## LI. The Fragment

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When you travel in China I think nothing amazes you more than the passion for decoration which possesses the Chinese. It is not astonishing that you should find decoration in memorial arches or in temples; here the occasion for it is obvious; and it is natural enough to find it in furniture; nor does it surprise, though it delights you, to discover it on the commoner objects of household use. The pewter pot is enriched with a graceful design; the coolie’s rice bowl has its rough but not inelegant adornment. You may fancy that the Chinese craftsman does not look upon an article as complete till by line or colour he has broken the plainness of a surface. He will even print an arabesque on the paper he uses for wrapping. But it is more unexpected when you see the elaborate embellishment of a shop-front, the splendid carving, gilt or relieved with gold, of its counter, and the intricate sculpture of the signboard. It may be that this magnificence serves as an advertisement; but it does so only because the passer-by, the possible customer, takes pleasure in elegance; and you are apt to think that the  tradesman who owns the shop takes pleasure in it too. When he sits at his door, smoking his water pipe and through his great horn spectacles reading a newspaper, his eyes must rest with good humour sometimes on the fantastic ornamentation. On the counter, in a long-necked pot, stands a solitary carnation.

You will find the same delight in the ornate in the poorest villages where the severity of a door is mitigated by a charming piece of carving, and where the trellis of the windows forms a complicated and graceful pattern. You can seldom cross a bridge, in however unfrequented a district, without seeing in it the hand of an artist. The stones are so laid as to make an intricate decoration, and it seems as though these singular people judged with a careful eye whether a flat bridge or an arched one would fit in best with the surrounding scene. The balustrade is ornamented with lions or with dragons. I remember a bridge that must have been placed just where it was for the pure delight of its beauty rather than for any useful purpose, since, though broad enough for a carriage and pair to pass over it, it served only to connect a narrow path that led from one ragged village to another. The nearest town was thirty miles away. The broad river, narrowing at this point, flowed between two green hills, and nut trees grew on the bank. The bridge had no balustrade. It was constructed of immense slabs of granite and rested on five piers; the middle pier consisted of a huge and fantastic dragon with a  long and scaly tail. On the sides of the outer slabs, running the whole length of the bridge, was cut in very low relief a pattern of an unimaginable lightness, delicacy and grace.

But though the Chinese take such careful pains to avoid fatiguing your eye, with sure taste making the elaborateness of a decoration endurable by contrasting it with a plain surface, in the end weariness overcomes you. Their exuberance bewilders. You cannot refuse your admiration to the ingenuity with which they so diversify the ideas that occupy them as to give you an impression of changing fantasy, but the fact is plain that the ideas are few. The Chinese artist is like a fiddler who with infinite skill should play infinite variations upon a single tune.

Now, I happened upon a French doctor who had been in practice for many years in the city in which I then found myself; and he was a collector of porcelain, bronze, and embroidery. He took me to see his things. They were beautiful, but they were a trifle monotonous. I admired perfunctorily. Suddenly I came upon the fragment of a bust.

“But that is Greek,” I said, in surprise.

“Do you think so? I am glad to hear you say it.”

Head and arms were gone, and the statue, for such it had been, was broken off just above the waist, but there was a breastplate, with a sun in the middle of it, and in relief Perseus killing the dragon. It was a fragment of no great importance,  but it was Greek, and perhaps because I was surfeited with Chinese beauty it affected me strangely. It spoke in a tongue with which I was familiar. It rested my heart. I passed my hands over its age-worn surface with a delight I was myself surprised at. I was like a sailor who, wandering in a tropic sea, has known the lazy loveliness of coral islands and the splendours of the cities of the East, but finds himself once more in the dingy alleys of a Channel port. It is cold and grey and sordid, but it is England.

The doctor—he was a little bald man, with gleaming eyes and an excitable manner—rubbed his hands.

“Do you know it was found within thirty miles of here, on this side of the Tibetan frontier?”

“Found!” I exclaimed. “Found where?”

“Mon Dieu, in the ground. It had been buried for two thousand years. They found this and several fragments more, one or two complete statues, I believe, but they were broken up and only this remained.”

It was incredible that Greek statues should have been discovered in so remote a spot.

“But what is your explanation?” I asked.

“I think this was a statue of Alexander,” he said.

“By George!”

It was a thrill. Was it possible that one of the commanders of the Macedonian, after the expedition into India, had found his way into this mysterious corner of China under the shadow of the  mountains of Tibet? The doctor wanted to show me Manchu dresses, but I could not give them my attention. What bold adventurer was he who had penetrated so far towards the East to found a kingdom? There he had built a temple to Aphrodite and a temple to Dionysus, and in the theatre actors had sung the Antigone and in his halls at night bards had recited the Odyssey. And he and his men listening may have felt themselves the peers of the old seaman and his followers. What magnificence did that stained fragment of marble call up and what fabulous adventures! How long had the kingdom lasted and what tragedy marked its fall? Ah, just then I could not look at Tibetan banners or celadon cups; for I saw the Parthenon, severe and lovely, and beyond, serene, the blue Ægean.