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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BIT OF OLD CHINA ***

A BIT OF OLD CHINA

By Charles Warren Stoddard

China is not more Chinese than this section of our Christian city, nor the heart of Tartary less American.

Here little China flaunts her scarlet streamers overhead, and flanks her doors with legends in saffron and gold; even its window panes have a foreign look, and within is a glimmering of tinsel, a subdued light, and china lamps flickering before graven images of barbaric hideousness.

This description Of Old San Francisco's Chinatown has been taken from Charles Warren Stoddard's book, entitled, "In the Footprints of the Padres," which contains his memories of early days in California.

A BIT OF OLD CHINA

"It is but a step from Confucius to confusion," said I, in a brief discussion of the Chinese question. "Then let us take it by all means," replied the artist, who had been an indulgent listener for at least ten minutes.

We were strolling upon the verge of the Chinese Quarter in San Francisco, and, turning aside from one of the chief thoroughfares of the city, we plunged into the busiest portion of Chinatown. From our standpoint—the corner of Kearny and Sacramento Streets—we got the most favorable view of our Mongolian neighbors. Here is a goodly number of merchant gentlemen of wealth and station, comfortably, if not elegantly, housed on two sides of a street that climbs a low hill quite in the manner of a tea-box landscape.

A few of these gentlemen lodge on the upper floors of their business houses, with Chinese wives, and quaint, old-fashioned children gaudily dressed, looking like little idols, chatting glibly with one another, and gracefully gesticulating with hands of exquisite slenderness. Confucius, in his infancy, may have been like one of the least of these. There are white draymen and porters in the employ of these shrewd and civil merchants, and the outward appearance of traffic, as conducted in the immediate vicinity, is rather American than otherwise.

Farther up the hill, on Dupont Street, from California to Pacific Streets, the five blocks are almost monopolized by the Chinese. There is, at first, a sprinkling of small shops in the hands of Jews and Gentiles, and a mingling of Chinese bazaars of the half-caste type, where American and English goods are exposed in the show-windows; but as we pass on the Asiatic element increases, and finally every trace of alien produce is withdrawn from the shelves and counters.

Here little China flaunts her scarlet streamers overhead, and flanks her doors with legends in saffron and gold; even its window-panes have a foreign look, and within is a glimmering of tinsel, a subdued light, and china lamps flickering before graven images of barbaric hideousness. The air is laden with the fumes of smoking sandalwood and strange odors of the East; and the streets, swarming with coolies, resound with the

echoes of an unknown tongue. There is hardly room for us to pass; we pick our way, and are sometimes curiously regarded by slant-eyed pagans, who bear us no good-will, if that shadow of scorn in the face has been rightly interpreted. China is not more Chinese than this section of our Christian city, nor the heart of Tartary less American.

Turn which way we choose, within two blocks, on either hand we find nothing but the infinitely small and astonishingly numerous forms of traffic on which the hordes around us thrive. No corner is too cramped for the squatting street cobbler; and as for the pipe-cleaners, the cigarette-rollers, the venders of sweetmeats and conserves, they gather on the curb or crouch under overhanging windows, and await custom with the philosophical resignation of the Oriental.

On Dupont Street, between Clay and Sacramento Streets—a single block,—there are no less than five basement apartments devoted exclusively to barbers. There are hosts of this profession in the quarter. Look down the steep steps leading into the basement and see, at any hour of the day, with what deft fingers the tonsorial operators manipulate the devoted pagan head.

There is no waste space in the quarter. In apartments not more than fifteen feet square three or four different professions are often represented, and these afford employment to ten or a dozen men. Here is a druggist and herb-seller, with huge spectacles on his nose, at the left of the main entrance; a butcher displays his meats in a show-window on the right, serving his customers over the sill; a clothier is in the rear of the shop, while a balcony filled with tailors or cigar-makers hangs half way to the ceiling.

Close about us there are over one hundred and fifty mercantile establishments and numerous mechanical industries. The seventy-five cigar factories employ eight thousand coolies, and these are huddled into the closest quarters. In a single room, measuring twenty feet by thirty feet, sixty men and boys have been discovered industriously rolling real Havanas.

The traffic which itinerant fish and vegetable venders drive in every part of the city must be great, being as it is an extreme convenience for lazy or thrifty housewives. A few of these basket men cultivate gardens in the suburbs, but the majority seek their supplies in the city markets. Wash-houses have been established in every part of the city, and are supplied with two sets of laborers, who spend watch and watch on duty, so that the establishment is never closed.

One frequently meets a traveling bazaar—a coolie with his bundle of fans and bric-a-brac, wandering from house to house, even in the suburbs; and the old fellows, with a handful of sliced bamboos and chairs swinging from the poles over their shoulders, are becoming quite numerous; chair mending and reseating must be profitable. These little rivulets, growing larger and more varied day by day, all spring from that great fountain of Asiatic vitality—the Chinese Quarter. This surface-skimming beguiles for an hour or two; but the stranger who strolls through the streets of Chinatown, and retires dazed with the thousand eccentricities of an unfamiliar people, knows little of the mysterious life that surrounds him.

Let us descend. We are piloted by a special policeman, one who is well acquainted with the geography of the quarter. Provided with tapers, we plunge into one of the several dark recesses at hand. Back of the highly respectable brick buildings in Sacramento Street—the dwellings and business places of the first-class Chinese merchants—there are pits and deadfalls innumerable, and over all is the blackness of darkness; for these human moles can work in the earth faster than the shade of the murdered Dane. Here, from the noisome vats three stories underground to the hanging gardens of the fish-dryers on the roofs, there is neither nook nor corner but is populous with Mongolians of the lowest caste. The better class have their reserved quarters; with them there is at least room to stretch one's legs without barking the shins of one's neighbor; but from this comparative comfort to the condensed discomfort of the impoverished coolie, how sudden and great the change!

Between brick walls we thread our way, and begin descending into the abysmal darkness; the tapers, without which it were impossible to proceed with safety, burn feebly in the double night of the subterranean tenements. Most of the habitable quarters under the ground are like so many pigeon-houses indiscriminately heaped together. If there were only sunshine enough to drink up the slime that glosses every plank, and fresh air enough to sweeten the mildewed kennels, this highly eccentric style of architecture might charm for a time, by reason of its novelty; there is, moreover, a suspicion of the picturesque lurking about the place—but, heaven save us, how it smells!

We pass from one black hole to another. In the first there is a kind of bin for ashes and coals, and there are pots and grills lying about—it is the kitchen. A heap of fire kindling-wood in one corner, a bench or stool as black as soot can paint it, a few bowls, a few bits of rags, a few fragments of food, and a coolie squatting over a struggling fire, a coolie who rises out of the dim smoke like the evil genii in the Arabian tale. There is no chimney, there is no window, there is no drainage. We are in a cubic sink, where we can scarcely stand erect. From the small door pours a dense volume of smoke, some of it stale smoke, which our entry has forced out of the corners; the kitchen will only hold so much smoke, and we have made havoc among the cubic inches. Underfoot, the thin planks sag into standing pools, and there is a glimmer of poisonous blue just along the base of the blackened walls; thousands feed daily in troughs like these!

The next apartment, smaller yet, and blacker and bluer, and more slippery and slimy, is an uncovered cesspool, from which a sickening stench exhales continually. All about it are chambers—very small ones,—state-rooms let me call them, opening upon narrow galleries that run in various directions, sometimes bridging one another in a marvelous and exceedingly ingenious economy of space. The majority of these state-rooms are just long enough to lie down in, and just broad enough to allow a narrow door to swing inward between two single beds, with two sleepers in each bed. The doors are closed and bolted; there is often no window, and always no ventilation.

Our "special," by the authority vested in him, tries one door and demands admittance. There is no response from within. A group of coolies, who live in the vicinity and have followed close upon our heels even since our descent into the underworld, assure us in soothing tones that the place is vacant. We are suspicious and persist in our investigation; still no response. The door is then forced by the "special," and behold four of the "seven sleepers" packed into this air-tight compartment, and insensible even to the hearty greeting we offer

them!

The air is absolutely overpowering. We hasten from the spot, but are arrested in our flight by the "special," who leads us to the gate of the catacombs, and bids us follow him. I know not to what extent the earth has been riddled under the Chinese Quarter; probably no man knows save he who has burrowed, like a gopher, from one living grave to another, fleeing from taxation or the detective. I know that we thread dark passages, so narrow that two of us may not cross tracks, so low that we often crouch at the doorways that intercept pursuit at unexpected intervals. Here the thief and the assassin seek sanctuary; it is a city of refuge for lost souls.

The numerous gambling-houses are so cautiously guarded that only the private police can ferret them out. Door upon door is shut against you; or some ingenious panel is slid across your path, and you are unconsciously spirited away through other avenues. The secret signals that gave warning of your approach caused a sudden transformation in the ground-plan of the establishment.

Gambling and opium-smoking are here the ruling passions. A coolie will pawn anything and everything to obtain the means with which to indulge these fascinations. There are many games played publicly at restaurants and in the retiring-rooms of mercantile establishments. Not only are cards, dice and dominoes common, but sticks, straws, brass rings, etc., are thrown in heaps upon the table, and the fate of the gamester hangs literally upon a breath.

These haunts are seldom visited by the officers of justice, for it is almost impossible to storm the barriers in season to catch the criminals in the very act. Today you approach a gambling-hell by this door, tomorrow the inner passages of the house are mysteriously changed, and it is impossible to track them without being frequently misled; meanwhile the alarm is sounded throughout the building, and very speedily every trace of guilt has disappeared. The lottery is another popular temptation in the quarter. Most of the very numerous wash-houses are said to be private agencies for the sale of lottery tickets. Put your money, no matter how little it is, on certain of the characters that cover a small sheet of paper, and your fate is soon decided; for there is a drawing twice a day.

Enter any one of the pawn-shops licensed by the city authorities, and cast your eye over the motley collection of unredeemed articles. There are pistols of every pattern and almost of every age, the majority of them loaded. There are daggers in infinite variety, including the ingenious fan stiletto, which, when sheathed, may be carried in the hand without arousing suspicion, for the sheath and handle bear an exact resemblance to a closed fan. There are entire suits of clothes, beds and bedding, tea, sugar, clocks—multitudes of them, a clock being one of the Chinese hobbies, and no room is completely furnished without at least a pair of them,—ornaments in profusion; everything, in fact, save only the precious queue, without which no Chinaman may hope for honor in this life or salvation in the next.

The throngs of customers that keep the pawnshops crowded with pledges are probably most of them victims of the gambling-table or the opium-den. They come from every house that employs them; your domestic is impatient of delay, and hastens through his daily task in order that he may nightly indulge his darling sin.

The opium habit prevails to an alarming extent throughout the country, but no race is so dependent on this seductive and fatal stimulant as the Chinese. There are several hundred dens in San Francisco where, for a very moderate sum, the coolie may repair, and revel in dreams that end in a death-like sleep.

Let us pause at the entrance of one of these pleasure-houses. Through devious ways we follow the leader, and come at last to a cavernous retreat. The odors that salute us are offensive; on every hand there is an accumulation of filth that should naturally, if it does not, breed fever and death. Forms press about us in the darkness,—forms that hasten like shadows toward that den of shades. We enter by a small door that is open for a moment only, and find ourselves in an apartment about fifteen feet square. We can touch the ceiling on tiptoe, yet there are three tiers of bunks placed with headboards to the wall, and each bunk just broad enough for two occupants. It is like the steerage in an emigrant vessel, eminently shipshape. Every bunk is filled; some of the smokers have had their dream and lie in grotesque attitudes, insensible, ashen-pale, having the look of plague-stricken corpses.

Some are dreaming; you see it in the vacant eye, the listless face, the expression that betrays hopeless intoxication. Some are preparing the enchanting pipe,—a laborious process, that reminds one of an incantation. See those two votaries lying face to face, chatting in low voices, each loading his pipe with a look of delicious expectation in every feature. They recline at full length; their heads rest upon blocks of wood or some improvised pillow; a small oil-lamp flickers between them. Their pipes resemble flutes, with an inverted ink-bottle on the side near the lower end. They are most of them of bamboo, and very often are beautifully colored with the mellowest and richest tints of a wisely smoked meerschaum. A small jar of prepared opium—a thick black paste resembling tar—stands near the lamp.

The smoker leisurely dips a wire into the paste; a few drops adhere to it, and he twirls the wire in the flame of the lamp, where they fry and bubble; he then draws them upon the rim of the clay pipe-bowl, and at once inhales three or four mouthfuls of whitish smoke. This empties the pipe, and the slow process of feeding the bowl is lazily repeated. It is a labor of love; the eyes gloat upon the bubbling drug which shall anon witch the soul of those emaciated toilers. They renew the pipe again and again; their talk grows less frequent and dwindles to a whispered soliloquy.

We address them, and are smiled at by delirious eyes; but the ravenous lips are sealed to that magic tube, from which they draw the breath of a life we know not of. Their fingers relax; their heads sink upon the pillows; they no longer respond, even by a glance, when we now appeal to them. Here is the famous Malay, the fearful enemy of De Quincey, who nightly drugged his master into Asiatic seas, and now himself is basking in the tropical heats and vertical sunlight of Hindustan. Egypt and her gods are his; for him the secret chambers of Cheops are unlocked; he also is transfixed at the summit of pagodas; he is the idol, the priest, the worshiped, the sacrificed. The wrath of Brahma pursues him through the forests of Asia; he is the hated of Vishnu; Siva lies in wait for him; Isis and Osiris confront him.

What is this key which seems for a time to unlock the gates of heaven and of hell? It is the most

complicated drug in the pharmacopoeia. Though apparently nothing more than a simple black, slimy paste, analysis reveals the fact that it contains no less than five-and-twenty elements, each one of them a compound by itself, and many of them among the most complex compounds known to modern chemistry. This "dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain," this author of an "Iliad of woes," lies within reach of every creature in the commonwealth. As the most enlightened and communicative of the opium-eaters has observed: "Happiness may be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket; portable ecstasy may be had corked up in a pint bottle; peace of mind may be set down in gallons by the mail-coach."

This is the chief, the inevitable dissipation of our coolie tribes; this is one of the evils with which we have to battle, and in comparison with which the excessive indulgence in intoxicating liquors is no more than what a bad dream is to hopeless insanity. See the hundred forms on opium pillows already under the Circean spell; swarms are without the chambers awaiting their turn to enter and enjoy the fictitious delights of this paradise.

While the opium habit is one that should be treated at once with wisdom and severity, there is another point which seriously involves the Chinese question, and, unhappily, it must be handled with gloves. Nineteen-twentieths of the Chinese women in San Francisco are depraved!

Not far from one of the pleasure-houses we intruded upon a domestic hearth smelling of punk and pestilence. A child fled with a shrill scream at our approach. This was the hospital of the quarter. Nine cases of smallpox were once found within its narrow walls, and with no one to care for them. As we explored its cramped wards our path was obstructed by a body stretched upon a bench. The face was of that peculiar smoke color which we are obliged to accept as Chinese pallor; the trunk was swathed like a mummy in folds of filthy rags; it was motionless as stone, apparently insensible. Thus did an opium victim await his dissolution.

In the next room a rough deal burial-case stood upon two stools; tapers were flickering upon the floor; the fumes of burning punk freighted the air and clouded the vision; the place was clean enough, for it was perfectly bare, but it was eminently uninteresting. Close at hand stood a second burial-case, an empty one, with the cover standing against the wall; a few hours more and it would find a tenant—he who was dying in rags and filth in the room adjoining. This was the native hospital of the quarter, and the mother of the child was the matron of the establishment.

I will cast but one more shadow on the coolie quarter, and then we will search for sunshine. It is folly to attempt to ignore the fact that the seeds of leprosy are sown among the Chinese. If you would have Proof, follow me. It is a dreary drive over the hills to the pest-house. Imagine that we have dropped in upon the health officer at his city office. Our proposed visitation has been telephoned to the resident physician, who is a kind of prisoner with his leprous patients on the lonesome slope of a suburban hill. As we get into the rugged edge of the city, among half-graded streets, strips of marshland, and a semi-rustic population, we ask our way to the pest-house. Yonder it lies, surrounded by that high white fence on the hill-top, above a marsh once clouded with clamorous water-fowl, but now all, all under the spell of the quarantine, and desolate beyond description. Our road winds up the hill-slope, sown thick with stones, and stops short at the great solid gate in the high rabbit fence that walls in the devil's acre, if I may so call it. We ring the dreadful bell—the passing-bell, that is seldom rung save to announce the arrival of another fateful body clothed in living death.

The doctor welcomes us to an enclosure that is utterly whitewashed; the detached houses within it are kept sweet and clean. Everything connected with the lazaret is of the cheapest description; there is a primitive simplicity, a modest nakedness, an insulated air about the place that reminds one of a chill December in a desert island. Cheap as it is and unhandsome, the hospital is sufficient to meet all the requirements of the plague in its present stage of development. The doctor has weeded out the enclosure, planted it, hedged it about with the fever-dispelling eucalyptus, and has already a little plot of flowers by the office window,—but this is not what we have come to see. One ward in the pest-house is set apart for the exclusive use of the Chinese lepers, who have but recently been isolated. We are introduced to the poor creatures one after another, and then we take them all in at a glance, or group them according to their various stages of decomposition, or the peculiar character of their physical hideousness.

They are not all alike; with some the flesh has begun to wither and to slough off, yet they are comparatively cheerful; as fatalists, it makes very little difference to them how soon or in what fashion they are translated to the other life. There is one youth who doubtless suffers some inconveniences from the clumsy development of his case. This lad, about eighteen years of age, has a face that is swollen like a sponge saturated with corruption; he cannot raise his bloated eyelids, but, with his head thrown back, looks downward over his cheeks. Two of these lepers are as astonishing specimens as any that have ever come under my observation, yet I have morbidly sought them from Palestine to Molokai. In these cases the muscles are knotted, the blood curdled; masses of unwholesome flesh cover them, lying fold upon fold; the lobes of their ears hang almost to the shoulder; the eyes when visible have an inhuman glance that transfixes you with horror. Their hands are shapeless stumps that have lost all natural form or expression.

Of old there was a law for the leprosy of a garment and of a house; yet, in spite of the stringency of that Mosaic law, the isolation, the purging with hyssop, and the cleansing by fire, St. Luke records: "There met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off; and they lifted up their voices and cried, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And today, more than eighteen hundred years later, lepers gather on the slopes of Mount Zion, and hover at the gates of Jerusalem, and crouch in the shadow of the tomb of David, crying for the bread of mercy. Leprosy once thoroughly engrafted on our nation, and nor cedar-wood, nor scarlet, nor hyssop, nor clean birds, nor ewes of the first year, nor measures of fine flour, nor offerings of any sort, shall cleanse us for evermore.

Let us turn to pleasanter prospects—the Joss House, for instance, one of the several temples whither the Chinese frequently repair to propitiate the reposeful gods. It is an unpretentious building, with nothing external to distinguish its facade from those adjoining, save only a Chinese legend above the door. There are many crooks and turns within it; shrines in a perpetual state of fumigation adorn its nooks and corners; overhead swing shelves of images rehearsing historical tableaux; there is much carving and gilding, and red

and green paint. It is the scene of a perennial feast of lanterns, and the worshipful enter silently with burnt-offerings and meat-offerings and drink-offerings, which they spread before the altar under the feet of some colossal god; then, with repeated genuflections, they retire. The thundering gong or the screaming pipes startle us at intervals, and white-robed priests pass in and out, droning their litanies.

At this point the artist suggests refreshments; arm in arm we pass down the street, surfeited with sight-seeing, weary of the multitudinous bazaars, the swarming coolies, the boom of beehive industry. Swamped in a surging crowd, we are cast upon the catafalque of the celestial dead. The coffin lies under a canopy, surrounded by flambeaux, grave offerings, guards and musicians.

Chinatown has become sufficiently acclimatized to begin to put forth its natural buds again as freely as if this were indeed the Flowery Land. The funeral pageant moves,—a dozen carriages preceded by mourners on foot, clad in white, their heads covered, their feet bare, their grief insupportable, so that an attendant is at hand to sustain each mourner howling at the wheels of the hearse. An orchestra heads the procession; the air is flooded with paper prayers that are cast hither at you to appease the troubled spirit. They are on their way to the cemetery among the hills toward the sea, where the funeral rites are observed as rigorously as they are on Asian soil.

We are still unrefreshed and sorely in need of rest. Overhead swing huge balloon lanterns and tufts of gold-flecked scarlet streamers,—a sight that maketh the palate of the hungry Asiatic to water, for within this house may be had all the delicacies of the season, ranging from the confections of the fond suckling to funeral bakemeats. Legends wrought in tinsel decorate the walls. Here is a shrine with a vermilion-faced god and a native lamp, and stalks of such hopelessly artificial flowers as fortunately are unknown in nature. Saffron silks flutter their fringes in the steams of nameless cookery—for all this is but the kitchen, and the beginning of the end we aim at.

A spiral staircase winds like a corkscrew from floor to floor; we ascend by easy stages, through various grades of hunger, from the economic appetite on the first floor, where the plebeian stomach is stayed with tea and lentils, even to the very housetop, where are administered comforting syrups and a menu that is sweetened throughout its length with the twang of lutes, the clash of cymbals, and the throb of the shark-skin drum.

Servants slip to and fro in sandals, offering edible birds'-nests, sharks'-fins, and beche de mer,—or are these unfamiliar dishes snatched from some other kingdom? At any rate, they are native to the strange people who have a little world of their own in our midst, and who could, if they chose, declare their independence tomorrow.

We see everywhere the component parts of a civilization separate and distinct from our own. They have their exists and their entrances; their religious life and burial; their imports, exports, diversions, tribunals, punishments. They are all under the surveillance of the six companies, the great six-headed supreme authority. They have laws within our laws that to us are sealed volumes.

After supper we leaned from the high balcony, among flowers and lanterns, and looked down upon the street below; it was midnight, yet the pavements were not deserted, and there arose to our ears a murmur as of a myriad humming bees shut in clustering hives; close about us were housed near twenty thousand souls; shops were open; discordant orchestras resounded from the theaters; in a dark passage we saw the flames playing upon the thresholds of infamy to expel the evil shades.

Away off in the Bay in the moonlight glimmered the ribbed sail of a fishing-junk, and the air was heavy with an undefinable odor which to this hour puzzles me; but it must be attributed either to sink or sandalwood—perchance to both!

"It is a little bit of old China, this quarter of ours," said the artist, rising to go. And so it is, saving only a noticeable lack of dwarfed trees and pale pagodas and sprays of willowy bamboo; of clumsy boats adrift on tideless streams; of toy-like tea-gardens hanging among artificial rocks, and of troops of flat-faced but complaisant people posing grotesquely in ridiculous perspective.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BIT OF OLD CHINA ***

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