

## THE LITTLE CRITIC

### An Open Letter To M. Dekobra

*A Defense of the Chinese Girl*

DEAR MON. DEKOBRA,

THINGS have happened since I last saw you at Yufeng-tai, the Shaohsing wine shop on Foochow Road, where we had, besides crabs and wine, the company of some of Shanghai's elite Madonnas, and where, thinking of your "Madonnas of the Night Express," I suggested to you to write a sketch on "Crabs and Madonnas," but you disdained the crabs and preferred to listen to the Madonnas. The wine was excellent, and the crabs were delicious (although you were entirely unaware of it), and the Chinese Madonnas were charming and beautiful. Some of the flavour of the night still remains with me. As I was sitting there, I could not help thinking that you had the privilege of observing modern Chinese women at their best and that this fact might change your entire outlook on Chinese womanhood. I did not know that you were going to be carried away by your enthusiasm and land yourself in trouble by your inordinate praise of Chinese women. And now some of our Peiping college girls are howling at you for saying nothing more offensive than that they are beautiful. You are probably at a loss to understand yourself how this trouble came about, and I am offering to help you out by analyzing the psychology of the Chinese college girls for you.

Now, I have not met a single European visitor of the artist type who did not give his opinion that the Chinese girls are supremely beautiful in their dignity and refinement and that their dress, too, has a charm and witchery of line not found in European ladies' dress. But, so far as I know, you are the first man to come out and openly declare that the Chinese girls are beautiful. It is reported that you have the bad taste to like both Chinese chow and Chinese girls, and worse than that, there is the possibility of your one day abandoning your confirmed bachelorhood and marrying one of them. Such an unusual statement is unheard of in the Chinese press. Now we have never heard a Shanghai European praising Chinese food or Chinese dress or Chinese buildings or Chinese women, or if I personally have, the Chinese public as a whole is unaware of it. Some Britishers have confessed privately and in shame that they really like Chinese food, but no decent Englishman could make a statement in the Shanghai Club that he likes Chinese food or Chinese women or the Chinese people in general without being regarded as "queer" and at once losing his class. This fact is attested by the fact that, while there are two or three chop suey shops in every town in the United States, there is not a single one of them in Shanghai. I have seen "queer" Europeans sneak into Sunya on Nanking Road, in humble dress if not downright in disguise, and eat their tongues off and their plates

clean. But whoever heard of respectable white gentlemen and ladies publicly going into a Chinese restaurant in evening dress or giving a party in Sunya? It simply isn't being done—that's the English way of looking at it. The thing has gone so far that the Chinese people themselves are afraid of eating their food in their own way in the presence of foreigners or wearing their own long gowns or talking their own language, or owning a Chinese-style garden. And now you have the audacity to come and tell us that Chinese girls are beautiful. Of course, nobody would believe you, least of all the Chinese girls themselves. The sophomore girls refuse to believe in you. Miss Pan, who led the boycott against you in Peiping, says of course you are sarcastic. Of course you are joking, and—this is what makes it unbearable—you are mocking at them. A girl writer in the *Tawanpao* asks, Why do you mock at Chinese, and not at Parisian women? Miss Pan demands to know why you don't talk of literature and talk only of girls (a typically sophomoric question). Another writer retorts that, if Chinese women's dress clings to the body and shows its graceful outline, doesn't European women's dress do the same? A male contributor to the *China Times* gives a heart-searching question: Why don't you insult the ladies of other countries, but choose to insult Chinese girls? Isn't this food for thought for the Chinese girls themselves? And the echo of a woman writer in the *Tawanpao* is pathetic in its sincerity: although we do not choose to be insulted by anybody, still ourselves are to blame. Oh, sisters, we must wake up... All this because you say (according to *Sun Pao*) that the ideal woman for you is a gay, Oriental beauty!

No, M. Dekobra, we have been so bullied and bamboozled and disheartened that we can't believe anybody who says a good thing of China. We have gone so far now that when we see a foreign visitor standing transplanted and spellbound before the Temple of Heaven, we have a feeling the Temple of Heaven ought to bow its head in shame. We are inwardly sorry it isn't built of reinforced concrete, and that it has only three stories. And if the foreigner should call it beautiful, the Temple of Heaven would, if it were a human being, like Miss Pan, say to him in protest "you cannot be serious," if not accuse him of downright intentional insult. It's like a slave-girl who has been ill-treated all her life, suddenly finds somebody patting her on the back, and shouts in amazed anger, "How dare you!" But you have dared, Monsieur Dekobra. There is now no way to make them believe you except by keeping on saying and saying again that "that Chinese girls are beautiful." And when the next European novelist comes along and concurs in your opinion, his cross may be made a little lighter for him.

Of course, you know what I have been driving at. The phrase "inferiority complex," trite as it is, involuntarily crops up. As a novelist, you know of course that an inferiority complex can very well exist without actual inferiority. All you need is to tell a man that he is no good ten times a day, and very soon he begins to believe it himself. That is how Sunday schools turn out so many "children of Beelzebub"—just by telling boys and girls they are

that when they like red ribbons or sweets, and they will go home like criminals and tell their parents, to their great embarrassment, that this is what they learn at school. So for the existence of children of Beelzebub, a Sunday School teacher is necessary, and *vice versa*. There would be no children of Beelzebub without the virtuous Sunday school teacher who spurns red ribbons and sweets by way of contrast. Your white brothers in the Far East, Monsieur Dekobra, are the Sunday school gossippers who by their clean-shaven superiority and by their hatred of dirt and the yellow skin and the flat face make us think we are children of the devil, and don't mind telling us so until we half believe it ourselves. Of course all this Shanghai Club white superiority isn't entirely unselfish. They need it. Life is usually quite a mess, and human beings are so little, so small. It does one good therefore to have a good ancestor and borrow a little of that reflected greatness. And if that is impossible, if not every one out here can show ancestral portraits in oil in their hall, it does one good also to believe that his primaeval great-grandfather in the forest had the right blood in him. It sets everything right and engenders self-confidence, and self-confidence is success, as all American professors of psychology can tell you. And it relieves one of all desire to learn and study things Chinese. But I was talking about the origin of this inferiority complex and in particular was explaining where Miss Pan got her inferiority from. What with all this white superiority, and what with nudist pictures and Mae West and Greta Garbo, the Chinese college girls are all but dying to have curly hair and blonde blue eyes. It never occurs to Miss Pan that a Chinese girl with straight black hair and slim willowy figure could absolutely bewitch a European. It also never occurs to Miss Pan that, if praising the beauty of girls of another nation is an offence, Mae West and Greta Garbo ought to sue the Chinese movie theatres for what they say in the advertisements in Chinese papers about their bodies—something I consider untranslatable. But the movie advertisements have done their work, the visible consequence of which is Miss Pan's proposed boycott against you when you dare to say that your ideal is Oriental beauty. Oriental beauty indeed! Why don't you discuss literature, but must discuss us poor girls?

You will understand now why, when you try to make the Chinese girls believe that they are charming and graceful and perhaps more dignified than their sisters in the west, the Chinese madonnas will just fling mud at you. You are not disheartened, are you? Meanwhile, go back to Paris and try to invent a formula for dyeing ladies' hair golden and ladies' eyes blue, and you will reap an enormous fortune in China with all the Chinese college girls as your ardent patron-admirers, besides receiving a warm welcome with big banners by a delegation of Chinese college girls at the wharf next time you come to China. They will then believe you are serious.

Yours, etc.,  
Lin Yutang.

## BOOK REVIEW

EDITED BY QUENTIN PAN

### The American Review

(Vol. 1. Number 3. Summer, 1933. Published 10 times a year. Foreign, G.\$5.00 per annum. 218, Madison Avenue, New York).

THE following quotation from *The Tyranny of Tokens*, by Vincent McNabb, the second article in the present number of *The American Review*, will give one an idea the sort of point of view this magazine stands for: "There must be an inevitable struggle between the Capitalist and the Communist.... Intellectually and economically there is a mid-point between these two extremes. Pragmatically there are movements, of which this *Review* is a token, which have as a practical program to prefer things to tokens—and amongst things to put first things first—to organize production not for the sake of production but for consumption—to endeavour to give society a stable basis by making, as far as possible, the area of consumption co-terminous with the areas of production—and in the organizing of society to prefer things to tokens, persons to things, and families to individuals, under the conviction that the family or home is the psychological defence of liberty and the homestead is the economic defence of the home." This point of view is reinforced by another article under the hand of Hilaire Belloc: *The Restoration of Property*. It is a vigorous onslaught against both Big Finance and Socialism. The alternative Belloc seeks is the multiplication of the small property-owner. This he wishes to secure by differential taxation in favour of the small property-owner, e.g. the small distributor and the small craftsman; and from the proceeds of such taxation, to subsidize the small propertyman.

Associated with the above point of view is usually an anti-modernistic attitude. And this is what we actually find in the tone of the *Review* as a whole. In this respect, the choice of Christopher Dawson's *Progress and Religion*, and *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* for two full-dressed reviews is significant. Dawson's conception of culture is pre-Goethean, and therefore anti-modernistic. "It (culture) transcends the economic and political orders. It finds its appropriate organ not in a state but in a Church, that is to say a society which is the embodiment of a purely spiritual tradition and which rests, not on material power, but on the free adhesion of the individual mind."

*Scottsboro, the Third Crusade*, by Frank L. Owsley, is a frank and able defence of the slave-owning mentality of the Southern States. Mr. Owsley tries to make one believe that negroes were better off before, when they were slaves, than now, when they are supposedly free. He thinks that the Abolition of Slavery (1st Crusade), the Reconstruction of the Southern States (2nd Crusade), and recently the Scottsboro case (3rd Crusade), are all dictated not by any love for the negroes, but by the greed of Big Finance in