

THE POISON ORDEAL.



CENTRAL Africa is a curious conglomeration of diverse peoples, who, in their tribal relations, resemble, in a large degree, the cliques of an English country town. Each tribe subsists by and for itself, to the rigid exclusion of outsiders. Though the mode of life is the same in all, because all have the same natural conditions to which to adapt themselves, the customs are not infrequently dissimilar. Thus it is by no means uncommon to find a tribe of restless cannibals with roving and brutal instincts bordering on another that is peaceful, industrious, and home-loving. Another striking trait is the varying degree of difference between the sexes. In the majority of tribes the women are only so many slaves, representing the real property of their lords and masters, and upon them falls the most laborious and menial portion of the daily toil. It was now, however, my good fortune to view the reverse of this picture, where the females were the recognised chiefs of the land and the tribe was ruled by a queen.

The short tropical afternoon was rapidly closing in when I reached the chief village of Nkula, a tributary princess governing one of these latter tribes. As I neared the clustering group of dome-shaped huts I heard a monotonous and lugubrious sound of a tom-tom, mingled with the crooning of many voices raised in lamentations. Our approach was not unexpected and did not disturb the mourners, who were mostly females, seated in an open space in front of Nkula's hut. On the report of our arrival Nkula stepped out to meet us. Her appearance was a pleasant surprise. She was young, tall and well made, with shapely limbs and figure. Her face and expression were full of meaning, and intellect of an unlooked-for capacity seemed to beam from her dark and dreamy almond-shaped eyes. The sunlight glistened on and accentuated the clearness of her smooth dark skin—for her only garment was a grass cinchure—and flashed upon her heavy brazen ornaments.

She received me with a quiet grace and manner not altogether free from curiosity, which she repressed with a studied courtesy that elsewhere would have been called well-bred. In response to the usual salutations she offered me the shelter of her village, and gracefully accepted a present in token of goodwill. When asked what was the cause of the mourning and lamentation going on around us, her pointing lips seemed to quiver with momentary pain and her nostrils to dilate with sudden passion as she faced me. Then it all faded away, and she simply answered, "Come."

Silently I followed her into a hut, to a corner of which she pointed sadly, and in the half-light I could distinguish, lying side by side, the bodies of two small black children stiffened by the hand of death. The scene had a striking pathos all its own. The dim interior, the tall, sad figure pointing silently to the tiny forms on the ground, over which death had cast a halo of impressive calm; the wailing sound of the distant threnody, with its rude chant, and roder poetry, contrasting with the hushed chamber and its silent occupants made up a picture of which I have never lost the memory. Nkula stood thus for a few moments, and then, with pathetic simplicity, she said, with a perceptible tremour in her voice: "They are mine. Some one bewitched them suddenly, for they were playing together when bedtime came."

Sad little souls! A heavy and unbroken sleep would mark their lengthy bedtime.

Before we had pitched our camp I had learned the particulars of this event. Nkula's two babes, on whom, as is common with all African women, she had lavished an extravagant amount of affection, had died the day of my arrival quite suddenly. In accordance with the customs and traditions of the tribe their death was attributed to witchcraft, and I learned that a messenger had been despatched to Emba, Nkula's foe, to send a witch doctor, who was to discover the bewitcher, in order that he or she might be forced to submit to the invariable punishment in these cases—the deed by poison.

As the brief twilight of the following evening faded into night I was summoned to attend the witch doctor's ceremonies. I found the village assembled in the open space by Nkula's hut. In the centre was blazing a large wood fire, by the side of which the medicine man squatted. He was a thin, meagre, and hungry-looking individual, clothed from head to foot in a fantastic robe of twisted grasses dyed in patches. His hair was abnormally long, and stuck out round his head like a bunch of crimped black wire. In his hand he held a quaintly fashioned stringed instrument, made of a hollow wooden box with thin strips of root fibre strained tightly across it. At his feet stood a curiously carved calabash containing the poison to be administered to the culprit, and which I afterward found to be a strong infusion of the bark of a particular tree and very rapid and deadly in its effects. In the centre of her people stood Nkula, looking very calm and stately. When the whole village was placed she began to speak with the force of her rude language. She detailed the tragic deaths of her children, and then in loud and determined tones announced the punishment of the accused wretch who had bewitched them.

I could with difficulty follow her speech, so measured and yet so rapidly delivered were the periods; but the impression of outraged dignity and intolerant pride that animated her voice; the profound and bitter threats of vengeance against the offender, whom, high or low, male or female, it was her reiterated determination to punish to the bitter end; the fanatic fervour with which she explained how her weird creed enforced the rigid law of vengeance, awed and stirred me and infected me with something of the same spirit that held spell-bound the hushed and awe-struck crowd around

us. A low murmur of approbation greeted her as she closed her speech and resumed her seat—her eyes sparkling with excitement, her lips firmly compressed with invincible determination. During the whole of the harangue the women around her beat their breasts with both hands quickly and unremittently; and the light, regular sound echoing along the line had a curious effect on the listeners. It was a strange, restless, pulsating accompaniment to the words that harmonized with the whole scene.

Then the weird and interesting ceremony commenced. Fuel was heaped upon the fire until its lurid flames played fiercely on the set features of those around it, sending red



REV. F. W. CHATTERTON, Incumbent of All Saints, Nelson.

shafts of light high up amidst the surrounding trees. The witch doctor seated himself on his haunches and began a solemn monotonous incantation, accompanying himself with a running series of tones from his stringed instrument, which, without pretence to harmony, rang out, now sharp and clear, now falling to a low vibration, as the cadence of his song were fierce or sad. The music was savage in the extreme. There was nothing of the tender or vague; the expression coincided with the rude denunciation and the description of the unalterable decrees of a stern fate depicted in the song.

At its close a band of women, with their bodies daubed with red and white paint, their heads hideously decked with feathers marched around and around the fire, each holding a fowl in her hand, plucking it as she walked and throwing

Slowly the medicine man rose, and lifting the painting figure from the ground, supported it in his arms. With the wild gesture of a maniac she seized his arm and dragged him forward, giving vent to a shriek so wild and despairing in its intensity that my blood ran cold. Dragging him along with superhuman force, she flung herself violently on the ground at the feet of Nkula, and was seized with a second horrible fit of hysteria.

A perceptible shiver went around the assembly. Expressions of agonized surprise and fearful doubt flitted across their features. The die was cast. The bewitcher of Nkula's babes was Nkula herself! She who had been so uncompromising in her denunciation of the culprit, so vindictive in her animosity, and so full of threatening vengeance, was singled out by a fiat that admitted of no appeal, as the victim of her own dread sentence. Who could tell what hands pulled the strings which worked the puppets who performed this tragedy?

The fantastic scene was dramatic in the extreme. My eyes were riveted on Nkula's countenance, and never shall I forget the fleeting expressions of anger, agony, doubt, fear, and despair as they passed over her features so that one could read as in a book the tragic course of those inexpressible emotions.

But her native nobility asserted itself. One moment, and no more, of hesitation, and she rose to her feet. Even then, before her affrighted and awe-struck people she might have flung aside the fetters of relentless fate her own fanaticism had forged. But her nature was of sterner stuff. She spoke not, and her eyes seemed to stare dully before her as she stretched her hand to the calabash of poison destined for the victim of her vengeance. One swift glance round on her silent subjects, one swift quiver of the mobile features, and she raised the bowl without trembling to her lips. Ere one could have staid the action she was quivering in the dust in a frightful death-agony.

AN ATTRACTION FOR FATHER AND SON.

CHRISTOPHER BLEYER is the name of a retired merchant of large means, whose daughters were married to well-known men, and whose son is a popular club member. Although Christopher has been a grandfather ten years and more, and is close upon 70, yet he still remains an ardent admirer of the gentler sex, and may often be seen taking young girls to the theatre or opera, or may be seen calling upon some dashing widow. He has plenty of money and spends it freely, and as a natural consequence is very popular. A few weeks ago it was remarked by members of his family that he was haunting a theatre where a fascinating actress is singing and dancing. More than this, his daughters were informed that he was sending valuable presents to Miss Flossie Bremer; that she had answered his notes, and was leading him on. To call the old gentleman into a private room, lecture him for his frivolity, and forbid him to go near Flossie, might merely make him obdurate, and there was no telling what his hot blood might prompt him to do. There was £200,000 at stake. If old Bleyer should marry the actress it would give to her a dower right worth £5,000 a year. The situation called for wise and immediate action and heroic treatment.

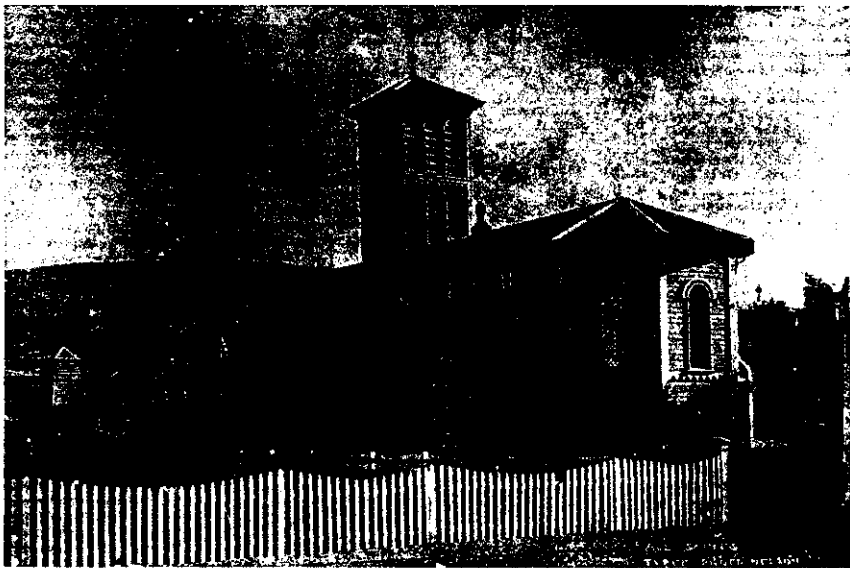
The two daughters were equal to it. They went straight to Flossie, laid the matter before her in its true light, and asked her to help them to save their father. Flossie listened attentively to these two fine ladies who had come to her as suppliants. A faint smile parted her pretty lips, and her fingers toyed with the long, silken ears of her King Charles spaniel.

"Ladies," said she at length, "I have no desire to disturb the serenity of your family oracle. I'll dismiss Mr Bleyer in a few days; be patient. Old men are often very persistent. It may take a week or more. The elegantly-clad ladies shed tears of gratitude as they pressed Flossie's little hand. "You are so good," they exclaimed, "so noble. God bless you."

Flossie was as good as her word, and such was the contemptuous manner in which she received the attentions of old Mr Bleyer that he got his temper up and abandoned the beautiful Flossie. After the thing was all over, and the gossips had got hold of the veritable facts, one of Flossie's intimate friends rushed in upon her with a long string of hard names. "Why, you little fool," she cried, "old Bleyer is worth a million, and you have lost the opportunity of your life. In heaven's name, what prompted you to turn him away?"

"Well, I'll tell you," gurgled this sweet thing in woman-kind, as she moistened the end of a tiny rose-coloured cigarette with her tongue. "You see, it was deuceably hard for me to keep the old gentleman from meeting Fred. Poor boy! he was so afraid of running foul of the governor, as he calls him, that he never had a moment's peace of mind in my presence. Just try to have father and son in love with you and you'll see how it is yourself. Of course, I might have given Fred the sack, but, ah, no, he is so handsome! And then, you know, love is more than money."

Brave Flossie!



ALL SAINTS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NELSON.

the feathers in the flames. At first their steps were slow and majestic; then, as the chant gathered volume, they became quicker and quicker, till nothing could be distinguished but a maze of whirling black figures, over whose bodies the leaping flames flashed. When the last feather was plucked the fowls were thrown on one side and each seized a small stringed instrument and twanged it loudly to a new chant. Faster and faster around the fire they danced, twirling round in a circle till one became giddy looking at them. Crash after crash of wild music, with screams and mocking cries, growing shriller and sharper at each repetition, accompanied them as they trod their mad bacchanalian measure, twisting their bodies into nameless contortions and still whirling madly round and round, until exhausted nature gave way beneath the strain of this maddening excitement, and one of them fell to the ground in a fit of violent hysterics.

Instantly the music stopped and a dead silence followed, broken only by the crackling and roaring of the flames. On each face was set a look of fearful, heart-rending anxiety.

The railways of the Andes exhibit some of the most marvellous results of engineering skill. The highest inhabited place in the world is Galera, a railway village in Peru, 15,635 feet above the sea, or within 100 feet of the summit of Mount Illane. Near it a tunnel, 3,947 feet long, is being bored through the peak of the mountain, 600 feet above the perpetual snow-line.