

A Night in an Opium Den.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "A DEAD MAN'S DIARY."



YES, I have smoked opium in Ratcliff Highway, and in the den which was visited by Charles Dickens, and through the pipe which had

the honour of making that distinguished novelist sick.

"And did you have lovely dreams? and what were they like?" asks a fair reader.

Yes, I had lovely dreams, and I have no doubt that by the aid of imagination, and a skilful manipulation of De Quincey, I could concoct a fancy picture of opium-smoking and its effects, which might pass for a faithful picture of what really occurred. But, "My Lord and Jury"—to quote the historic words of Mrs. Cluppins, when cross-examined by Serjeant Buzfuz—"My Lord and Jury, I will not deceive you": what those dreams were, I could not for the life of me now describe, for they were too aerial and unsubstantial to be caught and fixed, like hard facts, in words, by any other pen than that of a Coleridge, or a De Quincey. I might as well attempt to convey to you, by means of a clay model, an idea of the prism-fires and rainbow-hues that circle, and change, and chase each other round the pictured sides of that floating fairy-sphere which we call a soap-bubble, as attempt, unassisted, to describe my dreams in words. Hence it is that in this narrative, I have confined myself strictly to the facts of my experiences.

The proprietor of the den which I visited was a Chinaman named Chang, who positively grinned me over from head to foot—not only when I was first made known

to him by the friend who had piloted me to the establishment, but as long as I remained within grinning range. An uninformed onlooker might not unnaturally have concluded that I was stone-deaf and dumb, and that our host was endeavouring to express, by his features, the cordiality he was unable to convey in words. In reply to every casual remark made by my companion, the Chinaman would glance up for a moment at his face, and then turn round to grimace again at me, as though I, and I only, were the subject of their conversation, and he was half afraid I might think he did not take a becoming interest in it. In the few words which I exchanged with him, I found him exceedingly civil, and he



THE PROPRIETOR.

took great pains to explain to me that his wearing no pigtail was attributable, not to his own act and deed, but to the fact that that ornament had been cut off by some person or persons unknown, when he was either drunk or asleep—I could not quite make out which. The deadliest insult which can be offered a Chinaman (so I understood him) is to cut off his pigtail, and it was only when referring to this incident, and to his desire to wreak a terrible vengeance upon the perpetrators, that there was any cessation of his embarrassing smile. The thought of the insult to which he had been subjected, and of his consequent degradation in the eyes of his countrymen, brought so evil a look upon his parchment-coloured features, and caused his small and cunning eyes to twist and turn so horribly, that I was glad to turn the conversation to pleasanter topics, even though it necessitated my being once more fixed by that bland and penetrating smile so peculiarly his own. The smile became more rigid than ever, when I informed him that I was anxious to smoke a pipe of opium. The way in which he turned his face upon me (including the smile, which enveloped and illumined me in its rays) was, for all the world, like the turning-on by a policeman of a bull's-eye lantern. With a final grin which threatened to distort permanently his features, he bade us follow him, and led the way up the most villainously treacherous staircase which it has



A VILLAINOUS STAIRCASE.

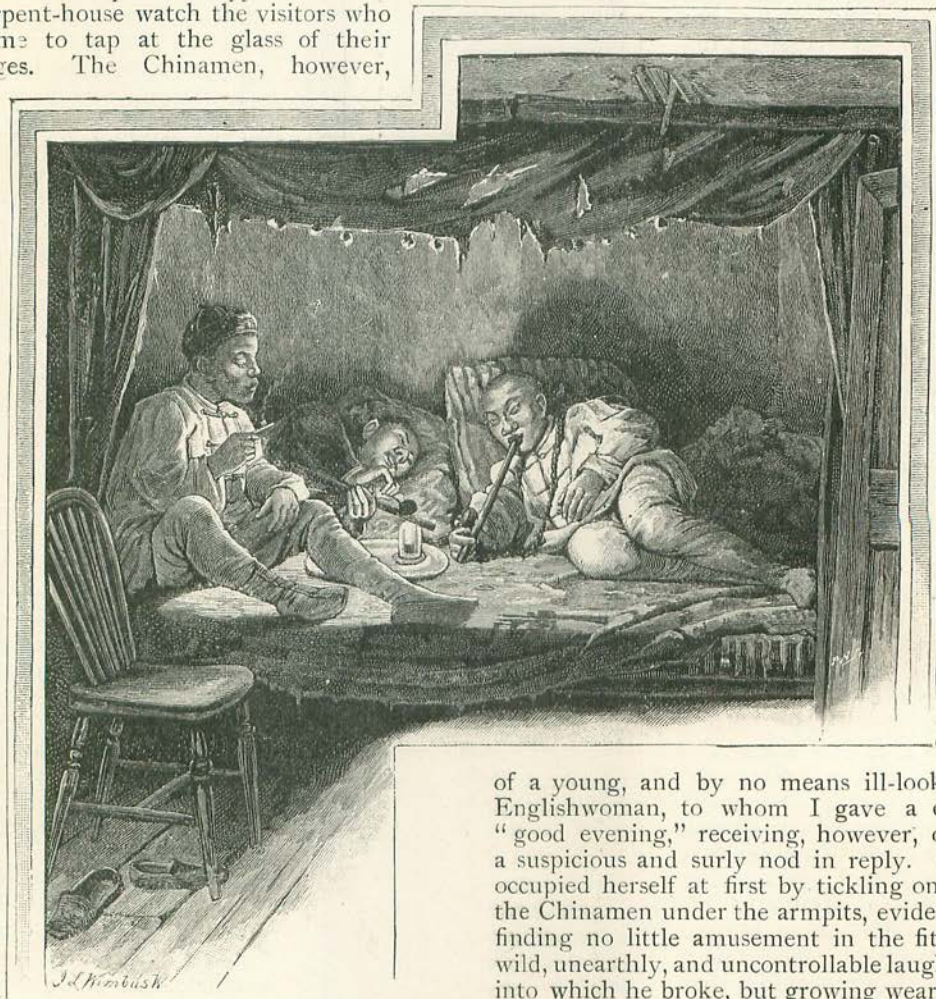
ever been my lot to ascend.

"Den" was an appropriate name for the reeking hole to which he conducted us. It was dirty and dark, being lit only by a smoking lamp on the mantel-shelf, and was not much larger than a full-sized cupboard. The walls, which were of a dingy yellow (not unlike the "whites" of the smokers' eyes) were quite bare, with the exception of the one facing the door, on which, incongruously enough, was plastered a coarsely-coloured and hideous print of the crucifixion. The furniture consisted of three raised mattresses, with small tables on which were placed pipes, lamps, and opium.

Huddled or curled up on these mattresses lay two wretched smokers—one of them with the whites, or, I should say, "yellows," of his eyes turned up to the ceiling, and another, whose slumbers we had apparently disturbed, staring about him with a dazed and stupefied air. Something in the look of these men—either the ghastly pallor of their complexion, or the listlessness of their bearing—reminded me not a little of the "white lepers" of Norway. I have seen patients in the hospitals there whose general aspect greatly resembled that of these men, although the skin of the white leper has more or a milky appearance—as if it had been bleached, in fact—than that of the opium-smoker, which is dirtier and more yellow. The remaining occupants of the den, two of whom were Chinamen, were wide awake. The third

was a partly naked Malay of decidedly evil aspect, who shrank back on my entrance, and coiled himself up in the recesses of a dark corner, whence he lay furtively watching me, very much in the same way in which the prisoned pythons in a serpent-house watch the visitors who come to tap at the glass of their cages. The Chinamen, however,

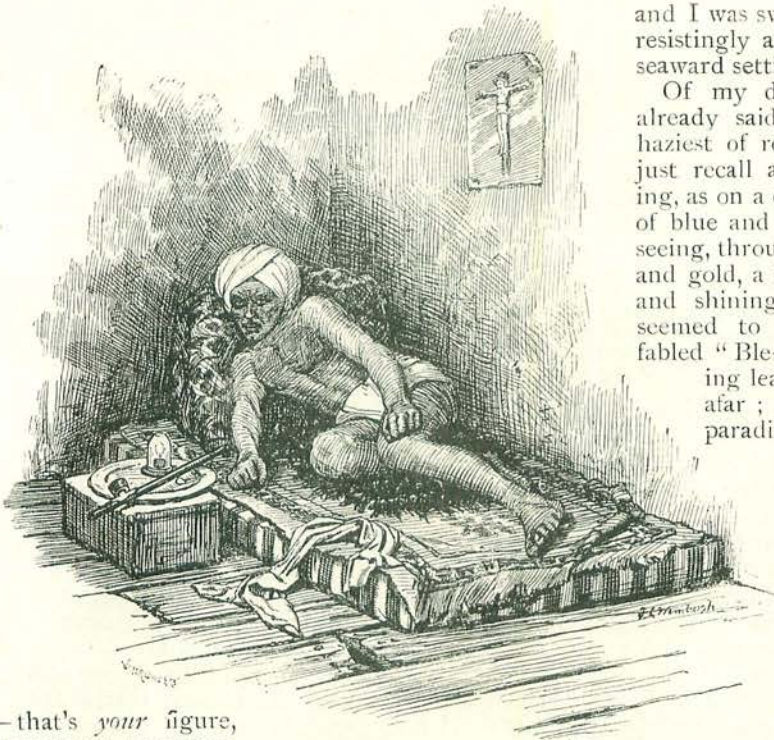
friend, watching me narrowly all the time, through the chink between his knees. At this point of my visit, and before I could take any further stock of the surroundings, I was not a little surprised by the entrance



IN THE DEN.

seemed pleased to see me; and, after I had handed my cigar-case to the nearest, begging that he and his friend would help themselves, they became quite companionable. One of them, to my surprise, immediately relinquished the drug which he had been smoking, and began to suck with evident relish at the cigar. The other, after pocketing the weed, lay down on his back with his arms behind his head, and with his legs drawn up to his body, in which singularly graceful and easy attitude he carried on a conversation with his

of a young, and by no means ill-looking Englishwoman, to whom I gave a civil "good evening," receiving, however, only a suspicious and surly nod in reply. She occupied herself at first by tickling one of the Chinamen under the armpits, evidently finding no little amusement in the fits or wild, unearthly, and uncontrollable laughter into which he broke, but growing weary of this, she seated herself on the raised mattress where I was located, and proceeded to take stock of her visitor. Beginning at my boots, and travelling up by way of trousers and waistcoat, up to my collar and face, she examined me so critically and searchingly from head to foot that I fancied once or twice I could see the row of figures she was inwardly casting up, and could hear her saying to herself, "Boots and trousers, say, sixty bob; and watch and chain, a couple of flimsies each; which, with coat and waistcoat, bring it up to thirty shiners; which, with a couple of fivers for links, loose cash and studs make about forty quid



A MALAY.

— that's *your* figure, young man, as near as I can reckon it."

While this was going on, my host, Mr. Chang, was busily making preparations for my initiatory smoke by sticking small pellets of the opium (a brownish, glue-like substance) upon a pin, and rolling and re-rolling them against the pipe, which is about the size of a small flute, and has a big open bowl with a tiny aperture at the base. Into this aperture the drug-smearing pin is slipped, and the pipe is then held over a lamp, and the fumes of the burning opium inhaled. The occupation is by no means a luxurious one; for, as surely as I removed the pipe from my lips to indulge in a furtive cough (and it did make me cough a bit at first), it inevitably went out. By means of repeated applications to the lamp, however, I managed to get through the allotted number of pipes, and sank slowly and insensibly into the deep waters of slumber, until at last they closed over my head,

and I was swept and borne unresistingly away upon the vast seaward setting tide of sleep.

Of my dreams, as I have already said, I have but the haziest of recollections. I can just recall a sensation of sailing, as on a cloud, amid regions of blue and buoyant ether; of seeing, through vistas of purple and gold, a scene of sunny seas and shining shores, where, it seemed to me, I beheld the fabled "Blessed Isles," stretching league beyond league

afar; and of peeps of paradisaical landscapes that swam up to me as through a world of waters, and then softened and sank away into a blending of beautiful colours, and into a vision of white warm arms and wooing bosoms.

And so we slept on, I and my wretched

companions, until, to quote Rossetti:—

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
And their dreams watched them sink, and slid
away.

Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams
Of watered light, and dull drowned waifs of day;
Till, from some wonder of new woods and streams,
He woke and wondered more.

Yes, "I woke and wondered more"—
woke to wonder where I was, and where
were my boots, my hat, and my umbrella;
woke to find the faithless friend, who had
promised to guard my slumbers, sleeping
peacefully at his post; and woke with a
taste in my mouth which can only be
likened to a cross between onions and bad
tobacco. And this taste, in conjunction with
a splitting headache and a general lowness
of spirits, served, for the next day or two,
to keep me constantly in remembrance of my
visit to the Opium Den in Ratcliff Highway.

