into view. Nobody of course questioned such an authority. He would be offended if anybody did. He made a tremendous impression on Tom.

“And turkey?”

“Yes, and turkey. A whole big turkey.”

Tom’s mouth watered.

“You see what you want through a glass and put in the nickel, and out it jumps. Yes, Amelicans are clever. You go to Amelica when you grow up.”

Tom, of course, had wanted to come to “Amelica.” He wanted very much to. All the ancient stories about the killings and muggings of the railroad men could not scare him. All the tales about the big bugaboo, the Yiminkeok (Immigration Bureau), and its quiet, absurd tactics stimulated the boy’s imagination. What was this Yiminkeok but a lot of officials? By the universally accepted dictum in China officials were a pest to the people anyway. They were no different from the Chinese officials he knew. Why should they be? So long as you have a relative in America you don’t have to worry. An official may be an official, but a relative is a relative.

Tom Fong, Sr., had wanted his family to come. For ten long years he had been wanting them. But it was not easy. If his family should come across the continent by railroad, the traveling expenses of three people would come close to a thousand dollars. When he going to earn and save so much money from his laundry? Some years ago, when he thought he had saved enough to send for his family, his bank had failed. Busi-

ness was bad; fewer people sent their laundry. Those who remained his customers no longer sent their underwear, those who sent shirts seemed to change their shirts once instead of twice a week, and there was much work and little money in sheets. He lowered his prices; he worked long hours (heaven be thanked that there was no law against that!); he stood on his legs and sweated until eleven in the night; and he put all his money in a little cloth parcel inside a steel cabinet locked and hidden in a lower drawer. He had lost faith in all banks. He once prayed for delivery to come from fan-tan and was rewarded with the vision of winning two hundred dollars and then, in the hope of achieving all of his ambition, lost it all again. Thereafter he played moderately, but as a relaxation, not as a means of bringing his family over. But he continued to spend ten dollars systematically every year to take chances on the Irish sweepstakes.

A stroke of good fortune came in the person of his second son, who was beginning to do well as an insurance agent. Generous soul that he was, he handed over one day a check for five hundred dollars, his first savings, and said to his father, "Here, take this and send for Mother and the young children. Tell them Yiko sent the money. I know you want Mother here. It is all in the family."

Something stirred very deep in Tom senior's heart when he heard his son's offer, so deep that it took a long time for his feeling to come to the surface. The armor of patience and strength that he had worn for years had been pierced, and all his muscles relaxed. Slowly a contracted smile found its way to his face, and beads of moisture formed in his eyes. He was so touched that he could not say a word. He merely wiped his eyes. They seemed to say, "I appreciate it, my son. I have wanted very much to have your mother come."

With the money kept severely untouched in the bank, Tom's mother planned to go. For herself, she would rather have remained in China. The arrangement of living as the head of the

family back home had been perfect for Mother Fong, and going at her age to America, where the language and customs were so strange, was hardly a pleasant prospect. But she wanted it for Tom and Eva, and there was unanimity of opinion in the family and great excitement among the children. They were not able to go until after the grandmother died. How long this was going to be nobody could tell. Leaving her alone would of course be outrageous, and they were willing to wait. But it could not be very long; Grandmother was in her eighties. Tom secretly wished it would happen soon and then blushed at the thought. But when Tom was thirteen, his grandmother died and was properly buried, and so they came.

No, it was not easy. There were those immigration officials, and there were immigration laws, laws made, it seemed, especially to keep Chinese out of America, or to let in as few as possible. But Chinese are used to officials and know of old that there are ways to get around laws. Yiko's way had been to jump ship. But a mother and her children could not do that. Neither could they be floated ashore in barrels on the California coast or smuggled across the Mexican border. A laundryman certainly could not bring his family into the country legally. But a merchant could if the children were not yet twenty-one years old. And Uncle Chan was a merchant, with a fine busy grocery store in Chinatown. Uncle Chan was glad to help to bring his sister and her children over.

So the legal procedures were taken to make Tom Fong joint owner of the grocery store with Uncle Chan. Thus in the somewhat blinking eyes of the law, Tom Fong became a merchant. Both he and Uncle Chan knew that this was a temporary expedient, to satisfy the law. It was irregular. But the thing was done.

Tom senior's eyes had come to have a softer look in the last months. His hair, clipped evenly at the back, was already whitish gray. But when you looked at his face, there was not a record to tell what he had gone through, and only a few deep wrinkles across the corners of his mouth told of a healthy maturing old age. He had high cheekbones, narrow eyes, and a long upper lip drawn sharply downward at the sides, so that it was sometimes hard to judge whether he was serious, or displeased, or about to smile, or just being contented. That downward-curved upper lip concealed a whole load of emotions seldom expressed. It also expressed patience and endurance as if it was saying, "We shall see who has the last laugh." He had always been a silent man with a good strong constitution. The few words he spoke to his eldest son, whom he called Loy, were about business details. Some days late in the afternoon, to Loy's surprise, he would say in his throaty voice, "Le's go Chatam Squay." Then Loy knew they were going to have a good dinner at a restaurant in a basement in Chinatown and come back to work until eleven or twelve.

Father and son ironed and ironed and ironed deep into the night, silently and contentedly, in the room and a half in the basement of the house in a crosstown street in the Eighties. Outside was a red sign marked in big white characters, TOM FONG HAND LAUNDRY. There was not such a thing as a "hand laundry" any more, but the tradition persisted and was properly conformed to. The short stocky figure of the father, with its powerful shoulders, and the thinner taller figure of the young man moved about under the white glow of hundred-watt lamps like silent robots.

It was a good little world, safe and peaceful and without problems, except that once in a while old Fong would ask Loy discreetly, "When am I going to have a grandchild?"

"Don't know."

“What’s the matter with Flora?”

There the conversation always ended.

The problems of the laundry were simple. They were making an honest living. They had enough customers and everybody paid his bills. Their one purpose was to deliver clean laundry, quick laundry, and get paid in return. There were no employee problems, no union. Every minute they spent at the large ironing board meant more nickels. It was just like picking up nickels from the street. There was no limit to what they could earn except sheer physical exhaustion. The father at almost sixty was stronger than the young man. Often he would tell his son, “Loy, you go to bed,” and go on working himself. When Flora was there, helping with the packing and the accounts, he always asked them to go to bed early. He had his own idea about heredity—a strong grandchild could not come from a weakened mother.

So it was a simple world. Nobody could do anything to them. In the final analysis that was why Tom Fong called “Amelica” a good country. It was a wonderful thing, peace. They wanted to be left alone, and they were left alone. The Chinese government did nothing to him, and he did nothing to the Chinese government. The United States government did nothing to him, and he did nothing to the United States government. The New York police had nothing to do with him, and he had nothing to do with the police. He loved China as one loves one’s own parents, but to him China was a community of people rather than a state—a community of people bound by common beliefs and customs.

Around him lived Czechs, Greeks, Italians, Jews, Germans, Austrians. He did not understand the arrogant sovereignties of nations. All of these were people intent on making a living for their families. More by necessity than by conviction, the Chinese since Manchu days learned that every son of China abroad had to look out for himself, almost like people traveling on Nansen passports. You would be surprised how you

could get along without a thing called the state if you are a peaceful citizen. If you are a thug or a gangster, your home government can't do anything to protect you anyway. So on this pattern of free-lancing and self-governing individualism, Tom Fong had drifted to New York as hundreds of thousands of his brothers had penetrated Arkansas and Illinois and Lima and Cape Town and Dresden and Marseille. In 1847 a Chinese traveler recorded meetings with his compatriots on the island of St. Helena. It was conclusively proved that government protection was unnecessary.

But individuals were different. Flora, for instance. When Flora wanted to marry Loy and Loy wanted to marry Flora, the father said in characteristic American fashion, "Okay," which meant he couldn't do a thing about it, for Flora was a woman and one woman was like another. Chinese girls were scarce in New York; why should his son not marry a woman? Flora was foreign, but she had pretty eyelashes and a small mouth with very even teeth. Her breasts were good, which is an important test for maternity. So the old father said "okay." He knew how badly he himself needed Loy's mother, though he never gave anyone an inkling of his sacrifice in exile until that day when his second son gave him the check and saw how deeply he had missed the mother.

Flora, being an American woman, was demonstrative. When an American woman was happy, she had to be demonstratively happy, and when an American woman was thankful, she had to be demonstratively thankful. When an American woman was in love, she was terribly demonstratively in love. There was strength in reserve and danger in demonstrativeness. How does a reservoir become a reservoir except by being dammed up? The father put down many of Flora's ways as Americanisms. But when Flora, in the full view and presence of the austere father, kissed his son while at work, it was one of those things you would expect to happen but refuse to expect to happen, but which had now happened. Loy was annoyingly

undemonstrative when Flora kissed him. But looking at his son, the father felt that he could not be sure Flora would continue to love Loy, but Loy would continue to love Flora always.

Flora was only twenty-two, and she had dark passionate eyes, with long lashes such as only a white woman could have. Her skin was not as good as a Chinese woman's, and her forearms were covered with visible hair. Thin and slim, her face was set off by beautiful dark tresses, which made it all very womanly as far as the father's judgment of womanliness was concerned. Some one had told the father about the deeply passionate Italian women. A deeply passionate woman may be interpreted as one with many husbands or one with many children. Father Fong hoped it was the latter. Her love for his son was shown in many ways, in her good cheer and willingness to help in the shop, in her trying as far as she could to like Chinese ways, and above all, her sharing and liking their Chinese food. On this last important point there was luckily no conflict, and the bedrock of international democracy seemed, in the present instance, to be secure. More international marriages have been wrecked on badly done lamb chops than on differences of a strictly national character.

4

When Tom and Eva saw the Statue of Liberty as the small Panama-registered freighter pulled into New York harbor, the sight of that goddess and of the skyscrapers was not new to them. They had seen these structures on post cards and the screen many times, but now they were in the round. You felt you could reach your fingers behind them, which was not the case with a post-card picture. Yet some of that picture effect still remained. It is like seeing a movie actress in person. She seems to have stepped down bodily from the screen, but she still talks as she does on the screen, and you still don't think