Tales of the Far East

1. Chun Ti-kung: A Novel. By Claude A. Rees. Dodd, Mead & Co.
2. Kakemonos. By W. Carlton Dawe. John Lane.

THE ATTENTION of the sallow and gangrene school of writers is invited to the abundance of what is horrible, revolting and nasty among the possibilities of fiction about Chinamen. The limitations of the field lie in other directions, and Mr. Rees, who is not at all of the sallow and gangrene school, but would rather draw the honest tears of the unperverted, has recognized these limitations and has compromised with them in introducing into the life of Chun Ti-kung (1) an English girl, who becomes the Chinaman's wife. A Caucasian romancer about Chinamen will realize the most readily at how few points intelligent Caucasian sympathy touches Chinese life. It is true that even in the Middle Kingdom, Heaven still sends small children with hearts such as it would have the hearts of men; and there is universal testimony to the charm of little pigtails. But the charm fails inversely with the pigtail's growth. The first serious undertaking of the Chinese youth, when he enters the native school-room, where he is tapped loudly on the skull when memory fails him, strikes us as no more than comic. We know that on the other side of the sphere most things are inverted; but nevertheless we do not readily entertain the fact that upside-down methods are for the greater part as practical there as our methods are here. Then, if we pursue the student in his strivings to fit himself for the ruling rank, solely by cramming himself with the classic verse and epigram of his tongue, he excites merely our intellectual contempt, even though he be learning all the wisdom of ages of his people that can be held in words. Meantime the unspirituality of his marriage and the religious doctrine that decrees it we find appalling, even if we grasp how this wonderfully virile and self-perpetuating doctrine of ancestor-worship has been the warp of the Chinese social fabric for thousands of years. Whether he now becomes merchant or mandareen, by our standards his career lies along low levels of highly cultivated artifice and artistic mendacity and concealment, illumined by little more than the usually perfect integrity in dollars and cents which seems to him the most profitable policy. Custom, fear, superstition and material gain ride him to the grave; and if he indulges extravagantly in friends it is with the certainty that they will indulge extravagantly in him; for friendship is in his creed as it is in the teachings of Socrates—a cold coöperation. There are Chinese who do not answer to this description; but marvelously few—in 1897. And until one realizes how few, one cannot realize the infinite inertia of that great empire which lies over against Russia like a vast bulk of lead.

So in verisimilar narratives, too long to trim stably without an appeal to deeper Caucasian sympathies, Caucasian elements must generally be introduced. This is what Mr. Rees has done; but his English girl who marries a Chinaman arouses little more than our curious pity. For, despite his unsurpassed mandareen dignity and his civet-cat cap and his gorgeous winter silks and the bland oil that runs in his veins, it is very Chinese to marry a Chinaman. A few such marriages have happened, and some comparatively high in the social scale; there seems to be nothing that has not happened. And Mr. Ralph has sketched a like conjunction. But we are apt to hold our tears for the things that, considered in their finer abstractions, might have happened to us. Miss Serjeant used to sit in her library, which we are told was "a nice shady place," and read as much as she could find about China. What book she could have read that would not have left the thought of living in China with a Chinese husband forever odious to a woman of ordinary delicacy, is certainly not in the Library of Congress; and it is not likely to have been written by an Englishman. Granted that Chun had embraced soap, and that Nellie Serjeant was motherless, and that her father was a weak rascal, and that Nellie was a fool, still the utter barbarousness in person of any Chun, and the hopeless occultation of his soul, ought to make his English fiançée homesick in the shade of her own green-gage tree at Bayswater. But it is not as a story that the book is ponderable; as a novel it is crudely put, rambling and swamped with irrelevant matter, and the word "novel" might have been omitted from the title-page with greater justice to the author. Mr. Rees's primary intention was to give a picture of ways and means in Northern China; and he saw the clear advantage of the fiction method; but he lacks the art to weld descriptive detail lightly with romantic action.

By chance, it is the minutiæ which make the book worth while; for Mr. Rees is neither a transitory swallow nor a missionary with a bias, which makes his position as an observer comparatively fresh. He tells of an American missionary who, inferentially, uses tobacco; but this is merely an unguarded Briticism, as British as the frequent protractions upon food and baths. His acquaintance with the Northern Chinamen—not our fighting Cantonese and Hahkah men, who are the only Celestials, outside of the motley of the legations, with whom we are familiar in America—seems intimate and long-suffering; and he dwells but shortly upon hackneyed points, recounting much that is new and vividly presented, especially the forlornness of life in inland towns like Pa-li Kiao. There is a deal of suggestiveness in the youthful Chun's first impressions of the modern city of Shanghai, where the English, French and Americans rule contiguous territories conceded by the Chinese, and where you may pass in an instant from the unutterable filth of the ancient walled city of Shanghai—far filthier than Canton—to the swept pavements and the Sikh policemen and telegraph wires and massive stone buildings of the occidentalized Shanghai, whither flock the coolies from all parts of the Kiangsu province, to enjoy the western liberty and justice. Chun attended the Foreign College at Peking; and the statement of how amicably the real facts of history and science lived on in his brain beside the incongruous traditions and superstitions of his native teachings is a most truthful touch, as well as that of his inability to put his new knowledge to any practical purpose. Howsoever faulty Mr. Rees's English is, and howsoever sluggish the movement of the tale, the book is faithfully Chinese in atmosphere and color, and will repay those for whom far Cathay has its fascinating spell.

The sensuality of Mr. Dawe's "Kakemonos" of the Far East (2) is not of the sallow and gangrene school, but is woven with a raw gusto that is rare, and that is quite distinct from the decayed æstheticism of a second-rate London artistic *entourage*. The "Kakemonos" are nine tales of the kind of life led by a proportion of English bachelors and others in Hong Kong and the treaty ports of Siam, China and Japan; a life made up of whiskey-and-soda, females and horses, and sometimes varied by substituting brandy for the whiskey. All but one of these might have been told in the stuffy smoking-room of an English mail-steamer on her way down the Formosa Channel, to a gathering of mixed nationality from which perhaps not so many hearers have withdrawn as might nevertheless decline to introduce the teller to the bosoms of their families. As an unwitting exposition of the moral workings of the debauchery formula of the Far East, the book would be of value to some sociological libraries; for its best-drawn character, though apparently without intention, is the hero who relates in the first person all but two of the stories—a creature of ceaseless prurience, with a secretion of cheap cynicism accurately fitted to his own peccability, and capable of pointing a smutty innuendo with a poke of the thumb. Six of the stories centre about women, some born white, others yellow and brown, but all off-color by the time Mr. Dawe has done with them, if not before; and two other tales in which women do not figure seem to fail of forcible crises by lack of the writer's unmitigated enthusiasm for the sort of thing in the other six.

As a general glimpse of life in that part of the world the book is one-sided, being somewhat overladen with blood and revolvers and being unrelieved by a single character that rises to the level of one's admiration. There are many more clean-minded and decently bred Englishmen about Hong Kong and the treaty ports than one would gather from these pages, and some of them might have been used to advantage in laying on a more truthful background. But the hulking British bully who demolishes a flower-boat at Canton is from life, and is so well represented that one feels with some satisfaction that Canton is well able to dispose of his like. The theme of the marriage of a European to a Japanese woman, where the European is sincere, is so treated that considerable light touches the ostracism that befalls the European, though the reason of that might have been more fully developed. Another similar story, where Hina-San is deserted by a man to whom she has no legal ties, is, notwithstanding the disagreeable subject, carried on a level which is Mr. Dawe's best in this book, and which it would credit him more to maintain.