

THE YARN OF THE BLACK HAND.

BY ANDREW LANG.

'THE MAORI,' said my friend the Beach-comber, 'have not leprosy much, but they have a kind of skin disease that's not very pretty. I remember a yarn about that.'

'Tell us it,' we said.

'It didn't happen to me,' said the Beach-comber, with an obvious and highly honourable effort. 'For a yarn is much improved by being told in the First Person.'

'No; it was my old pal X it happened to,' said the Beach-comber, mentioning a name with which many people are familiar.

'I've read his book,' I murmured.

'He didn't put *this* into his book, though there are some rather rum yarns there too. However, this one he told me; and I give it just as I heard it.'

'It was in April, 1849,' said old X, 'that I was staying for some weeks in the Hokiang district.'

'What was he doing there?'

'Oh, he was a Judge in the Land Court, and highly respected in the parish, I can tell you. No tricks played on him. He was a sober man, too.'

'As sober as a Judge—in the Native Land Court,' I suggested. 'But drive on, Jim!'

'Well, he had a cottage in the village, two rooms, and a Maori servant called Piriipi to keep them clean for him. One evening he came home rather tired, got his supper, chatted with Piriipi, lit his pipe, and went into the inner room, where he slept. He hadn't much of a bed—just sacking stretched on two poles, and a chair; he laid his clothes on the chair, turned in, and went on smoking. He wasn't asleep, you see,' said the Beach-comber, anticipating an objection.

'All right, let it be granted that the Pak—that he was awake.'

'Well, as he lay there smoking he felt something stirring in his bed, alongside of his right thigh. He thought a rat had got among the blankets, and he said, "I'll have you directly, my gentleman!" So he waited till it touched his leg again, and then down he came with his hand—outside the blankets. But he was surprised to find that, though he had got hold of it safe enough, he couldn't hold on, it was too strong for him; and then, said the Beach-comber, opening his eyes very wide, 'he felt a most awful grip on his right thigh! He tore the blankets down, and there, pushed through the surface of the blanket, was a Black Hand—long, sinewy, and with a scaly skin, diseased, you know, holding on to his thigh. He was a strong fellow; he grabbed at the hand with his right—couldn't tear it off. Then he laid hold with both hands, and at last worked himself free. Then he set to work to pull the Black Hand and the forearm up to him; but pull it he couldn't! It was pull devil, pull baker; and slowly the Black Hand strained itself away from him and disappeared. Mind you, he

hadn't called out all this time—he was too much absorbed. Then he yelled for Piriipi, who was chatting with his pals in the verandah. Piriipi came in; but X made some excuse and sent him out. Then he lit up again, had a long smoke, turning it over in his mind, and fell asleep. The Beach-comber paused, and I thought his anecdote was ended.

'I know two stories very like that,' I said; 'one happened to a man who was sleeping in a house where an old fellow was dying. My man took turns with a servant in sitting up with the patient, and he was awakened one night just as you describe, only he didn't see the hand.'

'Nightmare!' said the Beach-comber sceptically.

'Nightmare yourself; I dare say X was asleep.'

'Let me finish my yarn; there's more of it. Next day X goes into the outer room and finds Piriipi very *pouri*—solemn, miserable, you know. "What's the matter?" says X. "Oh, sir," says Piriipi, "So and so (a Maori) has been murdered near us in the night." This was an old native, who had been working on a plot near by, and was found in the morning with his head battered in. X and Piriipi went to the place, and found the old fellow's dead body lying by the bed of a little stream, the skull knocked to bits, not recognizable. But the long, black, sinewy, scaly hand was the hand which had grabbed X by the thigh the night before.'

'Tell that,' I said, in perfect good faith, 'to the Psychological Society.'

'If you mean the Marines,' growled the Beach-comber—but I hastened to reassure him, for he is a very powerful man.

'Still, X does not give this yarn in his printed book.'

CHURCH FACES.

BY FLO JACKSON.

It is wrong, they say, to think your own thoughts in church, but somehow everybody does it. When the sermon is long or tedious who can blame us? These faces all round us, don't you make histories for them?

That lovely face across the aisle, with no idling feathers in her huge hat, it belongs to a dainty girl in dainty clothes; her hands are covered with rings lying idly on her lap, her solemn eyes are fixed on the common-place curate up there in the small stone pulpit. She must have a history with that perfect face; if it has not already come, then it must come hereafter, rich and full.

Down at the end of the church is another face. It also belongs to a girl, who might have been very lovely had the world given her enough to eat all her young life. Her head rests against the cold wall, she is very tired. She came in late, and she does not hear any other words but those which met her on her entrance—'He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away.'

It seems to her the white-robed choir have got wrong somehow, for she is certainly very poor and how often has she been sent empty away in her sort life. Strange, very strange. There are sweet sounds, and the soft rustlings of well-dressed fashionable people all about her. 'The hungry with good things.' Her tired eyes close, the curate drowses on, she sleeps, she dreams, and as she dreams she smiles. Perhaps she is receiving her 'good things.' Poor soul.

Then other faces come out of the long ago; these near us grow dim, the fashionable church fades. We are in one of those old, quaint, world-forsaken spots, the droning curate is lost, and the colourless windows of a whitewashed church are round us, and outside we can see a summer tree, nodding, nodding in the sunshine, a butterfly flapping about the panes, a bird far away up in the sky, and an old, old man's face smiling from the older three-decker pulpit, with scraps of white hair round his dear old bald head, and he is talking to his rustic friends in the square pews below, and his tones are quavery.

Should we sleep if we could hear him again? I think not; but he sleeps soundly now, they say, outside the colourless windows, under the nodding summer tree.

There are other faces in those pews, the rosy girl's face, with smooth hair and old-time hat above her sunny eyes, demure and good by that other face, old and shrivelled, belonging to her grandfather, leaning on his staff, with steadfast eyes fixed on the oaken pulpit. They say she wandered away, that the rosy face turned pale, the sunny eyes dim, and her feet were weary of the dull grey streets of the busy town before she sought again the sweet ignorant place, so far from city strife, and sat once more in the square pew—near by her granddad's side, for he too had gone to sleep outside the colourless windows.

There was a woman with a weary face among those faces of the past. Her eyes were heavy with watching, though she was not old. She bent her head as though her burden were more than she could bear. The sun was gay, the clouds were white and few, the birds still sang up there, and after that another face, with brown skin and rough curly hair, looked fixedly at the weary woman across the aisle, but she saw him not, and we would fain call to her in the silence to look over the side of the high pew at those earnest, watching eyes. But when we are surging out into the glad air, those two linger near the old altar, and the weariness has gone from the tired woman's face. We leave them with the light streaming through that colourless window upon them, and the shadow of the summer tree nodding, nodding on the wall.

Ah! we are not there, but here, in the fashionable church, among the well-dressed people, and the droning curate is silent. We gather our scattered senses together and rise, faces pass us, on they come; each has its history, but it hides it well. We follow, the music is loud, heart-breaking, sweet. Not many stay to listen; they are going into the world, these faces; they have not time to think.

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