

# Shanghai, Not Without Gestures

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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She came in from the street and stood watching the auction, a slender girl with great dark eyes and a clear, creamy complexion. It was raining outside on Kiangse Road, and her shoes were wet. From time to time she shifted uncomfortably and glanced about. Once her eyes met mine, and I smiled, but she looked quickly away, watching the auction.

There was always an auction somewhere, it seemed. One day it might be on Range Road or somewhere along the Route Frelupt, tomorrow in Kelmscott Garden. Household effects, usually, for people were always coming or going. The worlds of international business, diplomacy, and the armed services are unstable, and there is much shifting about, from station to station, often without much warning.

I knew none of these people, being an outsider in Shanghai and contented to be so, for a writer, even when a participant, must also be the observer. As yet I was not a writer, only someone wishing to be and endlessly working toward that end.

There were beautiful things to be seen, Soochow curtains, brass-topped tea tables, intricately carved chests of drawers, even sometimes swords or scimitars with jeweled hilts or the handmade guns of long ago. I used to imagine stories about them and wonder what sort of people had owned them before. It wasn't much of a pastime, but they were dark days, and it was all I could afford.

The girl interested me more. Reading or thinking stories is all right, but living them is better. This girl had obviously not come to buy. She had come to get in out of the rain, to find a place to sit down. Probably it was cold in her rooms.

Rooms? No—more likely just one room, a small place with a few simple things. Some worn slippers, a Japanese silk kimono, and on the old-fashioned dresser would be a picture—a man, of course. He would be an army or naval officer, grave and attractive.

By the way she seemed to be moving her toes inside her shoes and bit her lower lip from time to time, I knew she was tired of walking and her feet were sore.

When I tried to move closer to her, she noticed it and got up to go. I was persistent. There was a story here that I knew well. I had often lived it. When she stepped into the rain, I was beside her.

„Wet, isn't it?“ I said, hoping to hear her voice, but she hurried on, turning her face away and ignoring me.

„Please,“ I said, „I'm not being fresh. I'm just lonely. Weren't you ever lonely?“

She started to walk slower and glanced at me. Her eyes were dark and even larger than I had thought. She smiled a little, and she had a lovely mouth. „Yes,“ she said, „I am often lonely.“

„Would you like some coffee?“ I suggested. „Or tea? What does one drink in Shanghai?“

„Almost everything,“ she said, and laughed a little. She seemed surprised at the laugh and looked so self-conscious I knew she was hungry. Once you have been very hungry you know the signs in someone else. It makes you feel very different. „But I would like some coffee,“ she admitted.

We found a little place several blocks away run by a retired French army officer and his wife. We sat down and looked across the table at each other. Her dark suit was a little shabby but neat, and she was obviously tired. I have become sensitive to such things.

There was the slightest bit of an accent in her voice that intrigued me, but I could not place it. I have heard many accents, but I was younger then, and that was the other Shanghai before the guns of Nippon blasted Chapei into smoking ruins and destroyed the fine tempo of life.

„You are new here?“ she asked. „You don't belong here?“

„I have just come,“ I said, „but I belong nowhere.“

„Then you must be at home. Nobody belongs in Shanghai. Everyone is either just going or just arriving.“

„You?“ I suggested.

She shrugged a shoulder. „I am like you. I belong nowhere. Perhaps Shanghai more than anywhere else because it is a city of passersby. Not even the Chinese belong here because this city was started for Europeans. It was only a mud flat then.“

She moved her feet under the table, and I heard them squish. She had been walking a long time, and her feet were soaked.

„I'm part Russian, but I was born in Nanking. My grandfather left Russia at the time of the Revolution, and for a time they lived in Siberia. There was an order for his arrest, and he escaped over the border with his wife and children. She was French. He met her in Paris when he was a military attaché there.

„I am told he had a little money, but he could never seem to find a place, and the money disappeared. My father was an interpreter in Peking and then in Nanking.“

She sipped her coffee, and we ordered sandwiches. This time there was money enough, and for once I had more in prospect. „He knew nothing about the Revolution or the tsar's government and cared less. Everyone talked politics in Peking—all the Russians did, at least. So he came to Nanking where I was born.“

„An interesting man. I thought only grand dukes left Russia. What did he do then?“

„My grandfather died and left him whatever there was. For a time we lived very well, and my father drank.“

The sandwiches came, and it was several minutes before she touched one, then a small bite only, which she took a long time chewing. I knew the signs, for when one is hungry, it is the taste one wants. In the movies, when they portray a hungry man, he is always gulping down his food, which is entirely false. It is not at all that way, for when one has been truly hungry for some time, the stomach has shrunk, and one can eat but a little at a time. Only in the days after that first meal can one truly eat, and then there is never enough.

„What did he drink?“ I asked.

„Fine old Madeira at first. And port. He would sit in the cafes and talk of Tolstoi and Pushkin or of Balzac. He was a great admirer of Balzac. Father had always wished to become a writer, but he only talked of it. He could never seem to sit down and do it.“

„There are thousands like him. If one wishes to be a writer, one shouldn't talk about it, one should do it.“

„Then he could not afford such wines. He drank vodka then, and finally samshu or Hanskin.“

The decline and fall of a refined palate. „And then he died?“

She nodded, but I had known that it had to be. For a man to sink from fine old Madeira to Hanskin—after that there is nothing to do but die.

Our coffee was finished. I looked into the cup, made a mental calculation, and decided against ordering another. „Shall we go?“ I suggested.

The rain had resolved itself into a fine mist, and streetlights were glowing through the fog that was coming in off the river. It would be this way all night. She hesitated, glanced quickly at me, and held out her hand. „I'd better go.“

I took her hand. „Why not come with me? It's going to be an unpleasant night.“ Her eyes met mine, and she looked quickly away. „Why not?“ I said. „It isn't all that much of a place, but it's warm.“

„All right,“ she said.

We walked rapidly. It was not going to be a nasty night; it was already one. A taxi skidded around a corner throwing a shower of spray that only just missed us.

A rickshaw passed, going the other way, its curtains drawn. I was glad when we reached the door.

For myself it did not matter. Sometimes I walked for hours in the rain, but she was not dressed warm, and the rain was cold and miserable. The Shanghai streets were not a place to be at night and alone.

My place was warm. My boy was gone. I called him my „number-only“ boy. I told him when he took the job he couldn't be the „number-one“ boy because there would not be a number two, three, or four.

It was not just a room but a small apartment, pleasant in a way. Drifting men have a way of fixing up almost any place they stop to make it comfortable. Seamen often fix things up like any old maid might do and for much the same reason.

Yet the apartment was not mine. I'd been given the use of it by a Britisher who was up-country now. His name was Haig, and he came and went a good deal with no visible means of support, and I was told that he often stayed up-country months at a time. He had been an officer in one of the Scottish regiments, I believe. I had a suspicion that he was still involved in some kind of duty, although he had many weird Asiatic connections.

Some of the books were mine, and it pleased me when she went to the books immediately. It always makes a sucker out of a man who truly loves books to see someone taking a genuine interest in them.

Later, when she came out of the shower wearing my robe, her eyes were very bright. I hadn't realized she was so pretty. We sat by the fire, watching the coals.

„Lose your job?“ I asked finally.

„Two weeks ago, and it came at a bad time. My rent was up last week, and there is always a demand for lodgings here. This morning they said not to come back unless I could pay.“

„That's tough. What's your line?“

„I've done a lot of things. A secretary, usually. I can handle five languages very well and two others a little. I worked for Moran and Company in Tientsin, and then here for a transport firm, but lately there has been so little business, and the owner has been gambling. I don't know what I'm going to do.“

Outside was China. Outside was Shanghai, the old Shanghai when it was an international city. Outside were the millions, of all nationalities. French, English, Japanese, Dutch, German, Sikh, Portuguese, Hebrew, Greek, Malay, and of course, Chinese. Outside was the Whangpoo, a dark river flowing out of China, out of old China and into the new, then down to the sea. Outside rivers of men flowed along the dark streets, men buying and selling, men fighting and gambling, men bargaining and selling, loving and dying. Millions of men, women, and children, opening countless doors, going into lives of which I knew nothing, eating the food of many countries, speaking in tongues I had never heard, praying to many gods.

Listening to her as she spoke of China, I remembered the shuffle of feet in the noontime streets. There was nothing I could do. It was bad for a man to be broke but so much worse for a woman. Especially for such a girl as this.

Perhaps I was a fool, but I, too, had been hungry. Soon there would be a ship, and I would go to Bombay or Liverpool or New York, while she—

„You wouldn't have come had there been any other place to go, would you?“

„No.“

A lock of her dark hair had fallen against my robe. It looked good there. So black against the soft white of her throat.

„But I am grateful. What could I have done?“

Well, what? I had a feeling I was going to make a fool of myself. Americans are a sentimental lot, and every cynic is a sentimentalist under the skin. I knew enough about women to be skeptical but had been hungry enough to be human.

A wind moaned about the eaves, and rain dashed against the window.

„Listen,“ I said, „this isn't quite the sporting thing, is it? To have you come here because there was nowhere else to go and because I bought you a cup of coffee? Or maybe because of breakfast in the morning? I don't like the sound of it.

„Well, hell, I'm going to sleep on the sofa, and you can have the other room.“

After the door closed, I stood looking at it. If she hadn't been so damned lovely it would have been easier to be gallant. Probably right now she was thinking what a sap I was. Well, she wouldn't be the only one.

I had a feeling I was going to be sorry for this in the morning.

