

## The Celestial Adventure of Sin Loo.

BY RICHARD STILLMAN POWELL.



IN LOO paused again beneath a lamp post and again examined the slip of paper held in his hand. On it was written an address. To that address Sin Loo had been traveling for over an hour; for the contents of the twin baskets hanging from the ends of the pole across his shoulder were being impatiently awaited by the person who had penned the directions. A dozen times had Loo held the paper forth to passers-by and softly asked, "Wha-lat?" And not once had assistance been denied. Some, captivated by Loo's artless and helpless countenance, had even walked to the nearest corner and from there indicated the right direction. Already, had he but known it, Loo had passed the house he was seeking a half dozen times, for, since a half hour ago, he had been breathlessly hurrying around the same block. And now he studied the slip of paper again with perplexed eyes. But to him it was only a series of faint black scratches, sadly deficient in symmetry and sense, when judged by his idea of what correct writing should be.

For Sin Loo was not a low-born Chinaman; a fact indicated by the silken texture of his blouse that shimmered faintly in the light, by the neatness of his two little cloth slippers, and by the cleanliness of the slim hand that held the address. Sin Loo sighed, shook his head despondently, and, clutching the bit of paper tightly, looked about him in bewilderment and alarm.

It was very dark; the long sidewalks were practically deserted, and the scurrying cabs and carriages with the blazing lights suggested to Sin Loo the passing of so many fiery-orbed dragons, of the kind impressed upon his memory by his grandmother's fairy tales, told years before under the twilight of Canton skies.

Presently, as he hurried on, his eyes caught sight of a figure in the distance, and on the moment he was fleeing down the avenue

as though the evil one himself were upon his heels. For a whole block he fled, the baskets swaying and bobbing about him as though suddenly invested with life. Then he paused and glanced fearfully back, and a long-drawn sigh of relief escaped him; the blue-coated demon was no longer in sight.

Sin Loo, during his brief residence amongst them, had learned to look upon policemen as the incarnation of all evil, and to fly from them as he would have flown from the Purple Ogres of his grandmother's tales.

Out of all reckoning now, Sin Loo held forth his precious slip of paper and looked about for assistance. But no one was to be seen until, presently, his troubled gaze, searching the dim street, encountered a wonderful sight. At a little distance a canopy of striped cloth reached from a residence into the street, and from under it shone a radiant blaze of light. Sin Loo was but eighteen, and curiosity seized upon him. Cautiously he moved forward. A throng of people barred the way, and Sin Loo crept into the shadow of the group. From there he could see a strip of beautiful crimson carpet running from the street across the sidewalk, up a flight of high, broad steps, and through a portal luminous with golden light, from whence issued forth the subdued strains of what seemed celestial music. Surely, thought Sin Loo, here lived the blessed gods!

Wondering curiosity got the upper hand of fear, and Sin Loo began to worm his way forward through the crowd. But the swinging baskets seriously retarded progress until the onlookers, becoming aware of his presence, opened up a path for him with cries of, "Here's another of 'em! Make way there for Li Hung Chang!" and Sin Loo, smiling timidly upon all, advanced until the beautiful crimson carpet lay at his feet. He stretched forth one little slipper until it rested caressingly upon the edge of the carpet, and then heaved a sigh of ecstasy. The carpet was for all the world like the soft down on the breasts of the white ducks that his grandfather raised on the Choo-Kiang!

Suddenly Loo darted back with a cry of absolute terror. There was a great noise, the people behind pressed forward, a carriage with the fiercest of eyes stopped, with a clanking of chains, before the awning; two resplendent beings in red and blue livery darted

forward and swung open the door; and an angel — two angels — in white, stepped out. But it was not the carriage that had frightened Sin Loo. Nay; but there, not two steps away, terrible, demoniac, stood a huge Blue-Coated One, waving a huge stick toward Sin Loo! With a yell of agony Sin Loo strove to retreat. But no, the crowd held him. There was but one way open. His profane feet trod the carpet of the gods, and with three bounds he stood in the portal of Paradise!

Struck with the danger of his predicament, Sin Loo glanced fearfully back, only to meet the eyes of the Blue-Coated One who barred the way. He was laughing loudly with the rest of the throng, but to Sin Loo he appeared to be gnashing his teeth with disappointment over the escape of his prey. To remain there was to be lost. Sin Loo gazed about him, and for a moment was lost in awe and admiration of his surroundings. Near at hand, lined by flowering shrubs and waving palms, rose a great staircase, winding slowly upward to be lost in another flood of light from above. About him were blazing lights, banks of brilliant blossoms, graceful festoons of swaying vines; in his nostrils what seemed the odors of a thousand plum gardens, and in his ears such music as they had never heard. A burst of laughter aroused him. Down the great staircase, holding their brilliant draperies about them, came a group of goddesses. In desperation Sin Loo darted to a great curtain, whose soft folds shed a dozen hues under the light. Behind this he would hide. He lifted a corner, when, as though by magic means, the curtain was whisked from his grasp, and before him, dazzling in jewels and radiant apparel, with hand outstretched, stood, — ah, yes, it could be the queen of the goddesses, no less, in wait to rebuke his presumption.

With quaking heart, Sin Loo turned to flee. But lo! the entrance was gone from sight. Behind him stood sentinel two huge ogres in shining armor, and clasping great glittering blades, the sight of which sent thrills of terror coursing through the marrow of Loo's trembling bones. Before him stood, sat, or walked a multitude of gods. He closed his eyes and awaited annihilation. Presently he opened them again, and found himself still alive. Then he sought to escape in the throng, flattening himself and his awkward burdens against the nearest flower-screened wall,

and hiding behind the great marble pillars and the tall palms. But he could not avoid notice; murmured comment greeted his stealthy progress, and the eyes of gods and goddesses followed him. Then the music began again, and in a moment the great gold and white hall was a wonderful kaleidoscope, for the inhabitants of Paradise in their gorgeous dresses, with their flashing gems and waving plumes, were dancing together. Sin Loo, forgetting his terror for the moment, peeped from behind a tall and feathery fern, and thought that never had his most magnificent dreams pictured Paradise one thousandth part as wonderful as it was. Before him two gods, one in a mass of pale blue silk and creamy lace, the other clad in russet leather, slashed here and there to show a lining of crimson satin, were talking together. Sin Loo listened with might and main, but the words were strange and not to be understood.

"Magnificent sight, isn't it?" the one in blue was saying in languid tones. "Ought to be, though, since they've been over six months in preparing for it. I hear there were over a thousand invitations sent out."

"Yes," replied the other. "By the way, have you seen Jack Vandergrift and his wife?"

"Can't say; probably wouldn't have known them if I had."

"Yes, you would, though. Mrs. Jack's been getting ready for this affair for months and months. Told me the other day that she had secured the finest rig-out of them all. Seems that she went to the high Mogul, or whatever you call him, of a Chinese acting troop that's playing in Chinatown, and engaged costumes for herself and Jack. She's to be a celestial princess or something, and Jack's to be an emperor. Had to deposit a cool thousand apiece for the costumes, don't you know. Can't understand what's keeping them."

"I saw a Chinaman awhile ago, carrying a couple of baskets slung over his shoulder like those the vegetable carriers use in California, only smaller. Fine get-up, but didn't look *much* like an emperor."

"Yes, saw him myself. Everybody's speaking of him. Never saw a finer Chinaman make-up in my life. Acts his part, too. I say if you see Jack or his wife, let me know. Engaged to her for supper."

“ Won't do you any good. We're to be paired off, helter-skelter, by our hostess with a view to artistic effect, and marched into supper like a double file of convicts. Look, I believe the hour of doom approaches. Come on ! ”

The pair hurried away, and Sin Loo now noticed that both music and dancing had ceased and that all Paradise was flocking to the far end of the hall. To be alone was more terrifying than to be amidst the crowd ; in Loo's case safety lay in numbers ; and with his baskets flopping to and fro he scuttled down the room, a ludicrous little figure, slipping and sliding on the waxed surface of the ball-room floor like a duck on ice.

The queen of the goddesses, assisted by lesser deities, was going and coming amongst the crowd, forming it couple by couple into line of march. Here Richelieu was giggling with a nineteenth century milk maid ; there one of his Swiss guard was whispering soft nothings into the pink ear of a Highland lass ; yonder, a black-garbed and black-masked executioner leaned on his broad-ax and joked with a pretty Parisian cyclienne. Soldiers and peasants, kings and queens, lords and ladies, favorites of mythology and celebrities of nursery rhyme, were all here, waiting for the orchestra hidden in the balcony above to strike up the martial air. Already the hostess had raised her fan, when suddenly her gaze sweeping about the hall caught sight of a skulking blue-clad figure. She advanced and seized Sin Loo by the sleeve.

“ This way, please ; ” and Loo, his knees knocking together with fright, was led to the rear of the line.

“ You will take me in, please, ” said the hostess. Again she lifted her fan and again lowered it without making the expected signal, for across the floor from the entrance hurried a lady in simple evening costume, a black vizard held before her eyes, while at the alcoved doorway, his entrance impeded for a moment by the two knights-at-arms who raised gleaming blades to bar his progress, a man in conventional broadcloth and linen paused with a look of serio-comic helplessness.

“ It was our costumes ! ” exclaimed the lady with the vizard, breathlessly, between her hostess' expressions of pleasure and playful reprimand. “ They never came, and as we couldn't miss this, here we are at the eleventh hour, plain nobodies ! ”

"What was the trouble? I don't know. I only know they were incomparable. I engaged them last week, and they were to be delivered this evening. Ko Ha, the Chinese actor —

"Gracious! What's that?"

Sin Loo, groveling on his knees, was begging for mercy in high-pitched, terror-filled vowels. He had heard his master's name and knew that the time of reckoning had come at last, Mrs. Jack sprang forward.

"I really believe — it is Ko Ha's valet! Where —"

But there was no need of asking. Sin Loo's bundle lay beside him, and from an overturned basket — one of the properties of the Chinese theater — flowed a dazzling stream of gold-embroidered silks and satins.

"My costume!" cried Mrs. Jack.

"And mine!" cried her husband, as, laughing, he drew the treasures from the other basket.

"You — you wretch!" cried Mrs. Jack. "Where have you been? How came you here? Why —"

But Sin Loo was deaf to all questioning. In his shrill treble he was gabbling monotonously forth all the prayers ever taught him by his beloved grandmother.

Then the orchestra played an extra waltz; Mr. and Mrs. Jack Vandergrift hurried away to don their costumes; and Sin Loo, still clutching the slip of paper tightly in his hand, was conducted through the great portal, down the beautiful crimson carpet, and so forth from the presence of the outraged gods.

The throng on the sidewalk was gone. Only the Blue-Coated One remained. With a startled cry Sin Loo looked once, and then fled into the darkness. And, strange to tell, the demon only grinned!

