

A FIGHT WITH THE POWERS OF DARKNESS.

A SOUTH SEA STORY.

BY ED. WAKEFIELD—LATE MINISTER OF DEFENCE.

Do you believe in witchcraft?

'Not a bit. Why do you ask?'

'Because we are coming to a place where everybody does; and according to the old saying, what everybody believes must be true.'

'Well, I don't care. Nothing will ever make me believe in such rubbish. Produce your witches and I shall be most happy to try conclusions with them.'

'Don't be too confident. You haven't got through all your experiences yet. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

It was a careless, chaffing sort of conversation between a friend and myself, as we lay under the awning on the deck of one of Her Majesty's cruisers, in full view of a lovely, palm covered island, almost on the Equator, toward which we were running before a gentle breeze.

My friend was an officer in the navy, who had spent years among the islands of the Pacific and knew almost all that could be known about them and their inhabitants.

I was very much surprised, therefore, to hear him speaking in this serious way about practices which I supposed were the commonest kind of imposture. I had often heard of the so-called witches and sorcerers of the Solomon Islands and other equatorial groups, and I knew that they had unbounded influence over the minds of the natives. But this was the first time I had ever realized that that influence could extend to Europeans, especially to a strong-minded, hard-headed man of the world, thoroughly familiar with savages and all their tricks.

However, I soon learned from his remarks that he was quite in earnest, and this made me all the more curious to witness the so-called manifestations of witchcraft.

Toward evening, after the infinitesimal tropical twilight, we steamed up to the island with grand precipitous cliffs standing out black and bold in the full moonlight. Finally we came to anchor in a beautiful bay, entirely sheltered by a coral reef, and landed upon a silvery beach close to a village of huts nesting among feathery cocoanut palms and tropical growth of brilliant colouring. The place was a paradise of beauty, and we had nothing to complain of in the people. They were almost entirely naked and very graceful in figure, while among the younger ones were many comely faces. They welcomed us with quiet cordiality, and vied with one another in their offers of hospitality. After a supper of fish and fruits I suggested to my friend, who spoke the language fairly well, that he should inquire whether there were any witches in the neighbourhood.



FEATHERY PALMS AND GRACEFUL NATIVES.

The first words he spoke on the subject had an extraordinary effect on the natives. Instantly they showed a deep interest in us, but at the same time I could see that they themselves were becoming strangely excited. They told us that there dwelt upon their island the most powerful of all witches, one who practised magic of every kind, and who could inflict death by her mere will and also bring back the dead to life.

When I proposed that we should then and there pay a visit to this terrible sorceress and see for ourselves what she could really do in the way of witchcraft, such horror fell upon them that I was sorry I had not been more cautious. Most of them left the hut trembling and groaning and fled into the woods. Those who remained hid their faces in their hands and went through bodily contortions as if they were writhing in fear and pain.

At length after much persuasion, accompanied by various presents, they consented to guide us to the witch's abode, though it was expressly stipulated that not one of them should be required to approach it.

We started from the village by a steep path through the thicket, and were soon on an elevated plateau several hundreds of feet above the sea. The party consisted, besides the natives, of my friend the lieutenant, a boatswain's mate, accounted the strongest and sturdiest man in the ship, and myself. I also had with me my dog Tim, a faithful but exceedingly fierce and wiry bull terrier, which had never shrunk from mortal foe.

The night was oppressively hot, and the heavy scent of the spice trees and tropical flowers was overwhelming. It was a relief when we arrived at an open space, where the forest had been cleared and where the sea breeze was able to penetrate. At the further end of this space, partially hidden in creepers and palms, stood a large building, with a conical roof not unlike a gigantic beehive. Our guides hastily told us that that was the temple, the witch's haunt, and before we could make any further inquiries they had vanished. Without further ado we crossed the open space and knocked loudly at the entrance of the temple, which I now saw was built of the largest sized bamboos and thatched with palm leaves.

All had been in darkness before, but the moment our sticks rattled on the bamboos the whole building seemed to burst into light—the ruddy glow of a fire or a pine torch, such as is commonly seen in native huts, but a cold, white light, with a peculiar quivering appearance, as if it were radiating from the earth. At the same time we heard a strange sound from the interior of the temple, like a chorus of voices, singing several words in a low key, followed by a prolonged cadence or strain of music. The Lieutenant evidently was very uneasy, and I was alarmed to see how pallid and anxious he looked in the lurid light that seemed to come from the bamboo walls of the temple and enabled us to see one another just as plainly as in daylight.

He strongly urged that we should push our adventure no further, but I laughed at his fears and again knocked with a loud rat-tat-tat with the knob of my walking stick. Again there was a swelling chorus of song, as if fifty powerful voices were singing in unison; what the words were I could form no idea, but they gave something of the sound of a Latin chant in some great church, while the strain of music that followed was like a dozen harps being played together.

The white light changed at the same time to a faint blue, and I suddenly became aware of a perfume, exquisitely delicious at first, but soon becoming so concentrated that it made me reel as if half drunk, with a most painful feeling of sickness or faintness. Recovering myself with a great effort, I pushed aside the heavy mat that hung over the entrance and walked into the building, followed by my companions.

I could hardly believe my senses when I found we were in total darkness. The light which had shone so brightly outside of the building gave not the slightest glimmer inside. Neither was there any of that perfume there which had been almost insupportable in the open air. I had brought with me two large ship's candles and a box of wax matches, and I was about to strike a light when I became aware of a weird kind of a luminous glow on the ground, as it seemed at some distance in advance of where we stood. I stepped toward it and I saw that it was rapidly increasing. I can compare it to nothing better than luminous vapour, rising from the earth in spiral columns, which formed a semi-circle at the extreme end of the building.

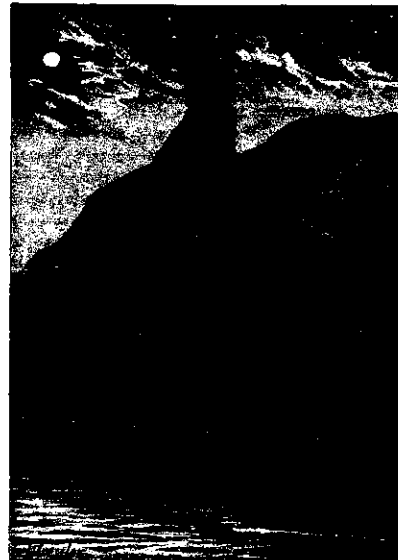
I now saw we were in a vast structure of bamboo, the walls covered with plaited leaves and the cavity of the roof forming a lofty dome. At the first glance the place appeared to be

absolutely empty, not a single object of any kind appearing on the whole expanse of earthen floor, which extended for at least a hundred feet each way.

Walking towards the light, however, I saw in the midst of the semi-circle formed by the spiral columns of vapour or luminous smoke a figure which filled me with the strangest sensations I had ever known. It was that of a woman with all the roundness of youth and with singularly regular and well shaped features. The bust and limbs were as finely formed as those of a Greek statue. But she was of gigantic stature, and of a dusky brown colour, and was crouched upon the floor with her legs crossed and her arms folded in a particularly ungraceful attitude. She wore not a particle of clothing of any kind, except a necklace of glass or crystal balls, as large as oranges, and with a wreath or diadem of the same in lieu of the simple chaplet of cocoa leaf with which the native girls usually confine their magnificent hair.

This woman's hair was drawn closely round her head by her glittering coronet, and thence fell in wavy masses upon her shoulders and down her back until it lay in heaps upon the ground. What startled me most in her appearance was that the crystal balls around her head and neck were filled at rapid intervals with pink and green lights, making them look like electric lamps or gigantic opals and casting a radiance about her which was dazzling to gaze upon. She seemed to be asleep when we approached, but as soon as I set foot inside the luminous space she raised herself to the full height of a kneeling posture, and opening a pair of large, dark eyes, bent on me a glance of anger and hatred such as cannot be described.

I met it nevertheless as boldly as I could, for, after all, I said to myself, it was only a woman I had to deal with. In



GRAND PRECIPITOUS CLIFFS.

a few moments her eyelids drooped, her head languished on her bosom and she sank once more into the crouching attitude in which we had found her.

She gave me the impression of being intoxicated with some drug: yet her teeth were beautifully white, not blackened with chewing bhang nor red with the juice of betel, and when she did open her eyes they were full of life and fire.

I ventured to reach out my hand toward hers with some idea of waking her up and making a friendly approach; but in an instant her eyes were glaring at me like hot coals, and though I had not touched her I felt a thrill and a stiffness in my hand and arm exactly like a sharp shock from an electric battery.

It was now nearly midnight, and from the tumult of the elements we knew that one of those terrific storms which are common on the Equator had come on since we ascended the mountain. The huge temple shook and creaked, and the crash of the thunder vied with the roar of the wind and the rattle of the rain.

I turned round and asked the lieutenant whether it would not be as well to inquire about accommodation for the night. Witch or no witch, she might at least let us know where we could sleep. I could see that he was terribly frightened, and what surprised me more I noticed that the boatswain's mate was affected in the same way. My bull dog, too, was trembling and whining, with his hair standing on ends and his mouth foaming, as if he were going mad.

Certainly much that had occurred was marvellous and totally inexplicable, but I did not see anything to be frightened at. For my part, I merely felt very much excited and wild with curiosity to see more of these wonders and find out what they all meant. I begged my friend to speak to the woman in the dialect of the island, and to ask whether we might stay there until morning.

He approached with hesitating steps, and giving her the customary salutation, told her who we were and asked whether we might have shelter from the storm and a place to sleep in. A change at once came over the expression of her face. The great eyes opened with a look of unutterable tenderness which made her something more than beautiful, and slowly raising herself, she stood up before us at her full height. We were all tall men, but she towered a head and shoulders over the tallest of us. Gazing at the lieutenant with a wonderful sweetness in her face and manner—with all the subtle fascination of the island women, in fact—she bowed her head three times, and slowly waved her shapely arms in the air.

Again we heard the chorus of voices singing some clear words that had no meaning to us, and again the place seemed filled with the strains of harps. At the same