

The Story of a Common China Plate.
(From an old Magazine.)

The name which common consent has given to the best kinds of pottery and porcelain indicates its origin; and the name *China* is applied with equal intelligibility to the ornaments on the mantel-piece, the crockery in the closet, or to that vast empire which stretches from the north to the south of the east coast of Asia. To this country it is probable that we are indebted for many articles in daily use; and it is certain that the Chinese were acquainted with the use of spectacles and magnifying glasses, gunpowder, and cast-iron, long before the light of civilization—which arose like the sun in the east, and now fulminates in the west—had reached our shores.

Our present manufacturers have far outstripped, in beauty of material, the pottery of the old Chinese specimens, but fashion still gives a preference to Chinese patterns and forms. A remarkable instance of this preference is to be found in the fact, that the sale of the common blue plate, known as the "willow-pattern," exceeds that of all the others put together. The name is derived from the figure of the tree which occupies the centre of the plate, and which is intended to represent a willow in the spring, which unfolds its blossoms before its leaves appear.

Who is there, since the earliest dawn of the intelligent perception, who has not inquisitively contemplated the mysterious figures on the willow-pattern plate? Who, in childish curiosity, has not wondered what those three persons in dim blue outline did upon that bridge; whence they came, and whither they were flying? What does the boatman without oars on that white stream? Who people the houses in that island?—or why do those disproportionate doves forever kiss each other, as if intensely joyful over some good deed done? Who is there through whose mind such thoughts as these have not passed, as he found his eye resting upon the willow-pattern plates where they lay upon the dinner-table, or brightly glittered on the cottage plate rail?

The old willow-pattern plate! By every association, in spite of its want of artistic beauty, it is dear to us. It is mingled with our earliest recollections; it is like the picture of an old friend and companion whose portrait we see everywhere, but of whose likeness we never grow weary. Unchanged are its charms, whether we view it as a flat oval dish—rounded into a cheese-plate—hollowed out into a soup-tureen, or contorted into the shape of a ladle! Still, in every change of form, are the three blue people rushing over the bridge; still the boatman sits listless on the stream, and the doves are constantly kissing and fluttering in great glorification at the result.

What it is all about we will presently inform the reader, if he will provide himself with an orthodox plate, and go with us through the following story, which is said to be to the Chinese what our "Jack the Giant-Killer," or "Robinson Crusoe," is to us. It is the story of the Willow-Pattern Plate.

On the right-hand side is seen a Chinese house, of unusual extent and magnificence. The wealth and resources of the owner are indicated by its being of two stories in height—a most rare thing in China—by the existence of out buildings at the back, (to the right,) and by the large and rare trees which are growing upon all sides of the main building. This house belongs to a mandarin of great power and influence, who has amassed considerable wealth in serving the emperor in a department corresponding to our excise. The work, as is the case in other places besides China, was performed by an active secretary, named Chang, while the business of the master consisted in receiving bribes from the merchants, at whose smuggling and illegal traffic he winked in exact proportion as he was paid for it. The wife of the mandarin having, however, died suddenly, he requested the emperor to allow him to retire from his arduous duties, and was particularly urgent in his suit, because the merchants had begun to talk loudly of the unfairness and dishonesty of the Chinese manager of the customs.

The death of his wife was a fortunate excuse for the old mandarin, and in accordance with his petition, an order signed by the vermilion pencil of his imperial majesty the emperor, was issued to a merchant who had paid a handsome douceur to his predecessor.

To the house represented on the plate did the mandarin retire, taking with him his only daughter, Koong-see, and his secretary Chang, whose services he had retained for a few months in order to put his accounts in such array as to bear a scrutiny, if, from any unforeseen circumstances, he should be called to produce them. When the faithful Chang had completed his duty he was discharged. Too late, however!—The youth had seen and loved the mandarin's daughter. At sunset, Koong-see was observed to linger with her maid on the steps which led to the banquet-room, and as the twilight came on, she stole away down the path to a distant part of the grounds; and there the fond lovers, on the last evening of Chang's engagement, vowed mutual promise of love and constancy. And on

many an evening afterwards, when Chang was supposed to be miles away, lovers' voices in that place might be heard amongst the orange trees; and as darkness came on, the huge peonies which grew upon the fantastic wall had their gorgeous petals shaken off as Chang scrambled through their crimson blossoms. By the assistance of the lady's handmaid, these interviews were obtained without the knowledge of the old mandarin; for the lovers well knew the hard fashion of the country, and that, their stations in life being unequal, the father would never consent to the union. Chang's merit, however, was known, and the affectionate wishes of the young people pictured a time when such an obstacle would be removed by his success. They believed as they hoped, and the year of their fancy had only two seasons—spring time and summer.

By some means, at last, the knowledge of one of their interviews came to the old man, who, from that time, forbade his daughter to go beyond the walls of the house; the youth was commanded to discontinue his visits, upon pain of death; and to prevent his chivalrous courage any chance of gratification, he ordered a high wall of wood to be built across the pathway from the extremity of the wall to the water's edge. (See plate) The lady's handmaid, too, was dismissed, and her place supplied by an old domestic, whose heart was as withered as her shrivelled face.

To provide for his daughter's imprisonment, and to enable her to take exercise in the fresh air, he also built a suite of apartments adjoining his banquet-room, and jutting out over the water's edge, upon terraces, upon which the young lady might walk in security. These apartments having no exit but through the banquet hall, in which the mandarin spent the greatest part of his time, and being completely surrounded by water, the father rested content that he should have no further trouble from clandestine meetings. As also the windows of his sitting-room looked out upon the waters, any attempt at communication by means of a boat would be at once seen and frustrated by him. To complete the disappointment of the lovers, he went still further—he betrothed his daughter to a wealthy friend, a Ta-jin, or duke of high degree, whom she had never seen. The Ta-jin was her equal in wealth and in every respect but age, which greatly preponderated on the gentleman's side. The nuptials were, as usual, determined upon without any consultation of the lady; and the wedding was to take place "at the fortunate age of the moon, when the peach-tree should blossom in the spring." The willow tree was in blossom then; the peach-tree had scarcely formed its buds. Poor Koong-see shuddered at what she called her doom, and feared and trembled as she watched the buds of the peach-tree, whose branches grew close to the walls of her prison. (See plate) But her heart cheered by a happy omen; a bird came and built its nest in the corner above her window.

One day, when she had sat on the narrow terrace for several hours, watching the little architect carrying straw and feathers to its future home, the shades of evening came upon her, and her thoughts reverting to interviews that were associated with that hour, she did not retire as usual, but disconsolately gazed upon the waters. Her abstraction was disturbed by a half cocoa-nut shell, which was fitted up with a miniature sail, and which floated gently close to her feet. By the aid of her parasol she raised it from the water. Her delighted surprise at its contents caused her to exclaim aloud in such a manner as to bring the old servant to her side, and nearly to lead to a discovery; but Koong-see was ready with a plausible excuse, and dismissed the woman. As soon as she had gone, she anxiously examined the little boat. In it she found a bead she had given to her lover—a sufficient evidence from whose hands the little boat had come; Chang had launched it on the other side of the water. There was also a piece of bamboo paper, and in light characters were written some Chinese verses.

The nest yon winged artist builds
Some robber bird shall tear away;
So yields her hopes the affianced bride,
The wealthy lord's reluctant prey.

"He must have been near me," she murmured, "for he must have seen my bird's nest by the peach-tree." She read on:—

The fluttering bird prepares a home,
In which the spoiler soon shall dwell.
Forth goes the weeping bride, constrained:
A hundred cars the triumph swell.

Mourn for the tiny architect—
A stronger bird hath ta'en its nest;
Mourn for the hapless stolen bride—
How vain the hope to soothe her breast!

Koong-see burst into tears, but hearing her father approaching, she hid the little boat in the folds of her loose robe. When he was gone she read the verses again; and again wept over them. Upon further examination she found upon the back these words, in the peculiar metaphorical style of Oriental poetry:—"As the boat sails to you, so all my thoughts tend to the same centre; but when the willow blossoms drop from the bough, and the peach-tree unfolds its buds, your faithful Chang will sink with the lotus-blossoms beneath the deep water. There will he see the circles of the smooth river when the willow blossoms fall upon it from the bough—broken away like his love from

its parent stem." As a sort of a postscript was added, "Cast your thoughts upon the waters, as I have done, and I shall hear your words."

Koong-see well understood such metaphorical language, and trembled as she thought of Chang's threat of self-destruction. Having no other writing materials, she sought her ivory tablets, and with the needle she had been using in embroidery, she scratched her answer in the same strain in which her lover had addressed her. This was her reply:—"Do not wise husbandmen gather the fruits they fear will be stolen? The sunshine lengthens, and the vineyard is threatened to be spoiled by the hands of strangers. The fruit you most prize will be gathered, when the willow blossom droops upon the bough." Much doubting, she placed her tablets in the little boat, and after the manner of her country-women, she placed therein a stick of frankincense. When it became dark she lighted the frankincense and launched the little boat upon the stream. The current gradually drew it away, and it floated safely till she could trace it no longer in the distance. That no accident should have overturned the boat or extinguished the light, she had been taught to believe was a promise of good fortune and success; so with a lighter heart she closed her casements and retired to rest.

Days and weeks passed on, but no more little boats appeared; all intercourse seems to have been cut off, and Koong-see began to doubt the truth of the infallible omen. The blossom upon the willow tree—for she watched it many an hour—seemed about to wither, when a circumstance occurred which gave her additional grounds for distrust.

The old mandarin entered his daughter's apartment one morning in high good humor. In his hands he bore a large boxful of rare jewels, which he said were a present from the Ta-jin, or duke, to whom he had betrothed her. He congratulated her upon her good fortune, and left her saying, "that the wealthy man was coming that day to perform some of the preliminaries of the wedding, by taking food and wine in her father's house." Koong-see's hopes all vanished, and she found her only relief in tears. Like the netted bird, she saw the snare drawing closer and closer, but possessed no power to escape the toils.

The duke came, his servants beating gongs before him, and shouting out his achievements in war. The number of his titles was great, and the lanterns on which they were inscribed were magnificent. Owing to his rank, he was borne in a sedan, to which were attached eight bearers, showing his rank to be that of a viceroy. The old mandarin gave him a suitable reception and dismissed his followers. The gentlemen then sat down to the introduction feast, according to custom, and many were the "cups of salvation" which were drank between them, till at last they became boisterous in their merriment. The noise of revelry and the shoutings of the military duke seemed to have attracted a stranger to the house, who sought aims at the banquet-room. His tale being unnoticed, he took from the porch an outer garment which had been left there by one of the servants, and thus disguised, he spread the screen across the lower part of the banquet-hall; passing forward, he came to Koong-see's apartment, and in another moment the lovers were locked in each other's arms. It was Chang who had crossed the banquet-room. He besought her to fly with him, "for," said he, "the willow blossom already droops upon the bough." She gave him into his hands the box of jewels which the duke had that day presented to her, and finding that the elders were growing sleepy over their cups and that the servants were taking the opportunity to get intoxicated elsewhere, Koong-see, and Chang stole behind the screen—passed the door—descended the steps, and gained the foot of the bridge, beside the willow-trees. Not till then did the old mandarin become sensible of what was going on—but he caught a glimpse of his daughter in the garden, and raising the hue-and-cry staggered out after them himself.

To represent this part of the story, are the three figures on the bridge. (See plate) The first is the lady Koong-see carrying a distaff, the emblem of virginity; the second is Chang, the lover bearing off the box of jewels; and the third is the old mandarin, the lady's father, whose paternal authority and rage are supposed to be indicated by the whip which he bears in his hand. As the Chinese artist knows little or nothing of perspective, he could not place the old gentleman—to be seen—in any other situation than in the unnatural proximity in which we find him. The sketch, simply indicates the flight and the pursuit, and is graphic enough for the purpose.

CHAPTER II.

The old mandarin, tipsy as he was, had some difficulty in keeping up the pursuit, and Chang and Koong-see eluded him without much effort. The Ta-jin fell into an impotent rage on hearing what had occurred, and so great was his fury, that he frothed at the mouth, and well-nigh was smothered in his drunken passion. Those few of his servants, indeed, who were sober enough to have successfully pursued the fugitives, were detained to attend upon the duke, who was supposed to be in a fit, until the lovers had made good their escape.

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