Ways that are Dark*

The Cat and the Cherub. Stories by Chester Bailey Fernald. The Century Co.

THE Chinese war, in so far as it pictured itself to the American imagination, was a huge laundry affair. In vain did we inform ourselves of the number and variety of their troops, in vain did we watch their battles on paper and think of their 400,000,000 souls, their impressive history, their institutions, their vast social system. We could but see them, hordes of them—Sam Lees and Hoo Tongs,—as the tidings of war came fast, dropping their flat-irons, wrapping their chemises about them and their "pants," and with their swinging sleeves and wavy legs and slapping shoes, flopping off to fight. So do our poor imaginations halt and strive with the little they have seen. So do we go begging for a Chinese Empire, from door to door, where we leave our cuffs and collars.

As a human being, at least from a narrow, civilized point of view, the Chinaman has always seemed a kind of caricature of the rest of us. He is a sardonic grin at humanity. Too much like ourselves, we dimly conceive, not to be taken seriously, half vexing, half amusing, we let him iron the queer little rings we mortals of a western world wear patiently around our necks. We go to his theatres to see the play of his seeing a play. The hazy literary atmosphere of an opium joint appeals to us, and then, of course, there are his tea and jades and dragons and myths and things; but an instinct, or superstition, or 5000 years—there is no telling what,—keeps us incorrigibly aloof from John Chinaman. We confine ourselves to abusing him, or to saving his soul. It makes little difference which, so far as John is concerned. Street-boys and gospels—are they not both the same to him? He is the genius of Imperviousness.

The spirit of this imperviousness has at last been caught with rare success. Mr. Fernald has caused it to pass before us. He has made it a haunting thing. The first Chinaman we see shuffling down the sidewalk is bound to be followed by it. Let him disappear—he rounds the corner into romance and murder and passion and mystery. It is only the spiritual touch that can give to brutality its supreme brutishness. "The Pot of Frightful Doom" is but a pot until an artist touches it; and "The Man Who Lost His Head" is as prosaic for all practical purposes as though he had one. Chinamen who cut off the heads of their wives' admirers are dull enough while they are doing it, or before they have done it, or because they have not done it before—except in a book. Being murdered is uninteresting until Stevenson writes it up, and the poetry of it, the imaginative bearing, the spiritual force of it, is actually brought out. One never has time to appreciate being murdered. Murdering people is no better. One is always too preoccupied, too much wrapped up in detail, to get at the soul of the thing, to really see what a fine tragedy one is in, and what an important part he plays, and how everything is connected with everything, and how interesting one really is. Crime has no distinction of itself. Murder is a mere crunching of something by something. The most vivid impression of the criminal Chinaman, so far as he is dealt with in Mr. Fernald's book, is this crunching impression—the matter-of-factness of murder to a Chinaman, its soullessness, his killing people with *ennui*. He kills a man, forsooth—happens to think of it as he goes along. Something drops. Then he passes on—bored, probably, when he comes to be killed himself.

To the spiritualized imagination of the Occident, there is a revelation, a new conception, in this deadness to death. It is one of the most striking effects that Mr. Fernald could possibly have produced—John Chinaman the masterpiece of matter. By dint of inference and atmosphere he brings out the humor—the essential humor of tragedy and religion—from the Chinaman's point of view. The conversion of High Rob is one of the best jokes in the book; and Hoo King, poor, anxious father, bound to find his child to save his cat, is as sad and funny and astounding as could possibly be desired. But Mr. Fernald has done more than to discover some new and delightful villains for us. He has revealed, at the same time with this imperviousness of the Chinaman, the flicker of something behind it, the something which, for the lack of a better name, is called his soul. One does not soon forget the humanity and insight of the second story, the exquisite idyl of a knot-hole—Pyramus and Thisbe in Chinese,—by the walls of the Important Town, before the Cruel Thousand Years. Nor does one forget the Cat and the Cherub.

It is a question whether one can ever feel quite acquainted with a child until he sees it loving and lugging something. If it is something rather big and cuddling and bungling, like a cat—so much the better. What with the mutual protection of it, the mutual embarrassment and endurance of it, the peeking by each other, the squeeze and being squeezed,—there is but one result possible to a normal man—taking the whole picture up into one's arms and being scratched by the cat. Mr. Fernald—thanks to some lucky day perhaps, some stray and happy walk, when he ought to have been doing something else, or thinking of something else, or doing his duty and not thinking at all, like the rest of us—must have found himself in Chinatown, must have been scratched by the Cat. At all events, there came some clue to him, scratched or unscratched, some beautiful, evasive, sideways delight, some little edge of a vision—a baby's face, and lo! a New Man led into Literature and Fame, and *The Century*, by a toddling heathen and a cat.

We should fail
To give credit,
Where credit is due,
Not to give credit
To the Infant Hoo.

Anyone who takes up "The Cat and the Cherub," who looks for one moment into the 5000-year-old face of the Infant Hoo, will see how reasonable this is. Almost anyone could write a book on a face like this. The great trouble would be, not to. Whether Grace Wetherell found the owner of all of this face, lost and left upon the pavements of San Francisco like a little chunk of ancient history, and brought him into the House of Glittering Things, and sketched him and washed him and immortalized him like the godsend he was, and Mr. Fernald came and saw and was conquered, and the story came from the picture, we cannot say; but we are sure that whichever of these two—the artist or the author—created first, one of them has transposed into his own particular kind of joy the creation of the other. It is a twice-told tale. It may be necessary, as a last resort, to admit that Hoo Chee the original might have been seen by both, and Hoo Chee—the original Hoo Chee—with his

*See portrait on page 358.

chin on the balcony rail, peering down on Chinatown, would have made a book necessary and a picture inevitable. Even the hardened reader wants to write a book about him. The critic, the desperate critic, down in his dulled, seared heart has the same desire.

It is only to be regretted from the missionary point of view, that Miss Wetherell should have made being born a heathen so dangerously attractive. Readers of average books will wonder a little, too, at the recklessness of the publishers in not saving Miss Wetherell's frontispiece for some other tale of the Chinese. Mr. Fernald's story makes pictures for itself.

So far as the other stories in the volume are concerned—the civilized ones,—while it would be unfair to accuse the author of a merely Mongolian imagination, the most that can be said of them is that they would be very good, indeed, it anyone else had written them. They serve as an excellent buffer against criticism, the assertion that Mr. Fernald is a provincial artist, that he does extraordinarily well with the material which he has lived into, but can hardly expect success in a venture beyond. There is every reason to believe—with or without the wager that is laid before the public in these added stories, that Mr. Fernald's art can be translated into American life, that he is too original and vital in his mental habit not to make of more than usual interest any work he may do, if only to see how he does it, or why he fails to do it, or how long an adjustment he will require, to give an inevitably creative mind its swing and final movement into power. In the meantime, China is big enough. The rest of the world—the same old blotter of a world, criss-crossed and scribbled through and through and over and over again, weary of ourselves and blurred—are we not almost written out, Mr. Fernald? And perhaps, after all, until some more of us are dead, we are hardly worth while.

Pray bring us Hoo Chee.

GERALD STANLEY LEE.