

THE DISCOVERY OF GNEUGH-IOUGHRCK

(A Fragment)

As I approached the landing-place, continued the explorer, the savagery of the natives manifested itself in a thousand extravagances.

In one canoe was to be seen a medicine man, waving a saffron rag, who parleyed in some inscrutable jargon; the tenant of another, a gorilla-like creature, boarded my boat, and plied me with idiotic questions as to whether I had been there before, where I was born, who was my father, was I a native of the country (!!!), what were my political opinions and my moral character, in short, everything that an imbecile curiosity could conjure up. He paid not the least attention to my answers. I learnt afterwards that this was part of a religious ritual of these astonishing half-men.

The great point was that the stranger must be made to swear some oath, no matter what, and no matter whether true or false. The fact of attestation guaranteed the favor of their gods. So again on landing I was confronted by another creature with a head resembling that of a sheep, but with the expression of a vulture, who exacted another oath to the effect that I was not intending to trade with the natives. I swore as requested, and he was immediately satisfied; but on subsequent examination I found that he had taken advantage of my distraction to rifle my loads, and sequester several articles that took his fancy. When I complained of this through an interpreter, I was told that the articles in question were of necessity "either displeasing to the gods, or pleasing to them, since the gods were never indifferent. In the first case, they must be destroyed; in the second they must be offered to the gods. In neither case have you any right in the matter." They added that I might flatter my fortune that she had brought me off so easily, for had I been a native, all my possessions must infallibly have been seized.

But no sooner had I quitted the landing-stage with my porters than an innumerable company of sordid persons began to jostle me. These were all ragged and dirty; they stank horribly of stale liquor of some kind unfamiliar to me, and also of some filthy aromatic. They began at once to ply me with questions which made those of my former tormentor seem almost reasonable.

For those other questions were at least such as I could answer; the new infliction was absurd. They asked me whether I had ever been in their country before; and on my replying "no," inquired how I liked their country, what I thought of its institutions and customs, which they assured me were the best in the world. They asked if I admired their women, who were the most beautiful in the world, and none of whom, as they well knew, I had yet seen. They wished even to know things which God alone could have known, concerning the future; how long I was going to stay, what I would do, and other matters even more ridiculous. They then became extremely insolent, commenting on my personal appearance and costume, catching at my clothes and asking their price, seeking information as to my most private affairs, and in every way conducting themselves as the sodden and mannerless mongrels that they were.

However, being at last for the first time well rid of these scurvy knaves, I was able to rest to some extent, and to listen while I ate my food to the

babble around me. On my journey from the landing-place I had already remarked that no man was able to fix his mind upon his affairs. Every pebble by the roadside on which the sun's rays chanced to fall at the proper angle would catch his eye, and crying, "Cowrie! Cowrie!" he would leave his occupation and rush after it. This frequently led to free fights between savages who had observed the pebble at the same moment, and they would continue to fight even after they found it to be only a pebble. Some seemed altogether hypnotized by their desire for cowries, and, picking up pebbles, would maintain angrily that they were cowries, or were better than cowries, or would be cowries one day!

Their conversation was exclusively on this one subject. It was unlucky or irreligious—I was never able to determine the root-idea in this superstition—to complete a sentence without mention of cowries, or to refer to any object without giving its equivalent in cowries. It was also usual to prefix to every sentence a brief invocation of the "official" god; and this I found to be the only trace remaining of his worship. The real god is a fabulous bird—the Aquila duplex of Mungo Park may be a congener. Fabulous, I say, though the natives assert positively that it exists. Yet some such bird is to be found in the western part of the country. The possession of a specimen is said to confer the highest happiness.

In default of such specimens they have dirty and crumpled oblongs of some substance resembling paper. These are covered with hieroglyphic signs and pictures, and the Big Medicine-Man, a mysterious being in the interior of the country, consecrates them and issues them. Their possession ensures good luck. Some are more sacred than others; this depends on the signs written by the makers. For even one of these every native is ready to perform any service, however degrading; or to steal, rob, and murder.

There is, however, a difference in degree; it is pretended that such crimes are only honorable or even (among the stricter sort of men) excusable when the number or value of the oblongs is great. But each man knows in his heart that even one of the least desirable of these is worth the loss of his soul; for this is their religion.

The food of the country is very varied and delicious, but the cooks are by no means skilful in their art. It is possible, however, after some experience, to avoid actual poisoning; and this the natives themselves are not able to do. For instead of using their noses, tongues, and eyes, they judge wholly by ear, which, a good principle in musical criticism, is unsuited to ripe gastronomy. Their method is as follows: Certain persons are chosen for the loudness of their tones, and appointed to declare the benefits or the reverse of devouring certain substances. One class cries that such a food is poison; his opponent that it is the only true nourishment of life. This shouting goes on continuously, and the other natives catch the enthusiasm of the shouters and join in their sacred war-dances, which often develop into fights. The shouters claim the direct inspiration of the god of truth, or of the god of freedom, or of the god of the people; but in reality they are faithful to the true but unofficial god of this strange people, as is every one. Those who most loudly blaspheme him are in truth often his