

Among the Heathen

Wonderful is California, and San Francisco is one of its wonders. Enthroned on more than seven hills, it overlooks one of the most glorious bodies of water in the world. "It is a thing of beauty," "it is a joy forever," Golden Gate Park, Sutro Heights, Market Street, Kearney Street, the United States Mint, the Palace Hotel, are things to be remembered. But besides all this there is a peculiar air about the whole city which distinguishes it from all others.

Writing on the cable cars up and down, up and down, one is inclined to believe, the town ready-made, was recklessly thrown by the gods on the sand dunes of the Pacific coast. Man came and finding the wooden houses with their bay-windows already established in their places, straightway built the cable roads. For was it not easier to do these things, then to level the hills?

In the heart of this beautiful city is a place covering eight blocks which is called Chinatown. "Seeing is believing," said Thomas the Doubter. Seeing Chinatown is understanding, in some degree at least the hostile attitude of the West Coast people towards the Coolies. I went to San Francisco with no particular views on the Chinese question. I left it with feelings which I leave those to infer, who hear this narrative.

Kearney Street is the aristocratic shop street. On California Street are the residences of Senator Stanford, the late Mrs. Hopkins, Searles and other nabobs. The it is the millionaire street of the Golden Gate City. These thoroughfares surround Chinatown on two sides. Fiction may indulge in contrasts, but reality has greater ones.

It was half past eight in the evening when I started out. At this time the Mongolians began to swarm about most numerously. I walked along California to DuPont. On the corner of DuPont is a Roman Catholic Church. I turned the corner, past the church and behold! I was in Chinatown. I was in a civilization entirely different from our own. I felt as if I were no longer in America.

The shops were arranged differently with signs in Chinese characters, all around me yellow faces with almond eyes; the few white people there were foreigners like myself. I cast about for a guide and soon found one in the person of a gentleman, who was introduced by the policeman as Dan Poorhees. He promised to show me Chinatown "thoroughly." His territory was not large, only eight blocks yet within this space there live forty-five-thousand Chinamen and three thousand Chinese women. The women according to Mr. Poorhees, are nearly all prostitutes. We walked through narrow alleys and streets with the penetrating odor of sandal-wood about us. We entered a house two stories high and about one hundred feet square. There was a courtyard within but, lest any space might be wasted, piles had been driven into the ground and on these another room or suite of rooms had been built. Thus there was left a narrow circular walk by which the inhabitants could reach their respective lodgings.

The pavement of the walk was wet and there was a smell of urine in the air. In this place which is called the Gibson House there live two hundred Chinese. It is one of the two

buildings that are actually owned by Mongolians. But the same economy of space seems to be practiced by all.

After various other studies in ventilation we went to several Joss houses. The moment we entered the first one I could not help saying to myself, "childish." And childish seems to be the word which, better than any other, characterizes every thing about the Chinese excepting their vices. Their vices are those of full-grown men, but all else, pardon the repetition appears childish. They are small in stature. They cling with childish tenacity to their peculiar dress and their pig-tails. They are superstitious, even their children do not look like ordinary children but rather like the children of children, i.e. like dolls. Given a Chinese baby in a quiet state, it would be difficult to distinguish it from the common Chinese doll. In the Joss houses the images were made of wood, carved in rude outlines, decorated with a profusion of ornaments.

Here is worshiped the originator of gambling, for by universal testimony our yellow brethren are inveterate gamblers. The god of commerce is there for the Chinese are an acquisitive people. The guide also pointed out an image which is worshiped by the women. It represents one who was impure at the rather precarious age of six. Confucius is of the assembly. About him Mr. Poorhees gave some rare information. He carefully pronounced his name in Chinese which sounded like Cen-foo-tsee and told me he was the one who first instructed the sons of the Celestial Empire in morals and Christianity.

I was overjoyed at this discovery, "carry the news to Rennon , " I thought "perhaps he would re-write his origins." Other objects of worship are images of ancestors and tools of various kinds, the common offerings seem to be candles and sandal wood, for in each of the Joss houses a stick of this wood was burning, and lighted candles were seen in the streets. There do not seem to be regular services to which congregations assemble but each individual offers prayer and incense separately. There are occasional festivals, however, but I was not fortunate enough to witness any.

Having seen the places where John satisfies his hunger after righteousness, we proceeded to the restaurants where his physical hunger is appeased. They are disgustingly dirty. On the counters are little plates such as children delight to play with, Worcester sauce and onions are served in tiny portions on tiny saucers and all the precious morsels which are sold there are of corresponding size. But we must not forget the kitchen down in the cellar. No stove there, but a hearth. Immediately adjoining the hearth, separated from it by only a thin wooden partition was that which may optimistically, be termed the water-closet and the stench of it was by no means peculiar to one place. I noticed it in each of the kitchens which we visited.

One restaurant was a notable exception in its cleanliness. Here most tourists take tea, but as I was not introduced to the cooking den, I could not overcome my repugnance and I abstained. But John does something more than work, sleep, pray and eat; he must have his pleasures too. He gambles, goes to the theater, to houses of ill fame and indulges in the use of opium. The opium dens were our next objective point. We descended two flights of rickety stairs, walked along an underground passage and stopped before a door. The guide took a key from the wall, unlocked the door and after we had entered, locked it again. He remarked that it was forbidden by law to visit these places and hence his

precaution. This tallied beautifully with the fact that the guide had been procured for me by a police man who probably received a commission for his trouble.

The place which we had entered was truly a den, ten feet square were utilized to the utmost. Along the walls two shelves had been fastened and on these lady opium smokers. One such room accommodated nine persons. We saw some lying there in a stupor, others smoking, others roasting the opium at the end of the wire. After we had seen several of these the guide wanted to take me to the theater but as I had resolved to go there alone I asked to be taken to a gambling house. This he declared himself unable to do as the Chinese had been deceived some years ago by detectives and ever since have excluded all white people. I bade good night to Mr. Poorhees and went home. But the odor of Chinatown was in my clothes and it haunted me all night.

The next evening I went to one of the Chinese theaters. There are two of them in San Francisco. They open at half past four in the afternoon and close at twelve mid-night sharp. Sometimes the play is not finished in one evening and in that case is continued the next. Here too I was impressed with the childishness of the performance. There was no scenery. The orchestra consisted of four men who produced most unearthly discords. The singing was unmelodious and would brake forth now and then into a hoarse screech.

Men with long flowing beards, which grew from there upper lips, appeared on the stage. The language sounded like babble and where the action was intelligible it was exaggerated. Towards mid-night the play grew more exciting. People came rushing in, spoke a few words and rushed out again. Finally, however, an actor with a most hideous porcelain mask came forth. He held in his hand a white wand with which he made various motions, then the supernumerary held up an oblong piece of cloth bewritten with Chinese characters, and he of the white mask, turning his back to the audience, made two most profound bows before the cloth. More waving of the wand, the supernumerary brought some sandal wood which he lighted on the stage and at two minutes of twelve (there was a clock above the stage) shooting crackers began to explode most unexpectedly to myself and at twelve the show was over. Although I did not understand one word, yet I was much interested and I was the very last to leave the theater.

It is but just to state in a few words the favorable impressions that I received. From what I had seen I inferred that the Chinese were an unclean race. And yet I never saw a China man whose face was not scrupulously clean and whose socks, at least those parts of visible above the slippers were not of snowy whiteness. I had also thought, judging from the few that had up to that time crossed my path, that they were an unintelligent-looking race. But in Chinatown I saw many men whose countenances would have done honor to Caucasians and some of them had truly magnificent heads! I had also believed that they all looked alike. In this, too, I found myself badly mistaken. It is simply because we see so few of them that we receive such an impression. True, not one of them wears a beard, but otherwise I was really surprised after I had been in their midst for a little while, at the variety of faces among them. By the testimony of the West Coast people themselves John is peace-loving and unoffending.

Such, briefly stated were my impressions and experiences in Chinatown. The bearing of the Chinese problem on the labor question is too well known to admit of discussion here.

Shall we then admit the coolies because this is a free country? I have answered that question to my own satisfaction.

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