

the fumes of brimstone after it is received from the dealers, sewn into shape, sized, blocked and pressed; and when a girl goes thither to learn them it is looked upon as a rise in life; and in truth good, steady lasses, who can bear the necessary heat and confinement, do go home from time to time with a good stock of clothes and a little money in the savings-bank. The majority of the young women who work at Luton, how-

ever, are the daughters of small tradesmen and farmers, and it is comparatively few of the plaiters who ever reach that goal. Most of them marry early and bring up a tribe of flaxen-haired babies to follow in their own footsteps, and mark the epochs of life as the "time afore last when we made benet," "when whole straw fust come in," or "when there was sich a lot o' pearl about."

E. CLARKE.

A CHINESE NOVEL



OUR letters on the embroidered silken cover—four word-letters that have a confused square aspect, resembling something between an outlined distorted coat-of-arms and a gridiron—tell the initiated that this book, printed on leaves of doubled flimsy paper, is "Pih-shay-tsing-ke"

—or, in English, *The History of the Spirit of the White Adder*. It is one of the novels popular in China among the middle and less educated classes. For us, with our ideas of light reading, the spirit of a white serpent would be an uninviting subject; but we forewarn the reader that better things may be expected. Even Chinese taste would not be charmed by a serpent-spirit that was only a serpent; to use the words of the American poet—"He war a woman."

The hero of the novel is Han-wen, a pig-tailed youth, apprenticed to an apothecary. His romantic history and his misfortunes all date from the day when he pays homage at the tombs of his ancestors, and somewhat inconsistently goes farther to amuse himself, and is overtaken by rain and by two sirens in need of an umbrella. The narrative deals alternately with human affairs—tea-drinkings, dinners, marriages, pagodas, shops; and with preternatural wonders—magical changes, dragons, genii of the stars. The heroine is called White, or, perhaps we might say Blanche. She and her maid, Little Blue, have a provoking habit of escaping our sympathy by making themselves invisible whenever they like, or going up in clouds and riding any distance, like witches, with vapours instead of broomsticks. The genii of the stars, the Buddhist Fa-hai, from the Pagoda of the Mountain of Gold, and various other awful personages, have the power of crossing the whole Celestial Empire in cloud-chariots whither they will. These great folks address Blanche politely as "Odious Monster" when they meet her out

cloud-riding; and we also note that her cloud is a black one, full of foul and poisonous air. The explanation is that Blanche is the spirit of a white snake, and is a Chinese fairy—a very different thing from a European fairy, since it possesses none of the graceful and pretty attributes that we associate with the word, but, instead, is fated with the character of something fearful and baneful. We are first introduced to Blanche in the Cave of the Pure Winds on a high mountain. There, we are told, the spirit of the white snake had passed nineteen hundred years "in the practice of virtue"—with the Chinese very much the same thing as "Tao," *Reason*—to expiate the faults of a former life. The white serpent is, in fact, a woman, condemned by Fo, the Chinese Buddha, to assume that form; and at the beginning of the novel she has managed to take human shape again, tired of her long seclusion. In the garden of what we should call a "house to let," in the Street of the Two Tea Trees, in Tsien-tang, she meets another snake that has assumed human shape. It is the spirit of a blue serpent. After a contest in magical powers, Little Blue consents to serve her; and when they enter the deserted house it makes us benighted foreigners envious of the wisdom and method of the Chinese to hear that they lived happily together, "observing mutually the relations which the book of rites has established between mistress and servant." They are beautiful young maidens, one in white embroidered robes with a red sash, and with aristocratically small feet necessitating her servant's support; the other all in blue. As in Western novels, the opening illustrates the adage, "the course of true love never did run smooth;" but here every chapter naïvely ends with a paragraph hinting woes and wonders yet to come, and adding always, "If you want to know what happened to Han-wen—read the next chapter."

What happened to Han-wen was this:—That misguided young man, after burning gilt paper and laying offerings at the tombs of his ancestors, shook off his grief, and meant, in popular phrase, "to make a day of it." He crossed the Kiang River, and wandered by the Lake Si-hou—of which we may make an imaginative vision from any *bric-à-brac* tea-pot or willow-plate, and learn for once what befalls the people who make holiday in the scenery of porcelain and willow-ware. Han-wen saw two beautiful girls, mistress and maid, looking down from one of the quaint wood-work bridges; and they saw Han-wen—with mutual heart-

burnings, not divided on either side, and not jealous, but, like Chinese writing, peculiar and incomprehensible. They were afterwards rowed across the river in the same boat with him. A shower of rain overtook them on the opposite shore, and he politely forced upon their polite refusals his umbrella. We can fancy that luckless article, the source of all his bliss and all his woe—a gentleman's umbrella, wide, flat, and many-coloured, with best bamboo handle. Little Blue asked his address, that she might bring it back to-morrow: happy and precise Chinese, so far in advance of the West! He politely replied that he would call for it

field, when he bought four sumptuous waistcoats—"for Dora"—during the first week of his passion, and laid the foundations of all his corns? Han-wen, inquiring his way, was surprised to hear that the address given by the ladies was an empty house. But he went on perseveringly down the Street of the Two Tea Trees, and into the garden; and the head of the maid popped out of the garden door by a remarkable chance while he was admiring the flowers. She admitted him to the vestibule, called the Hall of Perfumes. He politely refused to let her bring her mistress, but she, as politely, refused to bring the umbrella



"HE POLITELY FORCED UPON THEIR POLITE REFUSALS HIS UMBRELLA."

himself on the morrow, received the address of the charmers, and went away rejoicing, with streaming-wet blue coat, straw hat, and pig-tail.

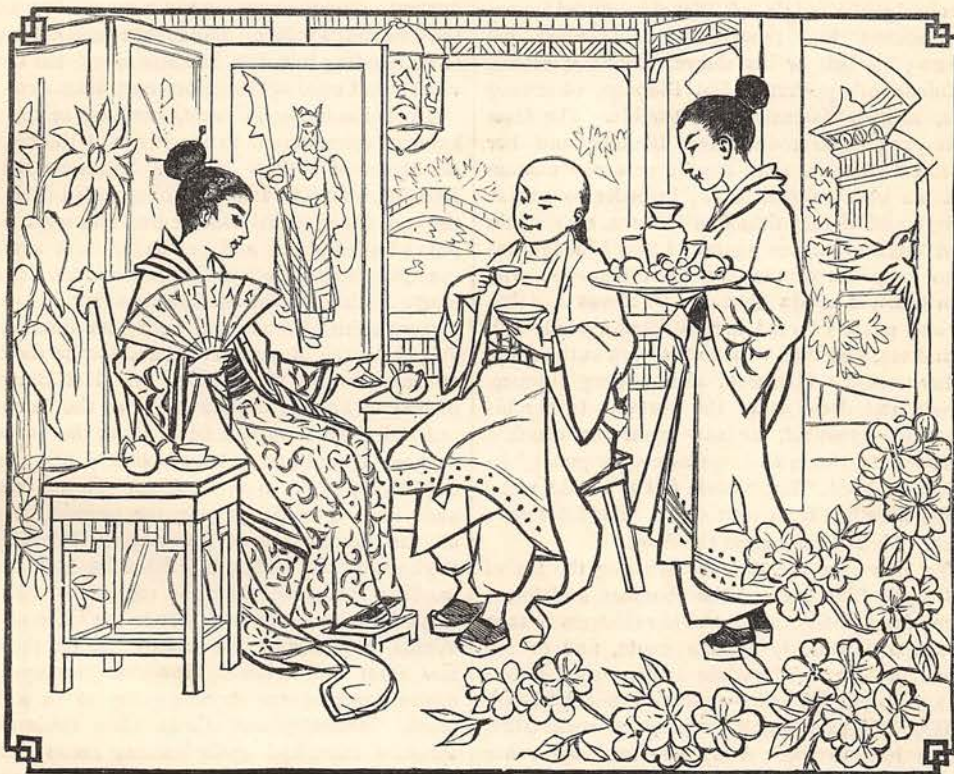
He forgot his master's advice, not to remain out or amuse himself after paying homage at the tombs of his ancestors. He did not return that night to pestle and mortar and the fumes of drugs. He went instead to the house of his married sister, whose husband, Kong-fou, was keeper of the city treasury. After a sleepless night, he sallied forth secretly before breakfast to call for the umbrella. The Chinese marriage colour is red, and perhaps he wished to give a hint to the lady; but when we are told that he "dressed with particular care, and put on a coat of brilliant red," there is a touch of nature making the whole world kin; for was not this the Chinese form of the well-known state of mind illustrated in David Copper-

without summoning her mistress to thank him. She triumphed, and went for the lady, whom he was all the while dying to see. Blanche entered, thanked her "benefactor," and ordered tea—cold tea in little cups, without cream or sugar, the usual Chinese visitors' beverage; and Little Blue served it to them on separate small tables—*vide* the Chinese fans and trays. He took "a few cups," then rose, as if to tear away himself and his umbrella. But Blanche would not let her benefactor depart without his breakfast. After this meal, at which we are told they drank cups of wine, the fair one gave a full (and most mendacious) account of herself and her solitary position, and proposed a marriage with him. Han-wen gave the customary polite refusals of a good thing, alleging that he was too poor for such an alliance; whereupon, to prove her riches sufficient, the lady ordered her maid to bring

from the interior of the house a hundred ounces of silver, which she handed over to him to buy the marriage gifts. And Han-wen, his hopes all crowned, hastened home to his sister, and his brother-in-law Kong-fou, to tell the blissful news.

Now the night before, Blanche, suspecting money and marriage presents would be convenient when Han-wen called, had, by her magical powers, brought "all the demons from the five parts of the world," and made them supply her with silver from the city treasury. The result of this little manœuvre was that when the blissful lover hurried to the house of his

cloud, was present' afterwards when the magistrate gave the official decision that the culprit, being the victim of fairies, should not be put to death, but should be exiled to Soo-chow-foo. In that city he had an introduction to Wou, the friend of Wang, his former master; and he was established there peacefully in the shop of Wou when there came suddenly to the door Blanche and Little Blue, who had sped after the unhappy Han-wen on their clouds. Han-wen did not want them; he insulted them as fairies, the cause of his woes. But when Blanche pleaded with Wou that Han-wen was affianced to her, and that she and her



"LITTLE BLUE SERVED IT TO THEM ON SEPARATE SMALL TABLES" (p. 80).

relations, he found them anything but blissful. His sister was grieving for her husband's disgrace and anxiety, and Kong-fou himself had been bastinadoed that morning for his inability to account for a robbery during the night. Kong-fou, seeing the treasury-mark on Han-wen's silver, was obliged to give evidence against him. Han-wen was led before the magistrate, bound by a chain locked round his neck; there, kneeling upon the red steps, he told the very likely story that the silver had been given to him by a friend whose name he had forgotten. The ever-ready bamboo forced the truth out of the hapless lover; but when the police went to search for the ladies, they found in the Street of the Two Tea Trees only a deserted house and garden, reputed to be haunted. The heroines had escaped in a most unsatisfactory manner by becoming invisible; and Little Blue, high up in her

servant were no fairies, but had trudged wearily all this way for his sake, Wou induced Han-wen to believe her story for the sake of Blanche's happiness and reputation; for in China not only is it considered dishonourable to marry a second time, but it is also dishonourable for one who has once been affianced, even in infancy, to marry any one else if the contract be broken. Having consulted an astrologer as to an auspicious day for the marriage, the ceremony took place, and Han-wen set up for himself as a dispensing chemist, painting the front of his house with bright colours, and hanging out a sign-board, inscribed "Pao-ngân-tang," the Shop of Health. It is to be hoped he did not add thereto the words "Pu-hu," which many Chinese shopkeepers place beside their door, to signify "He will not cheat you;" for under his wife's guidance Han-wen was decidedly a heathen Chinese, peculiar for

ways that were dark and for tricks that were mean. For a whole month no customers came. Then they hung out the advertisement, "Han-wen, doctor of medicine, skilled in the art of curing all diseases." Still no customers. One day Blanche told her husband that there was soon to be a pestilence, and she would prepare pills to cure instantly those stricken with it; at which good news, the Chinese novelist gravely says, Han-wen was beside himself with joy. That night Blanche sent out Little Blue to drift over the country on her cloud, pouring poisoned vapours down upon all the lakes and wells. Of course the epidemic came, and much doctoring was needed. The pills of Han-wen, made by the magic of Blanche, cured every one, established his reputation, and filled his pocket—no; his belt or his sleeve, which, it seems, are a Chinaman's pockets. But Blanche, observing the stars, already foresaw fresh trouble. The feast of Touan-yang came round, and Blanche and her servant knew that on that day it was the custom to drink tea with sulphur in it, in order to banish evil spirits; and if they drank of this tea, they would be turned back to snakes again. Little Blue feigned illness, to keep out of the way. But Han-wen, who had been warned again that his wife was a fairy, amiably and politely forced her to drink a whole cup of the festal tea, and then went to his work in the shop, leaving her to rest. Han-wen, after a long absence came back, and drew aside the curtains to see his sleeping wife. Instead, he saw upon her couch a white serpent, "its eyes as large as copper gongs," its mouth deep and red, "like a basin full of blood," while foul smoke breathed from its tongue. His fears were confirmed. He fell dead upon the floor.

It being now past the time for drinking the tea of the feast, Little Blue entered the chamber, and found her master dead. She cried out to her mistress to take human shape as quickly as she could, and to see what she had done. The white snake turned into a woman again, and Blanche wept over her husband, and declared she would seek the plant of immortality, and restore him to life. Away she went upon her cloud to the region of deities, and genii, and supernatural cloud-riding beings, with the heads of stags and birds, her meetings with whom, her prostrations, polite speeches, insults, and battles, it is impossible to tell in short space. It is enough to note that at one time, Blanche being killed with fright by the star Nan-sing, the hero and heroine of this extraordinary novel are both dead, though plenty of adventures remain for them still. Blanche is restored to life by one of the supernatural characters, because, it is revealed, her marriage with Han-wen had been decreed hundreds of years ago, and she is destined by Fo to bring into the world the genius of the star Wen-sing. She finds and carries back at last the plant of immortality, gets Little Blue to boil it, and administers this immortality-soup to her husband. He wakes as if from a deep sleep, and the moment he finds himself on his legs again he rather savagely and ungratefully accuses her of being a snake and a fairy. She and Little Blue stoutly deny the charge, and effect a re-

conciliation by showing Han-wen, in the vestibule, a chopped-up white snake made out of a white scarf by Blanche, which they persuade him is the one that crept in awhile ago and lay on the couch.

Soon after, this accomplished but dangerous lady made pills for the wife of the governor of the city. Han-wen was called to the house as a doctor, and thither he went, carrying his pills in his sleeve. They effected an instantaneous cure, and the governor paid his doctor's bill with four pieces of flowered satin and a thousand ounces of silver, and sent him home in a palanquin surrounded by eight musicians. To extricate him from a plot jealously contrived by the other doctors, Blanche next caused a magical robbery from the Emperor's palace; and for the second time, instead of befriending him, her luckless magic led to the conviction and exile of the unfortunate Han-wen.

To Tchin-kiang he went, carrying in his sleeve a letter of introduction to the owner of the red house in the Street of Willow Leaves. There he fell ill; and Blanche, who had followed him, with Little Blue, by the convenient aerial route, cured him with a magical pill (a boiled pill!) and persuaded him again of her innocence and devotion. But, soon after, the Buddhist monk Fa-hai convinced Han-wen that his wife was a serpent-spirit after all, and kept him immured in the Pagoda of the Mountain of Gold, despite the entreaties of Blanche and Little Blue. At last Blanche summoned to her the dragon kings of the four seas, and ordered them to raise a flood about the pagoda. The dragons bowed and behaved politely, and then raised the flood; but the Buddhist Fa-hai quelled it, and, instead of destroying the pagoda, it drowned all the inhabitants of the city of Tchin-kiang, at the base of the mountain. Blanche had again been working more evil than she reckoned. She advised Little Blue to return with her to the Cave of the Pure Winds, and expiate the crime; but on the way they saw from their clouds Han-wen journeying to his native town, where he was going to be a Buddhist monk. Blanche and Little Blue descended, told specious tales, and again became reconciled. They accompanied him to his former home, the house of his brother-in-law Kong-fou, and Kong-fou furnished a house for them, into which they went, having chosen an auspicious day for moving. Afterwards a son was born to Han-wen and Blanche, and a daughter was born to Kong-fou. Before the births a promise was given between the parents that if a son and daughter were born, the cousins should be affianced, and should be married in time to come. Thus the child of Blanche, who was no other than the genius of literature, otherwise the genius of the star Wen-sing, came into the world already promised in marriage! A month after his birth, the Buddhist Fa-hai suddenly broke in upon the happy family, sent his golden vase to Blanche under pretence of its containing the purest tea for his entertainment, caused the vase to stick to her in the presence of her affrighted husband, and finally caused Blanche, the serpent-spirit, to disappear, while at the same moment there was discernible coiled on the end of his wand a white snake, which he

carried away with him. The family followed him to the Pagoda of Louï-pong. There he gave the promise that when the boy should win literary honours for his name and ancestors, he should see his mother once more; and having shown them Blanche in human form, he touched the pagoda with his wand, the whole structure moved aside, and Blanche sank into the stream flowing under it, which stream the pagoda covered again when he moved it back to its former site. This engineering business done, he sailed away in a cloud to his own Pagoda of the Mountain of Gold.

The son of Han-wen, as befitted the genius of literature, easily passed the three Government examinations, which in China are the opening to all official employment; and in the last of the three examinations, conducted by the Emperor himself, he was the highest, or "flower-crowned" student. The novel gives *verbatim* his petition, by which he obtained unpronounceable titles for his deceased mother, his father, uncle, and aunt. In reward for this filial piety, which is the Chinaman's ruling virtue and the moral of the book, the Pagoda of Louï-pong was once more moved aside, and he beheld his mother, the beautiful Blanche. The Buddhist Fa-hai declared

her faults all expiated now, and bidding her step upon a white scarf, he changed it into a white cloud, which carried her away to the skies. Han-wen's blue scarf was changed likewise to an azure cloud, and he followed her to the happy abode of Fo. Their son, before returning to the capital, married the daughter of Kong-fou, fulfilling the marriage engagement made before the birth of either. As we know they must have mourned in white for the death of Blanche long ago, it seems only a natural sequel when we are told now that the bride looked lovely on her wedding-day, and the bridegroom was dazzling in red, with "a black crêpe cap." And with an enumeration of the joys and honours that befel them in reward for their filial piety, we find ourselves at the last page of the Chinese novel—the last page, which in our reckoning would be none other than the first, since the books of that all-contrasting nation not only carry each printed line of word-letters downward in columns instead of across, but begin, like the Hebrew, at the right-hand cover, and invert our process of reading as well as our ideas, while we are travelling back to that last leaf which Westerns call the first.

 SATURDAY NIGHT IN A FREE LIBRARY.


THE Free Libraries Act, passed in 1850, was the result of the report of a Committee of the House of Commons, appointed in 1849, on the motion of Mr. William Ewart —M.P. for Dumfries. It provided that two-thirds of the rate-payers of a borough, &c.,

should have power to authorise the levying of a rate for the purpose of maintaining a library that should be absolutely free, under certain specified conditions, to all comers. By a singular oversight, the Act, as first passed, did not give authority for the expenditure of a single farthing in the purchase of books, so that the first and most essential outlay in connection with a library had to be provided for by public subscription, till the amended Act of 1855 remedied the omission, and gave sundry other facilities for the better working of the measure, including an increase in the amount of rate from one halfpenny to a penny in the pound. Prior to the passing of the Act there was but one Public Library in England open to all who chose to

use it, namely, the "Chetham Library" in Manchester, founded in 1653, by the piety and spirit of Humphrey Chetham, of whom Fuller has given an interesting account in his "Worthies of England." The Chetham Library, which still flourishes, can claim to have been the first institution of the kind in Europe, freely accessible to all classes of the community, without distinction of rank.

Manchester was the first town to avail itself of the provisions of the Act of Parliament, and its example was very soon followed by Liverpool. Since then libraries have been provided for free public use in about one hundred towns; and it is worthy of remark that, with comparatively few exceptions, these institutions are to be found solely in districts inhabited by populations engaged in manufacturing and other industrial occupations.

The working of a Free Library under ordinary conditions can best be seen if we visit it on Saturday evening, the busiest time of the whole week. That which we select for the purpose has been in operation only a few years, and is situated in a manufacturing town of about 25,000 inhabitants. To what extent the boon is appreciated, and the class of visitors by whom the library is frequented, we shall see as we enter the various rooms and watch the proceedings. On the left of the entrance hall is a spacious reading-room, lighted from the top by day, where, on stands fixed round the room, are copies of the London and provincial daily press, while large tables are liberally supplied with other papers and periodicals. Many of these, we learn, are free gifts, the proprietors of several valuable