

Maori Feasts.



SOME few years ago—before the days of 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay'—there used to be an immensely popular song, in which each verse was devoted to a separate nation. It began, of course, with the English, and if memory plays not false, the opening lines went something after this fashion:—

In feasting and jollity some men delight;
That's English you know, quite English you know.
While some prefer racing, a dance, or a fight;
That's English, quite English, you know.

Unquestionably, the bard of this delectable ditty—which ran through some twenty-four verses—hit the national characteristics on the head when he set down the above lines, but they would have applied with even greater force if given in a Maori verse—one of the few nationalities not included by the way.

In feasting the Maories do most certainly delight, and even though the occasion be a funeral or rather a tangi, there is usually even nowadays any amount of 'jollity' as a relaxation from the serious business of the gathering—the wailing and crying—which must honestly be a rather exhausting performance. Neither are our island aborigines at all behind their white brothers in their intense enjoyment of 'racing, a dance, or a fight,' as anyone who has attended a Maori race meeting and the ball which invariably winds up proceedings can fully endorse.

It is, however, 'in feasting' that Maories have always chiefly delighted, and it must be confessed that in this respect they are—or perhaps it would be more correct to say used to be—veritable 'record breakers,' if one may be pardoned the slang of the day. The writer's ancient history is something weak, but even the huge banquets of Nero and of Darius were not, comparatively speaking, on a more lavish scale than those

of the great Maori chiefs of the 'good old times,' before the pakeha 'swallowed up the land,' and when it was still permissible to lunch or dine off the bodies of one's enemies, and to ornament one's gate posts with their heads. True, of course, there was not the variety of fare, but the number of guests would not have been contemptible even for a Roman emperor. Four thousand is mentioned casually by one writer on early New Zealand as being the number of Maories present at a feast at which he was one of the guests. With the characteristic neglect of descriptive writing which makes most of the reminiscences of early New Zealand irritating reading, the author does not make the smallest attempt to describe this leviathan entertainment further than to say 'it must have cost at least a thousand pounds.

How characteristic of the Britisher! The picturesqueness, the savage splendour, the prodigality of this mammoth 'party' impress him not at all, they merit barely a sentence or so. But the cost! a thousand pounds!!! There's something worth setting forth.

The menu on such occasions was, as has been said, somewhat more limited than was the case when the Caesars scoured the world for dainties which might tempt stomachs delicate after the 'second vomit,' a custom of the age which we shudder at nowadays, but which is not so very much greedier than the 'punch romania' which bon viveurs in London take in the middle of a sixteen course dinner with the acknowledged intention of enabling them to eat when satiety has really set in. But still even in variety the Maori menu was not an altogether despicable affair.

Let us first attempt to describe how the food was arranged. Usually it was placed on a platform supported by a scaffolding. In the case of monster feasts, such as that of the four thousand, there would be three or four tiers of platforms, one above the other on each scaffolding.

An old Maori chief, Toenga Pou, tells of one of these enormous entertainments in the 'Defenders of New Zealand.' The scaffolding on this occasion—memorable for its disastrous sequel—reached a total length of over 360 feet. The lowest platform was 12 feet square, and held somewhere about 600 baskets of kumeras; the next above slightly smaller held 500 baskets, and so they towered upwards, 75 feet in height, the uppermost platform being perhaps 18 inches square and holding a single basket. From the sides of these platforms and from poles in between hung every imaginable viand known to the Maori gourmand. Preserved birds there

were of every sort. Pigeons, tuis, kaka, weka, kiwi curlew, duck, widgeon, etc., etc., and tons, literally tons, of fish of all kinds. Baked dog, preserved rats, pork, and other delicacies dear to the Maori mind and stomach were also provided in incredible profusion. Of kumeras alone there were 3,500 baskets. Verily an heroic Barmecidal feast! Steamed dog there was too, but this was a delicacy reserved for the chiefs and men of high rank. For the rest 'twas come and cut again for all apparently. The pork for such feasts was killed in old time Maori fashion; that is to say the unfortunate grunterns' legs were secured, and then, shade of gentle Elia! poor piggie was incontinently cast into deep water to die by drowning. The idea was that killing in this way saved the blood and made the meat juicier.

The presents given at feasts such as this were always valuable, and the more noted the tribe and important the chief the more costly the parting gifts. These were, however, always supposed to be returned with interest sooner or later, so the custom must have been a somewhat embarrassing one occasionally. Something akin to the wedding present nuisance of our day one imagines.

Mr. W. Brown—who also wrote in '45—tells for instance of a Waikato friend of his, who being invited to one of these feasts, was for his parting gift presented with four large hogs and over one hundred kits or about two and a half tons of potatoes. Not knowing what amount of obligation he might be deemed to have incurred he respectfully declined the present. It was allowed to remain four days on the ground before anyone attempted to appropriate it. On another occasion the banquetting hall, so to say, was a species of tent or marquee roofed in with the very best and finest Whitney blankets procurable. At the conclusion of the festivities a wild rush took place, each guest endeavouring to help himself to as many as possible.

In the olden time there can be no doubt great feasts were given with much the same intention as we Britishers in the present day give our naval demonstrations and reviews at Spithead and elsewhere. We invite foreign powers thereto and entertain them royally, in order that they may have a wholesome idea of what even a part of our navy looks like when 'out for the day.' So the war dances, hakas and displays of war paint, wealth and warriors at a Maori feast were often intended to impress on visitors the wisdom of letting their hosts alone, or of submitting easily to them if attacked. There are, indeed, instances where the feast has been the direct forerunner of the conflict.



Drawn by H. W. Young.
from a study by G. F. Angus.

AN OLD-TIME MAORI FEAST.