

## Of Dry Goods and Black Bow Ties by Yoshiko Uchida

Long after reaching the age of sixty, when my father was persuaded at last to wear a conservative four-in-hand tie<sup>1</sup>, I it was not because of his family's urging, but because Mr. Shimada? (I shall call him that) had died. Until then, for some forty years, my father had always worn a plain black bow tie, a formality which was required on his first job in America and which he had continued to observe as faithfully as his father before him had worn his samurai sword. My father came to America in 1906 when he was not yet twenty-one. Sailing from Japan on a small six-thousand-ton ship which was buffeted all the way by rough seas, he landed in Seattle on a bleak January day. He revived himself with the first solid meal he had enjoyed in many days, and then allowed himself one day of rest to restore his sagging spirits. Early on the second morning, wearing a stiff new bowler<sup>2</sup>," he went to see Mr. Shozo Shimada to whom he carried a letter of introduction.

At that time, Shozo Shimada was Seattle's most successful Japanese businessman. He owned a chain of dry goods stores which extended not only from Vancouver to Portland, to cities in Japan as well. He had come to America in 1880, penniless but enterprising, and sought work as a laborer. It wasn't long, however, before he saw the futility of trying to compete with American laborers whose bodies were twice his in muscle and bulk. He knew he would never go far as a laborer, but he did possess another skill that could give him a start toward better things. He knew how to sew. It was a matter of expediency over masculine pride. He set aside his shovel, bought a second-hand sewing machine, and hung a dressmaker's sign in his window. He was in business.

In those days, there were some Japanese women in Seattle who had neither homes nor families nor sewing machines, and were delighted to find a friendly Japanese person to do some sewing for them. They flocked to Mr. Shimada with bolts of cloth, elated to discover a dressmaker who could speak their native tongue and, although a male, sew western-styled dresses for them.

Mr. Shimada acquainted himself with the fine points of turning a seam, fitting sleeves, and coping with the slippery folds of satin, and soon the women ordered enough dresses to keep him thriving and able to establish a healthy bank account. He became a trusted friend and confidant to many of them and soon they began to bring him what money they earned for safekeeping.

"Keep our money for us, Shimada-san," they urged, refusing to go to American banks whose tellers spoke in a language they could not understand.

At first the money accumulated slowly and Mr. Shimada used a pair of old socks as a repository," stuffing them into a far corner of his drawer beneath his union suits." But after a time, Mr. Shimada's private bank began to overflow and he soon found it necessary to replenish his supply of socks.

He went to a small dry goods store downtown, and as he glanced about at the buttons, threads, needles, and laces, it occurred to him that he owed it to the women to invest their savings in a business venture with more future than the dark recesses of his bureau drawer. That night he called a group of them together.

"Think, ladies," he began. "What are the two basic needs of the Japanese living in Seattle? Clothes to wear and food to eat," he answered himself. "Is that not right? Every man must buy a shirt to put on his back and

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<sup>1</sup>A *four-in-hand tie* is a man's necktie that is tied in a slip knot with the ends hanging down vertically.

<sup>2</sup> A *bowler* is a hard, round hat with a narrow, curled brim

pickles and rice for his stomach.”

The women marveled at Mr. Shimada’s cleverness as he spread before them his fine plans for a Japanese dry goods store that would not only carry everything available in an American dry goods store, but Japanese foodstuff as well. That was the beginning of the first Shimada Dry Goods Store on State Street.

By the time my father appeared, Mr. Shimada had long since abandoned his sewing machine and was well on his way to becoming a business tycoon.” Although he had opened cautiously with such stock items as gingham, flannel, handkerchiefs, socks, shirts, overalls, umbrellas, and ladies’ silk and cotton stockings, he now carried tins of salt, rice crackers, bottles of soy sauce, vinegar, ginger root, fish-paste cakes, bean paste, Japanese pickles, dried mushrooms, salt fish, red beans, and just about every item of canned food that could be shipped from Japan. In addition, his was the first Japanese store to install a U.S. Post Office Station, and he therefore flew an American flag in front of the large sign that bore the name of his shop.

When my father first saw the big American flag fluttering in front of Mr. Shimada’s shop, he was overcome with admiration and awe. He expected that Mr. Shozo Shimada would be the finest of Americanized Japanese gentlemen, and when he met him, he was not disappointed.

Although Mr. Shimada was not very tall, he gave the illusion of height because of his erect carriage. He wore a spotless black alpaca suit, an immaculate! white shirt and a white collar so stiff it might have overcome a lesser man. He also wore a black bow tie, black shoes that buttoned up the side and a gold watch whose thick chain looped grandly on his vest. He was probably in his fifties then, a ruddy-faced man whose hair, already turning white, was parted carefully in the center. He was an impressive figure to confront a young man fresh from Japan with scarcely a future to look forward to. My father bowed, summoned as much dignity as he could muster, and presented the letter of introduction he carried to him.

Mr. Shimada was quick to sense his need.

“Do you know anything about bookkeeping?” he inquired.

“I intend to go to night school to learn this very skill,” my father answered.

Mr. Shimada could assess a man’s qualities in a very few minutes. He looked my father straight in the eye and said, “Consider yourself hired.” Then he added, “I have a few basic rules. My employees must at all times clean white shirt and a black bow tie. They must answer the telephone promptly with the words, ‘Good morning or good afternoon, Shimada’s Dry Goods/ and they must always treat each customer with respect. It never hurts to be polite,” he said thoughtfully. “One never knows when one might be indebted to even the lowliest of beggars.”

My father was impressed with these modest words from a man of such success. He accepted them with a sense of mission and from that day was committed to white shirts and black bow ties, and treated every customer, no matter how humble, with respect and courtesy. When, in later years, he had his own phone, he never failed to answer the phone before it could ring twice if at all possible.

My father worked with Mr. Shimada for ten years, becoming first the buyer for his Seattle store and later, manager of the Portland branch. During this time Mr. Shimada continued on a course of exhilarated expansion. He established two Japanese banks in Seattle, bought a fifteen-room house outside the dreary confines of the Japanese community and dressed his wife and daughter in velvets and ostrich feathers. When his daughter became

eighteen, he sent her to study in Paris, and the party he gave on the eve of her departure, with musicians, as well as caterers to serve roast turkey, venison, baked ham, and champagne, seemed to verify rumors that he had become one of the first Japanese millionaires of America.

In spite of his phenomenal success, however, Mr. Shimada never forgot his early friends nor lost any of his generosity, and this, ironically enough, was his undoing. Many of the women for whom he had once sewn dresses were now well established, and they came to him requesting loans with which they and their husbands might open grocery stores and laundries and shoe repair shops. Mr. Shimada helped them all and never demanded any collateral<sup>3</sup>. He operated his banks on faith and trust and gave no thought to such common prudence as maintaining a reserve.<sup>i</sup>

When my father was called to a new position with a large Japanese firm in San Francisco, Mr. Shimada came down to Portland to extend personally his good wishes. He took Father to a Chinese dinner and told him over the peanut duck and chow mein that he would like always to be considered a friend.

“If I can ever be of assistance to you,” he said, “don’t ever hesitate to call.” And with a firm shake of the hand, he wished my father well.

That was in 1916. My father wrote regularly to Mr. Shimada telling him of his new job, of his bride, and later, of his two children. Mr. Shimada did not write often, but each Christmas he sent a box of Oregon apples and pears, and at New Year’s a slab of heavy white rice paste from his Seattle shop.

In 1929 the letters and gifts stopped coming and Father learned from friends in Seattle that both of Mr. Shimada’s banks had failed. He immediately dispatched a letter to Mr. Shimada, but it was returned unopened. The next news he had was that Mr. Shimada had had to sell all of his shops. My father was now manager of the San Francisco branch of his firm. He wrote once more asking Mr. Shimada if there was anything he could do to help. The letter did not come back, but there was no reply, and my father did not write again. After all, how do you offer help to the head of a fallen empire? It seemed almost irreverent.<sup>4</sup>

It was many years later that Mr. Shimada appeared one night at our home in Berkeley. In the dim light of the front porch my mother was startled to see an elderly gentleman wearing striped pants, a morning coat, and a shabby black hat. In his hand he carried a small black satchel. When she invited him inside, she saw that the morning coat was faded, and his shoes badly in need of a shine.

“I am Shimada” he announced with a courtly bow, and it was my mother who felt inadequate to the occasion. She hurriedly pulled off her apron and went to call my father. When he heard who was in the living room, he put on his coat and tie before going out to greet his old friend.

Mr. Shimada spoke to them about Father’s friends in Seattle and about his daughter who was now married and living in Denver. He spoke of a typhoon that had recently swept over Japan, and he drank the tea my mother served and ate a piece of her chocolate cake. Only then did he open his black satchel.

“I thought your girls might enjoy these books,” he said, as he drew out a brochure describing The Book of

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<sup>3</sup> A moneylender sometimes requires a borrower to provide collateral: something of equivalent value offered or promised as proof that the debt will be repaid

<sup>4</sup> showing a lack of proper respect

Knowledge. “Fourteen volumes that will tell them of the wonders of this world.” He spread his arms in a magnificent gesture that recalled his eloquence of the past. “I wish I could give them to your children as a personal gift,” he added softly

Without asking the price of the set, my father wrote a check for one hundred dollars and gave it Mr. Shimada. Mr. Shimada glanced at the check and said, “You have given me fifty dollars too much.”

He seemed troubled for only a moment, however, and quickly added, “Ah, the balance is for a deposit, is it? Very well, yours will be the first deposit in my next bank.”

“Is your home still in Seattle then?” Father asked cautiously.

“I am living there, yes,” Mr. Shimada answered.

And then, suddenly overcome with memories of the past, he spoke in a voice so low he could scarcely be heard.

“I paid back every cent,” he murmured.

“It took ten years, but I paid it back. All of it. I owe nothing.”

“You are a true gentleman, Shimada-san,” Father said. “You always will be.” Then he pointed to the black tie he wore, saying, “You see, I am still one of the Shimada men.”

That was the last time my father saw Shozo Shimada. Sometime later he heard that he had returned to Japan as penniless as the day he set out for America.

It wasn't until the Christmas after we heard of Mr. Shimada's death that I ventured to give my father a silk four-in-hand tie. It was charcoal gray and flecked with threads of silver. My father looked at it for a long time before he tried it on, and then fingering it gently, he said, “Well, perhaps it is time now that I put away my black bow ties.”

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### Understanding the Reading [Answer on another sheet of paper and turn in]

1. Describe your reaction to what happens to Mr. Shimada.
2. What happens after Japanese Americans in Mr. Shimada's neighborhood entrust him with their savings?
3. What traits and qualities do you think help Mr. Shimada become a success in business?
4. Why does Mr. Shimada's generosity prove to be his “undoing?”
5. Why does the author's father continue to wear a bow tie even though he no longer works for to Mr. Shimada?
6. When does the author's father decide it is time to put away his black bow ties?
7. What are the most important lessons that the author's father learned from his experience of working for Mr. Shimada?
8. In your opinion, is Mr. Shimada a shrewd or a naive businessman? Use evidence from the selection to support your answer.

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<sup>i</sup> A bank maintains a *reserve* of uninvested funds to meet possible demands or emergencies (such as a drop in the value of its invested funds)