

CHAPTER XIV.

PRISONS AND PUNISHMENT.

Horrors of a Chinese prison—Prisoners nailed together—Prisoner in a cage—Starving to death—An address to the throne—Salutary interference of Lord Elgin—Instances of fatal effects of ill-usage—Various kinds of torture—Imitation of official cruelty—A poor wretch saved—Curious customs regarding wives—Deliberate act of vengeance—Other instances of the like kind—Flogging big boys—A servant flogging his master—More cruelties—Life for life—Gods in the rain.

JUSTICE is depicted blind, but in China, the bandage that darkens the eyes should cover the ears also. The horrors of a Chinese prison are so great that prisoners, deeming death an escape, go with apparent contentment to the place of execution. In Shanghai, I have seen them crammed like wild beasts in a cage, rolling about in the midst of filth and disease, begging for food. In the depth of winter, prisoners are chained to each other in strings, one of them not unfrequently hanging dead to his comrades! Once a party of pirates were seized and landed near the foreign houses; there had been a deficiency of chains, so the poor wretches were joined together with a large nail clenched through the hand of each! At Foochow, I met a prisoner whom they were carrying into the city, in a cage barely large enough to contain his body, cramped up in a sitting posture; two of the bars at the top had been cut to allow his head to pass through, every jostle or stop in the movement of his

bearers causing his neck or face to be dashed against the broken bars. It is in the recollection of Canton residents, when four men were placed in the *cangue* with a guard around them, and publicly starved to death in the open streets!

No matter how good the laws may be; let us see how they are carried out, and not judge of the country by its maxims or its rules. I will not even grant that these are always correct. Sir George Staunton gives us the following translation of an address to the throne from the Foo-Yuen of Canton regarding the prisoners in that city:—"Among the prisoners, many had been brought up from the country under charges of theft, murder, and the like, accompanied by the *witnesses and accusers* respectively concerned,—the cognizance of their offences having been referred to the magistrate of the provincial capital; but whether the parties were more or less implicated, the charges serious or trifling, it was usual to expose them for many months, or even a year, to the hardship of a tedious and indiscriminate confinement, in authorized places of detention. These were employed to enforce by oppression and arbitrary confinement, nothing less than a system of fraud and extortion. I hastened to remedy this grievance, but already many persons had perished under confinement, and the inhuman nefarious practice has been so long established, that it is difficult to ascertain the year in which it originated, or conjecture how many lives have been lost by its contrivance. To two women curators, all the female prisoners who had not yet received sentence or been discharged were committed; and the younger part of them were not unfrequently let out for prostitution, and the wages thereof received by the curators as a part of their regular profits." The character

of the present holders of similar appointments leads us to suppose that the practice referred to still exists in many places. It even existed for some time after the British flag waved over Canton, until Lord Elgin insisted upon the Chinese governor putting a stop to it.¹

Out of 500 banditti some years ago in the prisons of Nanshaou (Kwang-Tung), 300 sickened. Hundreds of prisoners are reported to die annually from ill-usage in the jails. In 1829, the Governor of Canton reported that one of the prisons had been burnt through carelessness, along with twenty-one of the prisoners confined in it. The Emperor suspected "that illegal torture had been applied to the prisoners, or that something had been done by the governmental officers, the traces of which they wished to obliterate by consigning all to the flames." He must have had a fine opinion of his officers! During the famine, when I was in Shanghai, in the winter of 1849, the prisoners were put upon such short allowance that they actually threatened to *break out* if more food was not given to them. Poor wretches, how were they to break off their chains!

The tortures for confession are too revolting to enumerate, and many of the punishments are worse,—dis-membering, emasculation, flogging in all its horrible varieties, kneeling on hot chains, &c. &c., form but a mild portion; the most frequent is bamboosing on the inside of the thighs, and exposure in the *cangue*.

The people sometimes ape the cruelties of their rulers. I remember an instance of the creditors of a man hanging him up by his great toe to extract payment; and I once cut down a poor wretch I discovered with his hands tied behind his back, and hung up by his thumbs. He

¹ Mr. Wingrove Cooke's "China, 1857-1858," gives most interesting particulars of the Canton prisons.

had been in this state for six hours, could hardly get his arms back to their usual position, and his hands were purple, the fingers as thick as wrists: he had only been *suspected* of going to steal!

There are some curious customs existing in China regarding punishments to unfaithful wives, and concerning marriage generally. Men, on leaving home for a long period, sometimes sell their wives, or lend them during their absence; this, however, is only among the poorer classes. I know a man that killed his wife. She was young and handsome, but he doubted her faithfulness. The gay Lothario suspected was the son of one of his most intimate friends. He pretended he was called away on business, made all the preparations for a long journey, and invited his friends, including some relations of the suspected party, and him also, to a feast at an adjacent tea-house. Supper being over, he started for his boat, bidding the guests good-bye. Late at night he returned home, armed, and with two trustworthy servants, he had arranged for his entrance into the seraglio; his other wife was sister of the young lover, and connived at the connexion. His worst fears were confirmed. He stabbed to the heart the son of his friend, and dreading to slay his faithless wife with his own hand, made his servants destroy her, and then having cut off the heads of the guilty couple, marched off with them to the magistrate to report the occurrence. An extraordinary trial then took place, by order of the mandarin, to prove the truth of the man's testimony. A large tub was procured; in this was placed a quantity of water and some lime. The two heads were then put into the tub, and the water quickly stirred round. The result was satisfactory. The guilty heads spun round in the centre, with their faces lovingly towards each other, and the unfortu-

nate husband returned tranquilly to his deserted home, the mandarins rewarding him with 20,000 cash for doing an act of justice. He is now a wealthy merchant in Canton, a native of Chin-Chew, and rather a fine-looking Chinaman.

Many of the oldest residents in Shanghai will remember the man who dragged his wife into the water at the Soochow Creek, and held her there till she was drowned, the Chinese not interfering. Husbands have a certain power of life and death over their wives, and fathers over their children. The children, however, seem to behave very well, and it is rare to see them punished. I once saw a very old man give his great lout of a son, a full grown man, a good sound thrashing. The fellow offered no resistance, nor did he attempt to run away, stood quietly, but blubbering like a child while his father laid on with a stick. It was ridiculous to see the great booby crying; but the northern men are very much given to it. When there has been a fight in the street, you generally find the combatants in tears; and if there is a coolie doing something particularly vexatious, and an angry foreigner gives him a good "punch in the ribs," the Chinaman will drop down and have his cry. The southern people are different, and will even resist a blow. There is a story told of a gentleman in Canton, with a stronger mind than body, who attempted to chastise his servant, but the celestial valet locked the door, and gave the master more than he bargained for. The cruelties perpetrated by high government officers, under the head of punishment, are startling. It is sufficient to allude to the shocking case of Captain Stead, whom that wretch Yeh-Shun skinned alive. Some of the rebels at Shanghai, when captured, were tatooed to death. The people are almost as bad when their evil passions are let loose,

though they are generally peaceable. The six young Englishmen who were killed by them at Hwang-Chu-Kee, in 1847, were barbarously murdered; but at that time the authorities had been instigating the people against foreigners. In mentioning this last case, we cannot too strongly press on the public notice the dangerous precedent that was then allowed to be established. Our authorities acknowledged or acted upon the Chinese principle of life for life. Six Englishmen were killed: the Chinese said they had killed two natives, and made up the balance of six by four prisoners out of the jails, as it is supposed. Now, it should not have been "life for life" that we should have exacted, for hundreds must have been guilty, and scarcely one suffered. The village should have been razed to the ground at the time—a blot of desolation left as a monument, over the ground once occupied by Hwang-Chu-Kee.