

BETTER A LAUNDRY

By
ROB WAGNER

萬元堂各地道



© Anna May Wong is the best known Chinese girl in the world.

M OSEYING around the De Mille lot, fed up on the tumultuous rough-stuff of Chicago I wandered back through the decaying palace of Caiaphas, and soon found myself in Thibet surrounded by the shaven priests of that land. Suddenly a Mongolian dancing girl with a boyish figure stood before me and began to smile, and through her smile I seemed to recognize a little Chinese friend of the long ago.

© Rob Wagner, the author.

"I've been thinking about you lately," she said, "and—" But this gracious beginning was cut short as she was called to the set.

And so I perched upon a camera case and watched Anna May Wong do a very dramatic scene under the patient and genial direction of Fred Niblo. I had never seen her work before and I marveled at her artistry.

"She's a great little trouper, Bob," said Fred in one of his smiling asides. "I only wish I could direct her in something worthy of her talents."

As I sat there and watched, my mind went back ten years—to a time when I was living up in the Arroyo Seco, and two little Chinese girls, ten and eleven, used to trudge up the hill, leave a heavy bundle of laundry on the back porch, and then come to visit me in my writing shack among the giant eucalyptus trees. They were Liu Ying—we called her Lulu—and Anna May, daughters of dear old Wong, who for thirty years had added cleanliness to his transparent godliness.

At that time Lulu was studying music but Anna May wished to become a writer and so she would bring her little compositions to me for criticism. We became great friends.

The years went by and as Chinese crowds were



© Anna May Wong and her brother before her father's laundry.

and SINCERITY

Says
ANNA MAY WONG

Her oriental soul knows the lotus flower and temple bells are within her understanding but the four-flushers around Hollywood were too much for Anna May Wong.

constantly in demand it was inevitable that Anna May should participate. Her bright mind and good English brought her rapidly to the front in these exciting adventures and it was not long before the diminutive child was acting as interpreter and doing foreground bits.

In the meantime we had moved to Beverly Hills and after that I saw little of Anna May, though I had occasionally heard how she had been gradually advanced into small parts. I often wondered how she was accepting her growing honors.

Then on a certain memorable night of a great Movie Revue at the Auditorium we saw our little friend again, charmingly dressed in her native cos-



Her next picture will be 'The Devil Dancer' with Gilda Gray.



The spark Anna May ignited in 'The Thief of Bagdad' still burns clearly. 'The Chinese Parrot' is her latest.

tume, as one of the 'Baby Stars' in a lively number. Each of the pretty young things carried a spotlight which at a given cue was turned upon some 'notable' in the audience, who would then rise and take his bow. Leave it to these wise youngsters—undoubtedly coached by their still wiser parents—to flatter the big studio executives. One after another they turned their smiles and lights upon those from whom they might expect future favors. All but Anna May—she preferred to honor her friend! Nor was her embarrassed friend able to hide behind the more or less ample skirts of his tall (Cont. on page 82)

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DR. ISAAC THOMPSON'S EYE WATER

Better a Laundry—Continued from page 35

Gothic wife. He was stood up before a frankly puzzled audience.

Other years went by and as Anna May grew to success I heard how she had left the ancient roof-tree and had gone to live in Hollywood. According to the publicity stuff I gathered that the glamor had gone to her head and she had become just another flapper. I regretted this, for it seemed so out of key with her natural and exotic charm.

"Cut!" called Niblo, as he finished the scene, and in an instant the little Mongolian dancing girl stood before me again.

"I've gone back home," she said as though reading my thoughts, "and I want you to come down and dine with us tomorrow night. Father often asks after you and the kids will love to see you again."

Way down into the old Spanish and Chinese quarter of the town I went, and as I crossed the threshold of the dimly lighted but immaculate old building, with its mysterious shadows and pungent odors of the Orient, I was instantly transported to another world.

What a greeting I received from the patriarchal Wong and the dear little other of his six upstanding children! Here was Wah—now James—grown to splendid manhood and attending the University of Southern California. He is specializing in 'Business Administration' so that he can carry on the honorable enterprise so laboriously built up by his father during forty hardworking years. . . . Compete with the big steam laundries? Yes, indeed; so long as people wish fine hand work. Why, many of the customers have been retained for twenty and thirty years. . . . As Anna says: "There are many laundries but the question is, are they good laundries. Father's, of course, is the best!" Parenthetically, one might observe that there are many log cabins, but they do not all bring forth Lincolns. There are many Chinese laundrymen but they do not all send their children to college and bring forth Anna Mays.

Then there was Liu Heung—called Mary—and the younger brothers, 'Frank,' 'Roger' and 'Richard.' Yes, and four other Wongs, grown men—"cousins"—who have wives back in China whom they are supporting much better by living in America. . . . It was the old, medieval, patriarchal family—one for all and all for one. They welcomed me with the warmth of heart that the Chinese genuinely feel toward us Americans.

Such a dinner! Not a familiar thing! No bread, butter, pepper or salt—no need for them. Strange vegetables, water chestnuts, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, roast pork, rice, chutney, delicate tea, candied cumquots. Mme. Wong insisted I be permitted a fork, for which I was grateful as I should have had hard sledding with the chopsticks. I wondered while I was eating—everything was so well seasoned and delicious—why we went to the French for so many of our dishes.

Following dinner—cigarettes, Chinese wine and Chinese music on the Victrola. The latter utterly beyond me—greatly to the amusement of my hosts.

Then to visit with Anna May in her little bungalow behind the laundry. American in structure, the only occidental 'props' in it were a flatteringly inscribed picture of Doug and Mary, and a piano, which Anna has had to give up because of her finger nails—long pointed symbols of gentility so necessary in her pictures.

"Yes," she said, "I had my fling in Hollywood. After my first big success as the Mongolian slave girl in *The Thief of Bagdad* I thought living there the thing to do. The publicity men were doing their best to Americanize me and I appreciated it, for I am an American; also I appreciated the confidence placed in me by my father when he allowed me to leave home, a very hard thing for a Chinese father to do. I employed a sort of governess who tried to make an American 'lady' of me but all the time she was instructing me I could hardly keep from saying: 'Be yourself, madam; be yourself!' In fact I grew to think there was no use in learning to act, for in Hollywood everybody was acting. Even the houses seemed artificial and finally I began to feel that I was dwelling within a world of 'sets.'

"Then I decided to go back to the laundry and to my family," she went on thoughtfully, "where I would hear the truth!"

"But isn't the truth sometimes disappointing?" I asked.

"Not so it hurts," she answered, a sense of humor playing in the corners of her mouth as she shifted her eyes. "I love my family above all else and they love me. Father I believe, is worried at times but he doesn't say anything. He went with me to see the premier of *The Thief of Bagdad*—You know of course I didn't wear many clothes in that—and his only remark when we came out of the theatre was: 'My, it's very cold tonight!' I don't know whether he meant something or not.

"To tell the truth," she added, "I'm Chinese by race and I love Chinese people and things. I love our traditions and even our ancient religion. I think there is poetry in our plural gods of the North Wind, the West Wind and the like. They are beautiful like the American Indian gods. My only regret is the limitation upon my work, as I can only play oriental roles, or sometimes Indian parts. Hayakawa's stardom failed because he was never allowed to kiss the heroine. The fans wouldn't have stood for it."

"But surely no one objects to seeing an American kiss a pretty little Chinese girl?" I ventured.

"Not if she is impersonated by an American," she answered sadly.

"But some day," she came back brightly, "some one will write a story demanding a real Chinese girl—then perhaps I'll have my chance."

When a girl who has been given only the smallest parts calls forth a fan mail of five hundred letters a week—more than many of the stars receive—it would seem that there are plenty of people who could fall deeply in love with a Chinese star—not a flapperized Oriental, but a real daughter of Far Cathay.

I left at nine o'clock, and as I passed out through the laundry to pay my final respects to Wong pere, there were the four 'cousins' industriously ironing away—they had been at it since 6 a. m. with occasional siestas—And there was joy in their industry, made more joyous by the strains of those strange music records. As I drove away Anna May waved me goodbye from the doorway, a doorway in which she fitted perfectly, for behind it lay a family spirit that accounts for much that is fine in her splendid race.