

THE POET AND THE MANDARIN.

OR,

LE-PIH'S ADVENTURE IN THE GARDENS OF
KWONFOOTSE.*A passage from Chinese History.*

THE moon shone like glorified and floating dew on the bosom of the tranquil Pei-ho, and the heart of the young poet Le-pih was like a cup running over with wine. It was no abatement of his exulting fulness that he was as yet the sole possessor of the secret of his own genius. Conscious of exquisite susceptibility to beauty, fragrance and music, (the three graces of the Chinese,) he was more intent upon enjoying his gifts than upon the awakening of envy for their possession—the latter being the second leaf in the book of genius, and only turned over by the finger of society.—Thoughtless of the acquisition of fame as the youthful poet may be, however, he is always ready to anticipate its fruits, and Le-pih committed but the poet's error, when, having the gem in his bosom which could buy the favour of the world, he took the favour for granted without producing the gem.

Kwonfootse had returned a conqueror, from the wars with the Hwong-kin, and this night, on which the moon shone so gloriously, was the hour of his triumph, for the Emperor Tang had condescended to honour with his presence, a gala given by the victorious general at his gardens on the Pei-ho. Softened by his exulting feelings (for though a brave soldier, he was as haughty as Luykong the thunder-god, or Hwuyloo the monarch of fire,) the warlike mandarin threw open his gardens on this joyful night, not only to those who wore in their caps the gold ball significant of patrician birth, but to all whose dress and mien warranted their appearance in the presence of the emperor.

Like the realms of the blest shone the gardens of Kwonfootse. Occupying the whole valley of the Pei-ho, at a spot where it curved like the twisted cavity of a shell, the sky seemed to shut in the grounds like the cover of a vase, and the star seemed but the garden lights overhead. From one edge of the vase to the other—from hill-top to hill-top—extended a broad avenue, a pagoda at either extremity glittering with gold and scarlet, the sides flaming with coloured lamps and flaunting with gay streamers of barbarian stuffs, and the moonlit river cutting it in the centre, the whole vista, at the first glance, resembling a girdle of precious stones with a fastening of opal. Off from this central division radiated in all direc-

tions alleys of camphor and cinnamon trees lighted with amorous dimness, and leading away to bowers upon the hill side, and from every quarter resounded music, and in every nook was seen feasting and merriment.

In disguise, the emperor and imperial family mingled in the crowd, and no one save the host and his daughters knew what part of the gardens was honoured with their presence. There was, however, a retreat in the grounds sacred to the privileged few, and here, when fatigued or desirous of refreshment, the royal personages laid aside disguise and were surrounded with the deferential honours of the court. It was so contrived that the access was unobserved by the people, and there was therefore, no feeling of exclusion to qualify the hilarity of the entertainment; Kwonfootse, with all his pride, looking carefully to his popularity. At the foot of each descent, upon the matted banks of the river, floated gilded boats with lamps burning in their prows, and gaily dressed boatmen offering conveyance across to all who required it; but there were also, unobserved by the crowd, boats unlighted and undecorated holding off from the shore, which at a sign given by the initiated, silently approached a marble stair without the line of the blazing avenue, and taking their freight on board, swiftly pulled up the moonlit river, to a landing concealed by the shoulder of the hill. No path led from the gardens hither, and from no point of view could be overlooked the more brilliant scene of imperial revel.

It was verging toward midnight when the unknown poet, with brain floating in a celestial giddiness of delight, stood on the brink of the gleaming river. The boats plied to and fro with their freights of fair damsels and gaily-dressed youths, the many coloured lamps throwing a rainbow profusion of tints on the water, and many a voice addressed him with merry invitation, for Le-pih's beauty, so famous now in history, was of no forbidding stateliness, and his motions, like his countenance, were as frankly joyous as the gambols of a young leopard. Not inclined to boisterous gaiety at the moment, Le-pih stepped between the lamp-bearing trees of the avenue, and folding his arms in his silken vest, stood gazing in reverie on the dancing waters. After a few moments, one of the dark boats on which he had unconsciously fixed his gaze drew silently towards him, and as the cushioned stern was brought round to the bank, the boatman made a reverence to his knees and sat waiting the poet's pleasure.