

THE EXECUTION BY HARA-KIRI.

A REMARKABLE SCENE IN JAPAN.

Algernon Bertram Mitford, secretary to the British Legation in Japan, contributes to the *Cornhill* the following account of an execution by *hara-kiri* :—

"I was sent officially to witness the execution by *hara-kiri* (self-immolation by disembowelling) of Taki Zenzaburo, the officer of the Prince of Bizen. He it was who gave the order to fire on the foreign settlement at Hiogo. As the *hara-kiri* is one of the Japanese customs which has excited the greatest curiosity in Europe, although owing to the fact that it had never hitherto been witnessed by foreigners, it has seemed little better than a fable. I will relate what occurred :

"The ceremony, which was ordered by the Mikado himself, took place at 10:30 at night in the Temple of Seigokuji, the headquarters of the Satsuma troops at Hiogo. A witness was sent from each of the foreign legations. We were seven foreigners in all.

"We were conducted to the temple by officers of the Princes of Satsuma and Choshu. Although the ceremony was to be conducted in the most private manner the casual remarks which we overheard in the streets, and a crowd lining the principal entrance to the temple, showed that it was a matter of no little interest to the public. The courtyard of the temple presented a most picturesque appearance; it was crowded with soldiers standing about in knots around large fires which threw a dim, flickering light over the heavy eaves and quaint gable-ends of the sacred buildings. We were shown into an inner room, where we were to wait until the preparation for the ceremony was completed; in the next room to us were the high Japanese officers. After a long interval which seemed doubly long from the silence which prevailed, Ito Shunsuke, the provisional governor of Hiogo, came and took down our names, and informed us that seven *kenshi*, sheriffs or witnesses would attend on the part of the Japanese. He and another officer represented the Mikado; two captains of Satsuma's infantry, and two of Choshu's, with a representative of the Prince of Bizen, the clan of the condemned man, completed the number, which was probably arranged in order to tally with that of the foreigners. Ito Shunsuke further inquired whether we wished to put any questions to the prisoner. We replied in the negative.

"A further delay then ensued, after which we were invited to follow the Japanese witnesses into the *hondo* or main hall of the temple, where the ceremony was to be performed. It was an imposing scene. A large hall, with a high roof supported by dark pillars of wood. From the ceiling hung a profusion of those huge gilt lamps and ornaments peculiar to Buddhist temples. In front of the high altar, where the floor, covered with beautiful white mats, is raised some three or four inches from the ground, was laid a rug of scarlet felt. Tall candles placed at regular intervals gave out a dim, mysterious light, just sufficient to let all the proceedings be seen. The seven Japanese took their places on the left of the raised floor, the seven foreigners on the right. No other person was present.

"After an interval of a few minutes of anxious suspense, Taki Zenzaburo, a stalwart man thirty-two years of age, with a noble air, walked into the hall attired in his dress of ceremony, with the peculiar hempen

cloth wings which are worn on great occasions. He was accompanied by a *kaishaku* and three officers, who wore the *zimbatori* or war surcoat with gold-tissue facings. The word *kaishaku*, it should be observed, is one to which our word *executioner* is no equivalent term. The office is that of a gentleman; in many cases it is performed by a kinsman or friend of the condemned, and the relation between them is rather that of principal and second than that of victim and executioner. In this instance the *kaishaku* was a pupil of Taki Zenzaburo, and was selected by the friends of the latter from among their own number for his skill in swordsmanship.

"With the *kaishaku* on his left hand, Taki Zenzaburo advanced slowly towards the Japanese witnesses, and the two bowed before them, then drawing near to the foreigners they saluted us in the same way, perhaps even with more deference; in each case the salutation was ceremoniously returned. Slowly, and with great dignity, the condemned man mounted to the raised floor, prostrated himself before the high altar twice, and seated himself on the left carpet with his back to the high altar, the *kaishaku* crouching on his left hand side. One of the three attendant officers then came forward bearing a stand of the kind used in temples for offerings, on which, wrapped in paper, lay the *wakizashi*, the short sword or dirk of the Japanese, nine inches and a half in length, with a point and an edge like a razor's. This he handed, prostrating himself, to the condemned man, who received it reverently, raising it to his head with both hands, and placed it in front of himself.

"After another profound obeisance, Taki Zenzaburo, in a voice which betrayed just so much emotion and hesitation as might be expected from a man who is making a painful confession, but with no sign of fear either in his face or manner, spoke as follows :

"I, and I alone, unwarrantably gave the order to fire on the foreigners at Kobe, and again as they tried to escape. For this crime I disembowel myself, and I beg you who are present to do me the honor of witnessing the act."

"Bowing once more, the speaker allowed his upper garments to slip down to his girdle, and remained naked to the waist. Carefully, according to custom he tucked his sleeves under his knees to prevent himself from falling backward, for a noble Japanese gentleman should die falling forwards. Deliberately with a steady hand, he took the dirk that lay before him. He looked at it wistfully, almost affectionately; for a moment he seemed to collect his thoughts for the last time, and then stabbing himself deeply blow the waist on the left hand side, and turning the dirk in the wound gave a slight cut upwards. During this sickeningly painful operation he never moved a muscle of his face. When he drew out the dirk he leaned forward and stretched out his neck; an expression of pain for the first time crossed his face, but he uttered no sound. At that moment the *kaishaku*, who, still crouching by his side, had been keenly watching his every movement, sprang to his feet, poised his sword for a moment in the air; there was a flash, a heavy ugly thud, a crashing fall; with one blow the head had been severed from the body.

A dead silence followed broken only by the hideous noise of the blood gushing out of the inert heap before us, which but a few moments before had been a brave and chivalrous man. It was horrible.

"The *kaishaku* made a low bow, wiped

the sword, and retired from the raised floor; and the stained dirk solemnly was borne away, a bloody proof of the execution.

"The two representatives of the Mikado then left their place, and crossing over to where the foreign witnesses sat, called us to witness that the sentence of death upon Taki Zenzaburo had been faithfully carried out. The ceremony being at an end, we left the temple."

That highly influential paper, the *Springfield Republican*, speaks in very high terms of the Messrs. Shanly and their rapid progress on the Hoosac tunnel. They now employ 847 men upon it, and disburse \$60,000 a month in pay alone, and, apart from this, have already erected workshops and machinery which have cost them upwards of \$100,000. They are to receive \$4,594,268 for the work, and, if all goes well, will not close upon a million. The oldest of the brothers addressed the following manly letter to the editor of the *Republican* in reply to an inquiry whether they intended to apply for a modification of the contract :

HOOSAC TUNNEL, Contractor's office, }
NORTH ADAMS, Monday, Dec. 14. }

Dear Sir,—In answer to your note of 10 day,—we have no intention of asking the Legislature for any change or modification of our contract. If we cannot put the tunnel through, without going into the lobby of the state house, we will rather pack up and go home. All we ask is that the commonwealth should live up to the spirit and equity of its contract with us. There are obligations on both sides,—we will make no attempt to evade those that are binding on us.

Yours Truly,
W. SHANLY.

[Just like him.—ED. REVIEW.]

WEARING VOLUNTEER UNIFORMS.—A military overcoat is a warm and comfortable luxury on a cold night, and no one would object to its occasional use on promiscuous occasions, though it may not be according to regulation; but when it is seen, as it often is on the back of a teamster, wood-cutter, or marketer it is time that the Militia Department look after its property. From what has already transpired, we believe that Lt.-Col. Corbett, on assuming his new duties, is bound to take steps to prevent Volunteers wearing regimentals when not on duty. So Volunteers look out.—*British Whig*, 17th Jan., 1870.

PRICE OF WHEAT IN ENGLAND.—The average price of wheat in England, says the *Times*, has reached a point lower than that of the abundant year of 1865, when it fell to 46s. 6d., while it is now 45s. 6d. The harvest of 1865 was far above an average. The harvest of 1866 was below an average. The harvest of 1867 was decidedly below an average. The wheat harvest of 1868 came soon to market, was a good average in quantity, and was altogether exceptional and superlative in quality. But both barley and oats were a very short crop, and the high prices of 1867 and 1868 had brought stocks low. Accordingly there was scarcely so large a fall in wheat last year as might have been expected. The high prices which have ranged for several years, made farmers anxious to grow wheat. The consequence was that an unusual breadth of land was sown, and what with the additional breadth of land under crop, and the good average yield, the amount of wheat realized by the British farmer from the harvest of 1869, has been large. This circumstance, taken in connection with the tolerably abundant harvest throughout the world, fully accounts for the fall which has taken place.