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THE CHINESE PLAY AT THE HAYMARKET.

"I DON'T know how it is, Meenie," said the manager gloomily, "but this theatre don't seem to pay at all. It's a complete failure, that's what it is. We must strike out something new and original, with a total change of scenery, properties, and costume."

It was the last night of the season at the Crown Prince's Theatre, Mayfair. The manager was an amiable young man, just beginning his career as a licensed purveyor of dramatic condiments; and though he had peppered and spiced his performances with every known form of legitimate or illegitimate stimulant, the public somehow didn't seem to see it. So here he was left at the end of the last night, surveying the darkened house from the footlights, and moodily summing up in his mind the grand total of the season's losses. Meenie, better known to the critical world as Miss Amina Fitz-Adilbert, was his first young lady, a lively little Irish girl, with just the faintest *soupçon* of a brogue; and if the Crown Prince's had turned out a success under his energetic management, Jack Roberts had fully made up his mind that she should share with him in future the honours of his name, at least in private life. She was an unaffected, simple little thing, with no actress's manners when off the stage; and as she had but one relative in the world, a certain brother Pat, who had run away to foreign parts unknown after the last Fenian business, she exactly suited Jack, who often expressed his noble determination of marrying "a lone orphan." But as things stood at present, he saw little chance of affording himself the luxury of matrimony, on a magnificent balance-sheet in which expenditure invariably managed to out-run revenue. So he stood disconsolate on the pasteboard wreck of the royal mail steamship which collided nightly in his fifth act; and looked like a sort of theatrical Marius about to immolate himself amid the ruins of a scene-painter's Carthage.

"We've tried everything, Meenie," he went on disconsolately, "but it doesn't seem to pay for all that. First of all we went in for sensational dramas. We put "Wicked London" on the stage: we drove a real hansom cab with a live horse in it across Waterloo Bridge; we had three murders and a desperate suicide: *you* nearly broke your neck leaping out of the fourth-floor window from the fire, when Jenkins forgot to put enough tow in the sheet to break your fall; and *I* singed my face dreadfully as the heroic fireman going to the rescue. We had more railway accidents, powdered coachmen, live supernumeraries, and real water in that piece than in any piece that was ever put on the London boards; and what did the *Daily Irritator* say about it, Meenie, I ask you that? Eh?"

"They said," Meenie answered regretfully, "that the play lacked incident, and that the dulness of its general mediocrity was scarcely relieved by a few occasional episodes which hardly deserved the epithet of sensational."

"Well, then we went in for æsthetics and high art, and brought out Theophrastus Massinger Villon Snook's 'Ninon de l'Enclos.' We draped the auditorium in sage-green hangings, decorated the proscenium with peacock patterns by Whistler, got Alma-Tadema to design the costumes for the classical masque, and Millais to supply us with hints on Renaissance properties, and finally half ruined ourselves over the architecture of that château with the unpronounceable name that everybody laughed at. You got yourself up so that your own mother wouldn't have known you from Ellen Terry, and I made my legs look as thin as spindles, so that I exactly resembled an eminent tragedian in the character of Hamlet: and what came of it all? What did the *Evening Stinger* remark about that play, I should like to know?"

"They observed," said Meenie, in a tone of settled gloom, "that the decorations were washy and tasteless; that the piece itself was insipid and weakly rendered; and that no amount of compression or silk leggings would ever reduce your calves to a truly tragic diameter."

"Exactly so," said the despondent manager. "And then we went in for scenic spectacle. We produced 'The Wide World: a Panorama in Five Tableaux.' We laid our first act in Europe, our second in Asia, our third in Africa, our fourth in America, and our fifth in the islands of the Pacific Ocean. We hired five full-grown elephants from Wombwell's menagerie, and procured living coconut palms at an enormous expense from the Royal Gardens, Kew. We got three real Indian princes to appear on the stage in their ancestral paste diamonds; and we hired Farini's Zulus to perform their complete toilette before the eyes of the spectators, as an elevating moral illustration of the manners and customs of the South Sea Islanders. We had views, taken on the spot, of England's latest acquisition, the Rock of Raratonga. Finally, we wrecked this steamer here in a collision with a Russian ironclad, supposed to be symbolical of the frightful results of

Mr. Gladstone's or Lord Beaconsfield's foreign policy—I'm sure I forget which: and what was the consequence? Why, the gods wanted to sing the National Anthem, and the stalls put on their squash hats and left the theatre in a fit of the sulks."

"The fact is," said Meenie, "English plays and English actors are at a discount. People are tired of them. They don't care for sensation any longer, nor for æsthetics, nor for spectacle: upon my word, their taste has become so debased and degraded that I don't believe they even care for legs. The whole world's gone mad on foreign actors and actresses. They've got Sarah Bernhardt and the Comédie Française, and they go wild with ecstasies over her; as if I couldn't make myself just as thin by a judicious course of Dr. Tanner."

"No, you couldn't," said Jack, looking at her plump little face with a momentary relaxation of his brow. "Your fresh little Irish cheeks could never fall away to Sarah's pattern." And to say the truth, Meenie was a comely little body enough, with just as much tendency to adipose deposit as at one-and-twenty makes a face look temptingly like a peach. She blushed visibly through her powder, which shows that she had no more of it than the custom of the stage imperatively demands, and went on with her parable unrestrained.

"Then there are the Yankees, with the Danites and Colonel Sellers, talking tragedy through their noses, and applauded to the echo by people who would turn up their own at them in a transpontine melodrama. But that's the way of English people now, just because they're imported direct. That comes of free-trade, you know. For my part, I'm a decided protectionist. I'd put a prohibitory tariff upon the importation of foreign livestock, or compel them to be slaughtered at the port of entry. That's what I'd do."

Jack merely sighed.

"Well, then there are the Dutch, again, going through their performances like wooden dolls. 'Exquisite self-restraint,' the newspapers say. Exquisite fiddlesticks! Do you suppose *we* couldn't restrain ourselves if we chose to walk through Hamlet like mutes at a funeral? Do you suppose *we* couldn't show 'suppressed feeling' if we acted Macbeth in a couple of easy-chairs? Stuff and nonsense, all of it. People go because they want other people to think they understand Dutch, which they don't, and understand acting, which they can't see there. If we want to get on, we must go in for being Norwegians, or Russians, or Sandwich Islanders, or something of that sort; we really must."

Jack looked up slowly and meditatively. "Look here, Meenie," he said seriously; "suppose we get up a Chinese play?"

"Why, Jack, we're not Chinamen and Chinawomen. We don't look in the least like it."

"I don't know about that," said Jack, quietly; "your eyes are not quite the thing perhaps, but your nose is fairly well up to pattern."

"Now, sir," said Meenie, pouting, and turning up the somewhat *retroussé* feature in question, "you're getting rude. My nose is a very excellent nose, as noses go. But you could never make yours into a Chinaman's. It's at least three inches too long."

"Well, you know, Meenie, there's a man who advertises a nose-machine for pushing the cartilage, or whatever you call it, into a proper shape. Suppose we get this fellow to make us nose-machines for distorting it into a Chinese pattern. You'll do well enough as you stand, with a little walnut-juice, all except the eyes; but your warmest admirer couldn't pretend that your eyes are oblique. We must find out some dodge to manage that, and then we shall be all right. We can easily hire a few real Chinamen as supernumeraries—engage Tom Fat, or get 'em over from New York, or San Francisco, or somewhere; and as for the leading characters, nobody'll ever expect them to be very Chinese-looking. Upon my word, the idea has points about it. I'll turn it over in my mind and see what we can make of it, We may start afresh next season, after all."

The next six or eight weeks were a period of prodigious exertion on the part of Jack Roberts. At first, the notion was a mere joke; but the more he looked at it, the better he liked it. An eminent distorter of the human countenance not only showed him how to twist his nose into Mongoloid breadth and flatness, but also invented an invisible eyelid for producing the genuine Turanian almond effect, and rose with success to the further flight of gumming on a pair of undiscoverable high cheek-bones. In a few days, the whole company were so transformed that their own prompter

wouldn't have known them, some allowance in the matter of noses and cheek-bones being naturally made in the case of the leading ladies, though all alike underwent a judicious course of copious walnut-juice. Jack telegraphed wildly to all parts of the globe for stray Chinamen; and when at last he picked up half a dozen from vessels in the Thames, it was unanimously decided that they looked far less genuinely celestial than the European members of the company. As for the play, Jack settled that very easily. "We shall give them George Barnwell," he said, with wicked audacity; "only we shall leave out all the consonants except *n* and *g*, and call it 'Hang Chow, the Apprentice of Fa Kiang.' It'll be easy enough to study our parts, as all we've got to do is to know our cues, and talk hocus-pocus in between as long as necessary." Very wicked and unprincipled, no doubt, but very natural under the circumstances.

In a few weeks Jack was able to announce that the celebrated Celestial Troupe of the Mirror of Truth, specially decorated by his Majesty the Emperor of China and Brother of the Sun with the order of the Vermilion Pencil-case, would appear in London during the coming season in an original Chinese melodrama, for a limited number of nights only. Enthusiasm knew no bounds. The advent of the Chinese actors was the talk of society, of the clubs, of private life, and of the boys at the street corners. The *Daily Irritator* had a learned article next morning on the origin, progress, and present condition of the Chinese stage, obviously produced upon the same principle as the famous essays on the metaphysics of the Celestial Empire which attracted so much attention in the columns of the *Eatanswill Gazette*. The *Hebdomadal Vaticinator* ventured to predict for its readers an intellectual treat such as they had not enjoyed since the appearance of Mr. Jefferson in "Rip van Winkle"—evidently the only play at the performance of which the editor of that thoughtful and prophetic journal had ever assisted. Eminent Oriental travellers wrote to the society weeklies that they had seen the leading actress, Mee-Nee-Shang, in various well-known Chinese dramas at Pekin, Nagasaki, Bangkok, and even Candahar. All of them spoke with rapture of her personal beauty, her exquisite singing, and her charmingly natural histrionic powers; and though there were some slight discrepancies as to the question of her height, her age, the colour of her hair, and the soprano or contralto quality of her voice, yet these were minor matters which faded into insignificance beside their general agreement as to the admirable faculties of the coming *prima donna*.

Applications for stalls, boxes, and seats in the dress circle poured in by the thousand. Very soon Jack became convinced that the Crown Prince's would never hold the crowds which threatened to besiege his doors, and he made a hasty arrangement for taking over the Haymarket. "Hang Chow, the Apprentice of Fa Kiang," was duly announced, and the play was put in rehearsal with vigour and effect.

At the beginning of the season, Jack opened the theatre with a tremendous success. Such a first night was never known in London. Duchesses intrigued for boxes, and peers called personally upon Jack to beg the favour of a chair behind the dress circle, as all the stalls were secured beforehand for a month ahead. The free list was *really* suspended, and the pit and gallery were all transformed into reserved places at five shillings a head. Jack even thought it desirable to ensure proper ventilation by turning on a stream of pure oxygen from a patent generator in the cellars below. It was the grandest sensation of modern times. Sarah Bernhardt was nowhere, Mr. Raymond took a through ticket for California, and the Dutch players went and hanged themselves in an agony of disgrace.

The curtain lifted upon a beautiful piece of willow-plate pattern scenery in blue china. Azure trees floated airily above a cerulean cottage, while a blue pagoda stood out in the background against the sky, with all the charming disregard of perspective and the law of gravitation which so strikingly distinguishes Chinese art. The front of the stage was occupied by a blue shop, in which a youth, likewise dressed in the prevailing colour with a dash of white, was serving out blue tea in blue packages to blue supernumeraries, the genuine Chinamen of the Thames vessels. A blue lime-light played gracefully over the whole scene, and diffused a general sense of celestiality over the picture in its completeness. Applause was unbounded. Æsthetic ladies in sage-green hats tore them from their heads, lest the distressful contrast of hue should mar the pleasure of their refined fellow-spectators; and a well-known Pre-Raphaelite poet, holding three daffodils in his hand, fainted outright, as he afterwards expressed it, with a spasmodic excess of intensity, due to the rapturous but too swift satisfaction of a subtle life-hunger.

The youth in blue, by name Hang Chow, appeared, from the expressive acting of the celestial troupe, to be the apprentice of his aged and respectable uncle, Wang Seh, proprietor of a suburban grocery in a genteel neighbourhood of Pekin. At first impressively and obviously guided by the highest moral feelings, as might be observed from the elevated nature of his gestures, and the extreme accuracy with which he weighed his tea or counted out change to his customers, his whole character underwent a visible deterioration from the moment of his becoming acquainted with Mee-Nee-Shang, the beautiful but wicked heroine of the piece. Not only did he become less careful as to the plaiting of his pigtail, but he also

paid less attention to the correct counting out of his change, which led to frequent and expressive recriminations on the part of the flat-faced supernumeraries. At length, acting upon the suggestions of his evil angel, with whom he appeared about to contract a clandestine marriage, George Barn—I mean, Hang Chow—actually robbed the till of seventeen strings of cash, represented by real Chinese coins of the realm, specially imported (from Birmingham) among the properties designed for the illustration of this great moral drama. Of course he was hunted down through the instrumentality of the Chinese police, admirably dressed in their national costume; and after an interesting trial before a Mandarin with four buttons and the Exalted Order of the Peacock's Feather, he was found guilty of larceny to the value of twenty shillings, and sentenced to death by the bastinado, the sentence being carried out, contrary to all Western precedent, *coram populo*. Meenie, whose admirable acting had drawn down floods of tears from the most callous spectators, including even the directors of a fraudulent bank, finally repented in the last scene, flung herself upon the body of her lover, and died with him, from the effect of the blows administered by one of the supernumeraries with a genuine piece of Oriental bamboo.

The curtain had risen to applause, it fell to thunders. Meenie and half the company came forward for an ovation, and were almost smothered under two cartloads of bouquets. The dramatic critic of the *Daily Irritator* loudly declared that he had never till that night known what acting was. The poet with the daffodils asked to be permitted to present three golden blossoms with an unworthy holder of the same material to a lady who had at one sweep blotted out from his heart the memory of all European maidens. Five sculptors announced their intention of contributing busts of the Celestial Venus to the next Academy. And society generally observed that such an artistic and intellectual treat came like a delightful oasis amid the monotonous desert of English plays and English acting.

That night, as soon as the house was cleared, Jack caught Meenie in his arms, kissed her rapturously upon both cheeks, and vowed that they should be married that day fortnight. Meenie observed that she might if she liked at that moment take her pick of the unmarried peerage of England, but that on the whole she thought she preferred Jack. And so they went away well pleased with the success of their first night's attempt at heartlessly and unjustifiably gulling the susceptible British public.

Next day, both Jack and Meenie looked anxiously in the papers to see the verdict of the able and impartial critics upon their Chinese drama. All the fraternity were unanimous to a man. "The play itself," said the *Irritator*, "was perfect in its naïve yet touching moral sentiment, and in its profound knowledge of the throbbing human heart, always the same under all disguises, whether it be the frock-coat of Christendom or the graceful tunic of the Ming dynasty, in whose time the action is supposed to take place. As for the charming acting of Mee-Nee-Shang, the 'Pearl of Dazzling Light'—so an eminent Sinaist translates the lady's name for us—we have seen nothing so truthful for many years on the Western stage. It was more than Siddons, it was grander than Rachel. And yet the graceful and amiable actress 'holds up the looking-glass to nature,' to borrow the well-known phrase of Confucius, and really acts so that her acting is but another name for life itself. When she died in the last scene, medical authorities present imagined for the moment that the breath had really departed from her body; and Sir John McPhysic himself was seen visibly to sigh with relief when the little lady tripped before the curtain from the sides as gaily and brightly as though nothing had occurred to break the even tenor of her happy thought. It was a pleasure which we shall not often experience upon British boards."

As for the *Hebdomadal Vaticinator*, its language was so ecstatic as to defy transcription. "It was not a play," said the concluding words of the notice, "it was not even a magnificent sermon: it was a grand and imperishable moral revelation, burnt into the very core of our nature by the searching fire of man's eloquence and woman's innocent beauty. To have heard it was better than to have read all the philosophers from Aristotle to Herbert Spencer: it was the underlying ethical principle of the universe working itself out under our eyes to the infallible detection of all shams and impostures whatsoever, with unerring truth and vividness."

Jack and Meenie winced at that last sentence a little; but they managed to swallow it, and were happy enough in spite of the moral principle which, it seemed, was working out their ultimate confusion unperceived.

For ten nights "Hang Chow, the Apprentice of Fa Kiang," continued to run with unexampled and unabated success. Mee-Nee-Shang was the talk of the clubs and the *salons* of London, and her portrait appeared in all the shop windows, as well as in the next number of the *Mayfair Gazette*. Professional beauties of Aryan type discovered themselves suddenly at a discount; while a snub-nosed, almond-eyed little countess, hitherto disregarded by devotees of the reigning belles, woke up one morning and found herself famous. On the eleventh night, Jack's pride was at its zenith. Royalty had been

graciously pleased to signify its intention of occupying its state box, and the whole house was ablaze, from the moment of opening the doors, with a perfect flood of diamonds and rubies. Meenie peeped with delight from behind the curtain, and saw even the stalls filled to overflowing ten minutes before the orchestra struck up its exquisite symphony for bells and triangle, entitled, "The Echoes of Nankin."

But just at the last moment, as the curtain was on the point of rising, Jack rushed excitedly to her dressing-room, and pushing open the door without even a knock, exclaimed, in a tone of tragic distress, "Meenie, we are lost."

"Goodness gracious! Jack! what on earth do you mean?"

"Why, who do you suppose is in the next box to the Prince?—the Chinese Ambassador with all his suite! We shall be exposed and ruined before the eyes of all London, and His Royal Highness as well."

Meenie burst away to the stage, with one half of her face as yet unpowdered, and took another peep from behind the curtain at the auditorium. True enough, it was just as Jack had said. There, in a private box, with smiling face and neat pigtail, sat His Excellency the Marquis Tseng in person, surrounded by half a dozen unquestionable Mongolians. Her first impulse was to shriek aloud, go into violent hysterics, and conclude with a fainting fit. But on second thoughts she decided to brazen it out. "Leave it to me, Jack," she said, with as much assurance as she could command. "We'll go through the first act as well as we can, and then see what the Ambassador thinks of it."

It was anxious work for Meenie, that evening's performance; but she pulled through with it somehow. She had no eyes for the audience, nor even for His Royal Highness; she played simply and solely to the Ambassador's box. Everybody in the theatre noticed the touching patriotism which made the popular actress pay far more attention to the mere diplomatic representative of her own beloved sovereign than to the heir-apparent of the British throne. "You know, these Chinese," said the Marchioness of Monopoly, "are so tenderly and sentimentally attached to the paternal rule of their amiable Emperors. They still retain that pleasing feudal devotion which has unfortunately died out in Europe through the foolish influence of misguided agrarian agitators." At any rate, Meenie hardly took her eyes off the Ambassador's face. But that impassive oriental sat through the five acts without a sign or a movement. Once he ate an ice *à la Napolitaine*, and once he addressed a few remarks to an *attaché*; but from beginning to end he watched the performance with a uniformly smiling face, unmoved to tears by the great bastinado scene, and utterly impervious even to the touching incidents of the love-making in the third act.

When the curtain fell at last, Meenie was fevered, excited, trembling from head to foot, but not hopeless. Calls of "Mee-Nee-Shang" resounded loudly from the whole house, and even dukes stood up enthusiastically to join in the clamour. When she went forward she noticed an ominous fact. The Ambassador was still in his place, beaming as before, but the interpreter had quitted his seat and was moving in the direction of the manager's room.

Meenie curtseyed and kow-towed in a sort of haze or swoon, and managed to reel off the stage somehow with her burden of bouquets. She rushed eagerly to Jack's room, and as she reached the door she saw that her worst fears were realized. A celestial in pig-tail and tunic was standing at the door, engaged in low conversation with the manager.

Meenie entered with a swimming brain and sank into a chair. The interpreter shut the door softly, poured out a glass of sherry from Jack's decanter on the table, and held it gently to her lips. "Whisht," he said, beneath his breath, in the purest and most idiomatic Hibernian, "make yourself perfectly aisy, me dear, but don't spake too loud, if you plase, for fear ye should ruin us botht."

There was something very familiar to Meenie in the voice, which made her start suddenly. She looked up in amazement. "What!" she cried, regardless of his warning, "it isn't you, Pat!"

"Indade an' it is, me darlin'," Pat answered in a low tone; "but kape it dark, if ye don't want us all to be found out togither."

"Not your long-lost brother?" said Jack, in hesitation. "You're not going to perform Box and Cox in private life before my very eyes, are you?"

"The precise thing, me boy," Pat replied, unabashed. "Her brother that was in trouble for the last Faynian business, and

run away to Calcutta. There I got a passage to China, and took up at first with the Jesuit missionaries. But marrying a nate little Chinese girl, I thought I might as well turn Mandarin, so I passed their examinations, and was appointed interpreter to the embassy. An' now I'm in London I'm in deadly fear that Mike Flaherty, who's one of the chief detectives at Scotland Yard, will find me out and recognize me, the same as they recognized that poor cricketer fellow at Leicester."

A few minutes sufficed to clear up the business. Pat's features lent themselves as readily as Meenie's to the Chinese disguise; and he had cleverly intimated to the Ambassador that an additional interpreter in the national costume would prove more ornamental and effective than a recognized European like Dr. Macartney. Accordingly, he had assumed the style and title of the Mandarin Hwen Thsang, and had successfully passed himself off in London as a genuine Chinaman. Moreover, being gifted with Meenie's theatrical ability, he had learned to speak a certain broken English without the slightest Irish accent; and it was only in moments of emotion, like the present, that he burst out into his native dialect. He had recognized Meenie on the stage, partly by her voice and manner, but still more by some fragments of Irish nursery rhymes, which they had both learned as children, and which Meenie had boldly interpolated into the text of the *Fantaisies de Canton*. So he had devoted all his energies to keeping up the hoax and deluding the Ambassador.

"And how did you manage to do it?" asked Jack.

"Sure I tould him," Pat answered quietly, "that though ye were all Chinamen, ye were acting the play in English to suit your audience. And the ould haythen was perfectly contint to belave it."

"But suppose he says anything about it to anybody?"

"Divil a word can he spake to anybody, except through me. Make yourselves aisy about it; the Ambassador thinks it's all as right as tinpence. The thing's a magnificent success. Ye'll jest coin money, and nobody'll ever find ye out. Sure there's nobody in London understands Chinese except us at the embassy, and I'll make it all sthraight for ye there."

Meenie rushed into his arms, and then into Jack's. "Pat," she said, with emotion, "allow me to present you my future husband."

"It's proud I am to make his acquaintance," Pat answered promptly; "and if he could lend me a tinpound note for a day or two, it 'ud be a convanience."

Three days later, Meenie became Mrs. Jack Roberts; and it was privately whispered in well-informed circles that the manager of the Chinese play had married the popular actress Mee-Nee-Shang. At least, it was known that a member of the embassy had been present at a private meeting in a Roman Catholic Chapel in Finsbury, where a priest was seen to enter, and Jack and Meenie to emerge shortly afterwards.

Of course the hoax oozed out in time, and all London was in a state of rage and despair. But Jack coolly snapped his fingers at the metropolis, for he had made a small fortune over his season's entertainment, and had accepted an offer to undertake the management of a theatre at Chicago, where he is now doing remarkably well. Of course, too, his hoax was a most wicked and unprincipled adventure, which it has given the present writer deep moral pain to be compelled to chronicle. But then, if people *will* make such fools of themselves, what is a well-meaning but weak-minded theatrical purveyor to do?

Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *The Chinese Play at The Haymarket* by Grant Allen]