

The Little Critic

Cigarettes

RECENTLY in taking a round trip to Foochow by land I visited dozens of big and small inland cities on the way. To my great surprise, the cigarette had already penetrated every nook and corner of our vast interior to take the place of the old-fashioned pipe. Each antiquated town or village, lacking in modern facilities as it was, had the best cigarettes to offer to the traveller. Some were imports from Shanghai or elsewhere from abroad; some were native products which seemed to carry the day by virtue of their equally good tastes and much lower prices. It looked as if our inland people did not like to be behind the times in the art of smoking. It is not too much exaggeration to say that nowadays tea is giving place to cigarettes, for in every place or inn I was oftener offered the cigarette than a cup of tea by the host or hostess. Smoking is of greater help to conversation than tea, in that the latter is much slower and milder in effect and a little bit over drinking makes the belly full; so in many cases to refuse cigarettes means to refuse talking. And for a traveller to keep mum is a torture indeed. That is why I came back to Shanghai to be a closer friend to cigarettes than before. Another thing was our poor means of communication. Our soldiers liked smoking too, and often being their co-passenger in a crowded long-range bus or a rowboat, I could make them give me more room and less pressure and squeezing by giving them some cigarettes to smoke together. What could I possibly do to kill time when the highway bus stopped short midway and needed hours of repairing, when I grew listless in a rowboat which moved only fifty *li* a day, when my whole body was almost shaken to pieces in a rumbling and creaking wheelbarrow on the rocky country road, when for a number of days the scenery around was the same all over, monotonous and desert-like? I smoked, and pensively smoked.

I did not in the beginning make any attempt to learn smoking. If my memory does not fail me. I dare say that never in the beginning did I say anything like this. "From now on I have made up my mind to learn smoking. I must not disappoint myself", as when I first picked up the study of the English language at nineteen. On the contrary, cigarettes, neatly equipped as they are with tin foil, superior paper, etc., did not give me any good impression as I was already much prejudiced against them through years of school education that "Smoking is a bad habit" and that "Smoking, drinking and gambling are vices." Though from time to time one thing by the name of curiosity prompted me to have a try, on second thought, the picture of a veteran smoker with his ghastly black

front teeth and disgusting yellow finger tips checked me because I knew that a young man should be good-looking in order to marry a beautiful wife. Years passed away when I successfully conquered each temptation to smoke cigarettes, but now cigarettes help me at the typewriter to type out the history of my acquaintance and friendship with cigarettes. I wonder if man is really contradictory.

I think I must plead that the habit of smoking was thrust upon me. One year ago, during the darkest age of Shanghai, the first cigarette took hold of me, and I was miserably spell-bound by it. One Mr. Cheng, a confidential friend of mine in college, and I occupied one room in the dormitory of the university. He was a confirmed smoker of cigarettes; from morning till night his usual record was twenty cigarettes. He used to smoke and smoke and the small room was full of smoke and smell which in the beginning I found to be disagreeable and even annoying. During some rainy days when the air was depressing and when the general conditions in Shanghai were going from bad to worse, we both suffered from *ennui* and would sit for hours by the table talking to our hearts' content. He began to dwell on the art of smoking and passed judgment on different brands of cigarettes with their different tastes; and though he very often said, "Smoking is a damn bad habit!" he would pass me some cigarettes which I hesitatingly accepted. To reject them would have been very unkind in this case. When I became accustomed to the daily offensive smoke in the room which was contagious in nature, my friend had already smuggled the smoking habit into my inner self. Later he was unfortunately crossed in love and kindly took me into his confidence. After every letter sent to his pretty bird finally failed to break her cruel silence, I took the responsibility to console him and even tried to find a way out for him because I knew nothing was more painful to a young man than disappointment in love. He seemed to have only one friend in me. And I noticed that his smoking was gradually intensified as a result of this blow; and to help him out I had to smoke more too.

In spite of the fact that almost all offices have the notice, "No Smoking" posted high up on the wall, those working inside ranging from the manager to the low-class clerks and coolies still keep on puffing away at their cigarettes. If human being can build a high civilization which they now possess, it is because only the mysterious human body must needs have such a luxury as cigarettes. No other living beings want to smoke. My front teeth are not yet tainted black and my fingertips are not yet yellow, but what do I care?