Wednesday, September 18th. We went this morning to court, in consequence of an invitation from the emperor, to see the Chinese comedy and other diversions, given on occasion of his birth-day. The. comedy began at eight o’clock A. M. and lasted till noon; he was seated on a throne opposite the stage, which projects a good deal into the pit. The boxes are on each side without seats or division. The women are placed above, behind the lattices, so that they can enjoy the amusements of the theatre without being observed. Soon after we came in, the emperor sent for me and Sir George Staunton to attend him, and told me, with great condescension of manner, that we should not be surprised to see a man of his age at the theatre, for that he seldom came there, except upon a very particular occasion like the present, for that considering the extent of his dominions and the number of his subjects, he could spare but little time for such amusements. I endeavored, in the turn of my answer, to lead him towards the subject of my embassy, but he seemed not disposed to enter into it, farther than by delivering me a little box of old japan, in the bottom of which were some pieces of agate and other stones, much valued by the Chinese and Tartars; and at the top a small book written and painted by his own hand, which he desired me to present to the king my master, as a token of his friendship, saying, that the old box had been eight hundred years in his family. He, at the same time, gave me a book for myself, also written and painted by him, together with several purses for Areca nut. He likewise gave a purse of the same sort to Sir George Staunton, and sent some small presents to the other gentlemen of the embassy. After this, several nieces of silk and porcelain, but seemingly of no great value, were distributed among the Tartar princes and chief courtiers, who appeared to receive them with every possible demonstration of humility and gratitude.

The theatrical entertainments consisted of great variety, both tragical and comical; several distinct pieces were acted in succession, though without any apparent connection with one another. Some of them were historical and others of pure fancy, partly in recitativo, partly in singing, and partly in plain speaking, without any accompaniment of instrumental music, but abounding in love scenes, battles, murders and all the usual incidents of the drama. Last of all was the grand pantomine, which, from the approbation it met with, is, I presume, considered as a first rate effort of invention and ingenuity. It seemed to me, as far as I could comprehend it, to represent the marriage of the ocean and the earth. The latter exhibited her various riches and productions, dragons and elephants, and tigers, and eagles, and ostriches; oaks and pines, and other trees of different kinds; the ocean was not behind-hand, but poured forth on the stage the wealth of his dominions, under the figures of whales and dolphins, porpoises and leviathans and other sea-monsters; besides ships, rocks, shells, sponges, and corals, all performed by concealed actors, who were quite perfect in their parts and performed their characters to admiration. These two marine and land regiments, after separately parading in a circular procession for a considerable time, at last joined together and, forming one body, came to the front of the stage, when, after a few evolutions, they opened to the right and left to give room for the whale, who seemed to be the commanding officer, to waddle forward, and who, taking his station exactly opposite to the emperor’s box, spouted out of his mouth into the pit several tons of water, which quickly disappeared through the perforations of the floor. This ejaculation was received with the highest applause, and two or three of the great men at my elbow desired me to take particular notice of it, repeating at the same time, *Hao*, *Hung-hao*, charming, delightful! As the entertainment lasted some hours, and there was an uninterrupted communication between the court boxes, where we were and the others, several of the principal Mandarines took the opportunity of entering into frequent conversation with us, and from what passed I have certainly derived much matter of observation and reflection. It did not escape me that most of these Mandarines were Tartars, scarcely any real Chinese coming near us, but among those that addressed us the most familiarly I particularly remarked two, who appeared to have a more confident and disengaged manner than the rest, and who asked us whether we could speak Persian or Arabic. It seems they were Musselmen and chiefs of those hordes of Calmucks who, not long since, on occasion of some discontent or misunderstanding with Russia, migrated in great numbers from the coasts of the Caspian to the frontiers of China, and put themselves under the emperor’s protection. He gave them a very favorable reception, and has decorated these two leaders, or mirzas, with transparent blue buttons, and peacock’s feathers to their caps, as an earnest of his accepting their submission and allegiance. A little before one o’clock P. M. we retired, and at four we returned to court to see the evening’s entertainments, which wore exhibited on the lawn, in front of the great tent or pavilion, where we had been first presented to the emperor. He arrived very soon after us, mounted his throne, and gave the signal to begin. There were wrestling, and dancing, and tumbling, and posture-making, which appeared to us particularly awkward and clumsy, from the performers’ being mostly dressed according to the Chinese *costume*, one inseparable part of which is a pair of heavy quilted boots, with the soles of an inch thick. The wrestlers, however, seemed to be pretty expert, and afforded much diversion to such as are admirers of the palæstra.

A boy climbed up a pole or bamboo thirty or forty feet high, played several gambols, and balanced himself on the top of it, in various attitudes, but. his performance fell far short of what I have often met with in India,

A fellow lay down on his back and then raised his feet, legs, and thighs from his middle perpendicularly so as to form a right angle with his body. On the soles of his feet was placed a large round empty jar, about four feet long, and from two and a half feet to three feet in diameter. This he balanced for some time, turning it round and round horizontally; till one of the spectators put a little boy into it, who, after throwing himself into various postures at the mouth of it, came out and sat on the top. He then stood up, then fell flat upon his back, then shifted to his belly, and after showing a hundred tricks of that sort, jumped down upon the ground and relieved his coadjutor.

A man then came forward. and, after fastening three slender sticks to each of his boots, took six porcelain dishes of about eighteen inches diameter, and balancing them separately at the end of a little ivory rod, which he held in his band, and twirling them about for some time, put them one after the other upon the points of the six boot-sticks above mentioned, they continuing to turn round all the while. He then took two small sticks in his left hand, and put dishes upon them in the same manner as upon the others; and also one more upon the little finger of his right hand, so that he had nine dishes annexed to him at once, all twirling together, which, in a few minutes, he took off one by one, and placed them regularly on the ground without the slightest interruption or miscarriage. There were many other things of the same kind; but I saw none at all comparable to the tumbling, rope-dancing, wire-walking, and straw-balancing of Sadler’s Wells; neither did I observe any feats of equitation in the stile of Hughes’s and Astley’s amphitheatres, although I had been always told, that the Tartars were remarkably skilful in the instruction and discipline of their horses. Last of all were the fireworks, which, in some particulars, exceeded any thing of the kind I had ever seen. In grandeur, magnificence, and variety, they were, I own, inferior to those of Batavia, but infinitely superior, in point of novelty, neatness, and ingenuity of contrivance. One piece of machinery I greatly admired; a green chest, of five feet square, was hoisted up by a pulley to the height of fifty or sixty feet from the ground; the bottom was so constructed as then suddenly to fall out, and make way for twenty or thirty strings of lanthorns inclosed in the box, to descend from it, unfolding themselves from one another by degrees, so as at last to form a collection of at least five hundred, each showing a light of a beautifully colored flame, burning brightly within it. This devolution and developement of lanthorns (which appeared to me to be composed of gauze and paper) were several times repeated, and every time exhibited a difference of color and figure. On each side was a correspondence of smaller boxes, which opened, in like manner, as the others, and let down an immense network of fire, with divisions and copartments of various forms and dimensions, round and square, hexagons, octagons, and lozenges, which shone like the brightest burnished copper, and flashed like prismatic lightning, with every impulse of the wind. The diversity of colors, indeed, which the Chinese have the secret of cloathing fire with, seems one of the chief merits of their pyrotechny. The whole concluded as at Batavia, with a volcano, or general explosion and discharge of suns and stars, squibs, bouncers, crackers, rockets, and grenadoes, which involved the gardens for above an hour after in a cloud of intolerable smoke. Whilst these entertainments were going forward, the emperor sent to us a variety of refreshments, all which, as coming from him, the etiquette of the court required us to partake of, although we had dined but a short time before.

However meanly we must think of the taste and delicacy of the court of China, whose most refined amusements seem to be chiefly such as I have now described, together with the wretched dramas of the morning, yet it must be confessed that there was something grand and imposing in the general effect that resulted from the whole *spectacle*; the emperor himself being seated in front upon his throne, and all his great men and officers attending in their robes of ceremony, and stationed on each side of him, some standing, some sitting, some kneeling, and the guards and standard-bearers behind them, in uncalculable numbers. A dead silence was rigidly observed, not a syllable articulated, or even a laugh exploded during the whole performance.

Before we left the court *Van-ta-gin* told me, that all the ceremonies and diversions of Gehol were now finished, and that as the emperor had fixed the time of his departure for *Yuen-min-yuen* to be on the 24th instant, it would be proper for us to set out some days before him; he therefore proposed to me the 21st, and hoped it would not be inconvenient—so we must get ready accordingly.