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**眼前現報**

## Chinese Picture Tracts.

By C. WILFRID ALLAN.

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**A**MONG the many literary diversions of the Chinese are what might be called Puzzle Poems. These are poems, the verses of which are so written as to make it almost impossible to understand the sense, unless possessed of the key. The key is generally a character which begins the poem and it is concealed amongst the mass of written characters so that it is very difficult to find. Anyone acquainted with Chinese writing will see how this may be done, because each character has a separate meaning of its own, and is not dependent on the accompanying characters, like the letters of an English word.

But the Chinese have also other ways of arranging the characters of poems or verses, one of which I wish to draw attention to in this paper. A tract or poem on any given subject is so written that the characters form, as far as is possible, an outline of the subject or of something referred to in the writing. Although these kinds of effusions are familiar to many who live amongst the Chinese, yet there may be many readers of this magazine who have not had the opportunity of seeing them and who, consequently, fail to understand their character. Many of these literary curiosities are issued by Buddhists, as tracts setting forth their various tenets, or exhorting the people to good works, to the practice of filial piety, or to abstinence from all forms of evil.

In Vol. IX of the "Chinese Repository" is a reproduction of one of these poems. It is a tract that might be useful to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, setting forth the grievances of an ox, the complaints being supposed to come from the ox itself. The characters are arranged in the form of this animal led by a herd-boy who also has a song about his own particular circumstances.

In "A String of Chinese Peach Stones" another of these tracts is reproduced, apparently on the same subject. The characters are arranged in the form of a decidedly disreputable old ox, whose term of usefulness seems to have ended, but who objects to die.

The writer in the "Chinese Repository" mentions another Buddhist tract that has come under his notice, the characters of which are arranged in the form of a seven-storied pagoda, with figures of Buddha and priests reciting prayers.

Some months ago the writer was attracted by a crowd on the streets of Hankow, and found a man selling tracts such a have just been described. It may be that in other parts of China these effusions are commonly seen, but such is not the case in Hankow. I eagerly bought several copies, one of which is reproduced here. The tract is an exhortation to obedience on the part of daughters-in-law, and contains a pathetic story of a girl who acted so contrary to all precedent that on one occasion, after illtreating her husband's mother, she was suddenly transformed into a cow. The poem, as will be seen, is arranged in the form of what appears to be a well-fed animal, with a human face to draw attention to the awfulness of the punishment described. As the seven-character lines are very difficult to translate literally into rhyme, I have given a free translation, keeping the English ballad style as some indication of the swing of such a string of verses as is found in this tract. I have entitled the poem "Retribution" but the original title is much longer, as will be seen by all who read Chinese. The verses begin with the first character under the chin of the unfortunate woman or cow.

#### RETRIBUTION.

My good kind friends and neighbours, now all of you draw near,  
I have a tale to tell you and I want you all to hear ;  
A girl at home obeys her dad, but after she is wed,  
Her husband's mother then requires her services instead.

The old dame looks for filial love from her now in the house,  
Which will repay the loving care bestowed upon her spouse.  
And trusts she with the household will have one heart and mind,  
And to the little children be tender, sweet and kind.

A wife who acts thus wisely is esteemed by all around,  
In such a model homestead true happiness is found ;  
Alas ! alas ! there many are whose actions daily prove,  
Their want of true obedience and their lack of filial love.

The wife who in her husband's home refuses to obey,  
To her must retribution come, and sure 't will not delay ;  
A tale of awful punishment I want to tell you now,  
How a disobedient daughter was turned into a cow.

The sad affair of which I speak took place in far Szechuan,  
And how it came about I'll tell as clearly as I can.  
Amongst the hills a family dwelt, Chen was their honoured name,  
But soon unworthy conduct brought that family pain and shame.

A girl who right from childhood her parents disobeyed,  
 Became the wife of Mr. Chen, and soon her fault displayed ;  
 She would not boil the rice or tea, but household duties shirked,  
 And sat the long day idle while the poor old mother worked.

The husband feared to chide her for then she found her tongue,  
 And impolite orations were delivered loud and long ;  
 At every meal for her alone were dainties sweet and nice,  
 But the poor ill-treated mother had nothing else but rice.

The poor old dame grew daily thin, her meals were scant and few,  
 You scarcely can believe it but it's truth I'm telling you,  
 And thus she suffered till one day determined then to go  
 To supplicate at Kuan Yin's\* shrine and tell her tale of woe.

Her clothes were old and so she went her daughter to implore,  
 And ask the loan of garments, just for an hour or more,  
 But lying as if fast asleep, her daughter there she found.  
 The daughter watched with half-shut eyes, but never made a sound.

From out a box the old dame drew some garments clean and nice,  
 Stole noiselessly from out the room and donned them in a trice,  
 Then to the temple made her way, but whilst she worshipped there,  
 In rushed the girl who mad with rage ceased not to curse and swear.

She seized her mother by the hair and dragged her from the place,  
 From off her body tore the clothes, then smote her on the face,  
 With trembling limbs the old dame stood, then called with might and main  
 To heaven and earth for vengeance, then homeward sped again.

And on the way she never ceased lamenting her sad case  
 How by a good son's wicked wife she suffered such disgrace,  
 She'd looked for help and comfort from a daughter good and wise,  
 Who would have thought instead to see Yen Wang † in human guise.

She thought of all her hardships, her poor bones aching sore,  
 And how her wicked daughter would turn her to the door,  
 To wander as an outcast around the country side,  
 And beg from folk her daily rice. O, would that she had died ;

From far across the Southern Sea good Kuan Yin heard her cries,  
 Assumed a human form and stood before the old dame's eyes :  
 "Now tell me what your trouble is," the goddess sweetly said,  
 "Afar I heard your cries and thus I've come to give you aid."

\* Kuan Yin, the popular Goddess of Mercy.

† Yen Wang, *i.e.*, His Satanic Majesty.

So Mrs. Chen poured forth her tale to sympathetic ears,  
 The goddess listened patiently then calmed the old dame's fears ;  
 A gift of lovely garments soon chased her tears away,  
 And bright with Kuan Yin's blessing she went her homeward way.

Arrived at home to her dismay she found her daughter there,  
 The thought of what her fate must be now filled her with despair ;  
 But thinking of good Kuan Yin's gift her fears were thus allayed,  
 And so before her daughter's eyes the lovely clothes displayed.

The graceless daughter snatched the robes and quickly put them on,  
 Then cursing loud and furious bade the old dame begone ;  
 The poor old mother turned to go with slow, unsteady feet,  
 But ere she made a movement was pushed into the street.

She fell before the doorway and gave a piercing cry ;  
 The sun grew dark and threatening clouds had gathered in the sky ;  
 Then all at once her daughter's voice arose in accents wild,  
 "O mother, come and help me ! O save, O save your child !"

The old dame looked in wonder and then and there she found  
 Her daughter turned into a cow and kneeling on the ground ;  
 The bad, unfilial daughter had no power to hurt her now,  
 For she like other cattle was nothing but a cow.

And from that time in peace and quiet the poor old woman dwelt,  
 And strange to say three times a day the cow before her knelt ;  
 Until one day in summer she saw a storm arise,  
 Loud crashed the thunder, and the cow lay dead before her eyes.

Such was the awful punishment, 't was retribution just,  
 Descended on this woman and laid her in the dust ;  
 And so my story's ended, but before I leave you now,  
 List to my warning and avoid being turned into a cow.

