

THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI

Directed by Orson Welles
Produced by Orson Welles
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1948

Lured by the attractive wife (Rita Hayworth) of a crooked crippled lawyer (Everett Sloane) to serve on board their yacht after he had saved her from an assault, Michael O'Hara finds himself caught in a high-stakes game of fools. And he is the key player. Fighting his desires every step of the way, Michael (Orson Welles) is maneuvered into accepting a position for the long journey to San Francisco.

By all evidence their initial meeting was by chance, Michael loping along, Elsa sitting pretty in her horse-drawn carriage. The assault by the three dopey mugs could have been staged to further draw Michael in. But this is pure speculation (and would take some very quick thinking on her part). Soon we learn that Michael is a sailor, a veteran of the anti-Franco Communist forces, and he killed a man in Spain, back in '39. Her past is more obscure, but we can ascertain that Elsa was a high-class prostitute in China, where she was born to White Russian parents. They get along well, she coy, he feeling heroic, but then she lets on that she is married. This freezes Michael. He doesn't want trouble, and though he admits in voice-over that he is terrible at smelling danger, he can see it. She looks it.

Her husband, criminal attorney Arthur Bannister, comes looking for Mike the next day. He repeats the offer of a job on board their yacht. Mike still wants to say no. He can't figure why her husband would want him around. Sure, he helped her out of a fix, but she's attracted to him, and there would be trouble if he went along. When he goes to deliver an inebriated Bannister to his yacht, Mrs. Bannister says he's got to stay. Even the maid wants him around, saying Elsa needs him, that she's just a helpless girl. Now, Elsa has had a tough life, but she is as bad as the rest of them. No, she's worse. Through compromise with the world she has become the very evil she thrashed against, those many difficult years past ("You need more than luck in Shanghai"). A dour romantic, she does not believe in love. We learn later in the film that she looks at love from a fatalistic perspective: "The Chinese say it is difficult for love to last long. Therefore one who loves passionately is cured of love...in the end." She may love Michael. She begins smoking from the night they meet, when he first hands her a cigarette. Instead of refusing it, she makes it a keepsake, a temptation to indulge in later. But in the end she cannot get over her anger and lust for money. Or maybe she really does think that Michael can't protect her as he would like to, like he did that first night in the park.

Just how she was blackmailed into marrying Arthur is never revealed. Mr. Bannister hints that it is quite a sordid tale. But the obvious point is that she cannot stand him, and she wants his money. Michael encourages her to just drop him, but she refuses to go without getting her share of his fortune. This may have been her undoing in the end. She wanted the money more than anything. And if she could kill her husband in the process, her thirst for vengeance would be quenched as well.

We soon meet the last significant character, George Grisby (Glenn Anders), a smarmy, off-kilter, and very queer man, Bannister's law partner. He soon makes a proposition to Michael. Kill me and net five thousand dollars.

But it's not that simple. Grisby doesn't really want to die. He wants to disappear and surreptitiously claim his monetary share of the law partnership with Bannister, somewhere far away from the falling atom bombs he expects any day. He hates Bannister, too. As part of the plan, Michael must confess to a crime he has not committed, and through a fluke in the homicide law, will be off the hook when no body is found. But Grisby is planning to frame Michael for Arthur Bannister's murder.

Ultimately, Elsa is manipulating Grisby and Michael. She brought Grisby in on the plan to kill her husband so that she could remain one step removed from the whole messy business. And she's given Michael a passion to protect her that motivates him to risk his neck for that five grand, money he needs to take care of her. But he's just one more guy to insulate her from trouble. He knows money is important to her, and she's important to him. He fails to see that he's not really important to her.

Things seem to be unraveling between them, until that morning at the aquarium. Suddenly she doesn't care about anything except getting away with him. She agrees that Grisby's plan is foolish, but encourages him to go through with it anyhow!

Once Michael is implicated in the murder, with Grisby and another man dead, Elsa wants her husband to defend him, even though Arthur has grown to despise Michael. For his part, Michael doesn't trust Arthur and doesn't want his counsel, but it's what Elsa thinks is best, and he may have resigned himself to just being a helpless pawn, now caught in a plan he thinks was cooked up by his own defense attorney, who is, himself, torn; Arthur wants to exonerate Michael to prevent him from being a martyr to his wife, but the thought of Michael languishing on death row is too delicious for him. He admits, just before Michael takes a swallow of pain medication, there as the jury returns with a verdict, that this is one case he's glad he lost.

We've seen the whole trial collapse into a sideshow. Nothing has been taken seriously, either the death of Grisby, or the fate of Michael. Evil has permeated the halls of justice. Evil is everywhere.

Michael does escape from this trap, lashing against the bailiffs who protect the sordid institution, and soon finds himself in territory very familiar to Elsa—Chinatown.

The big problem Michael faced in the trial was the absence of the murder weapon. Finding it can exonerate him. After all his trouble, it's the gun Elsa said she didn't know how to shoot, that first night they met, and it's still in her purse. But he passes out before he can figure out his next move.

She has him taken to an empty amusement park. It is here that the three main characters have their final showdown. It is here, amidst the funhouse mirrors, that Michael's story about the ravenous sharks devouring their own kind finds its application.

Before the shooting starts, Elsa and Michael have a little talk. Applying the comments of the investigator to what Michael says here about Elsa running off with Grisby, we can see that Elsa used Grisby just like she used Michael, as a sexual pawn, only we didn't see any of it. She claims she loves Michael, but it rings hollow. Michael recalls another of her maxims: "One who

follows his nature keeps his original nature in the end.' But haven't you heard ever of something better to follow?" She replies, "No." She only cares about herself. There is now and will be no room for anybody else. And there is no escaping what she is. Once a whore, always a whore.

Just then Arthur hobbles in. His comments reveal that her last plan has failed. Arthur knows she is planning for Michael to kill him in a fit of passion, and then she'll finally get all her husband's money. But he's delivered a letter to the D.A. explaining everything. She is finished, and so is he. Reflected in shattering mirrors, the false fronts of their lives are destroyed, one illusion at a time.

As Elsa dies, she says that there is no fighting evil. One must come to terms with it. She had said this earlier, but now she wants to be seen as a victim in her fight against it, only admitting that she'd made some 'mistakes.' Michael feels that if he can just keep on going, that will be enough, even if he never figures the world out. He never wanted wealth, and now he's seen first hand what it can do to people, driving them crazy. He barely escapes the madness, and, refusing to stay with her as she dies in fear, Michael walks out of the funhouse back into sanity, a little worse for wear, but never to be fooled again. It was a trap he tried to resist, but his passion for Elsa was overwhelming, and he isn't all that bright. Against his best judgment he joined the crew for the long journey by yacht, trying to convince himself it wasn't because of her. There was something wrong about it, a danger beyond adultery, but he couldn't figure it out.

Now, with all that behind, he realizes he should have known better; from now on he will, even if he dies trying to forget her.