

UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

# THE ATTACHE AT PEKING

BY

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One bright cold morning, about a fortnight ago, three of us witnessed a Chinese execution. The place of execution is at the opening of the vegetable market in the Chinese city. The market is held in a broadish street, into which a number of large thoroughfares, at right angles to it, lead. All these inlets were fenced off, and the street itself filled with soldiery and officials; such a tatterdemalion crowd! with nothing resembling uniformity of dress except the Tartar cap, and that, in many cases, was torn and battered, and tassel-less. The men were as

heterogeneous as their clothes. Old and young, strong and decrepit, half blind or whole deaf, none seemed too miserable objects for service. I saw one effective soldier on crutches ; hunch-backs and cripples were in plenty. We left our horses in charge of some of these poor devils, and walked through the lines, no one opposing us, but, on the contrary, every one showing us the utmost civility. The whole of the shops in the street were closed, but the flat, low roofs were crowded with spectators ; among them not a single woman or child was to be seen.

At one end of the space closed off was a matting shed. Inside this were the condemned prisoners, who were waiting for the Imperial decree for their death to be brought on to the ground. We went in, and I shall not easily forget the scene. There were fifteen criminals, of whom one was a woman, one was a murderer ; two, of whom the woman was one, had stolen girls and sold them into the worst of all slavery ; the rest were highway robbers. The murderer was to be decapitated, it being a severe punishment to a Chinese not to take his body out of the world as his parents gave it to him. (It is this feeling that makes them so averse to

amputation.) The others were all to be strangled. It is very strange to be talking with men who are to die within a few minutes. Some of them were perfectly calm and collected, and came up to talk with us and ask us questions, as if nothing was the matter. One bright, intelligent-looking fellow came up to me and said, "Well, I suppose you've come to see the fun." The word he used was the same that would be employed to signify the fun of a fair. "Do you have this sort of fun in your country?" another said laughingly. "I wish you would take me off with you." We said we should only be too glad; on which he smiled and said, "Ah! the law won't let you do that." One very old man could not forget his Asiatic politeness, even *in articulo mortis*. One of our party had asked a guard for a light for his cigar. The guard either did not hear or did not pay attention; on which the old fellow touched him and said, "What manners are these? don't you see the gentleman wants a light." All, however, were not so quiet. The murderer was raving and ranting drunk, howling out every obscene blasphemy that he could think of against the Emperor.

The woman had been charitably given some drug, which, though it had made her very sick, had deprived her of consciousness. Nothing could exceed the kindness of the officials, one and all, to the condemned men. They were giving them smokes out of their pipes, tea, and wine; even the wretched murderer, who was struggling and fighting between two soldiers, was only asked to "be quiet, be quiet," in spite of all provocation. The others were walking about the booth, their hands tied, and a sort of arrow stuck behind their backs, bearing their name and the crime for which they were to suffer, but otherwise uncontrolled. They were all from one part of the country. I told you that the woman had been drugged. This is a constant practice at executions. The most famous drug for this purpose is the blood from under the red crest of the crane, called by the Chinese "Ho ting hung." This, or a medicine purporting to be such, is sold at an immense price, and is said to be carried by mandarins in one of the beads of their necklaces, in order that if they incur the Emperor's displeasure, they may have the means of death at hand, for the crane's crest-blood is a poison as well as an

anodyne. We gave all the cigars we had with us to the poor condemned criminals, who were very grateful for them, and I was glad to leave so painful a scene. A little farther down the street another large booth had been erected. Here sat the high officials in a semicircle, with a red-button mandarin from the Board of Punishments at their head. On one side of this booth was a tiny sort of altar on which were displayed the tools of the executioner—the swords and bloody string, and the tourniquets and strings for strangling. In front of the altar a small brick stove had been built, over which was a caldron of boiling water, like a huge barber's pot, to warm the swords. The executioner's men were huddled round it toasting their hands. The swords are short broad blades, almost like choppers, with a long wooden handle on which is carved a grotesque head. They have been above two hundred years in use, and are regarded as genii and invested with preternatural powers. They are five in number, and their names are Great Lord, second Lord, third Lord, fourth Lord, and fifth Lord (Fa yeh, êrh yeh, san yeh, ssü yeh, and wu yeh). When they are not in use they are kept at the chief

executioner's house, a tower on the wall, where, as my teacher gravely informed me, they are often heard at night to sing gruesome songs of their past feats. When they are wanted their Lordships are "requested" to come out.

The executioners have all sorts of stories and traditions about them. One is supposed to be younger than the others, and of a skittish, frolicsome nature, dallying and toying with the heads, not striking them off at one blow like the others, who are older and more sedate. There were many false alarms that the decree had come and announced the fatal moment. But at last the chief headsman (Kwei-tzŭ-shou) came out, and throwing off his fur coat put on a bloodstained apron of yellow leather. He was a short, thick-set, but not ill-looking man, with that curious, anxious, *waiting* expression on his face that a man wears with serious work before him. It was horrid to see how completely he was the hero of the occasion, the soldiers round him treating him with the greatest deference, and evidently proud of a word from him. The five swords were carried in line near him. His assistant stripped his outer coat, and then all was ready. So soon

as the decree arrived the prisoners were led out one by one to the booth where the mandarins were sitting, and there made to go through the form of acknowledging the justice of their punishment. They were then handed over to the executioner. The headsman and his men had to beat back the other soldiers with sticks in order to clear a space. Nothing could be more indecent and revolting than the behaviour of the latter. All order and discipline were at an end; they were like hounds yelling, snarling, and struggling to tear a fox in pieces rather than men ostensibly employed to keep the peace. The murderer was the first man brought forward. Happily he had raved himself into a state of insensibility, so his pains were over. The decapitation is done with marvellous speed. A string is passed round the prisoner's neck, close under the chin, and his head is thus held up by the assistant so as to offer resistance to the sword. When a mandarin is executed, the headsman meets him and says, "Ching ta jên kwei tien," "I pray that your Excellency may fly to heaven"—much as our executioners used to ask the pardon of their victims. The man is made to kneel, in

an instant the sword is raised, the executioner gives a shriek supposed to represent the words "I have executed a man" (Sha liao jên), and at one blow the head is severed from the trunk and carried off to be inspected by the mandarins. As the blow falls the people all cry out, "A good sword" (hao Tao), partly in praise of the headsman's skill, but more especially from a superstitious feeling *um berufen*. The strangling is done with the same merciful quickness. It is far less lengthy than hanging. Two pieces of whip-cord are passed round the neck with a loop. The criminal is placed with his face to the ground, and the two executioners turn the tourniquet as quick as thought. Apparently there is no suffering. As I passed the big booth on my way out—for you may imagine that when I had seen how the matter was conducted I stayed for no more—I heard a loud voice shout out a name. Immediately out of the shed where the rest of the condemned were waiting, I saw a tall man walk out between two others as leisurely and composedly as if he had been going to his dinner. It was one of the young fellows with whom I had spoken so short a time before. The last act

of this horror is consummated in the *Pit of the 10,000* (Wan Jên K'êng) by the wolves and foxes, a pit in the Chinese city where the bodies of executed criminals are thrown. Rich people's bodies are bought back by their families that they may receive decent burial.

I was glad to see that the execution was conducted far more mercifully than one is led to suppose by certain writers. It is true that this is not the "Ling Chih," or disgraceful slow death, which is the punishment of parricide<sup>1</sup> and high treason. But an Englishman who has witnessed that assures me that the criminal he saw so executed was put out of his misery at once, and that the mutilation took place *after* death and not before. I was specially struck by the excessive kindness of the soldiery to the criminals. The only sign of cruel disposition was the eagerness with which they pressed forward to see the death. That was revolting.

<sup>1</sup> The crime of parricide includes high treason, murder of parents, elders in the family, and of the teacher, in such reverence is learning held. The murder of a master by an apprentice comes under the same category. A parricide is said to be an "owl-tiger," both animals being supposed to devour their parents. The owl especially eats its mother's head and eyes. The laugh of an owl portends death in a family.

Of all the men who died that day not one appeared to be in the slightest degree affected by the solemnity of his position, or to show any apprehension for what was to follow. Where there was any emotion it was simply abject terror of the immediate pain of dying. Beyond that their thoughts did not seem to penetrate.

I must bring this letter of horrors to an end.