



"RICKSHAW BOY"

Reviewed by MILLEN BRAND

A LEADING contemporary Chinese writer, Lau Shaw has been known previously, and only to a few, by his short stories. It is most fortunate for American understanding of China that this novel should receive the wide circulation of the Book-of-the-Month Club.* *Rickshaw Boy* will leave gaps in our factual knowledge of China, but its implicit statements and meanings should go far to orient readers here.

The story, it must be admitted at once, is not over-plausible and is not as strong as the material it is used to convey. But this material gradually acquires an overwhelming impact.

The novel centers around the figure of a rickshaw boy, symbolic of the masses of China to the foreign mind. Happy Boy, a farmer's son, comes to the city of Peking and, illiterate but strong, becomes a "seller of his strength," a rickshaw puller. The novel is not carried out on the single level of Happy Boy's experiences. Constantly behind the fictional figure is Lau Shaw himself, and this produces an effect long neglected by Western novelists. So the novel starts: "The person we want to introduce is Happy Boy and not Camel, because Camel is only his nickname. . . . We hope to describe Happy Boy's position with the same definiteness with which one would indicate the place of a certain bolt in a machine." The reader soon learns to accept this relation of subject to author, finding that what might be sacrificed in immediacy is made up in analysis and freedom of statement.

Happy Boy has a plan of life. The first part is to own a rickshaw, costing \$100, and requiring several years of absolute frugality. More vague is the hoped for return to the village for a wife, to whom he wishes to come with the same purity as she comes to him. But slowly the shadows of reality prove the Quixotic quality of the dream. Friendlessness is followed by poverty. Happy Boy, pulling a rented rickshaw, is fair at first in his dealings with other rickshaw boys; but as forces to which

he is blind beat him down, he becomes sharp and hard, ruthless, divided from his fellows by the necessity of the dream.

An old man and his grandson, Little Horse, are being fed at a tea shop by a group of rickshaw men, after the old man has fainted from hunger. "My son went away to be a soldier, and has never come back. His wife—"

"Don't talk about that!" Little Horse's cheeks were so full of food they looked like two peaches, and he kept on eating after interrupting his grandfather.

"It won't hurt to talk about it," the old man said. "We're none of us really strangers to each other."

The premonition of unity is laid across the novel.

Happy Boy has been beaten materially. Next he is beaten psychologically. Self-control and human love are a contradiction, in this environment. By a single sexual misstep, Happy Boy is forced into marriage with Tiger Girl, daughter of the proprietor of the Human Harmony Rickshaw Shed.

The process of entrapment appears to be through the workings of "face." The Western reader may well be advised to follow closely the meaning of "face" as revealed here in the powerful focus of fiction. Having yielded to Tiger Girl once, Happy Boy can no longer come pure to a pure girl of his village. Tiger Girl's knowledge of this loss of face gives her her initial hold on him. She maneuvers him into a situation in which he appears to be the cause of her father's disowning her, and again, having lost face, Happy Boy must marry her. Having succeeded, she allows him to see that it was all a stratagem. "If I hadn't deceived you that way, how would you ever have come to deaden your heart and walk the hard earth of reality and lower your head in submission? I put a pillow inside the waistband of my trousers. Ha, ha! Ha, ha!" She laughed until the tears came to her eyes. "You stupid thing! Let's not talk any more about it. At any rate, I have no reason to be ashamed to face you—I owe you nothing. You're the kind of a person you are, and I'm the kind of

person I am. You ought to thank the heavens and thank the earth—I came right out and fought with my father to follow you."

FACE is argued and adjusted constantly; yet, flexible and sinuous as it is, it is in the end also rigid and vicious. Once caught in the double vice of conscience and appearance, the victim of face can be led almost to self-destruction. And Lau Shaw challenges its tenets, exposing its ultimate rigidities and showing how they are used to rationalize the deepest degradation.

Tiger Girl dies in childbirth, and Happy Boy is tempted to marry a girl he could really love, Little Lucky One (the names are an ultimate irony and turning of the knife of meaning). But "love or no love, the poor have only one way of deciding any issue that confronts them, and that is on the basis of dollars and cents." Little Lucky One is abandoned, and only taken up again at the end of the novel as a gesture of absolute protest.

The forces that materially destroy Happy Boy are casual and fortuitous: a band of disorganized soldiery, a government detective. The actual forces are the whole organization of society. With blow after blow, Happy Boy's spine of individuality droops and he begins to merge with the ordinary rickshaw boys. Then comes the crucial scene of the novel. A girl student has been arrested and condemned to death for revolutionary activity and the thoughtful official who has ferreted her and her confederates out arranges a public parade. The city dwellers, descendants of a people inured to killing and being killed, "were most of a mind that execution by rifle fire was a little too simple. They would have preferred decapitation, or the death of a thousand slices, in which the appendages are all slowly cut away before the condemned is finally dispatched, or the more delicate operation of peeling off all his skin while he is still alive. Just to hear the words was like eating ice cream: it made you shiver with pleasure."

Blindly the people see the ones who love them carried to death. When the

* RICKSHAW BOY, by Lau Shaw. Translated from the Chinese by Evan King. Reynal & Hitchcock. \$2.75.

girl cries, "Freedom of publication!" the people spit. When she cries, "Overthrow the secret police! Oppose crooked politicians and the sale of justice! Drive out corruption from the government!" the effect is "strange indeed, and very tart." And when the mounted police beat her into silence, "the festival had somehow been spoiled a little."

The old man, the granddad of Little Horse, is present along the parade route, with Happy Boy. Happy Boy wants to protest, the old man prevents him, to save his life, and Happy Boy buries his head in his hands for shame. "Whether it is true," the old man says, "as it is written in the canons, that 'all men are born good, but in living depart from it,' it is certain that in all the children of Han there is both darkness and light, and that it was in the hour of the ascendancy of the evil in them that they set up this doctrine called the source of wealth. . . ."

It must be recognized that evil doctrines can sweep a people held by the anodyne of poverty and despair, and distort the principles of humanity and goodness. The struggle is extreme and the cost of human cleansing incalculable. *Rickshaw Boy*, by pointing out bluntly the failure of individualism in its lonely sense, calls for the greater individualism of struggle and merging. It calls for the courage of an ultimate devotion, to love, to honesty, to resistance to evil. Within the sore spots of the world exist the units of health, shown here in *Rickshaw Boy* as Albert Maltz showed them in *The Cross and the Arrow*. But the disease must be faced, and the inward and outward curative forces must be gathered and united. In *Rickshaw Boy*, one has the feeling that the summons to battle is issued across a subtle censorship, but that any mind that is sensitive and intelligent can receive the message.

Books into Life

THE KNIGHTS OF THE CAPE, and *Thirty-seven Other Selections from "Tradiciones Peruanas,"* by Ricardo Palma. Selected, Translated and Edited by Harrier de Onís; Foreword by Jose Rollín de la Torre Bueno y Thorne. Knopf. \$2.50.

WHEN it has been left to librarians to write the books, as in the Alexandrian days of Greek culture and the Christian-monastic days of Latin culture, and during the declines of the Chinese dynastic cultures, literature has always suffered dry years. But there have been a few librarians in whom the living principle of literature survives the confining effect of library shelves, who

can reach to the life within books and transmit it, living, in books of their own. One of these is the Peruvian, Ricardo Palma, from whose classic *Peruvian Traditions* come the thirty-eight selections that make up this book.

It is difficult to suggest the flavor of the *Traditions* by referring to any books better known to the English reader. The translator attempts it with Washington Irving's stories of the Hudson River Valley, and then has to devote a number of paragraphs to explaining away the differences. I can think of several other possible analogies but I would have to follow, in each case, with similar disclaimer paragraphs. The *Peruvian Traditions* must be regarded as, so far, a literary species by itself.

Palma's eighty-six years were full and vigorous, as the life-loving pages of his book would confirm. Most of them were spent as curator of the Library of Lima, capital of Peru, which he had made as living as any city can be through a book. Before settling on the form of the *Traditions* he tried his hand at a variety of other literary types without successfully making any one his own. Then he had the good fortune, the lack of which has kept hundreds of obviously gifted writers from fulfilling themselves, of hitting on the form exactly suited to his talents and his circumstances—brief sketches of two or three thousand words, evoking personalities of his beloved Lima whom he had tracked down through old books, civil or church registers, or oral traditions.

In these frankly personal sketches in which the author does not refrain from including himself and making remarks in the first person, Palma proves again that, as among the elements of the earth, everything is good for something. Thus he makes excellent use of methods that are supposed to invite certain literary disaster. He stands serenely above his characters and he pours comments over and around them. This is generally considered to be fatal treatment for characters and is supposed to smother them like pilgrims under an avalanche. But far from being submerged the characters step out of it all magnified and refreshed. At the worst Palma's comments, vivacious, pointed and wise, and, therefore, absorbing in themselves, are like the often disproportioned but lovingly detailed backgrounds of landscapes and cities in Renaissance paintings in which one may lose oneself and forget the foreground figures for the moment. But, for the most part, the comments are in full functional relations to characters in the narrative.

Palma's subjects are tales and oddities of his city's history. They cover episodes in the conquest of the Inca empire by Pizarro and his followers, and the treasure rushes and the conflicts that ensued. There are episodes, also, from the spiritual aggressions of the "soul-hungry" priestcraft that accompanied the conquerors, the forays of the British and Dutch pirates, and episodes of the wars by which Peru won her independence from Spain. This material has always been treated more or less romantically or mystically, but Palma deals with it with sunny rationalism, with a Voltairean poise. What with other writers has appeared to be a mystical exaltation is reduced to the frenzy of greed over the Inca treasure and later the frenzy of pride and combativeness induced by its over-sudden acquisition. The church's "soul-gathering" appears to have a similar get-rich-quick character. What we have is a persuasive secularization of events which have, because of their spectacular character, invited mystical "interpretation." Palma has accomplished this by the simple method of always sticking to the plain, human realities of his conquistadors.

He does so even when his subject is the miraculous. From miracles themselves he manages to evoke human personality, as in the one which keeps a falling man in mid-air while the friar, forbidden by his harassed abbot to perform any more miracles, runs to get permission to finish off this one.

ONE consequence of such treatment is that the American reader begins to feel the differences in Spanish and British colonization as a matter of historic circumstance rather than of innate English and Spanish character. He begins to see that it was a historic accident that the Spanish colonizer has appeared to us so much in the distorted visage of the plunderer. The plunderers of the English and Dutch pirates, show the same frenzied faces. The *auto da fe's* of the Inquisition, in their different proportions, appear not very different in social context from our New England witch burnings. And, finally, the Spanish slaveowner revolts against the humanitarian reforms of Las Casas were of the same order as the later North American slaveowner revolt against the threat of emancipation.

Such parallels are not drawn by Palma, who limits himself to the stories and their settings. But the parallels spring up for the American reader, in whose mind Palma's narratives, as good