Passing on among the crowd, our attention was next directed to the actors, who were exhibiting their powers on temporary stages, erected over the heads of the people at the ends of the streets. The representations appeared to depend entirely upon the skill of the performers, as no kind of scenery was visible behind them. A narrow platform, with a few bamboos set up around the sides and at the back, on which was suspended a coloured cloth, was the whole of the arrangement necessary to complete this temporary theatre. Although this exhibition was intended for the common people alone, and, of course, the performances were not of the highest class, yet it appears that very little more preparation is considered necessary unless the entertainment is given on very important occasions.

A foreigner may look a long while at one of these performances before he is able to derive amusement from it, or to understand how it is possible that any other person can do so. One of the first circumstances that strikes his attention is that the whole of the performers are men, no women being allowed to go upon the stage. As it is still necessary to represent that interesting portion of mankind, without whom no story can be complete, some of the men are dressed up as females: a small ledge in front of the stage serving to hide the sprawling feet, which would otherwise take away all the charm of the deception. The “Golden Lilies” being thus dispensed with, the harsh natural voice of the male sex is altered for the falsetto, and a screaching, penny-trumpet sound is uttered, as an imitation of the softer notes of the female. When you look at one of these lady-actors, and notice the distorted faces he makes as he pours out this flood of crude, squeaking rubbish, you cannot fail to be seized with the greatest disgust, and to stop your ears mechanically whenever you fancy it repeated. The sound still haunts you, however, wherever you go; you hear it resound from one end of the place to the other. This, which I considered the characteristic feature of the Chinese comedy, is often uttered in so loud and piercing a key, that you may frequently distinguish it above every other sound in the vicinity. At Whampoa especially, I have been obliged to notice it above the sound of all the kettle-drums, gongs, and trumpets, which were in full operation at some distance inland on the adjacent shore, during the festivity of the new moon.

On account of the poverty of the oral language, the meaning of the performers is required to be show much more by their actions than by their words; so that what we observe of the drama at Canton, made up as it appears to be of gestures and uncouth sounds, gives us a very unfavourable idea of its present state throughout China. It appeared, however, to be very well suited to the tastes and opinions of the common people, as they roared with laughter and seemed highly delighted at what we were apt to consider vastly inferior to our Punch and Judy. But after all, not understanding the language, the stranger is somewhat in the position of a man in a ball-room, who, having stopped his ears to the music, thinks all the company mad for jumping about in such an extravagant manner. Opinion and custom are the music, which makes the most ridiculous antics pass for sensible and intelligent actions.

However popular the drama may be among all classes in China, and there is every evidence that it is so, still its professors have never been held in much estimation in that country. It is considered merely as the amusement of an idle hour, and no idea of its utility as a political or moral agent would appear to be at all entertained.

The performers are, in general, slaves to the manager, and a heavy penalty is imposed upon those who would oblige a child to enter the profession; so that the actors are looked upon as the very dregs of society. There is no regular exhibition in any public theatre at stated times of the year, but the actors go about in troops, to be hired by those who can afford to pay for their services. Many hundreds of these companies are employed in Peking alone, while others stroll about the country, or take the course of the rivers and canals in barges and floating-houses. Even when the emperor chooses to see a play, he has to hire those who are in the most general repute, and bestows little favour upon them, however pleased he may be with their performances; nor does he attach them to him as a part of his household.

Notwithstanding these circumstances, no people are better employed. An entertainment of any kind is not considered complete without a dramatic exhibition, and the less opulent individuals will often subscribe together to defray the expenses of enjoying together this favourite amusement. The public inns, and all the large private houses, have a room which is set apart entirely for this purpose, and we have seen how soon and how easily a temporary stage is erected when the populace alone are to be gratified.

The princes and grand mandarins enjoy the pleasures of the theatre chiefly during their meals, and the stage is permanently fixed opposite to the royal table. On this the actors play their parts, and assist royal digestion by their wit and talents. During the progress of Lord Macartney’s embassy through the country, every attention was paid to the ambassador of his Britannic Majesty, and to please him especially, one of these moveable theatres was erected opposite his temporary dwelling, and the actors exerted their skill during the time of the repast. But his lordship begged as a particular favour that they would dispense with this disagreeable ceremony. The Chinese mandarins stared with astonishment at his singular taste, but upon his repeated entreaties withdrew the nuisance.

The drama labouring under such disadvantages, all hope of honour and distinction being denied to the performers, we should not expect to find that China had produced many Shakspeares, who had given birth to noble and sublime sentiments. No name appears to be held in reverence, or referred to with pride, as a genius in this branch of literature. There have been many writers, however, in this department; for there exists a collection of one hundred and ninety-nine volumes, from which have been selected a hundred plays, supposed to be the best productions of the class. Five of these alone have been translated into European languages, the titles of them being—“The Orphan of Tchao,” “The Sorrows of Han,” “The Heir in his Old Age,” “The Circle of Chalk,” and “The Intrigues of a Waiting-maid.”

The defects which are to be found in this species of composition may pretty well be inferred, from the low and grovelling state in which the dramatic art is held in the country. Sufficient inducements or prospects have not been held out by the influential members of society, to call out the energies of those who had genius for the task of reformation. The unities of time and place, with all those things which are considered by us essential to constitute a regular drama, are entirely disregarded. The art has not yet had sufficient *mind* bestowed upon it to bring it to any degree of perfection.

Even the dialogue labours under a great disadvantage. On account of the scantiness of the spoken language, words are not to be found sufficient to express the stronger and more impassioned feelings, so necessary to produce effect upon the stage. Here, therefore, the actor has to eke out the meaning of abrupt and disjointed sentences, by the most laboured and artificial actions; and, after all, the most affecting scenes are finished in such a summary and business-like manner that the effect is any thing but imposing.

Another striking peculiarity in the Chinese plays is the repeated introduction of singing into the most serious and affecting scenes. Thus, as the author of “The Chinese Miscellany” observes, “The Chinese plays are intermixed with songs, in the middle of which the actors often stop to speak a sentence or two in the common tone of declamation. On the other hand, it appears shocking to us for the actor in the middle of a dialogue all of a sudden to fall a singing; but we ought to consider that among the Chinese, singing is added to express some great emotion of the soul,—as joy, grief, anger, despair. A man, for example, who is moved with indignation against a villain, sings; another, who animates himself to revenge, sings; a third, who is going to put himself to death, sings likewise.”

With all these disadvantages the dramas are often full of feeling, and cannot be read without a considerable degree of interest. The quickness of the movements and actions would also preclude any of those feelings of *ennui*, which we are apt to experience when we have to listen to long-winded and tedious speeches. Those performances which are to be seen without the walls of Canton must be of a very inferior kind, a mere congeries of buffoonery; as the populace is kept constantly in a state of laughter, without any mixture of sentiment or feeling.

Those who have witnessed the best specimens of this performance, both in the interior at the tables of the grand mandarins, and those given to their honour by the Hong merchants of Canton, found them bearing the same general characteristics, but certainly conducted in a superior style. The dresses were remarked to be very splendid, but there was no kind of scenery or attempt at stage effect. Among the *dramatis personæ*, however, in one instance, a singular kind of actor was introduced, consisting of a dragon made of pasteboard, from whose mouth issued a torrent of fire and flame. The music on these occasions was considered by far the most disagreeable part of the entertainment. At the most solemn and tragic scenes of the drama, the noise of the gongs and kettle-drums was really horrifying, and such as one would almost expect to rouse the dead. Feats of jugglery and tumbling were also exhibited at the same time; and, on one occasion alone, a couple of children performed a kind of minuet to the sound of very tolerable instrumental music.