

THE SIXTH YEAR OF QWONG SEE.

WHILE gratifying my curiosity, and experiencing the pleasure of studying the habits and customs of a strange people during the recent Chinese civil and religious festival of the new year, it occurred to me that a short article giving the result of these observations might be of interest to readers, many of whom never have had, and possibly never will have, the opportunity to examine for themselves any of the peculiarities of this alien Asiatic race at present sojourning on the shores of the Pacific, apparently unaffected by contact with our Anglo-Saxon civilization, and which, while submitting respectfully to our laws when they touch its interests, or where its outward life comes in contact with our ordinances, still retains in the land of its present residence unswerving allegiance to the customs and traditions of its fathers, and recognizes with loyal and orderly obedience the fiat of tribunals of its own organization.

Within the confines of the Chinese quarter in San Francisco is presented probably the most curious phase of life to be seen on this broad continent. Within a circle whose radius is half a mile, in the heart of an intensely Western American city, itself the growth of little more than a quarter of a century, is found what we might call an Asiatic colony, and a colony bringing with it and retaining in its new home all the characteristics of its Chinese parentage. Traverse but a few feet, and the dividing line between a Mongolian and a Caucasian civilization, usually measured by an ocean, is crossed. Features, language, costume, merchandise, the exterior individuality of houses, and the hurried glimpses of interiors revealed by the passing glance, all proclaim what might be a quarter in some Chinese city. Strangers and visitors to San Francisco in many cases see more of the life of this curious people than residents of the city. The strong local prejudice against our Asiatic immigrants, and the proverbial procrastination of those who can avail of an interesting experience at their convenience, unite to keep "Chinatown" practically a sealed book to the better-class denizens of the "Queen City of the Pacific."

Availing ourselves of the invitation of a Chinese friend to visit him on New-Year's Day—February 9 of our calendar—

through his kind attentions we were able to receive on the camera of our mental experience impressions which, in spite of their meagreness of outline, are herewith offered for the benefit of those interested in the festival customs of all divisions and types of the great human family.

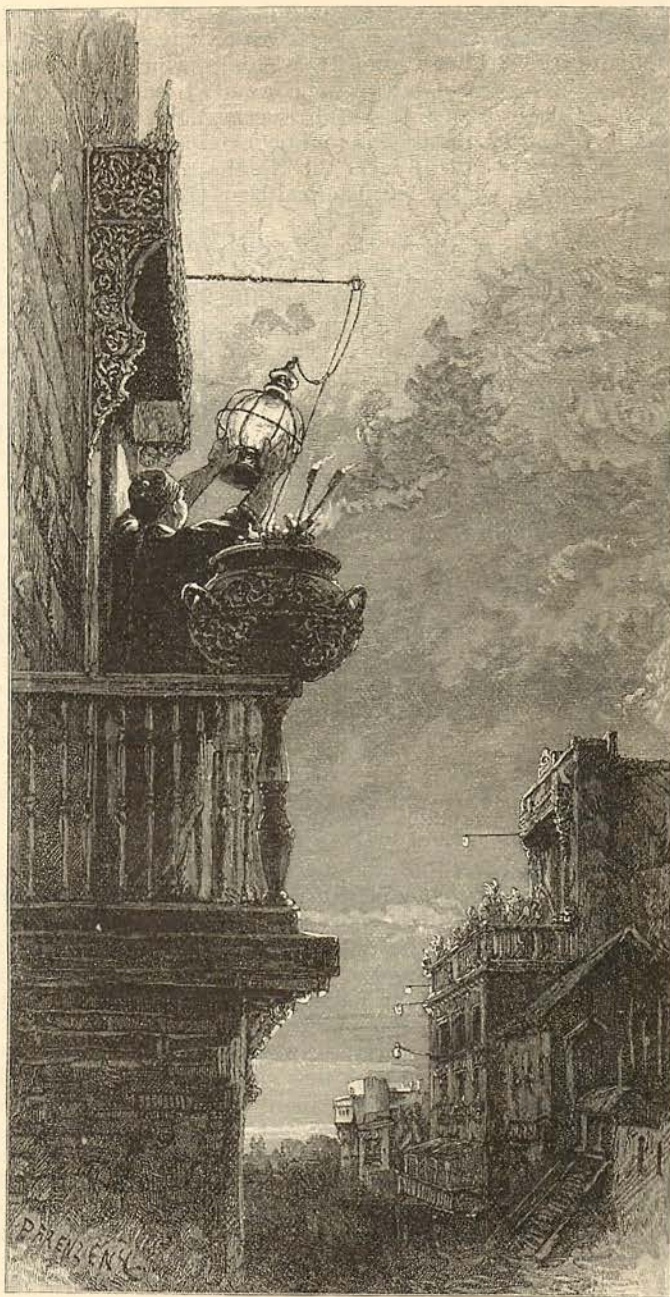
As an initial consideration, a word of explanation in regard to the Chinese manner of computing time and recording events may not be amiss.

Forty-five centuries ago this Oriental people had constructed astronomical instruments analogous to the quadrant and armillary sphere, which enabled them to make observations remarkable for their accuracy, and making possible, even at that remote period, the formation of a useful calendar.

Their present system is a very complicated one, but, like every arrangement of this ingenious people, works with absolute accuracy, once the principle of its procedure is understood.

Like that of the Hindoos, the Chinese civil year is regulated by the moon, and from the time of the Han dynasty, two centuries before Christ, has begun with the first day of that moon during the course of which the sun enters their sign of the zodiac corresponding to our sign Pisces. They have also an astronomical year which is solar, and for the adjustment of these solar and lunar years employ a system similar to our leap-year plan, except that instead of an intercalary day every fourth year, as in the Gregorian calendar, they insert an intercalary month, occurring alternately every third and second year in periods of nineteen. For instance, last year had an intercalary month; the next one will come in 1882, again in 1884, then in 1887, etc.—two intercalary months in five years, or seven in nineteen years. The year, therefore, contains thirteen or twelve months according as it has or has not an intercalary one. A month has either twenty-nine or thirty days, the number of days being intended to correspond to the number of days which the moon takes to make the revolution around the earth. A *month*, indeed, means one *moon*, the same Chinese character being used to indicate both. So, too, the number used to indicate the age of the moon at any time denotes also the day of the month; thus there is al-

ways a full moon on the 15th, no moon on the 1st, etc. Consequently the moon always presents the same appearance on the same day in any month from year to year. This plan is particularly convenient for farmers and sailors, whose memory is thus materially assisted in remembering the changes of moon and tides. The spots on the moon which we call the "man in the moon" suggest to the Chinese mind the idea of a small animal shell-ing rice, their chief staple of food; and a common saying in China is, "There is a little white rabbit in the moon pounding out rice." The era used by the Chinese in their histories is, next to that of the Jews, the oldest employed by any nation, as for over four thousand years they have for chronological purposes made use of a series of daily, monthly, and yearly cycles of 60. Each day, month, and year has its own name in its cycle, and by compounding these names a single one is made to express the date employed. A new cycle began in 1864, so that the present year is the 17th year of the 75th cycle. But the common events of every-day life amongst the Chinese have during these last twenty centuries been dated from the year of the accession of the reigning emperor. Some particular name, usually that of the new sovereign, is given by official proclamation to each reign, the years being number-



DAWN OF NEW-YEAR.

ed 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. The present emperor, Qwong See, came to the throne in 1875, consequently we are now living in the 6th year of Qwong See. A record of these eras is kept, called a Catalogue of the Nienh-hao, by reference to which the

chronological date of any event is determined. Some hundreds of years hence an inquisitive Chinese student, wishing to place the historical date of some occurrence in this year, such as some barbarous acts of legislation against his countrymen in California, would turn to the Nienhao, and so ascertain the historical bearings.

On the last evening of the old year—February 8 in the Gregorian calendar—"Chinatown" presented a busy, bustling, weird air, which plainly betokened an impending feast of importance. The signboards, with their curious hieroglyphics—well adapted for decorative effects—had generally been repainted and regilded, most of them being draped with bright scarlet cotton cloth—a favorite material for festooning. Red is the Chinese festal color, and is believed to be efficacious in keeping away evil spirits, and it is not unusual to see strands of red silk braided

和
氣
致
祥

NEW-YEAR'S MOTTO:
"LOVE ONE ANOTHER."

in children's queues to prevent them from being cut off by malicious spirits. Many of the shops displayed within and without sprigs of *kin-hwa*, or "golden flowers," which are merely bunches of brass tinsel wire and foil twined and cut into floriated forms; these are principally used as offerings before the ancestral tablet and in the temples. The lintels of the doors, the windows, and blank spaces on the walls were already covered with new colored papers, principally red and orange, of various sizes, on which sentences appropriate to the season are printed. White paper denotes that the inmates have lost a parent during the past year; blue or yellow signifies a second year's mourning for father or mother; the death of a grandparent is indicated by dark carnation; but the joyous red predominated, and mingled with them were many red and orange papers stippled with gold. The advertisement boards were freshly covered with clean notices printed in the same style—black characters on red ground. The writing on the papers pasted

above and beside the doors mainly expressed the hope that the five blessings in which are summed up all the elements of human felicity—health, riches, longevity, love of virtue, and a natural death—might be the portion of the indwellers. The larger ones contained such sentences as these: "May Heaven give happiness!" "May I never be without rich customers!" "Good hope." "Good will come to us." "Love one another." "Peace be to those who come out and go in." "May we never be without wisdom!"

Devout Chinese avail themselves of this season to settle their accounts with the gods, and the walls of the hall and staircase of the principal Joss-house were covered with colored slips of paper, about twelve inches long by four wide, containing the names of the donors to the idols. Besides these records of generous fidelity to a national creed, were scrolls on which were written antithetical sentences referring to the attributes of some favorite god. Ornamental tablets of wood are also presented by admiring votaries, and hang from the ceilings or against the walls of the temples.

Gorgeous lanterns were suspended in front of doors or hung in rows from the numerous balconies. The flags of the Consulate, of the Six Companies, of the several temples, etc., fluttered in the breeze, and the occasional crackle, crackle, of fire-crackers gave warning of the coming bedlam at midnight, when gongs, tom-toms (drums), bombs, and unlimited quantities of fire-crackers were to unite in driving away all evil spirits from the birth of the new year—the 6th of Qwong See. At nearly every window was to be seen a dish of the favorite Chinese lily, the narcissus, in full bloom. The shops displayed tables covered with them to tempt tardy purchasers, and the streets were crowded with "Celestials," some carrying a New-Year's offering to friend or master, others hastening to make final household investments before the shops closed—not to reopen until the first three days of the holiday season were passed.

Glimpses into interiors and down basements revealed strange sights. The whole population appeared to have submitted its head to the razor, and an unprejudiced observer, noting the conformation of the various Chinese foreheads, could not but be impressed by the phrenological indications, suggesting at least an average intel-

ligence. New clothes were being extensively donned: those who can not afford to purchase a suit at this season borrow for the occasion. Clean white stocking-leggings caught the eye below each blue blouse, and silk and satin had replaced the ordinary cloth or cotton attire of many a worthy merchant. A favorite New-Year's present amongst the lower classes is a pair of shoes. But the most momentous business of the hour was the settling of accounts. All debts must be cancelled before the new year, and this universal obligatory *custom*—not law—has manifest advantages. The *swan-pwan*, or counting-board, and brush pencils, were not at rest for an instant, and it was far into the small hours of the night before many merchants left their desks. Before midnight a feast took place in each household, when food was eaten with certain ceremonies, variously apportioned to the sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, the worship of the favorite family gods, and the offering to deceased ancestors. Before the ancestral tablets, or household idol, incense was consumed, punk or joss-sticks, mock money, and pieces of red paper covered with printed prayers, were burned. Many parties of Chinese whose ordinary homes are with their American employers clubbed together for this festal season, and rented rooms, where conjointly they held their midnight feasts. As the bells announced the mystic hour of twelve, the dawn of a new period was welcomed by musical strains peculiar to the inhabitants of "the Middle Kingdom," by crackers, bombs, and "flowers" (rockets, etc.). A procession of priests curiously costumed, walking in single file, with lanterns, made a tour of the different temples, where they were received by the resident priests. Food, incense, tea, printed prayers, and mock money were offered to the gods, and appropriate fare partaken of by their earthly ministers. Generous hospitality is the feature of the New-Year season, and there is a Chinese saying "that during the first part of the first moon no one has an empty stomach." And here permit the remark that there is a decorousness amongst all classes of Chinese in their manner of partaking of food which is not always seen amongst "the people" of more civilized nations. We laugh at the chopsticks of these barbarians, but a polite mandarin once remarked to an English-



BARBER-SHOP IN CHINATOWN.

man, "In remote ages, before we became civilized, we used knives and forks as you do, and had no chopsticks. We still carry a knife in our chopstick case, but it is a mere remnant of barbarism. We never use it. We sit down to table to eat, not to cut up carcasses."

At an early hour on New-Year's Day the streets of "Chinatown" were full of well-dressed men, many of whom were really gorgeously apparelled, blue, olive-green, and gray being the prevailing colors. They were hastening to pay congratulatory visits, although, according to "Celestial" etiquette, it is permissible to settle some social debts simply by cards. Friends, as they pass, salute each other with exclamations and greetings which answer very much to our Anglo-Saxon formula of "A happy New-Year!"

No shops were opened. In front of some the heavy wooden doors were in place, barred and bolted, excluding most



MARKETING FOR NEW-YEAR'S DAY.

effectually all inquisitive inspection, but, as a rule, only the glass doors were closed, some of them being made to serve as screens by having strung half way across them scarlet cotton curtains. A complete metamorphosis had taken place within the counting-houses, which for so many days in the year appear but as trading-places, with small regard for decoration or æsthetics. Every one had been swept and garnished most successfully. Carved tables and chairs, in many cases covered with scarlet cloth and satin embroideries; colored scrolls, with sentences and mottoes; pictures of gods or ancestral warri-

ors; and the official almanac for the new year, conspicuously framed—transformed trading shops into Chinese reception-rooms. The characters for happiness and longevity are frequently placed on the same scroll, and hung over the inside doors, as we would use the motto "A merry Christmas," or "A happy New-Year"; and another usual combination is made of four characters—for happiness, longevity, joy, and official rewards. In each of these rooms a table prominently displayed the usual festal bill of fare, such as tea, samshu (Chinese wine), oranges, lemonade, cakes—the recipes for some having evidently been secured in America—and a great variety of Chinese candied fruits and candies, these last being much less sweet than civilized bonbons, and some by no means distasteful to a Caucasian palate. One special delicacy is candied pork fat, from which all grease

appears to have been extracted. Oranges are particularly popular, as the colloquial name for them—*kèk*—is the same used to express "fortunate" or "lucky." Water-melon seeds are also "fashionable." Cigars, opium, and the appliances for "high play" were not forgotten. Gambling is indulged in during the New-Year festivities to a vicious extent, and even during a visit to a Christian Chinese boarding-house it was very evident to observant ears that some of the inmates were enjoying themselves at play up stairs. The Grand Theatre, on Clay Street, with its new green and gold sign, but otherwise

most civilized exterior, advertised startling attractions for the holidays; and as Chinese plays apparently have neither beginning nor end (and at this time are kept up day and night), crowds of men, and some women and children of the lower classes, were constantly streaming in and out. Indeed, children, dressed in clothes cut after those of their elders, but

of a New-Year's visit amongst the better classes, I shall conclude with a description of this visit, paid by request on the second day of the new year, the first having been reserved by the consul exclusively for receiving his own countrymen. The Chinese greet each other with low and ceremonious bows, shaking their own hands, each congratulating the other; but



NEW-YEAR'S CALLS AMONG THE MERCHANTS.

with much more brilliant and fantastically combined colors, seemed suddenly to have swarmed from all quarters, and formed by no means the least interesting phase of this alien life. The temples were very thinly attended, except by curious Caucasians, as the special services for the New-Year had been held the night before.

As our call on the Consul-General, Mr. Chun Suw Ton, and his wife, can probably be considered a fairly typical experience

as a courtesy to their American guests, both Mr. Chun and his wife complied with our Yankee prejudices, and shook hands in the orthodox manner, although in the lady's case it evidently was done with a real effort, and as she wore no gloves, I am confident that when the ceremonies of the day were over she confided to her liege lord her disapprobation of this one amongst some other "barbarian" American customs.

A bright, scrupulously neat servant, in Chinese livery, opened the door, and ushered us into General Bee's office. (General Bee is Chinese consul in San Francisco, his vice-consul is a Chinese, and Mr. Chun is the Consul-General for the United States.) We were asked to deposit our cards in a civilized bric-à-brac card-receiver, a pile of red paper beside it showing how many of Mr. Chun's countrymen had been before us. The New-Year's visiting-card is a sheet of red paper averaging nine inches by four inches, its dimensions and the size and position of the characters printed on it differing with the rank and importance of the visitor; generally it merely contains the name, but sometimes a complimentary sentence or wish is added.

In a few moments General Bee appeared, and my Chinese friend introduced me. He greeted those present *en masse*, amongst them some half-dozen ladies, and told us to follow him into the next room, a double apartment, one half an anteroom, the other a large, comfortable office, where we were each in turn presented to the commercial representative of his sacred Majesty the Emperor of China—a fine-looking man of the Tartar type of feature, in full Chinese consular uniform, who spoke English fairly well, and most graciously. Having fortunately gone in with a feminine party, we were included in the invitation almost immediately extended, "Will you walk up stairs and see the ladies?" Following General Bee down some steps, and along a short corridor into what was evidently an adjoining house, we passed by the council-chamber, where some guests were being entertained by the vice-consul, and so on up stairs into a decidedly American-looking double parlor, furnished with Pacific coast made sofas and chairs, where we found the sweet-faced, gentle-mannered lady who, in obedience to her husband's commands, had put aside her native customs and bravely taken up a rôle not only strange, but, owing to her entire ignorance of English, embarrassing and fatiguing. Receiving with Mrs. Chun, and acting as interpreter, was a friend, the wife of a prominent Chinese merchant, equally attractive in appearance, perfectly self-possessed, with the charm of simplicity, and speaking English with a very agreeable soft voice and remarkably good accent. In the adjoining room a little child some three or

four years old was playing; her curiosity—that of her sex—soon brought her to make friends with us, although finally she returned to her companion, a young Chinese student on "sick-leave" from Harvard. A nurse, dressed in perfectly plain dark blue trousers and skirts, was seated at the far end of the room, evidently quite as much to enjoy the treat of seeing so unusual a ceremony as to watch her young charge, who had small need for her services.

A small embroidered screen and some scrolls on the wall were, the hostesses excepted, all that reminded us that we stood on the foreign soil of a Chinese consulate. As for these hostesses, they were certainly two very womanly, well-bred, unaffected creatures, whose handsome, bright-colored, but well-toned, fashionable Pekin-cut garments formed a most striking and curious contrast to the serviceable (it was a rainy day) close-fitting Ulster rigs of the American ladies who formed the majority of the party, and who used their eyes to examine with feminine capacity the superimposed layers of various silks and satins and embroideries which disguised the figures, and alas! even the feet, of the Oriental ladies. Their hair was stiffened into side wings, behind which were two bunches of artificial pink and gold asters, flanking a central bow of hair. Their cheeks had been artistically beautified with cosmetics—a universal Chinese custom.

We remained standing, after our presentation, until, Mrs. Chun resuming her seat, we, under General Bee's direction, followed her example. The next move was to hand to Mrs. Chun, according to suggestion, our visiting-cards, which apparently gave her as much gratification as we Americans had earlier in the day experienced in the possession of some hieroglyphically marked red papers. In exchanging a few sentences with the merchant's wife, I asked her if it was customary in China for ladies to receive. "Oh yes; we always do on New-Year's Day. We receive our friends, but not gentlemen." General Bee, overhearing the remarks, said we owed the privilege we were then enjoying to his influence with Mr. Chun, and that in the future this innovation would probably be kept up.

Conversation, in spite of the efforts of the gentle interpreters, having flagged to an appalling extent, we bowed, and

shook hands indiscriminately in adieu. We were accompanied to the head of the stairs by a Chinese Harvard student, and taken down to the council-chamber, where refreshments, of too civilized a description to be interesting, were offered and declined. But little time was allowed for examining the decorations of this room, which were brilliant, almost the whole wall space being covered with scarlet scrolls hung perpendicularly. Back of a raised platform or table at the end of the room—on which was a pyramid of sugar-peaches, emblems of longevity—was a sacred picture, and here evidently the family feast had taken place two nights before.

Returned to the Consul-General's room, we were again greeted by him, asked how we enjoyed our visit, introduced to the vice-consul, Mr. Hwang Tak Kneu, understood to be a graduate of Amherst Col-

lege. Then having relieved ourselves of some few cordial speeches, and been the recipients of most polite and complimentary ones in return, we made our bow to our Chinese host, and separated as a party, each to go his or her way, and ruminate on the strange fate which had brought face to face on the soil of the American Union two such diverse civilizations as the Anglo-Saxon and Mongolian.

By the third day of the new year, social dues having been discharged, the denizens of "Chinatown" were principally occupied in domestic, theatrical, or gambling pleasures; comparatively few were to be seen abroad; most house servants had returned to their American homes, and the streets were mainly given up to Chinese scavengers, who were busy collecting and carrying away the débris of the feasts, and the remnants of exploded bombs and effete fire-crackers.



NEW-YEAR CALLS OF CHILDREN.