Chapter XI

Dramatic Entertainments of the Chinese.

The Chinese, as is elsewhere intimated, have very poor conceptions of architectural design, and are therefore unable to rear a building winch would answer the purposes, or deserve the name, of a public theatre. Their edifices for the enacting of plays are of a temporary kind, pitched like a tent in a field, and struck as soon as the engagement between the actors and their patrons has terminated. They differ widely in their dimensions, though constructed nearly upon the same plan, and consist generally of four separate buildings, planted upon the four sides of a large quadrangle. One side is occupied by the stage, which consists merely of a robing-room and platform for the actors: the opposite side is distinguished by a large gallery set apart for the ladies, who are thus indulged with a position corresponding to our front boxes. Here we have a practical proof of Chinese gallantry where strangers would scarcely expect to find it; for the front is regarded as the most advantageous place for seeing. In the opera-house at Rio Janeiro a large box or room at the top of the semicircle, is devoted to the emperor, who in this way faces the stage as he reclines in his chair; an honour of the same sort is awarded to the dames of the Celestial Land. The two side-galleries are intended for gentlemen who pay for their places: the area or pit is filled with persons of all ranks, who are admitted without payment of any fee.

When one of these theatres happens to be very large, and the actors of the first rate in reputation, the neighbourhood is in a blithesome ferment, and reminds an Englishman of the wakes and fairs of his fatherland. To preserve order, regular and special police-officers are stationed in different parts, each with a bundle of rattans in his hand. As all are merry and gay, there is little fear of any disturbance from an outbreak of passion: but all are eager to press forward towards the place of interest, and thus, without meaning any harm or offence, they crowd the paths and obstruct the passage that ought to be left for the supporters of the entertainment. Whom a lady approaches in her sedan, the interposition of an officer is unnecessary, for the chair-bearers evert their stentorian voices so effectually as to clear the path as they proceed; but if one is seen plying her small feet, and reeling to and fro, in anxious haste to be in time, an officer runs to meet her, and by the application of his rod opens a channel through the crowd.

Wishful to see everything that throws light upon the character of the Chinese, I started after breakfast one morning with a native servant, and reached the scene of amusement an hour and a-half before the acting commenced. The appearance of the *fan kwei* was unexpected; and some remarked upon it, but none offered hindrance or molestation. My attendant paid the fee, (half-a-dollar,) and I was forth-with invited to ascend by a narrow skittish kind of ladder to the gallery. The person who had the oversight of this department obligingly fetched me a seat, as the front divisions or boxes are unprovided with such things, and placed it in the best situation he could, find for viewing the spectacle; while my attendant seated himself immediately behind me, to shew that he was not ashamed of a foreign master. My position so near the front of the box, or stall if you please, attracted the notice of the mixed multitude in the pit, and tempted some of them to climb up, that they might ask what I thought of the scene before me. One of the persons whose duty it was to keep order had the imprudence to share in their curiosity, and began to put a variety of queries, till the manager came up and checked our proceedings. My seat was moved to the back of the inclosure,—the inquisitive spectators were dislodged,—and the poor fellow who had just been so busy with his questions got such a reproof that his face became like scarlet, and the blood gushed into his eyes and set them fast in their sockets. A Chinaman will put up with a blow from the rattan or the bamboo, but a rebuke cuts him to the heart. This is one of the most hopeful traits in the native character, and seems to mark out the Chinese as the very people to profit by instruction and remonstrance. My complaisance in allowing my seat to be set where the manager pleased, and the obvious contentment of my looks, bespoke me general attention, which each new comer seemed to fall in with as soon as he arrived. I had thus an opportunity of feeling that popularity is a very charming thing, though it must be confessed I had paid a very low price for it.

The spectators in the pit talked in their usual strain when their hearts are excited,—that is, as loud as they were able; and as the many were speakers, and the few hearers, the hubbub made the ears tingle. The scene was occasionally varied by a contest between some young fellow and a police-officer. The former was anxious to secure a better view of the actors, by climbing up the lofty pillars on which our roof rested, the latter determined to disappoint the expected pleasure. The fellow was seen clambering, with stealthy haste, half-way up the pillar, perhaps, before his proceedings were detected; but just as he began to felicitate himself upon his good fortune, a long bamboo pole was applied, to his back and legs, which compelled him to descend faster than he went up. Some who were more hardy compounded for the beating, and made their way up to the beams, whereon they took their seats and remained till the play was over. Every now and then another was descried endeavouring to seat himself upon the edge of the stage, but, alas for his happiness, the bamboo was always in abeyance, ever ready to fall upon the head of the culprit. The little wrath and ill-feeling which accompanied these disappointments and rebuffs could not fail to draw forth the admiration of the stranger. A fierce look and a sudden ejaculation were all that occurred to ruffle the tranquillity, and these were instantly swallowed up by the universal glee which pervaded the assembly. The boxes were filled by gentlemen in plain white or gray-coloured gowns, who came attended by a servant with a canteen, or a bundle of refreshments, the long tobacco-pipe, and its elegant pouch. Bows and other marks of recognition passed very freely among them; and I observed that each made his neighbour as welcome as himself to anything he had brought for his own gratification. The appearance of so many “celestial” ladies gave new interest to the spectacle, and afforded ample room for comment upon the manners and habits of the people. Their attire was of the favourite colour, blue, variegated by borders of black and white trimmings. The vest is fastened closely round the neck, but leaves the arms partially bare: these were adorned with rings and bracelets. But the head was the chief object of embellishment, and displayed as much taste as the lady and her faithful attendants could muster.

After every corner of the theatre was filled, and every one had fairly expended his stock of social remarks, the car-piercing sounds of the Chinese clarinet, and the loud and mingled roll of the gongs and drums, opened the prelude. Every eye was immediately directed towards the stage in eager expectation. At this instant the rush at the two entrances to the pit was so violent, that those who stood near the stage were, in spite of all their efforts to withstand the impulse by grasping the edge of the platform and its supports, carried several feet beneath it. As this made their seeing anything that was exhibited out of the question, they stoutly rallied, turned round, and, by a simultaneous effort, regained their places. This process was renewed at intervals during the whole performance, so that the crowd resembled the sea heaving and falling by turns. In the contest no man lost his temper, though, perhaps at the moment when he was deeply interested by some turn in the story, he suddenly found himself under the covert of the stage, where he could see nothing hut posts and stakes.—The first personage who presents himself upon the stage is a civilian, in the robes of office, carrying a sceptre, or rather a flat staff, as the representative of the writing-tablets which courtiers used to bear to the levee or council before paper was invented. He paces about the stage with a step that is ludicrously measured and formal, and smiles with all the well-acted complacency of a courtier. Every now and then he flourishes his sceptre, or gazes upon it with delight, as if the bliss of self-approbation were complete in the thought, that he is about to confer with and counsel the “son of heaven.” This pantomime he varies by taking up a long scroll which makes some allusion to the emperor, and pointing to it again and again as the object of his highest admiration. This is intended as a compliment to the emperor, and gives the traveller an excellent idea of what a courtier is expected to be in China. When this personage has finished his part, he retires, and is followed by the *pa seen*, or eight genii, in robes of the most gorgeous kind. These advance to the front of the stage in pairs, lift up their hands hid in their flowing sleeves, how, kneel, recline, touch the floor with their foreheads, and then go through the same evolutions in a retrograde order, with a grace and decorum surpassing all description. When the ceremony is finished, they look at each other and retire to make room for their successors. The two females are the last of the four pairs, and modify their obesiance by the introduction of a courtesy. These beautiful acts of respect are meant as an acknowledgment to the patrons of the theatre, who are in this instance their very “approved good masters.” The next scene furnishes us with a view of the imperial court,—his majesty sitting behind a small table, with his high officers on his right and left. He is chiefly distinguished by the predominance of yellow in his robes, and by a countenance which is a singular combination of beneficence and melancholy: a benevolent regard for the public weal and the multitudinous cares of government have cast this shade of thoughtfulness, over his visage. I have seen several emperors thus represented, and they all seemed to be members of the same family,—such was the similarity of their features and general bearing. The whole of the minutiæ of their looks, as well as their conduct, were the result of design, and shew what sort of person the Chinese think the supreme ruler ought to be in his temper and behaviour. His counsellors are often boisterous, hot in argument, and positive in affirming; and he checks them by reaching out his hand, with a countenance of entreaty, and not of threatening. He receives despatches, and answers them with his own hand, with the ease and rapidity of a man accustomed to business. War is soon decided upon—to repel some invader, or to recover some lost territory: and this makes room, for a display of warriors who are burning with desire to signalize themselves in the bloody combat. A group of these heroes, drawn from materials in the possession of the author, and executed under his superintendence, is faithfully represented in the London Saturday Journal, No. 80.

The field of battle is next before us, and gives the actors an opportunity of displaying a variety of feats, so that the action is a curious mixture of fun and fighting. After we are well sated with stirs and broils, the ebbs and flows of triumph and defeat, we are at length indulged with a little acting which we can understand and feel. The common scenes of life are introduced for our entertainment, and, I may add, for our instruction; for life, with all its realities, is imitated—nothing is added to make the picture a caricature, nor anything omitted which might contribute to make the resemblance more perfect. The features of the actor, his carriage, and his voice, harmonize admirably with the part he has to perform; while, from early habit, he enters into the spirit of his part with such an instinctive relish that every movement is full of meaning. In the intercourse of the middle and upper ranks among the Chinese there is something that strikes the stranger as studied and formal, but on the stage the bearing and the attitudes are English, with some few exceptions, which, though a little singular, are not difficult to understand. When, for example, a man is unable to overcome or persuade another by argument, he throws out his hand repeatedly towards him, by way of expressing his disgust or contempt, especially if the latter turns his back. Another action consists in pulling up the sleeves, as if the person were on the point of engaging in some handicraft, though the whole business before him must be conducted by words only. A man of distinction perchance entertains the idea of marrying a princess, and proceeds to court in the company of some skilful friend, who is to open the negotiation for him. The friend, however, does not at once make the overtures, but fetches many a circuitous form of speech to be sure of his ground as he advances. The great man, full of impatience, pulls up his sleeves, prances backward and forward, and lets you see, by most significant actions, that if the matter were in his own hands, he would cut it short. When he can no longer contain himself, he advances from his concealment, and is about to make his declaration, hut is most unfeelingly thrust back by bis wily acquaintance, to undergo afresh the process of self-torture. The interview of the princess and the courtier lasts some time; but the impetuous man evinces his displeasure at the delay with such an ever-changing succession of gestures and pantomime, that the eye is not weary, while the mind is ready to fancy that his passion must be real. It is not easy to see the connexion of all the scenes with their predecessors, though there are sometimes evident traces of a plot, and an attempt to shew how often inconsiderable circumstances lead to results of great importance. A small tablet is suspended upon the pillars in front of the stage, and in enigmatical language prepares you for the scene that is to follow next, but helps you not at all in seeing the concatenation which the several incidents have with each other. Many of these, however, are complete in themselves, and are perhaps introduced with the same view that an episode is in an epic poem, namely, to relieve the attention of the spectator. In one of these incidents a character appears very much like the hero of “Where shall I dine?” He is famished with hunger, and is in quest of some happy conjuncture to assuage his longings for food. In his way, he encounters some workmen, and offers to assist them at their toil, with the hope of sharing in their meal; but they, unlike the Chinese in general, devour their viands without bidding him welcome to a single morsel. Undismayed by disappointment, he addresses himself to a couple of priests, who have just replenished their vessels at the cost of some liberal benefactor. To win their friendship, he proposes to join them in some very interesting undertaking: they receive the proposal with the highest apparent satisfaction, but, in the most ungracious way, empty their basins without leaving a grain of rice behind. The anxiety of the hungry man, and the address and patience he exerts to obtain the smallest pittance chance might throw in his way, were exhibited with so many touches of real life and feeling, that it was hard to believe one was looking at a native of a country so famed for its eccentricities.

There was very little in the shape of scenery,—the Chinese stage being very nearly in the state of the Athenian when Thespis left it,—but the dresses were superbly elegant, and the acting throughout was so perfect in its kind, that the eye could not detect a single fault. The performance lasted about six hours, without any relief; but such was the interest which the players and the spectators felt in it, that neither seemed to be tired of the sport. A continuance in one position and on a hard seat for so many hours in a hot climate, made me glad when the attendant took down the tablet for the last time.

I was invited by a tradesman to be present at another performance, which promised to be singularly attractive from the splendour of the *e fuk*, or dress. As the theatre was some distance from the English factories, we seated ourselves in an elegant boat, and glided softly by the river’s bank to the scene of amusement. My companion settled with the officers, and I climbed the ladder, but the gallery was too full to gain a good position. I sat down on the first seat I could find, with my cap on; but thinking after awhile I would take it off, by way of compliment to the company, I attempted to remove it unperceived if possible. This, however, did not escape notice, but was applauded by a murmur that ran in all directions around me,—so alive are these people to the least act of respect that is paid them by the foreigner. I found that report had not exaggerated in reference to the robes, which, in beauty, surpassed all praise or description. The first scene was intended to represent the happiness and splendour of beings who inhabit the upper regions, with the sun and moon, and the elements, curiously personified, playing around them. The man who personated the sun held a round image of the sun’s disk, while the female who acted the part of the moon had a crescent in her hand. The actors took care to move so as to mimic the conjunction and opposition of these heavenly bodies as they revolve round in their apparent orbs. The Thunderer wielded an axe, and leaped and dashed about in a variety of extraordinary somersets. After a few turns, the monarch who had been so highly honoured as to find a place, through the partiality of a mountain nymph, in the abodes of the happy, begins to feel that no height of good fortune can secure a mortal against the common calamities of this frail life. A wicked courtier disguises himself in a tiger’s skin, and in this garb imitates the animal itself. He rushes into the retired apartments of the ladies, frightens them out of their wits, and throws the “heir apparent” into the moat. The sisters hurry into the royal presence, and, casting themselves upon the ground, divulge the sad intelligence that a tiger has borne off the young prince, who it appears was the son of the mountain nymph aforesaid. This loss the bereaved monarch takes so much to heart, that he renounces the world, and deliberates about the nomination of a successor. By the influence of a crafty woman, he selects a young man who has just sense enough to know that he is a fool. The settlement of the crown is scarcely finished when the unhappy king dies, and the blockhead is presently invested with the “golden round.” But the lout, instead of exulting in his new preferment, bemoans his lot in the most awkward strains of lamentation. He feels his incompetency, and cries “O dear, what shall I do?” with “such piteous action,” and yet withal so truly ludicrous, that the spectator is at a loss to know whether he is to laugh or to weep. The courtier who had taken off the heir, and broken the father’s heart, finds the new king an easy tool for prosecuting his traitorous purposes, and the state is plunged into the depths of civil discord at home and dangerous wars abroad.

In the sequel a scene occurred, which is still fresh in my remembrance. The reconciliation of this court and some foreign prince depends upon the surrender of a certain obnoxious person. The son-in-law of the victim is charged with the letter containing this proposal, and returns to his house, and disguises himself for the sake of concealment. When he reaches the court of the foreign prince, he discovers that he has dropped the letter in changing his clothes, and narrowly escapes being taken for a spy, without his credentials. He hurries back, calls for his clothes, and shakes them one by one in an agony of self-reproach, hut no letter appears. He sits down, throwing himself with great violence upon the chair, with a countenance inexpressibly full of torture and despair: reality could have added nothing to the imitation.

But while every eye was riveted upon him, he called the servant maid, and inquired if she knew anything about the letter; she replied, that she overheard her mistress reading a letter, whose contents were such and such. The mistress had taken her seat at a distance from him, and was nursing her baby; and the instant he ascertained the letter was in her possession, he looked towards her with such a smile upon his cheek, and such a flood of light in his eye, that the whole assembly heaved a loud sigh of admiration; for the Chinese do not applaud by clapping, but express their feelings by an ejaculation that is between a sigh and a groan. The aim of the husband was to wheedle his wife out of the letter, and this smile and look of affection were the prelude merely; for he takes his chair, places it beside her, lays one hand softly upon her shoulder, and fondles the child with the other, in a style so exquisitely natural, and so completely English, that in this dramatic picture it was seen that Nature fashioneth men’s hearts alike. His addresses were, however, ineffectual; for though a Chinese woman may be won to yield up her heart, she is too resolute to betray a parent or sacrifice her honour.

The morals of the Chinese stage are very good. Virtue suffers, and is not always successful; but vice, though it prosper for a time, meets with its punishment in the end. As a public amusement, it was the most unexceptionable that I ever witnessed, either in this country or elsewhere. This remark, however, applies to the bettersort, where the company, or rather the patrons, are respectable; what may be the character of some lesser entertainments, especially when they take place at night, I cannot pretend to say from observation, but conjecture that they are polluted by the vices of the country. To a traveller these spectacles are of the highest value, since they allow him to see into the very *penetralia* of domestic life,—the inner appartments being often exhibited with all the doings and amusements of sequestration and retirement. The Chinese, to render the picture exact and striking, are minutely circumstantial in all their scenes; and it is astonishing to see the variety of minor incidents that are crowded within the compass of a short passage. The rehearsal is of a perfunctory kind: the manager takes his place behind a curtain upon the stage, and, holding a book in his hand, calls each of the actors in their turn, and briefly reminds them of their part by pointing to some sentence to lie pronounced with significance, or some particular feature in the acting. We may sum up the character of the Chinese theatre by saying, that the scenery is wretched, the morals generally good, and the acting equal to, if not surpassing, anything to be met with in the Western world: their excellence consists in a wonderful regard to truth in all its finest shades of variation and detail.