John Chinaman as a Humorist.

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WESTERNERS in general are not wont to give much credit to John Chinaman for the faculty of humour. They are apt to imagine him a stolid, dry-as-dust sort of individual into whose wooden cranium no gleam of fun can ever penetrate. But those who have lived and conversed with him on somewhat intimate terms know better: they know that a keen sense of the ridiculous and a thorough enjoyment of a joke enter largely into his composition, grave and stolid though he may appear to outsiders.

A few of the humorous tales current among the Chinese may serve to illustrate this somewhat unappreciated feature in their character.

A One-Sided Bargain.

Once upon a time two friends started wine-making in partnership. “How shall we arrange matters?” asked Friend Number One at the outset. “Oh!” said Friend Number Two, “you can provide the rice*, and I will provide the water.” “That won’t do,” said Number One, to whom these terms appeared, to say the least of it, somewhat one-sided. “That will be all right,” replied the other, “When the wine is made, you can give back the water to me, and I will give you back your rice.”

Many a sly hit at avarice and stinginess is embodied by the Chinese in a merry tale, as witness the two following.

A Compromise.

A rich man once said to an individual remarkable for his covetousness: “If you will let me kill you, I will give you a thousand taels.” The proposal was a very perplexing one; the offer of such a large sum of money was well-nigh irresistible, but, on the other hand, of what use would it be to a dead man? After a few moments’ cogitation, our friend hit upon a capital via media. “Let it be this way,” he said. “Half kill me, and give me five hundred taels.”

* The “wine” referred to is a spirit distilled from grain.
A CERTAIN man was so mean that he never by any chance entertained visitors. One day his servant took a number of basins and plates to the riverside to wash them. “Has your master invited guests to his house to-day?” asked the neighbours, on seeing such an unwonted display of crockery. But the servant made answer, “You need not think that my master will invite any guests till Doomsday*.” The master happened to overhear this speech, and on his servant’s return, reproved him, saying: “Why did you tell them on what day I was going to invite guests?”

The Hasty Man and the Slow Man.

Two men were sitting together by a stove, one of whom was remarkable for the excitability of his disposition, the other for his extreme slowness. By-and-by the slow man perceived that the clothes of the other, having come in contact with the fire, were smouldering. Accordingly, after a due amount of hesitation, he addressed him thus. “I have a word to say to you, but, if I say it, I am afraid of exciting you; yet, if I don’t say it, I am afraid it will be to your disadvantage; will it be best for me to say it, or not to say it?” “What is it?” asked the other, sharply, in reply to this preamble. “I have seen your clothes burning for a long time,” placidly replied the slow man. Up jumped the hasty man in a great hurry. “Why didn’t you tell me before?” he said angrily. “People say you are hasty,” remarked the quiet man; “indeed, they are not wrong.”

If we may judge by the tone of the two stories which I will next transcribe, silversmiths bear a poor character for honesty, while tailors do not come far behind.

A Good Way out of the Difficulty.

A FATHER once consulted a “suan-mingtih,” or fortune-teller, about the destiny of his little son. “Will he live to grow up?” he anxiously asked. “Your son will grow up,” replied the fortune-teller, “but his destiny is to be a thief.” The father was in no wise disconcerted. “All I want is for him to grow up,” he said, “then I will apprentice him to a silversmith.” “Why will you do that?” asked the astonished fortune-teller. “What day is there,” was the reply, “on which a silversmith does not steal a little of his customers’ silver?”

The Three Sons-in-Law.

ONCE upon a time there was a man who had three sons-in-law. The eldest daughter’s husband was a silversmith, and the husband of the second a tailor, but the husband of the youngest wasted all his time in amusements. His father-in-law at last grew angry, and reproved him. “Look at my eldest son-in-law,” he said. “He earns money, and supports his family. Whenever he wants to keep back a few ‘ch’ien’† of

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* Literally, “till the last day.”
† The tenth part of an ounce.
silver he can do so. Then my second son-in-law, being a tailor, can easily appropriate a few feet of his customers' cloth, if he wishes. You alone have nothing to do." The "ne'er-do-well" had his answer ready. "I will go out to-morrow," he replied, and buy some keys. "What will you buy keys for?" "I will take the keys to rich men's houses, and open their doors, and then, if I want to take a few thousands of silver, I can. I don't think much of your few 'ch'ien' of silver and few feet of cloth. I can get several thousands of silver." "If you do such a thing you will be a thief," the father made reply in a tone of virtuous indignation. "Aren't they thieves then?" asked the son-in-law.

But if tradesmen do not escape the lash of John Chinaman's sarcasm, he also has a few sharp blows for the incompetence of professional men.

Another Version of "Ne Sutor Ultra Crepidam."

A soldier was once wounded by an arrow. When the battle was over, and he had returned to the camp, he sent for a surgeon. The surgeon "came, saw, and conquered." "Not difficult! not difficult!" he confidently exclaimed, as soon as he beheld the wound, in which the arrow was still fixed, and producing a large pair of scissors he cut off the shaft, leaving the head firmly imbedded in the flesh. Then he demanded his fee. But, strange to say, his patient was not satisfied with this masterly operation. "That outside part is of no consequence," he remonstrated; "the important thing is for you to heal the inside." "I am a 'weat-k'o'—an outside-doctor," (or surgeon) —was the reply; "so I heal outside matters, and nothing else. You must call in a 'li-k'o' —an inside-doctor (or physician)—for the rest. How can you expect me to attend to internal ailments?" Our friend, the surgeon, could certainly not be accused of being a "Jack-of-all-trades;" whether the latter half of the proverb might not be applied to him is a matter of opinion.

The Unappreciated Harpist.

There was once a professional harpist who prided himself considerably upon his musical skill but who, unfortunately, could not get other people to regard it in the same light. On one occasion, finding a table standing in the street, he leaned his harp upon it, and began to play, in the hope of attracting an audience, and pocketing certain tangible proofs of their appreciation. A group of people soon collected around him, but, alas! a very short space of time sufficed to disperse them. One man, however, remained; the gratified musician played on and on for his benefit, and at length gave utterance to his feelings on this wise. "Many people don't appreciate my music, but I am glad to see that there is one man who values it." Oh, the cruelty of that man's reply! "I'm waiting for the table," he said, "because it is mine; if it had not been for that, I would have gone long ago."
The Essentials of a Good Portrait.

An old gentleman once went to an artist to have his portrait painted. A wary old gentleman he seems to have been, after the genuine Chinese pattern, for he stipulated beforehand that he would only pay for the portrait if it resembled him. “All right,” said the painter, “if it is not like you, I don’t want any money.”

When the finishing touches had been put to the picture the artist called in a passer-by, and asked him whether he thought it like the original. The man looked at the old gentleman, looked at the portrait, and then pronounced his verdict. “The clothes are like his,” he said. A second passer-by was appealed to. “The cap and shoes are like,” he said, gravely. Some people are never satisfied, and this old gentleman seems to have been one of them. “The clothes, hat and shoes don’t matter so much,” he said. “Is the rest of it like me?” The two referees replied unhesitatingly, “The rest isn’t a scrap like you.” The sequel is involved in mystery, but we are left to surmise that the unfortunate artist had his labour for nothing.

Our next tale would seem to show that the Chinese schoolboy can take up his master sharply enough upon occasion, though, as a rule, he does not require as much keeping in order as his livelier and more independent Western contemporary.

A Schoolboy’s Repartee.

Once upon a time there was a schoolmaster who often went to sleep during school-hours. In view of the example set them, it is not to be wondered at that his scholars sometimes did the same for, as the Chinese proverb says, “If the upper beams are not straight, the lower beams will be crooked.” But if this “upper beam” awoke from his sweet slumbers to find any of the “lower beams” sleeping, he, of course, reproved them and would, by no means, countenance such an unseemly proceeding. On one occasion a youngster was bold enough to ask, “If you won’t let us sleep, sir, why do you sleep yourself?” “When I sleep,” pompously replied the pedagogue, “I dream that I go to visit Tso Kong” (Tso Kong was a sage, about whom Confucius is said to have often dreamed). The next day the same boy fell asleep again. The master awoke him with a blow, asking sternly, “Why do you go to sleep?” “I, too, have been to visit Tso Kong,” was the ready reply. “You say you have seen Tso Kong,” said the schoolmaster, hoping to put an extinguisher on the irrepressible youth; “What was he like?” But the pupil’s crushing answer was, “Tso Kong said, ‘I have not seen your master.’”

As is generally known, the Chinese possess splendid memories, memory being the one great faculty cultivated by their system of education almost to the exclusion of the reasoning powers. But there are exceptions to every rule; a forgetful man may be found even in China, and that his mistakes and misfortunes afford great amusement to his compatriots will be seen from the following story, which I present in a somewhat abridged form.
A man who had a very poor memory took an axe and went to a wood to cut down bamboos. On reaching the wood he suddenly felt very unwell, and threw down his axe. By-and-by the attack passed off, and he prepared for his work, but was pulled up by a distressing thought. "There now!" he said to himself, "I came to chop down trees, and forgot to bring an axe with me." What was to be done? At this moment he happened to look down, and discovered an axe lying on the ground at his feet, but failed to remember that it was his own. "This truly is heaven fulfilling man's wishes!" he delightedly exclaimed, as he picked it up. He then cut down as many bamboos as he wanted and carried them, together with the treasured axe, in the direction of home. Presently he came to some cottages. But by this time he had forgotten which was his own. A woman was standing at the door of one of them, and when she saw him staring stupidly around him she began to rate him in no measured terms on the subject of his bad memory. The poor man was utterly dumb-foundered. "It seems to me, ma'am, that I know your face," he said, deprecatingly, "but I have not offended you; why, then, do you abuse me like this?" The worthy dame was his own wife, but he had forgotten what she looked like.

His Master's Bones.

There was once a youth, who was greatly addicted to the pleasures of the table. He was so greedy that he always ate up all the meat that was set before him, leaving nothing for his servant but the bones. One day the servant said to him: "I hope that you, sir, will live to be a hundred years old, and I a year longer than you." "Why do you wish that?" demanded the young master. "Because, if I die after you, master, I can gather up your bones."

A Grateful Guest.

A wealthy old man of charitable disposition, on looking out of his door one winter's evening, saw a poor wretch standing shivering in the snow. Filled with pity for his destitute condition, he called him in, fed and clothed him, and put him up for the night. The next two days it still snowed hard, so he gave the poor man shelter and food till the weather cleared on the third morning. When about to leave, the guest said to his benefactor, "Please lend me your kitchen chopper." It was handed to him, though doubtless not without surprise at the strangeness of the request. But he soon explained himself. "I have troubled you for three days," he said, "and I have no means of repaying you but by killing myself." "That must not be! that must not be!" his host exclaimed in horror. "If you die, I shall have to spend at least twelve taels in burying you. And then suppose people should take it into their heads to say that I had killed you, I should be taken before the magistrate, and have to spend no end of money." This was
exactly the point to which the poor man had wished to bring him. "I don't want you to spend a lot of money," he said. "Only give me the twelve taels that my funeral would cost you if I died in your house, and that will do." The good old man grew very angry, and the dispute was threatening to become serious, when some neighbours, hearing loud voices, came upon the scene with the object of mediating, according to the usual custom in the Celestial Empire, where everything, from a wedding to a quarrel, requires a go-between. The neighbours proposed a compromise, and advised the rich man to give the poor man six taels instead of twelve. He found there was nothing for it but to submit, and handed over the six taels, but could not refrain from giving a parting thrust to his ungrateful guest together with the money. "You man without a conscience!" he cried—"to treat me like this after the way in which I have treated you!" "You say I have no conscience," returned the other, mortified at the reduction by six taels of the sum he had hoped to pocket, "I say you have no conscience. I have slept three nights in your house, and you charge me two taels a night for the accommodation."

Note.—The Western reader will probably think that the rich old man of our story was extremely foolish to be so terrified by a threat which would obviously never be carried out. But it is a common thing for a Chinese to commit suicide in the house of a person who has offended him, in order to spite him by making him pay the funeral expenses and, perhaps, also a fine for having been the cause of the suicide.