

LETTER IV. *(Continued.)*

ALTHOUGH I went to the execution ground two days before my visit to the prison, the account of it belongs to this place. Passing through the fruit-market, the "Covent Garden" of Canton, where now and in their stated seasons are exposed for sale, singly and in fragrant heaps, among countless other varieties of fruits, the orange, pomegranate, apple, citron, banana, rose-apple, pine-apple, custard-apple, pear, quince, guava, carambola, persimmon, loquat, pomegranate, grape, water melon, musk melon, peach, apricot, plum, mango, mulberry, date, coco-nut, olive, walnut, chestnut, lichi, and papaya, through the unsavoury precincts of the "salt fish market," and along a street the speciality of which is the manufacture from palm leaves of very serviceable rain cloaks, we arrived at the Ma T'au, a *cul de sac* resembling in shape, as its name imports, a horse's head, with the broad end opening on the street. This "field of blood," which counts its slain by tens of thousands, is also a "potter's field," and is occupied throughout its whole length by the large earthen pots which the Chinese use instead of tubs, either in process of manufacture or drying in the sun. This Ma T'au, the place of execution, on which more than one hundred heads at times fall in a morning, is simply a pottery yard, and at the hours when space is required for the executioner's purposes more or fewer pots are cleared out of the way, according to the number of the condemned. The

spectacle is open to the street and to all passers-by. Against the south wall are five crosses, which are used for the crucifixion of malefactors. At the base of the east wall are four large earthenware vessels full of quick-lime, into which heads which are afterwards to be exposed on poles are cast, until the flesh has been destroyed. From this bald sketch it may be surmised that few accessories of solemnity or even propriety consecrate the last tragedy of justice.

In some cases criminals are brought directly from the judgment-seat to the execution ground on receiving sentence, but as a rule the condemned persons remain in prison ignorant of the date of their doom, till an official, carrying a square board with the names of those who are to die that day pasted upon it, enters and reads the names of the doomed. Each man on answering is made to sit in something like a dust-basket, in which he is borne through the gate of the inner prison, at which he is interrogated and his identity ascertained by an official, who represents the Viceroy or Governor, into the courtyard of the Yamun, where he is pinioned. At this stage it is usual for the friends of the criminal, or the turnkeys in their absence, to give him "auspicious" food, chiefly fat pork and *Saam-su*, an intoxicating wine. Pieces of betel-nut, the stimulating qualities of which are well known, are invariably given. These delays being over, the criminal is carried into the presence of the judge, who sits not in the judgment-hall but in the porch of the inner gateway of his Yamun. On the prisoner giving his name, a superscription bearing it, and proclaiming his crime and the manner of his death, is tied to a slip of bamboo and bound to his head. A small, wooden ticket, also bearing his name and that of the prison from which he is taken to execution, is tied to the back of his neck.

Then the procession starts, the criminals, of whom

there are usually several, being carried in open baskets in the following order:—Some spearmen, the malefactors, a few soldiers, a chair of state, bearing the ruler of the Naam-Hoi county, attended by equerries; and another chair of state, in which is seated the official who, after all is over, pays worship to the five protecting genii of Canton, a small temple to whom stands close to the potter's field, and who have power to restrain those feelings of revenge and violence which the spirits of the decapitated persons may be supposed hereafter to cherish against all who were instrumental in their decapitation. Last of all follows a herald on horseback, carrying a yellow banner inscribed "By Imperial Decree," an indispensable adjunct on such occasions, as without it the county ruler would not be justified in commanding the executioner to give the death stroke. This ruler or his deputy sits at a table covered with a red cloth, and on being told that all the preliminaries have been complied with, gives the word for execution. The criminals who have been uncereemoniously pitched out of the dust baskets into the mud or gore or dust of the execution ground, kneel down in a row or rows, and the executioner with a scimitar strikes off head after head, each with a single stroke, an assistant attending to hand him a fresh sword as soon as the first becomes blunt. It is said that Chinese criminals usually meet their doom with extreme apathy, but occasionally they yield to extreme terror, and howl at the top of their voices, "Save life! Save life!" As soon as the heads have fallen, some coolies of a pariah class take up the trunks and put them into wooden shells, in which they are eventually buried in a cemetery outside one of the city gates, called "The trench for the bones of ten thousand men." It is not an uncommon thing, under ordinary circumstances, for fifteen, twenty, or thirty-five wretches to suffer the penalty of death in this spot; and

this number swells to very large dimensions at a gaol delivery, or during a rebellion, or when crews of pirates are captured in the act of piracy. My friend Mr. Bulkeley Johnson of Shanghai saw one hundred heads fall in one morning.

Mr. Henry says that the reason that most of the criminals meet death with such stoicism or indifference is, that they have been worn down previously by starvation and torture. Some are stupefied with *Saam-su*. It is possible in some cases for a criminal who is fortunate enough to have rich relations to procure a substitute; a coolie sells himself to death in such a man's stead for a hundred dollars, and for a week before his surrender indulges in every kind of expensive debauchery, and when the day of doom arrives is so completely stupefied by wine and opium, as to know nothing of the terror of death.

We had not gone far into this aceldema when we came to a space cleared from pots, and to a great pool of blood and dust mingled, blackening in the sun, then another and another, till there were five of them almost close together, with splashes of blood upon the adjacent pots, and blood trodden into the thirsty ground. Against the wall opposite, a rudely constructed cross was resting, dark here and there with patches of blood. Among the rubbish at the base of the wall there were some human fragments partly covered with matting; a little farther some jaw-bones with the teeth in them, then four more crosses, and some human heads lying at the foot of the wall, from which it was evident that dogs had partially gnawed off the matting in which they had been tied up. The dead stare of one human eye amidst the heap haunts me still. A blood-splashed wooden ticket, with a human name on one side and that of the Naam-Hoi prison on the other, was lying near one of the pools of blood, and I



picked it up as a memento, as the stroke which had severed its string had also severed at the same time the culprit's neck. The place was ghastly and smelt of blood.

The strangest and most thrilling sight of all was the cross in this unholy spot, not a symbol of victory and hope, but of the lowest infamy and degradation, of the vilest death which the vilest men can die. Nor was it the solid, lofty structure, fifteen or twenty feet high, which art has been glorifying for a thousand years, but a rude gibbet of unplanned wood, roughly nailed together, barely eight feet high, and not too heavy for a strong man to carry on his shoulders. ~~Most likely it was such a cross elevated but little above the heads of the howling mob of Jerusalem, which Paul had in view when he wrote of Him who hung upon it, "But made Himself obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."~~ To these gibbets infamous criminals whose crimes are regarded as deserving of a lingering death are tightly bound with cords, and are then slowly hacked to pieces with sharp knives, unless the friends of the culprit are rich enough to bribe the executioner to terminate the death agony early by stabbing a vital part.

These facts do not require to be dressed out with words. They are most effective when most baldly stated. I left the execution ground as I left the prison—with the prayer, which has gained a new significance, "For all prisoners and captives we beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord;" but though our hands are nationally clean now as regards the administration of justice and the treatment of criminals, we need not hold them up in holy horror as if the Chinese were guilty above all other men, for, ~~the framers of the Litany~~ were familiar with dungeons perhaps worse than the prison of the Naam-Hoi magistrate, and with forms of torture which spared not

even women, and the judges' and gaolers' palms were intimate with the gold of accused persons. It is simply that heathenism in Canton is practising at this day what Christianity in Europe looked upon with indifference for centuries.

I. L. B.