

## CHINESE NEW YEAR AND THEATER.

It is one of the grounds of complaint against John Chinaman that he lives in the poorest possible style, thus not contributing to the support of those thousands of industries that go to sustain our complex industrial system and give work to the mechanics; and, doubtless, this is a just cause of objection, since the best citizen is he who spends his money and thus returns it to the channels of trade and provides work for thousands. But, just as this criticism may be, there is a time when the Chinaman shows as much recklessness in expenditure as his Caucasian brother, or rather, excels him in the disregard of the cost of his jubilations. This is upon the various religious festival occasions, of which, though there are many, but two are observed with much ceremony in America. These



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are the Chinese new year and the harvest festival. The former is the anniversary of the assumption of power by the reigning dynasty, and now occurs the second week in February. The latter is a thanksgiving for bountiful crops and good business, and a placating of departed spirits, to keep them from interfering adversely in mundane affairs for the coming year, and occurs in October. In many particulars the form of celebration is much alike. The new year observances consist of an entire cessation of work for several days by even the poorest Mongolian, and for two weeks by the rich ones. Dressed in their best apparel, they pay formal visits to each other, and entertain their guests right royally.

White callers are made welcome and hospitably treated to tea, the like of which never graces the Caucasian table, wine, cigars, confectionery, fruit, etc. The ceremonious greeting of two long-gowned and small-hatted Chinamen is awe-inspiring. Each one, clasping his hands together in front of his face, bows his head almost to the ground before the other three times in succession, with an air of submission and reverence that is overpowering.

At night the streets are brilliant with a multitude of many-colored, balloon-shaped lanterns of all sizes. It is between the hours of six and eight that the authorities permit the firing of crackers, and then the noise is like that of a battle. The American does not know how to make a noise with crackers. Recklessly extravagant as he is supposed to be, he can not approach John Chinaman in his disregard of expense in exploding these red snappers. In the first place the cheap thing sold to the American boy for fourth of July is held in contempt, and the cracker used by the Chinaman explodes like the report of a rifle. Suspended from a balcony or from a long pole are bunches of crackers strung together in a string perhaps ten feet long. The fuse at the bottom of these is lighted and then the

fun begins. The rattle sounds like a discharge of musketry by a thousand men with repeating rifles, so constant is it, every second or so the heavier boom of a large cracker coming in to represent the artillery. New bunches are tied to the upper end of the string constantly, and this ceaseless rattle is often maintained for half an hour steadily, great crowds of all races and both sexes gathering to witness the spectacle. It is not only the rich merchants who indulge in this extravagance, but often the more humble wash house proprietor will add to the general din. Fourth of July pales into insignificance before Chinese new year, so far as firecrackers are concerned.

This, too, is the season when the Chinese theatre is at the height of its glory. Special preparations are made to please the public at that time, and the delighted Mongolians attend in crowds. The interior of this temple of Thespis is severely plain in all its appointments, a few rows of benches on the main and level floor, and a narrow gallery, with a few stalls for ladies, seated with wooden benches, constitutes the auditorium. The stage is a plain rostrum extending across the end of the hall, having two doors leading directly to the dressing and property room at the rear, one used for an entrance and one for an exit. A vivid imagination is required to comprehend a Chinese play, for there are no scenic effects to help place one *en rapport* with its spirit. When a bloody-minded villain requires a sword, the blue-bloused and black-cued property man walks out upon the stage and hands it to him. When the exigencies of the occasion require that both the fleeing villain and his wrathful pursuers shall cross a deep chasm in the mountains, both the mountains and the chasm being left to the unaided imagination of all concerned, the property man again appears in serene dignity, places two chairs upon the bare boards of the stage, across which he lays a plank, and both the chasm and bridge being now ready, the villain and his pursuers take a new start and successfully perform the perilous feat of crossing.

However meager and common the properties and stage settings may be, the costumes are marvels of gorgeousness. Nowhere else can one see such combinations of color and form in the raiment of human beings. The quality, too, is of the finest silk, satin and velvet, and the cost of some of the costumes would make the immortal Sara or the statistic Mary despair. Evidently salaries are based upon costumes and not upon the histrionic talent, although, from the Chinese standard, some of the actors are said to possess much of the latter.



THE HEAVY VILLAIN.



THE LEADING LADY AND JUVENILE.