No. 24. Tragedian in splendid costume.

25 & 26. Two juvenile actors, to perform the part of female characters.

27. Chinese juggler.

Parasol used on state occasions.

Magnificent specimen of embroidered tapestry.

Numerous specimens of theatrical caps on the wall.

In the fifth case we have a specimen of Chinese theatricals. There are three figures of actors, an adult and two children, a Chinese Juggler, a gorgeous state parasol, a number of theatrical caps, and a sample of embroidered tapestry. The costume of the Chinese stage is sufficiently appropriate to the characters represented, and on most occasions extremely splendid. Gay silks and embroidery are lavished on the dresses of the actors, and as most of the serious plays are historical, and for obvious reasons do not touch on events that have occurred since the Tartar conquest, the costume, as in the case of the tragedian here represented shows the ancient dress of China, which in females, is nearly the same now as ever; but, as regards men, very different. The dresses and adornments of the actors here represented, are of rich materials and elegantly wrought with gold thread. The splendour of Chinese theatrical wardrobes was remarked by Ysbrandt Ides, the Russian ambassador, as long ago as 1692.

“First entered a very beautiful lady, magnificently dressed in cloth of gold adorned with jewels, and a crown on her head, singing her speech in a charming voice and agreeable motion of the body, playing with her hands, in one of which she held a fan. The prologue thus performed, the play followed; the story of which turned upon a Chinese Emperor, long since dead, who had behaved himself well towards his country, and in honor of whose memory the play was written. Sometimes he appeared in royal robes, with an ivory sceptre in his hand, and sometimes his officers showed themselves with ensigns, arms, drums,” &c.

As the Chinese make no regular distinction between tragedy and comedy in their stage pieces, the claims of these to either title must be determined by the subject and the dialogue. The line is in general pretty strongly marked; in the former by the historical or mythological character of the personages, the grandeur and gravity of the subject, the tragical drift of the play, and the strict award of what is called poetical justice; in the latter, by the more ordinary or domestic grade of the *dramatis personæ*, the display of ludicrous characters and incidents, and the interweaving of jests into the dialogue. Some of their stage pieces are doubtless of a vulgar and indecent description; but these in general constitute the amusement of a particular class of society, and are generally adapted to the taste of those who call for them at private entertainments.

The avowed object of the Chinese stage is the promotion of virtue among the people, although, as in their writings, they frequently do great injury to the cause of morality by the manner in which they represent vice.

The principal work of the Chinese drama is the *Yuen jin pih chung*, “The hundred plays of the Yuen dynasty,” in forty-two octavo volumes. Many of the pieces in this work are set to music.

The moral writers of China frequently warn their readers against the atrical performances, and prohibit females from even witnessing them. Their dramatic productions are generally published without the names of the authors, as this is not considered a very respectable department of literature in Chinese estimation.

The origin of the drama is ascribed to an emperor of the Tang dynasty in the eighth century. It was then designated “The tradition of wonders”—afterwards, “Plays and Songs;” and during a still later dynasty, “Original miscellaneous comedies of the Palace.”

Theatrical exhibitions are favourite amusements of the Chinese, and as among the ancient Greeks and Romans, they are chiefly, in China, connected with religion; the female characters being generally performed by boys, to the total exclusion of women on the Chinese stage. The estimation in which they are held may be inferred from a single fact.

The money expended upon them in one year at Macao, a place where there are but few wealthy Chinese, amounted to nearly seven thousand dollars.

On some particular days the mandarins themselves supply the necessary funds. In Canton, for example, the inhabitants of a certain quarter club together and make up a purse, with which a company is engaged. A temporary theatre is erected, and the whole neighbourhood at liberty to attend. When the *quid pro quo* has been rendered by the actors, they move off to another quarter, and the same thing is repeated. It is customary to employ actors at private entertainments, which are never considered complete without a theatrical exhibition. Upon such occasions a list of plays is handed to the most distinguished guest, who selects whichever most accords with his fancy. The principal inns and all large private establishments have a room expressly for this purpose.

It is remarkable that there are no regular theatres, but temporary buildings constructed with surprising facility of bamboo poles and mats, are erected in front of their temples, or in open spaces in their towns, the spectacle being continued for several days at a time. The actors are literally vagabonds, strolling about from city to city, and from province to province, whose merit and rank in their profession, and consequently their pay, vary according to circumstances.

The best performers are those who come from Nankin, and who sometimes receive considerable sums for performing at the private entertainments given by rich persons to their friends.

They have no scenical deception (observes the editor of the “*Heir in old age*”) to assist the story, as in the modern theatres of Europe; and the odd expedients to which they are sometimes driven by the want of scenery, are not many degrees above Nick Bottoms’ ‘bush of thorns and a lantern, to disfigure or to present to the person of Moonshine,’ or the man ‘with some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him to signify wall.’”

Thus, a general is ordered upon an expedition to a distant province; he brandishes a whip, or takes in his hand the reins of a bridle, and striding three or four times round the stage in the midst of a tremendous crash of gongs, drums, and trumpets, he stops short, and tells the audience where he has arrived, A tolerable judgment may be formed of what little assistance the imaginations of an English audience formerly derived from scenical deception, by the state of the drama and the stage as described by Sir Philip Sidney, about the year 1583. “Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we have news of shipwreck in the same place; then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke; and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave; while in the mean time two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not take it for a pitched field?”

Visitors will perceive in the figure of the Juggler, one of a large class of persons, who obtain a precarious livelihood by an exhibition of feats of dexterity and legerdemain. Jugglers are numerous in the streets of Canton, and are as varied in caste as the different feats they perform. The person here represented ranks high in his profession. On his head is placed a porcelain jar, having a narrow mouth. This jar is so nicely poised in an angular position, that the slightest movement of the Juggler’s head, or even the relaxation of a muscle, would cause a fall of the fragile burthen. In the right hand of the *artiste* are several pieces of bamboo, each about two feet in length. The main object to be achieved by the juggler, is, while he is standing perfectly still, to throw these pieces of bamboo to a great height with his left hand, in such a direction that they all fall into the jar. This manoeuvre requires immense practice and steadiness, both of the eye and hand.

The amusements of a people have ever been regarded as indications, to a certain extent, of national character, denoting their boldness, simplicity, or frivolity. Thus, the bull-fights of Spain, the boxing matches and prize fights of England, and the juggling and sports of China, are all in harmony with the chief, but widely different traits of those nations where they are adopted as recreations. With this view, we proceed to mention a few other exploits of the most adroit Chinese exhibiters to the wondering crowd. A man produces from a basket the stuffed skin of a rat; this he exhibits to the multitude, and convinces them that it is exactly what he represents it to be. By placing the throat of the supposed animal between his finger and thumb, and pinching it, the jaws of the rat are forced open, and so exactly will the juggler imitate the squeak of a choking rat, that an observer, particularly if he be a foreigner, will at once suspect that he had been deceived as to the want of vitality in the apparently tortured animal before him. With a singularity and quickness of motion altogether admirable, the exhibiter tosses it about his person, giving it the exact semblance of a rat endeavouring to escape from the fangs of the destroyer; and at the same time uttering such piercing and natural cries of distress, that the beholder is at last only convinced of the man’s skill in ventriloquism, by an examination of the inanimate skin.

The following scene occurred in the drawing room of a foreign resident in Canton. Two jugglers were introduced before the company assembled; after going through a number of surprising feats of skill and agility, one of these men handed to the other a large china basin. This basin, after a few flourishes above his head, and being turned upside down to convince the spectators that it was empty, the exhibiter suddenly allowed it to fall, but caught it before it reached the floor. This movement brought him into a position resting upon his heels, the basin being now hidden from view by the folds of his garments. In that attitude he remained for a few seconds, with hands extended, but in no way touching the basin. With a sudden spring he stood upright, and displayed to the astonished spectators the basin filled to the brim with pure clear water, and two gold fishes swimming in their native element.

Another feat worthy of record, is one of a more exciting and thrilling nature. To be impressed on the mind with full effect, it should be seen under circumstances similar to those which attended the exhibition of it to the relater. Passing a motley crowd of persons in a public square near the foreign factories, the writer had his attention directed to a man apparently haranguing the bye-standers. Prompted by curiosity, he soon found the performer to be a mean-looking person, who divested himself of his outer clothing as far as the waist. He spread a small mat upon the pavement, and taking a box from the crowd, who was afterwards discovered to be his confederate; he placed him in the centre of the rush mat. He then took from his basket a large butcher’s knife, which he flourished over the head of the frightened boy, and with dreadful threats sprang upon his victim. The boy was thrown down, and the man knelt on him in such a manner as to secure his hands. While in this position, he forced back the head of the poor child, and with the knife inflicted a severe gash upon his throat, from which the blood instantly gushed in a torrent, flowing down the breast of the murderer, and sprinkling the nearest spectators. The death-throes of the poor sufferer were painful to behold; frightful and convulsive in their commencement, but diminishing with the loss of blood. The eyeballs start—the muscles are seen to work—there are twitches of the fingers—desperate efforts to free the confined arms—a change of colour in the face to an ashy paleness—a fixed and glassy stare of the eyes—then, a long, last spasmodic heaving and contortion, and all is over; the body apparently falls a corpse!

On witnessing such a strange and revolting scene, the first impulse of the stranger, despite the surrounding crowd, was to seize the murderous culprit, but from this he was prevented by the deafening shouts of the applauding multitude, testifying their approbation of the dexterity of the performer, by a shower of “*cash*.” It is almost superfluous to add, that the deception consisted in the construction of the blade and handle of the knife; so contrived, that by making a sawing motion on the throat of the boy, to produce a stream of coloured liquid resembling blood, pumped out of the knife and handle. These and many other rare sights of the kind are daily practised for the amusement of the idle crowd in the streets of Canton.