

The World Field.

THE WOMEN OF CHINA.

HEATHEN AND CHRISTIAN.

To understand a woman—Chinese or American—one must have some knowledge of her home, her family cares, and her habits of thought. A typical Chinese family consists of the father and mother-in-law, two or three sons and their wives and several grandchildren, all living in rooms opening upon the same high-walled court-yard, and sharing the same kitchen.

The father and sons work for and contribute to the common purse, and so strict are their ideas of impartiality, or rather so jealous is each member of the family of the others, that a husband may not take even of the money he himself has earned to buy a present for his own wife, without buying one equally valuable for each of his sisters-in-law. The Chinaman has ways and means, however, of evading almost every law or custom, and the fond husband buys a handsome gown and sends it and his wife for a few days to her maternal home. From there she will return triumphantly displaying her gown as a present from *her mother*.

In the home the mother-in-law is usually—but not always—the head. Sometimes a daughter-in-law of unusually bright mind or vicious temper rules the whole household. The quickest way a daughter-in-law possesses by which to bring her mother-in-law to subjection is threatening suicide. If a woman kills herself her spirit is supposed to return to haunt the mother-in-law, but worse than this to the practical mind of the Chinaman, her living relatives will gather and by demanding a costly funeral will plunge the whole family into debt that they will be unable to pay for years.

Imagine the situation in a Chinese home, and it becomes at once apparent that peace and happiness can not reign continually. On the one hand is the daughter-in-law, a young girl, perhaps indulged and spoiled from her babyhood in her mother's home, and untrained in housework and sewing. She is suddenly introduced by marriage into a new home. Her husband, her mother-in-law, her neighbors are all total strangers. She is miserably homesick; she gets wretchedly tired doing all sorts of unaccustomed work; she is criticized, laughed at, or reviled for her stupidity or her indolence.

On the other hand is the mother-in-law. She has perhaps suffered for years under the hard reign of her mother-in-law; she is now ready for her turn to sit on the throne. She expects to be treated with obedient consideration by her son's wife; she expects to take life easily in her old age. Instead of this she discovers that her new daughter-in-law is saucy, careless and wasteful, if not actually thievish; she is above all taking the place in her beloved son's affections which the mother has always held.

Remember, they are two heathen women with hot and hasty tempers which have never been controlled; each with a stock of vile words and insulting epithets at her tongue's end, and it is easy to imagine the result. When there are several daughters-in-law in the same house, and children of different mothers ready to quarrel at a moment's notice, and each mother ready to take her own child's part to the bitter end, it is often "confusion worse confounded."

It is well in such a household if there be one at the head who can command obedience and at least a semblance of peace. As the daughters-in-law grow older and wiser, as they bear sons to add luster to the family name, and as the various elements of the family become accustomed to each other, terrific outbursts of temper and violent chastisements by the mother-in-law become less frequent.

There are, of course, some cases where the mother-in-law and her son's wife live together in loving harmony, but these are, unfortunately, rare exceptions.

The saddest and most hopeless lot in China is that of the "nourished daughter-in-law"; the girl who, yet too young to marry, is sent to her betrothed husband's home because of her parents' death or extreme poverty. Her mother-in-law resents this most vehemently. Why should *she* be called upon to feed and clothe for years the unfortunate child? As there is no one to take the girl's part, she is usually overworked, reviled, beaten and sometimes half-starved and driven to sleep with the dogs in her new home. If the mother-in-law goes too far, however, resource may be had to a curious mob-law, as far as I know, only practised by the women of China.

Not long ago an orphan girl was sent to live with her mother-in-law who had already one daughter-in-law living with her. The child's betrothed husband was an industrious business man a good many years older than herself. He was seldom at home, and even when there, as it was not good form for him to take any notice of his little bride before marriage, he knew nothing of how she was treated.

Altho the girl was a gentle, modest child, afraid to say or do anything contrary to her mother-in-law's wishes, she was most cruelly treated. When she was thirteen years old, she inadvertently did something to offend her mother and sister-in-law, and the two women, working themselves into a fiendish rage, killed her with scissors, cutting her flesh horribly and slitting her tongue, but leaving no mark upon her face.

When she was dead they carefully dressed her in her best garments, and, according to custom, were obliged to send word of her death to her aunt, her only living relative. This aunt was a desperate character, a beggar-woman who could hope or fear nothing from the magistrates, as she had not enough money to make it worth an official's while to pay any attention to her case. She