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PROFILES FROM CHINA

Sketches in Free Verse of People and Things Seen in the Interior

by

EUNICE TIETJENS

1917

To My Mother

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Proem

Profiles from China

The Hand

As you sit so, in the firelight, your hand is the color of
new bronze.
I cannot take my eyes from your hand;
In it, as in a microcosm, the vast and shadowy Orient
is made visible.
Who shall read me your hand?

You are a large man, yet it is small and narrow, like the
hand of a woman and the paw of a chimpanzee.
It is supple and boneless as the hands wrought in pigment
by a fashionable portrait painter. The tapering
fingers bend backward.
Between them burns a scented cigarette. You poise it
with infinite daintiness, like a woman under the
eyes of her lover. The long line of your curved
nail is fastidiousness made flesh.

Very skilful is your hand.
With a tiny brush it can feather lines of ineffable suggestion,
glints of hidden beauty. With a little
tool it can carve strange dreams in ivory and
milky jade.

And cruel is your hand.
With the same cold daintiness and skill it can devise
exquisite tortures, eternities of incredible pain,
that Torquemada never glimpsed.

And voluptuous is your hand, nice in its sense of touch.
Delicately it can caress a quivering skin, softly it can
glide over golden thighs.... Bilitis had not
such long nails.

Who can read me your hand? In the firelight the smoke curls up fantastically from the cigarette
between your fingers which are the color of new bronze. The room is full of strange shadows. I am
afraid of your hand....

From the Interior

Cormorants

The boats of your masters are black;
They are filthy with the slimy filth of ages; like the
canals on which they float they give forth an evil
smell.
On soiled perches you sit, swung out on either side over
the scummy water—you who should be savage
and untamed, who should ride on the clean breath
of the sea and beat your pinions in the strong
storms of the sea.
Yet you are not held.
Tame you sit and willingly, ten wretches to a boat,
lurching and half asleep.

Around each throat is a ring of straw, a small ring, so
that you may swallow only small things, such as
your masters desire.
Presently, when you reach the lake, you will dive.
At the word of your masters the parted waters will
close over you and in your ears will be the gurgling
of yellow streams.
Hungrily you will search in the darkened void, swiftly
you will pounce on the silver shadow....
Then you will rise again, bearing in your beak the
struggling prey,
And your lousy lords, whose rings are upon your
throats, will take from you the catch, giving in its
place a puny wriggler which can pass the gates of
straw.
Such is your servitude.

Yet willingly you sit, lurching and half asleep.
The boatmen shout one to another in nasal discords.
Lazily you preen your great wings, eagle wings,
built for the sky;
And you yawn....

Faugh! The sight of you sickens me, divers in inland
filth!
You grow lousy like your lords,
For you have forgotten the sea.

Wusih

A Scholar

You sit, chanting the maxims of Confucius. On your head is a domed cap of black satin and your
supple hands with their long nails are piously folded. You rock to and fro rhythmically. Your voice,
rising and falling in clear nasal monosyllables, flows on steadily, monotonously, like the flowing of
water and the flowering of thought. You are chanting, it seems, of the pious conduct of man in all ages,
And I know you for a scoundrel.

None the less the maxims of Confucius are venerable, and your voice pleasant. I listen attentively....

Wusih

The Story Teller

In a corner of the market-place he sits, his face the target
for many eyes.

The sombre crowd about him is motionless. Behind
their faces no lamp burns; only their eyes glow
faintly with a reflected light.

For their eyes are on his face.

It alone is alive, is vibrant, moving bronze under a sun
of bronze.

The taut skin, like polished metal, shines along his
cheek and jaw. His eyes cut upward from a slender
nose, and his quick mouth moves sharply out
and in.

Artful are the gestures of his mouth, elaborate and
full of guile. When he draws back the bow of
his lips his face is like a mask of lacquer, set with
teeth of pearl, fantastic, terrible....

What strange tale lives in the gestures of his mouth?

Does a fox-maiden, bewitching, tiny-footed, lure a
scholar to his doom? Is an unfilial son tortured
of devils? Or does a decadent queen sport with
her eunuchs?

I cannot tell.

The faces of the people are wooden; only their eyes
burn dully with a reflected light.

I shall never know.

I am alien ... alien.

Nanking

The Well

The Second Well under Heaven lies at the foot of the
Sacred Mountain.

Perhaps the well is sacred because it is clean; or perhaps
it is clean because it is sacred.

I cannot tell.

At the bottom of the well are coppers and coins with
square holes in them, thrown thither by devout
hands. They gleam enticingly through the shallow
water.

The people crowd about the well, leaning brown covetous
faces above the coping as my copper falls
slantwise to rest.

Perhaps it will bring me luck, who knows?

It is a very sacred well.

Or perhaps, when it is quite dark, someone who is
hungry....

Then the luck will be his!

The Village of the Mud Idols

The Abandoned God

In the cold darkness of eternity he sits, this god who
has grown old.

His rounded eyes are open on the whirl of time, but
man who made him has forgotten him.

Blue is his graven face, and silver-blue his hands. His
eyebrows and his silken beard are scarlet as the
hope that built him.

The yellow dragon on his rotting robes still rears itself
majestically, but thread by thread time eats its
scales away,
And man who made him has forgotten him.

For incense now he breathes the homely smell of rice and tea, stored in his anteroom; For priests the
busy spiders hang festoons between his fingers, and nest them in his yellow nails. And darkness broods
upon him. The veil that hid the awful face of godhead from the too impetuous gaze of worshippers
serves in decay to hide from deity the living face of man, So god no longer sees his maker.

Let us drop the curtain and be gone!
I am old too, here in eternity.

Pa-tze-kiao

The Bridge

The Bridge of the Eight Scholars spans the canal narrowly.
On the gray stone of its arch are carvings in low relief,
and the curve of its span is pleasing to the eye.
No one knows how old is the Bridge of the Eight
Scholars.

In our house-boat we pass under it. The boatman
with the rat-like face twists the long broken-backed
oar, churning the yellow water, and we creep forward
steadily.
On the bridge the village is assembled. Foreign devils
are a rarity.
The gold-brown faces are not unfriendly, merely curious.
They peer in rows over the rail with grunts
of nasal interest.
Tentatively, experimentally, as we pass they spit down
upon us. Not that they wish us ill, but it can be
done, and the temptation is too great.

We retire into the house-boat.
The roof scrapes as we pass under the span of the
Bridge of the Eight Scholars.

Pa-tze-kiao

The Shop

(The articles sold here are to be burned at funerals for the use of the dead in the spirit world.)

The master of the shop is a pious man, in good odor with the priests. He is old and honorable and his
white moustache droops below his chin. Mencius, I think, looked so.

The shop behind him is a mimic world, a world
of pieties and shams—the valley of remembrance—the
dwelling place of the unquiet dead.
Here on his shelves are ranged the splendor and the
panoply of life, silk in smooth gleaming rolls, silver
in ingots, carving and embroidery and jade, a
scarlet bearer-chair, a pipe for opium....
Whatever life has need of, it is here,
And it is for the dead.

Whatever life has need of, it is here. Yet it is here in sham, in effigy, in tortured compromise. The
dead have need of silk. Yet silk is dear, and there are living backs to clothe. The rolls are paper.... Do
not look too close.

The dead I think will understand. The carvings, too, the bearer-chair, the jade—yes, they are paper;

and the shining ingots, they are tinsel. Yet they are made with skill and loving care! And if the priest knows—surely he must know!— when they are burned they'll serve the dead as well as verities. So living mouths can feed.

The master of the shop is a pious man. He has attained much honor and his white moustache droops below his chin. "Such an one" he says "I burned for my own father. And such an one my son will burn for me. For I am old, and half my life already dwells among the dead."

And, as he speaks, behind him in the shop I feel the presence of a hovering host, the myriads of the immortal dead, the rulers of the spirit in this land....

For in this kingdom of the dead they who are living cling with fevered hands to the torn fringes of the mighty past. And if they fail a little, compromise....

The dead I think will understand.

Soochow

My Servant

The feet of my servant thump on the floor. *Thump*, they go, and *thump*—dully, deformedly.

My servant has shown me her feet.

The instep has been broken upward into a bony cushion.

The big toe is pointed as an awl. The small toes are folded under the cushioned instep. Only the heel is untouched.

The thing is white and bloodless with the pallor of dead flesh.

But my servant is quite contented. She smiles toothlessly and shows me how small are her feet, her "golden lilies."

Thump, they go, and *thump*!

Wusih

The Feast

So this is the wedding feast!

The room is not large, but it is heavily crowded, filled with small tables, filled with many human bodies.

About the walls are paintings and banners in sharp colors; above our heads hang innumerable gaudy lanterns of wood and paper. We sit in furs, shivering with the cold.

The food passes endlessly, droll combinations in brown gravies—roses, sugar, and lard—duck and bamboo—lotus, chestnuts, and fish-eggs—an "eight-precious pudding."

They tempt curiosity; my chop-sticks are busy. The warm rice-wine trickles sparingly.

The groom is invisible somewhere, but the bride martyrs among us. She is clad in scarlet satin, heavily embroidered with gold. On her head is an edifice of scarlet and pearls.

For weeks, I know, she has wept in protest.

The feast-mother leads her in to us with sacrificial rites. Her eyes are closed, hidden behind her curtain of strung beads; for three days she will not open them. She has never seen the bridegroom.

At the feast she sits like her own effigy. She neither eats nor speaks.

Opposite her, across the narrow table, is a wall of curious faces, lookers-on—children and half-grown

boys, beggars and what-not—the gleanings
of the streets.

They are quiet but they watch hungrily.
To-night, when the bridegroom draws the scarlet curtains
of the bed, they will still be watching
hungrily....

Strange, formless memories out of books struggle upward
in my consciousness. This is the marriage
at Cana.... I am feasting with the Caliph
at Bagdad.... I am the wedding guest who
beat his breast....

My heart is troubled.
What shall be said of blood-brotherhood between man
and man?

Wusih

The Beggar

Christ! What is that—that—Thing? Only a beggar, professionally maimed, I think.

Across the narrow street it lies, the street where little
children are.

It is rocking its body back and forth, back and forth,
ingratiatingly, in the noisome filth.

Beside the body are stretched two naked stumps of
flesh, on one the remnant of a foot. The wounds
are not new wounds, but they are open and they
fester. There are flies on them.

The Thing is whining, shrilly, hideously.

Professionally maimed, I think. Christ!

Hwai Yuen

Interlude

It is going to be hot here.

Already the sun is treacherous and a dull mugginess is
in the air. I note that winter clothes are shedding
one by one.

In the market-place sits a coolie, expanding in the warmth. He has opened his ragged upper
garments and his bronze body is naked to the belt. He is examining it minutely, occasionally picking at
something with the dainty hand of the Orient. If he had ever seen a zoological garden I should say he
was imitating the monkeys there. As he has not, I dare say the taste is ingrained.

At all events it is going to be hot here.

The Village of the Mud Idols

The City Wall

About the city where I dwell, guarding it close, runs
an embattled wall.

It was not new I think when Arthur was a king, and
plumèd knights before a British wall made brave
clangor of trumpets, that Launcelot came forth.

It was not new I think, and now not it but chivalry is
old.

Without, the wall is brick, with slots for firing, and it
drops straightway into the evil moat, where offal
floats and nameless things are thrown.

Within, the wall is earth; it slants more gently down,

covered with grass and stubbly with cut weeds.
Below it in straw lairs the beggars herd, patiently
whining, stretching out their sores.
And on the top a path runs.

As I walk, lifted above the squalor and the dirt, the timeless miracle of sunset mantles in the west,
The blue dusk gathers close And beauty moves immortal through the land. And I walk quickly, praying
in my heart that beauty will defend me, will heal up the too great wounds of China.

I will not look—to-night I will not look—where at
my feet the little coffins are,
The boxes where the beggar children lie, unburied
and unwatched.
I will not look again, for once I saw how one was
broken, torn by the sharp teeth of dogs. A little
tattered dress was there, and some crunched
bones....
I need not look. What can it help to look?

Ah, I am past! And still the sunset glows. The tall pagoda, like a velvet flower, blossoms against the
sky; the Sacred Mountain fades, and in the town a child laughs suddenly. I will hold fast to beauty! Who
am I, that I should die for these?

I will go down. I am too sorely hurt, here on the city wall.

Wusih

Woman

Strangely the sight of you moves me.
I have no standard by which to appraise you; the outer
shell of you is all I know.
Yet irresistibly you draw me.

Your small plump body is closely clad in blue brocaded
satin. The fit is scrupulous, yet no woman's figure
is revealed. You are decorously shapeless.
Your satin trousers even are lined with fur.
Your hair is stiff and lustrous as polished ebony, bound
at the neck in an adamantine knot, in which dull
pearls are encrusted.

Your face is young and round and inscrutably alien. Your complexion is exquisite, matte gold over-
lying blush pink, textured like ripe fruit. Your nose is flat, the perfect nose of China. Your eyes—your
eyes are witchery! The blank curtain of your upper lid droops sharply on the iris, and when you smile
the corners twinkle upward. It is your eyes, I think, that move me. They are so bright, so black! They
are alert and full of curiosity as the eyes of a squirrel, and like the eyes of a squirrel they have no depth
behind them. They are windows opening on a world as small as your bound feet, a world of ignorances,
and vacuities, and kitchen-gods.

And yet your eyes are witchery. When you smile you
are the woman-spirit, adorable.

I cannot appraise you, yet strangely the sight of you
moves me.
I believe that I shall dream of you.

Pa-tze-kiao

Our Chinese Acquaintance

We met him in the runway called a street, between the
warrens known as houses.
He looked still the same, but his French-cut tweeds,
his continental hat, and small round glasses were
alien here.
About him we felt a troubled uncertainty.

He greeted us gladly. "It is good," he said in his soft French, "to see my foreign friends again. You find our city dirty I am sure. On every stone dirt grows in China. How the people crowd! The street is choked. *No jee ba!* Go away, curious ones! The ladies cannot breathe.... No, my people are not clean. They do not understand, I think. In Belgium where I studied— ... Yes, I was studying in Bruges, studying Christianity, when the great war came. We, you know, love peace. I could not see....

"So I came home.

"But China is very dirty.... Our priests are rascals, and the people ... I do not know.

"Is there, perhaps, a true religion somewhere? The Greeks died too—and they were clean."

Behind his glasses his slant eyes were troubled.

"I do not know," he said.

Wusih

The Spirit Wall

It stands before my neighbor's door, between him and the vegetable garden and the open toilet pots and the dirty canal.

Not that he wishes to hide these things.

On the contrary, he misses the view.

But China, you must understand, is full of evil spirits, demons of the earth and air, foxes and *shui-mang* devils, and only the priest knows what beside.

A man may at any moment be bewitched, so that his silk-worms die and his children go blind and he gets the devil-sickness.

So living is difficult.

But Heaven has providentially decreed that these evil spirits can travel only in a straight line. Around a corner their power evaporates.

So my neighbor has built a wall that runs before his door. Windows of course he has none.

He cannot see his vegetable garden, and his toilet pots, and the dirty canal.

But he is quite safe!

Wusih

The Most-Sacred Mountain

Space, and the twelve clean winds of heaven, And this sharp exultation, like a cry, after the slow six thousand steps of climbing!

This is Tai Shan, the beautiful, the most holy.

Below my feet the foot-hills nestle, brown with flecks of green; and lower down the flat brown plain, the floor of earth, stretches away to blue infinity.

Beside me in this airy space the temple roofs cut their slow curves against the sky,

And one black bird circles above the void.

Space, and the twelve clean winds are here; And with them broods eternity—a swift, white peace, a presence manifest. The rhythm ceases here. Time has no place. This is the end that has no end.

Here when Confucius came, a half a thousand years
before the Nazarene, he stepped, with me, thus
into timelessness.

The stone beside us waxes old, the carven stone that
says: *On this spot once Confucius stood and
felt the smallness of the world below.*

The stone grows old.

Eternity

Is not for stones.

But I shall go down from this airy space, this swift white peace, this stinging exultation; And time will close about me, and my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round. Yet, having known, life will not press so close, and always I shall feel time ravel thin about me; For once I stood In the white windy presence of eternity.

Tai Shan

The Dandy

He swaggers in green silk and his two coats are lined with fur. Above his velvet shoes his trim, bound ankles twinkle pleasantly. His nails are of the longest. Quite the glass of fashion is Mr. Chu! In one slim hand—the ultimate punctilio—dangles a bamboo cage, wherein a small brown bird sits with a face of perpetual surprise. Mr. Chu smiles the benevolent smile of one who satisfies both fashion and a tender heart. Does not a bird need an airing?

Wusih

New China: The Iron Works

The furnaces, the great steel furnaces, tremble and glow; gigantic machinery clanks, and in living iridescent streams the white-hot slag pours out.

This is to-morrow set in yesterday, the west imbedded in the east, a graft but not a growth.

And you who walk beside me, picking your familiar way between the dynamos, the cars, the piles of rails—you too are of to-morrow, grafted with an alien energy.

You wear the costume of the west, you speak my tongue as one who knows; you talk casually of Sheffield, Pittsburgh, Essen....

You touch on Socialism, walk-outs, and the industrial population of the British Isles.

Almost you might be one of us.

And then I ask: "How much do those poor coolies earn a day, who take the place of carts?" You shrug and smile. "Eighteen coppers. Something less than eight cents in your money. They are not badly paid. They do not die."

Again I ask: "And is it true that you've a Yâmen, a police judge, all your own?" Another shrug and smile. "Yes, he attends to all small cases of disorder. For larger crimes we pass the offender over to the city courts."

* * * * *

"Conditions" you explain as we sit later with a cup of tea, "conditions here are difficult."

Your figure has grown lax, your voice a little weary.

You are fighting, I can see, upheld by that strange graft of western energy.

Yet odds are heavy, and the Orient is in your blood.

Your voice is weary.

"There are no skilled laborers" you say, "Among the owners no coöperation.

It is like—like working in a nightmare, here in China.

It drags at me, it drags"....

You bow me out with great civility.

The furnaces, the great steel furnaces, tremble and
glow, gigantic machinery clanks and in living
iridescent streams the white-hot slag pours out.

Beyond the gate the filth begins again.

A beggar rots and grovels, clutching at my skirt with
leprous hands. A woman sits sorting hog-bristles;
she coughs and sobs.

The stench is sickening.

To-morrow! did they say?

Hanyang

Spring

The toilet pots are very loud today.

It is spring and the warmth is highly favorable to fermentation.
Some odors are unbelievable.

At the corner of my street is an especially fragrant
reservoir. It is three feet in diameter, set flush
with the earth, and well filled.

Above it squats a venerable Chinaman with a face such
as Confucius must have worn.

His silk skirt is gathered daintily about his waist, and
his rounded rear is suspended in mid-air over the
broken pottery rim.

He gazes at me contemplatively as I pass with eyes in
which the philosophy of the ages has its dwelling.

I wonder whether he too feels the spring.

Wusih

Meditation

In all the city where I dwell two spaces only are wide
and clean.

One is the compound about the great church of the
mission within the wall; the other is the courtyard
of the great factory beyond the wall.

In these two, one can breathe.

And two sounds there are, above the multitudinous crying
of the city, two sounds that recur as time recurs—the
great bell of the mission and the
whistle of the factory.

Every hour of the day the mission bell strikes, clear,
deep-toned—telling perhaps of peace.

And in the morning and in the evening the factory
whistle blows, shrill, provocative—telling surely
of toil.

Now, when the mulberry trees are bare and the wintry
wind lifts the rags of the beggars, the day shift
at the factory is ten hours, and the night shift
is fourteen.

They are divided one from the other by the whistle,
shrill, provocative.

The mission and the factory are the West. What
they are I know.

And between them lies the Orient—struggling and
suffering, spawning and dying—but what it is
I shall never know.

Yet there are two clean spaces in the city where I dwell,
the compound of the church within the wall, and
the courtyard of the factory beyond the wall.
It is something that in these two one can breathe.

Wusih

Chinese New Year

Mrs. Sung has a new kitchen-god. The old one—he who has presided over the household this
twelvemonth—has returned to the Celestial Regions to make his report. Before she burned him Mrs.
Sung smeared his mouth with sugar; so that doubtless the report will be favorable. Now she has a new
god. As she paid ten coppers for him he is handsomely painted and should be highly efficacious. So
there is rejoicing in the house of Mrs. Sung.

Peking

Echoes

Crepuscule

Like the patter of rain on the crisp leaves of autumn are the tiny footfalls of the fox-maidens.

Festival of the Dragon Boats

On the fifth day of the fifth month the statesman Kūh
Yuen drowned himself in the river Mih-lo.
Since then twenty-three centuries have passed, and the
mountains wear away.
Yet every year, on the fifth day of the fifth month,
the great Dragon Boats, gay with flags and gongs,
search diligently in the streams of the Empire
for the body of Kūh Yuen.

Kang Yi

When Kang Yi had been long dead the Empress decreed upon him posthumous decapitation, so that
he walks for ever disgraced among the shades.

Poetics

While two ladies of the Imperial harem held before him a screen of pink silk, and a P'in Concubine
knelt with his ink-slab, Li Po, who was very drunk, wrote an impassioned poem to the moon.

A Lament of Scarlet Cloud

O golden night, lit by the flame of seven stars, the years have drunk you too.

The Son of Heaven

Like this frail and melancholy rain is the memory of
the Emperor Kuang-Hsü, and of his sufferings at
the hand of Yehonala.
Yet under heaven was there found no one to avenge
him.
Now he has mounted the Dragon and has visited the
Nine Springs. His betrayer sits upon the Dragon
Throne.

Yet among the shades may he not take comfort from

the presence of his Pearl Concubine?

The Dream

When he had tasted in a dream of the Ten Courts of Purgatory, Doctor Tsêng was humbled in spirit, and passed his life in piety among the foot-hills.

Fêng-Shui

At the Hour of the Horse avoid raising a roof-tree,
for by the trampling of his hoofs it may
be beaten down;
And at the Hour of the cunning Rat go not near a
soothsayer, for by his cunning he may mislead
the oracle, and the hopes of the enquirer come
to naught.

China of the Tourists

Reflections in a Ricksha

This ricksha is more comfortable than some.
The springs are not broken, and the seat is covered
with a white cloth.
Also the runner is young and sturdy, and his legs flash
pleasantly.
I am not ill at ease.

The runner interests me.
Between the shafts he trots easily and familiarly, lifting
his knees prettily and holding his shoulders
steady.
His hips are lean and narrow as a filly's; his calves
might have posed for Praxiteles.
He is a modern, I perceive, for he wears no queue.
Above a rounded neck rises a shock of hair the shade
of dusty coal. Each hair is stiff and erect as a
brush bristle. There are lice in them no doubt—
but then perhaps we of the West are too squeamish
in details of this minor sort.
What interests me chiefly is the back of his ears. Not
that they are extraordinary as ears; it is their
very normality that touches me. I find them
smaller than those of a horse, but undoubtedly
near of kin.

There is no denying the truth of evolution;
Yet as a beast of burden man is distinctly inferior.

It is odd.
At home I am a democrat. A republic, a true republic,
seems not improbable, a fighting dream.
Yet beholding the back of the ears of a trotting man
I perceive it to be impossible—the millennium
another million years away.
I grow insufferably superior and Anglo-Saxon.
I am sorry, but what would you?
One is what one is.

Hankow

The Camels

Whence do you come, and whither make return, you

silent padding beasts?
Over the mountain passes; through the Great Wall; to
Kalgan—and beyond, whither?...

Here in the city you are alien, even as I am alien.
Your sidling jaw, your pendulous neck—incredible—and
that slow smile about your eyes and lip,
these are not of this land.

About you some far sense of mystery, some tawny
charm, hangs ever.

Silently, with the dignity of the desert, your caravans
move among the hurrying hordes, remote and
slowly smiling.

But whence are you, and whither do you make return?
Over the mountain passes; through the Great Wall; to
Kalgan—and beyond, whither?...

Peking

The Connoisseur: An American

He is not an old man, but he is lonely.
He who was born in the clash of a western city dwells
here, in this silent courtyard, alone.
Seven servants he has, seven men-servants. They
move about quietly and their slippered feet make
no sound. Behind their almond eyes move green,
sidelong shadows, and their limber hands are
never still.
In his house the riches of the Orient are gathered.
Ivory he has, carved in a thousand quaint, enticing
shapes—pleasant to the hand, smooth with the
caressing of many fingers.
And jade is there, dark green and milky white, with
amber from Korea and strange gems—beryl,
chrysoprase, jasper, sardonyx....
His lacquered shelves hold priceless pottery—peachblow
and cinnabar and silver grey—pottery
glazed like the new moon, fired how long ago
for a moon-pale princess of the East, whose very
name is dust!

In his vaults are incredible textures and colors that
vibrate like struck jade.

Stiff with gold brocade they are, or soft as the coat of
a fawn—these sacred robes of a long dead priest,
silks of a gold-skinned courtesan, embroideries of
a lost throne.

When he unfolds them the shimmering heaps are like
living opals, burning and moving darkly with the
warm breath of beauty.

And other priceless things the collector has, so that in many days he could not look upon them all.
Every morning his seven men-servants dress him, and every evening they undress him. Behind their
almond eyes move green sidelong shadows. In this silent courtyard the collector lives. He is not an old
man but he is lonely.

Peking

Sunday in the British Empire: Hong Kong

In the aisle of the cathedral it lies, an army rifle of
the latest type.
It is laid on the black and white mosaic, between the

carved oaken pews and the strip of brown carpet
in the aisle.

A crimson light from the stained-glass window yonder
glints on the blue steel of its barrel, and the
khaki of its shoulder-strap blends with the brown
of the carpet.

The stiff backs of its owner and a hundred like him are very still. The vested choir chants prettily. Then the bishop speaks: "O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord,... defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies." "Amen!" say the owners of the khaki backs.

The light has shifted a little. On the blue steel barrel
of the rifle the glint is turquoise now.

That will be from the robe of the shepherd in the window
yonder, He of the quiet eyes....

Hong Kong

On the Canton River Boat

Up and down, up and down, paces the sentry. He is dressed in a uniform of khaki and his socks are green. Over his shoulder is slung a rifle, and from his belt hang a pistol and cartridge pouch. He is, I think, Malay and Chinese mixed.

Behind him the rocky islands, hazed in blue, the yellow sun-drenched water, the tropic shore, pass as a background in a dream. He only is sweltering reality. Yet he is here to guard against a nightmare, an anachronism, something that I cannot grasp. He is guarding me from pirates.

Piracy! The very name is fantastic in my ears, colored
like a toucan in the zoo.

And yet the ordinance is clear: "Four armed guards,
strong metal grills behind the bridge, the engine-room
enclosed—in case of piracy."

The socks of the sentry are green.

Up and down, up and down he paces, between the
bridge and the first of the life-boats.

In my deck chair I grow restless.

Am I then so far removed from life, so wrapped in
cotton wool, so deep-sunk in the soft lap of civilization,
that I cannot feel the cold splash of truth?

It is a disquieting thought—for certainly piracy seems
as fantastic as ever.

The socks of the sentry annoy me. They are *too*
green for so hot a day.

And his shoes squeak.

I should feel much cooler if he wouldn't pace so.

Piracy!

Somewhere on the River

The Altar of Heaven

Beneath the leaning, rain-washed sky this great white
circle—beautiful!

In three white terraces the circle lies, piled one on
one toward Heaven. And on each terrace the
white balustrade climbs in aspiring marble, etched
in cloud.

And Heaven is very near.

For this is worship native as the air, wide as the
wind, and poignant as the rain,
Pure aspiration, the eternal dream.

Beneath the leaning sky this great white circle!

Peking

The Chair Ride

The coolies lift and strain;
My chair creaks rhythmically.
It is not yet morning and the live darkness pushes
about us, a greedy darkness that has swallowed
even the stars.
In all the world there is left only my chair, with the
tiny horn lantern before it.
There are also, it is true, the undersides of trees in
the lantern-light and the stony path that flows
past ceaselessly.
But these things flit and change.
Only I and the chair and the darkness are permanent.
We have been moving so since time was in the
womb.

The seat of my chair is of wicker.
It is not unlike an invalid chair, and I, in it, am swaddled
like an invalid, wrapped in layer on layer
of coddling wool.
But there are no wheels to my chair. I ride on the
steady feet of four queued coolies.
The tramp of their lifted shoes is the rhythm of being,
throbbing in me as my own heart throbs.

Save for their feet the bearers are silent. They move
softly through the live darkness. But now and
again I am shifted skilfully from one shoulder to
the other.

The breath of the coolies is short.
They strain, and in spite of the cold I know they are
sweating.
It is wicked of course!
My five dollars ought not to buy life.
But it is all they understand;
And even I am not precisely comfortable.

The darkness is thinning a little.
On either side loom featureless black hills, their summits
sharp and ragged.
The Great Wall is somewhere hereabouts.

My chair creaks rhythmically.
In another year it will be day.

Ching-lung-chiao

The Sikh Policeman: A British Subject

Of what, I wonder, are you thinking?
It is something beyond my world I know, something
that I cannot guess.
Yet I wonder.

Of nothing Chinese can you be thinking, for you hate
them with an automatic hatred—the hatred of
the well-fed for the starved, of the warlike for
the weak.
When they cross you, you kick them, viciously, with
the drawing back of your silken beard, your

black, black beard, from your white teeth.
With a snarl you kick them, sputtering curses in short
gutturals.
You do not even speak their tongue, so it cannot be
of them you are thinking.

Yet neither do you speak the tongue of the master whom you serve. No more do you know of us the
"Masters" than you know of them the "dogs." We are above you, they below. And between us you stand,
guarding the street, erect and splendid, lithe and male. Your scarlet turban frames your neat black
head, And you are thinking.

Or are you?
Perhaps we only are stung with thought.
I wonder.

Shanghai

The Lady of Easy Virtue: An American

Lotus, So they called your name. Yet the green swelling pod, the fruit-like seeds and heavy flower,
are nothing like to you. Rather, like a pitcher plant you are, for hope and all young wings are drowned
in you.

Your slim body, here in the café, moves brightly in
and out. Green satin, and a dance, white wine
and gleaming laughter, with two nodding earrings—these
are Lotus.
And in the painted eyes cold steel, and on the lips a
vulgar jest;
Hands that fly ever to the coat lapels, familiar to
the wrists and to the hair of men. These too
are Lotus.
And what more—God knows!

You too perhaps were stranded here, like these poor homesick boys, in this great catch-all where the
white race ends, this grim Shanghai that like a sieve hangs over filth and loneliness. You were caught
here like these, and who could live, young and so slender—in Shanghai? Green satin, and a gleaming
throat, and painted eyes of steel, Hunter or hunted, Peace be with you, *Lotus*!

Shanghai

In the Mixed Court: Shanghai

Two men sit in judgment on their fellows.
Side by side they sit, raised on the pedestal of the law,
at grips with squalor and ignorance.
They are civilization—and they are very grave.

One of them is of my own people, a small man, definite,
hard-featured, an accurate weapon of small
calibre.
Of the other I cannot judge.
He is heavily built, and when he is still the dignity of
the Orient is about him like his robe. His head
is large and beautifully domed, his hands tapering
and aristocratic.
When he speaks it is of subtleties.
But when he speaks his dignity drops from him. His
eyes shift quickly from one end of their little slit
to the other, his mouth, his full brown mouth,
moves over-fast, his hands flicker back and forth.

The courtroom is crowded with ominous yellow poverty.
The cases are of many sorts.
A woman, she of the little tortured feet and sullen face,
has kidnapped a small boy to sell. A man was

caught smuggling opium. A tea-merchant, in dark green silk, complains that he was decoyed and held prisoner in a lodging-house for ransom. A gambling den has been raided and the ivory dominoes are shown in court.

The prisoners are stoically sullen. The odor of them fills the room.

Above them sit the two men, raised on the pedestal of the law, judging their fellows. I turn to the man beside me, waiting his case. "Tell me" I ask "of these men, which is the better judge?" He answers carefully. "The Chinaman is cleverer by half. He sees where the other is blind. But Chinese magistrates are bought, and this one sells himself too cheap." "And the other?" I ask again. "A good man, and quite honest. You see he doesn't care."

The judges put their heads together. They are civilization and they are very grave. What, I wonder, is civilization?

Shanghai

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