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The Head of Wu-fang

By DON C. WILEY

The tale of a Chinese mandarin who exacted a fearful punishment on those who had brought him to death



"Startled, he attempted to wrench his throat from their grasp."

WHEN my good friend and spiritual adviser, the Reverend Josiah Davis, died suddenly of some mysterious malady contracted among the fever wards of his mission hospital at Kalgan, in northern China, certain of his private papers fell into my hands. Scanning them idly one night, while the winds that howl down the Gobi desert wailed around my little house like souls in torment, I came upon a thick document, neatly bound, but yellow with age.

On its cover was inscribed in Josiah's angular hand this legend: "Dying statement of the Christian convert Ching Tung-li taken down and translated by Josiah Davis, Kalgan, China, December 3, 19—".

Overcome by curiosity I turned back the cover and began reading.

An hour later I shuddered as I thumbed the last page. For many minutes I debated whether it would not be wise to consign the papers to the fire

which flickered on the hearth at my feet; for the story of the head of Mandarin Wu-fang and the curse which it put upon three men was so incredible, so horrible, so beyond the pale of things as they are that were it not for my knowledge of the essential honesty and level-headedness of Josiah Davis I would have ascribed the tale to the ravings of a madman.

However, the world may judge for itself as to the truth of the strange story of Ching Tung-li, for I give it in its entirety:

As you know, Father, I came to your Mission two years ago a man broken in body and with my mind tottering on the verge of madness. You took me in, fed me and taught me that the creed of the Christian God is kindness and love. Also you taught me that confession and repentance are great virtues. Now that I am dying I wish to confess and to repent. A little water, please, to moisten my lips, and I will tell you my story. There is nothing of kindness and love in it but much of hate and lust, pain and horror, and it is probable that you will believe little of it. But I, as I die, *know* that it is true, for even now I see the head of Wu-fang grinning at me out of the darkness. The lips are moving. . . .

You, I know, think me an old, old man, but I am really only forty, as we Chinese count our age. True, my body is bent and my voice is weak like that of a grandfather, but that is only because of the hell in which I have lived and the tortures which this poor body of mine has undergone.

I was born in the village of Minga, which lies far to the north of Kalgan on the edge of the great area that you foreigners call Inner Mongolia. I must confess that my youth was an evil one. I drank and stole and consorted with loose

women, though my father was one of the most respected men in the village. My constant companion and my evil spirit in these revels was a great, hulking fellow named Wong, the son of a petty tea-shop owner. For him I had the greatest admiration. He was always first in proposing some deviltry and his great strength made him feared for many *li* around our village. Him I followed slavishly.

For many years peace had blessed our village, but one autumn we saw smoke rolling up on the horizon and later a fear-stricken refugee from a neighboring town crept into Minga and told us that Chang-Tsu, the notorious bandit leader, was sweeping across the country, looting villages and towns and putting their inhabitants to the sword.

Then, while our elders were still debating methods of defense, Chang was upon us. Into our village he rode, a great grinning devil at the head of a hundred lesser devils who seized our women and looted our shops as they strode through the streets. Stalking into our temple, Chang ordered the village elders brought before him, and when they came he laughed at their pleas for mercy. Then with his own sword he cut the throat of the leading elder, holding him while he bled like a slaughtered pig. Chang growled an order to his men. In a moment the temple was a shambles. Every one of our leading citizens lay dying, my father among them.

For the next three days we lived in a smoky hell. Bodies littered the streets and women screamed in the drunken embraces of the bandits. Yet, strange as it seemed to me, my evil companion Wong went unscathed, nor was I injured. Then I learned the reason. Wong confided to me that he had approached Chang with the offer that the two of us

join his forces and that the offer had been accepted.

My father's body lay still on the blood-stained floor of the temple; my mother had died horribly in our burning home, and I had seen my own sister fling herself into a well to escape the clutches of one of Chang's drunken followers. It was far better that I, too, should die in the village in which I was born, but so strong was the hold that Wong had upon my soul that I accepted—nay, welcomed—his infamous proposal, and we left the village in the vanguard of Chang's band.

OF THE next few years I do not care to talk, for they were the blackest of my life. Let it suffice that Chang and his men swept across northern Chihli and into Manchuria like a scourge, murdering, plundering and burning, and that Wong came to the fore among the band of murderers by his signal acts of brutality until he was promoted to the post of executioner and became Chang's favorite. I followed Wong, rising with him. It was I who bound the victims and forced them to kneel so that their necks might feel the biting caress of his great headman's sword. And often I aided him when some stubborn enemy was put to the torture. There were many of these. Now, as I grow weaker, I can hear their screams again. Ah, many, many tortured spirits will meet and mock mine when the great blackness closes over me.

The more he killed and plundered the more powerful Chang became, until he was master over many hundred miles of territory. Yet, desperately as he tried, one city still held out against him. This was the walled city of Chufung, and its overlord was an aged mandarin named Wu-fang. Whisper that name softly, Father, for it is a terrible one.

Now, bandit Chang was afraid of but

one thing—death. And for that reason he was determined to conquer Chufung, for strange tales were told of the powers of its mandarin commander. Men said that nightly he held converse with the *cheous*—the devils of ancient China—and that he had learned the secret of everlasting life. None knew how old he was, although men's fathers could not remember the day when he was not their leader. Many were ready to swear that on a certain day when the plague that turned men's bodies black swept through Chufung, they had seen a dead coolie carried into old Wu-fang's palace. Next day the dead man walked from the place, well and sound of body, though his mind for ever after was a blank.

Wu-fang was rumored to be immensely rich, but that interested Chang less than did this secret of life, which our leader swore he would wrest from the old man. And so, when one of our spies came to Chang one day with a scheme by which we could win our way into Chufung, our leader ordered that we quit the town which then we were plundering and ride away to the mandarin stronghold, though it was many weary miles distant.

THE people of Chufung displayed a stubborn resistance, but our spy's scheme proved successful, and on the second day of the siege, Chang rode at the head of his men into the city through streets littered with the bodies of men and women, and finally he halted at the palace of the mandarin Wu-fang.

The rest of my story I hardly dare ask you to believe, but by the Christian God, in whom I now believe, the curse that the head of that ancient man put upon three strong and heartless men was powerful enough to drive them to their death. Chang Tsu is dead and he was the first

of the three. Wong is dead and he was the second. I am the third and you can see that I am dying.

As I said, Chang rode to the gates of Wu-fang's palace. Wong and I rode with the crowd of bandits at his heels. In a moment the men had smashed the bars and the great gates swung open. There, across the courtyard, Wu-fang stood in a portico richly decorated with gold and lacquer. He was an old, old man in silken robes and a scarlet cap bearing the jade button of the mandarin. Around him were clustered dark, crouching figures. They seemed human and yet were not completely human. Deep shadows lay in the portico and we could see their eyes shining as no human eyes have ever shone.

At the sight of these guardians Wong and I drew our pistols, but the old mandarin only laughed contemptuously. Then he waved a hand and the figures were gone. No, they did not slink back into the palace. He simply waved his hand—and they were not.

But, by my soul, we saw them again—and soon!

At this weird disappearance Chang halted for a moment and I saw him bite his lip. Then he stalked forward, as arrogant as ever, and reaching the old man struck him full in the face with the heel of his hand.

Wong and I caught the mandarin as he tottered back from the blow and together we dragged him through the palace door and into a room that for richness and beauty rivalled any in the Winter Palace in Peiping. Everywhere were carved screens and teakwood chairs and tables inlaid with the finest jade, and on the walls hung silken tapestries worth an emperor's ransom.

Rich was the loot in that room, but we paid little heed to it, for again we

saw those weirdly shining eyes, glaring at us from the corners which were shrouded in darkness. Yet once more they vanished in an instant when the mandarin made a motion with a half-freed arm.

Now, Chang Tsu was not one to be deterred by man or devil, so he flung himself down in a great chair, placed his muddied boots on a priceless rug and ordered that we drag the prisoner before him.

"Old man," Chang growled, "you know me and my ways. Therefore you dare not refuse what I am about to demand. You are the possessor of certain secrets, among them that of everlasting life. These secrets I must know. Tell me and you shall go free. Refuse and you will die most slowly. This man," pointing to Wong, "has his ways of making men talk and making men die that make even me shudder, and he shall have his way with you unless you speak."

The mandarin seemed to ponder for a moment, and then he laughed. Even today I do not like to think of that laugh. Never have I heard such a sound of utter contempt issue from a human throat. There was black evil in that laugh, and more knowledge than any man should have.

"No," the old man cackled, "my secrets are for wise men. You are a fool and would misuse them. Further, you are greedy; and those I serve, and who serve me, hate greed. They would destroy you, but not before you had done much harm. For many years I have ruled the people of this city and ruled them well. Now I am ready to die, and if you think that the manner in which I die can make any difference you are a greater fool than I thought."

Stepping forward he spat full in Chang's face.

For a full moment our leader stared unbelievably at the mandarin. Then with a bellow of rage he leaped from the chair and knocked down the old man with one blow and began to kick him unmercifully. So savage was his attack that I believe he would have killed Wu-fang then and there had not remembrance of the secrets the old man knew intervened.

When the mandarin fell, I heard a low muttering sound that seemed to sweep round the room, and once more I saw those awful figures materializing out of the gloom. But they vanished as Chang ceased his attack and dragged his enemy to his feet.

Now Chang had sworn that Wu-fang should tell his secrets; so when he turned the ancient mandarin over to our care he growled certain explicit instructions as to the treatment the prisoner should receive at our hands.

I SHALL speak but briefly of that treatment. Through it all, though we plucked out his long nails one at a time, applied white-hot irons to his feet and armpits and with a knife tortured certain nerve centers in a way which only Wong knew, the old man opened his mouth only once. Of that I shall tell you.

Early on the second day of the mandarin's ordeal, as I was aiding Wong in applying a hot iron to our victim's body, I felt soft, clammy hands creeping about my throat. These hands were horrible. They seemed to be reaching from beyond the grave. Startled, I attempted to wrench my throat from their grasp. I felt a strange paralysis creeping over me. The hands tightened and before my gaze swam a face so horrible that I can not attempt to describe it. Dimly I saw that Wong seemed to be trapped by the same mysterious power.

It was then that Wu-fang spoke, and his voice seemed far too powerful for a body tortured as his had been.

"Not yet," he said, and it seemed to be an order. "I am ready to die. Your task will come later. Begone!"

At the last word the hands relaxed and the breath of life came back into my body again.

I need not tell you that the horror of that experience was strong upon us, and had it not been for our fear of Chang, Wong and I would not have remained another instant in that dark chamber where the mandarin lay. But Chang had ordered that the old man be made to speak; so the torture went on.

On the third day it became apparent that our efforts would prove fruitless, that Wu-fang would die without opening his lips. Chang, when he realized this, was mad with rage. He was determined, however, that his victim should not cheat him of a final indignity—public and shameless execution.

Bending over the wasted body in the torture chamber he shouted, "Old fool, you have defied me and you shall die tomorrow on the public execution ground. No mandarin's death for you—no silken bow-string or swift poison! Tomorrow, unless you speak at once, you shall die like a common criminal under my headman's sword."

There was no movement to show that the mandarin heard the threat, but I could see that his eyes were open and that he glared balefully at our leader. However, he made no sound, and Chang, stamping with rage, set the hour of execution and ordered that a dozen of the city's elders be killed at the same time.

NEVER shall I forget that day when we led the old man out to die.

The sun blazed down on the barren

execution ground outside the city wall. The field was dotted with bodies and the dust was caked with the blood of a dozen sprawling, headless forms.

In the center stood Chang, smiling viciously at the scene of horror. Surrounding him were his picked riflemen, and near by Wong leaned upon his great blood-stained headsman's sword. The sweat trickled down his face, and his huge body, bare to the waist, glistened in the sun, for he had beheaded twelve men in less than an hour that morning.

Then from the people of the city, who crowded against the low wall around the place of execution, came a wail of sorrow and terror as a squad of our men led in the old mandarin. I say led, but rather they dragged him; for the tortures he had undergone were so great that his tottering legs could not support his body. Yet on his wrinkled face was a look, not of terror, but of hatred so fierce that we all gasped with fear. Even Chang's face blanched with terror.

The soldiers, who supported the old man, dragged him before executioner Wong and let him fall to his knees. Then, as Wong began to raise the great sword, an aged woman broke from the crowd, ran out on the field and screamed, "Touch him not, as you value your lives! He deals with the devils of the earth and the air, and so surely as you kill him he will return and——"

Here a shot from the rifle of one of Chang's guards cut short the warning, and the hag, a bullet through her forehead, slumped to the ground.

The interruption seemed to have brought back Chang's courage, for he stepped forward and with an evil smile on his face stood, legs straddled, before the man who was about to die.

"Old fool," he snarled, "I fear not your devils and curses, for I am Chang,

a devil far worse than any with whom you have treated. Now go to your ancestors, you dog!"

With the words Wong lifted his sword high in the air and brought it down with a mighty stroke.

I saw the blade strike the old man's neck and shear through it. I saw the head leap under the blade and fall to the ground a yard away, while great gouts of blood spurted from the severed neck.

And then a shadow like that of a great black wing swept swiftly across the sun, leaving the execution field bathed in an eery half-life. With the coming of the shadow the eyes in the severed head opened slowly and glared balefully at the man who had ordered the execution.

Came next a thin, piping voice from the awful Thing on the ground. The lips, drawn back from the sharp yellow teeth, did not move, yet the voice issued from between them. I could hear the voice distinctly.

"You called me a dog," the voice said to Chang. "Know then that you shall die like a dog ere the year has passed."

The voice ceased for a moment and I heard a moan of terror go up from the crowd and from our leader's bodyguard. Then those horrible glaring eyes turned slowly in their sockets straight at my friend Wong. Again the voice spoke.

"You, brutal one," it said to Wong, "struck the blow of death. Know that you shall die in the same manner as I died."

Wong screamed and fell grovelling in the dust. An icy hand gripping at my heart, I turned to flee from that awful spot. But the glaring eyes met mine and I could not move. For a third time the voice spoke.

"You, spawn of the gutter," it squeaked, "you saw fit to assist in my

torture. You shall suffer as I have suffered."

Slowly the eyes closed and the voice ceased. For a moment that seemed an age the hush continued, and then from the throat of Chang Tsu, who stood open-mouthed and trembling, came a great bellow of fear and rage.

That shout broke the awful spell upon us and I saw the men of Chang's body-guard rush in and beat the Thing on the ground into a shapeless mass with their rifle butts. And as they did this the shadow passed from the sun and the field was once more flooded with the blinding glare of midday.

I GROW weaker and know that my end is near, so my story must be told and told quickly. You know, and the world knows, how Chang died. For a year after the death of the old mandarin he waxed daily richer and more powerful, and I have heard that he laughed at the curse that came from those dead lips. He became known as Chang Tsu, the great war lord, and bought an armored train from the British when he declared open war on the government. But one day as the train was crossing a bridge, a bomb exploded beneath it, shattering the war lord's car like a match box.

Twenty men died outright in that explosion, but Chang, though grown fat and soft with rich living, managed to crawl away from the scene, sorely wounded.

Two days later a soldier of the government force, which had bombed the train, found Chang lying sprawled in a rice field. He still breathed, but the soldier put his heel on the wounded man's neck and forced his head into the mud until he strangled. And thus died Chang Tsu, bandit king and human devil, as

the head of Wu-fang had said he would—like a dog in a ditch.

Long ere bandit king Chang met the fate the head had decreed, Wong and I had fled from China. Night after night, as we lay in the captured city, the awful eyes and dreaded voice of that horror which lay on the execution ground came to haunt the sleep of Wong, and often I was awakened to hear him screaming against the abomination which insisted that he, who had lopped so many heads from their shoulders, should himself die under the executioner's sword.

I, too, felt the horror of that curse and dreamed my own dreams of undergoing torture such as I had imposed upon scores of Chang's enemies.

For a month Wong and I fought against the icy fear that the head had thrown upon us. Then one night, as the camp slept, Wong crept to my side and whispered that we must desert the forces of Chang Tsu and escape from China. To this I heartily agreed.

We might have gone to the east and thus reached Tientsin and the sea, but we knew that Chang would brook no desertion and that his men would surely capture us if we tried that route. To the west lay deserts and mountains and more deserts. Fierce, savage people lived in these places, but we preferred unknown dangers rather than the known death that awaited us at Chang's hands. When day dawned over the bandit camp we already were miles away.

To the west we went for many weary days, skirting the edge of the great desert that is called the Gobi, climbing wearily through the mountain passes of Inner Mongolia. We were armed, and when we needed food or money we took it from travellers along the way. Some of these, who objected to our methods, we

left lying on the trails, their sightless eyes staring at the burning sun.

But night and day, tramping or killing or sleeping, we had with us the head of the mandarin Wu-fang, and always it whispered, "Remember!"

At last we came to Sinkiang, that great province which lies to the north of Tibet and Afghanistan. It is one great barren desert, except where the mighty mountains rear their snow-capped shoulders into the sky. And it is bitterly cold, and the people, although they are called Chinese, are followers of Mohammed and very savage.

Here, one day, a band of mounted men swept down upon us. Resistance would have been foolish; so we dropped our rifles and were taken captive. The raiders bound us and drove us along with whips, but that night, as our guard dozed, Wong managed to slip from the thongs that held him and fled into the darkness. His escape angered our captors, and they beat me unmercifully as they drove me toward their village. Several also told me that the pain I had already suffered would be child's play to what I could expect when I was turned over to the village women. I shuddered, for I knew what that meant.

And so it came to pass that I became the first to feel the curse of the head of Wu-fang. My shattered body bears witness today to the things that those women did to me. Why I did not die I do not know, unless it was that the head willed that I should live. And the head came to me as I writhed under the knives of the women, and grinned with its thin lips and whispered, "Remember!"

For days they tortured me, but I could not die, and finally they were convinced that I was superhuman. So the headman ordered that the torture cease. And

though I could barely totter, they drove me from the village.

How I managed to reach Teheran, which is in Persia, I do not know. Surely I was mad, for when the people of the villages along the route saw my twisted body and heard me mutter of a head that talked to me, they were kind to me as one who had been stricken by Allah.

In Teheran I became sane again; as sane, that is, as the head would allow, but memory drove me on. For three years I wandered. Once I was a sailor aboard a ship which took me to New York, but they would not let me land there. Again I came to London and lived in the place they call Limehouse. And there I met a man who knew my companion Wong, Chang Tsu's one-time headman. He had joined a band of Apaches in Paris and as "The Chink" had become notorious there for his daring and his brutality.

Though I was penniless and friendless I would not have sought out Wong had not the head of Wu-fang appeared one night as I slept and bade me do so. I could not disobey such an order, and a week later I found Wong in a dive in one of the worst slums of Paris.

My story is nearly ended now and I feel death drawing closer; so I will be content with telling you that the head still haunted Wong as it haunted me. When I told him of how the curse put upon me had come true he shuddered. Yet in the next breath he broke into curses and vowed that he could cheat the head. He cared not, he swore, when death overtook him, but he was determined to die with his head on his shoulders.

Though it pains me now, I must confess that I joined the Apache gang of

which Wong was a member. We did not long remain in Paris, however; for one night Wong's knife drew the life-blood from a man in a café brawl. And the next day the erstwhile headsmen of Chang Tsu learned from another thief that "Mother Guillotine," so often spoken of by the Apaches, was really a great blade that severed a man's head from his shoulders. Paris, Wong felt, was no longer healthful for a man who valued his neck.

Within a week Wong and I were in Germany, and there he felt safe; for in Berlin he learned in the underworld that men were hanged for murder. Hanging did not frighten Wong. His only fear was that the curse of the head of Wu-fang would come true. And it did come true!

It did not take long for the Berlin police to drive us out, and we wandered into that border territory which the Germans call the Ruhr. There the head of Wu-fang came oftener to Wong than it had in the past, and he became daily more desperate until one night he killed a man on a crowded street. A policeman seized him before he could flee, and in a week, so swift is German justice, Wong had been condemned to die.

Although the police would not let me

see him, I smuggled letters into Wong's cell and his answers reached me. It was easy to see, then, that Wong did not fear death. If anything he welcomed it, for he felt he was to die by the noose and cheat the mandarin's curse.

In those days they executed criminals in the public squares in the Ruhr, and a great crowd had gathered on the morning they led Wong out to die.

He was smiling and his head was high as he mounted the steps. Then he reached the top and I heard him scream. Standing before a block of wood was a big man, and in his hand was a huge, shining ax. Wong had neglected to learn that in that section of Germany the headsmen were in vogue, as it is to this day!

They carried Wong to the block, for his legs had collapsed and he was gibbering with fear. When the ax flashed down and Wong's head tumbled into the basket I saw, from my place in the crowd, the head of Wu-fang lying on the platform and grinning at the Thing which had been headsmen Wong.

I see the head now, my friend, and I see it very clearly. It is speaking. May the God of the Christians protect me from the Thing that awaits me! . . .

