The Temples of Learning
Author(s): G. LaSELLE GILMAN
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The Temples of Learning
G. LASELLE GILMAN

LING Ki came to America for an education. His cousin, on the Hu Road, had an honored friend whose brother dwelt in Canton as a tea merchant, and he knew a man who had gone to America for an education. This man lived near the river, and he dealt in rice. He was not a young man, according to verified reports, but neither was he old, and he had seen the land that lay beneath the rising sun across the eastern ocean. The story of this man had planted the germ in Ling Ki's brain.

His father was honored among the learned men of the city. He had taught Ling Ki much. Therefore, when Ling Ki was eighteen years old, he approached his father and told him that which he wished to do. His father said neither yea nor nay; so after a period of six months, Ling Ki paid homage at the resting place of his venerable ancestors, packed a box, and bowed before his father. Then he sailed across the eastern ocean.

He knew no one on the boat, nor did he make friends. He knew nothing of the country to which he was going, save for gilded rumors, and he knew less than that concerning the manner in which he would receive the education he desired.

He had one object in mind. He would learn all he could concerning the ailments of people, and how to administer to them. Then he would return to the land of his birth and render great good. He did not know how long it would be until he could go back, filled with the knowledge of balms and potents, but time was nothing. Indeed, the years would slip by as the yellow Yangtze slipped by his father's house. He did not consider the mercenary end of the matter. He had enough gold in his pouch to last him a very long time if he were living comfortably in Canton.

He found relatives, or distant kinsmen of some sort, in Seattle. His father had told him that he would. They would harbor him for the time being, and instruct him in the man-
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ners and customs of the country. He must stay with them, his father had said, until he could speak the language.

The thing he learned first was that he could not go to the higher temples of learning, as yet. Friends of his relatives told him of his woeful ignorance. So he worked in the silk shop of Li Song for a great while, until he could say "cop," "hamburger," "book," and "whatthehell." Then he went to a school.

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The school, he found, was a high school, and was meant for the children of Americans. They were babes. Ling Ki learned quickly enough here, and after several years he could read English, talk intelligibly, and write a fine hand. He learned history, mathematics, and physiology.

He also learned other things. Chief among these was the fact that he was a damn Chink. One Su Yang, who was a student in this high school and had lived in America for ten years, told him that if he desired higher learning, he must go farther eastward. There were several reasons. The main one was that he would be treated decently if he went into the interior.

"The sons of these people do not love us," Su Yang said. "They say we are too many. But in the East, there are very few of us, and the people welcome us there. In a year I am done here, and I intend to travel to them. You would do well to accompany me."

To which Ling Ki agreed, and after the year, they traveled on the train to the East. They crossed great mountains, which Ling Ki did not like, and then they came to flat stretches of plain, which he did not like. But when these plains gave way to fields, Ling Ki became heartsick for a glimpse of his homeland.

This, he told Su Yang, was the place in which he wished to live. This was where he meant to stay. Su Yang was impartial. One place was as another to him. There must be places where they could study in this country, and they were far enough east. Besides, he had been told that it cost less to go to school here than in the West, and Su Yang was troubled because his wallet was flat. Ling Ki did not think of this, as yet, for he still had money which he had earned in the silk shop.

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They inquired, they found out where they might study, and they went there. It was a very simple matter.

The city to which they had come was different from Seattle. There were no parts of it devoted to members of his own race. But at the university they found two others of their own color who labored there. These two lived in a rooming house near the campus. They fraternized with their countrymen joyfully; so Ling Ki and Su Yang settled down. They entered the school.

This entrance settled Ling Ki, so far as money was concerned. He found that if he did not find employment, he would indeed be in hard straits. Therefore, he perused "want ad" columns until his eyes ached, and finally, after much difficulty, took a job in a restaurant. He wore a white coat and served food to people. The food was called chop suey and chow mein, and Ling Ki discovered two more foreign dishes which he had never met before.

He went to school and studied for two years, but most of the study had little to do with medicine. But he was learning fast, and beginning to fathom ways and means and manners and usages. Things were not so bewildering as before. He did not meet the cold aloofness he had known on the coast in such a marked degree, but nevertheless it was there. He had met a young man in one of his classes who urged him to attend a meeting of young people at a church. Ling Ki knew what a church was, of course. He knew what Christianity was also; for he had studied it in a book. It was all exceedingly queer. The book said one thing and the people said another, or at least did another. But they said they were Christians. Ling Ki had sighed and come to the realization that he had much to learn.

He had gone to the meeting, but was not especially impressed. It was held in one of the Temples, and no one removed his shoes, nor bowed down at the door, nor did he see any god or gods. Indeed, these strange folk did not act as if they were in their Temple, at all; for they beat upon the piano and sang songs which he had heard on the phonograph in the restaurant, and which were pleasing to hear, but not what he would have sung in this place. Perhaps this was a
special Temple, a Temple of Love. He saw numerous young people making love — ardently — in the kitchen.

They treated him well enough, but he knew it was forced, and he did not come again.

His professors always spoke to him on the campus. The students did likewise. But he saw through them and kept to himself. One night he said to one of his countrymen at the boarding house: “They do not love us in the West. Here, they treat us as children, but not loved children. Perhaps in the far East, they would hold out their arms to us.” He said this dubiously. His friend squinted at him. He was thirty, and he had lived in America for fifteen years. He had gone to school in the East also.

“You reason well, Ling Ki. Your ancestors must have been men of fame and honor in the courts. But theory and practice are enemies.”

The time came when Ling Ki found that he was unable to make enough money to continue in medicine. It was impossible to go on. He went to a professor and asked him what he should do.

“My advice, Ling Ki,” said the professor, “is to drop medicine. Go into biology, chemistry, anything in which you are interested and study that. Then go back to China and teach it in the American colleges there.”

Ling Ki had no alternative. He studied biology. But it was not what he had come to America for, and he was not interested in it. He could find no new interests. Then suddenly, he found that his grades were low. He was dropped from school in the summer.

He shook hands with Su Yang — for that was a good custom to follow — took what money he had, boarded a train, and went back west to San Francisco. He had no desire to see his kinsmen in Seattle. In San Francisco his money was gone again, and he worked in a souvenir shop for many months.

“The road of true happiness is the road that goes straight across the flat plain, and in the end it winds up the mountain to the rosy peaks of honorable old age,” had said Ling Ki’s father. His father did not matter so much now, and the memory of his face was hazy. Ling Ki found that the road
of true happiness may be straight but it is also hard and he who desires riches does not find them lying on the cobbles of the street for the picking. Also if he should, the picking is "few and far between." Ling Ki knew men who brought opium and silk and an occasional jewel into the city from ships that anchored down the coast in secluded coves. Even at times they brought in large boxes, in which were men of their own color. Ling Ki marveled much at the opulence of these traders, and finally, through the efforts of his Huan Min tong, he took his place in their ranks. The work was easy, and the riches came fast. And Ling Ki prospered. The memories of his home in the East, of the halls of wisdom, all were blurred.

He wrote a letter to his father, who was old and had resigned himself to the monotony and rest of the last days, and who had not seen the face of his son for so many years that he had forgotten it.

"In foolish youth," he wrote in a beautiful, flowered hand, "I thought that the height of ambition and achievement was to acquire an education in this land. I have gained years and wisdom of a sort, and it is not the wisdom of the temples. It is the learning that comes with living. Before I die I shall return to my birthplace, but for many years to come I am content to remain here, for I have done well, and have much wealth. I bear with me your words of good advice always, and I travel in the paths of peace and righteousness."