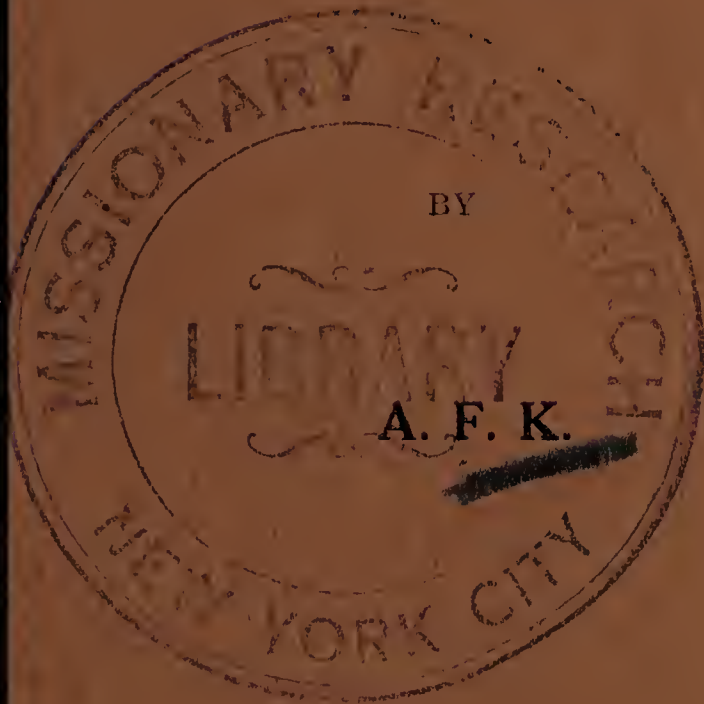


Paul
Miss.

1574

A Phase of Native Life.

WITCHCRAFT.



3d.

A Phase of Native Life.

Witchcraft.



EVERYBODY believes that witchcraft is the bane of Native Society and that witchdoctors are a gigantic fraud. These opinions are of course extreme but still they have much to say for themselves. Now, first of all it has to be determined what is meant by witchcraft and second what is meant by a witchdoctor and his partner the witchdoctress. It is not our intention to enter into a discussion on the question of witchcraft or on the changes in the conception that have shown themselves in the past ages, nor are we to define a witchdoctor in such a way as to make him more peculiar than he really is. What we propose doing is to describe an actual incident that will throw some light upon witchcraft and the witchdoctor. In our description, we shall seek to emphasise the points that are significant or elucidating in the problem of witchcraft and its votaries. In doing so we may be accused of following an empiric method, but empiricism and nothing more belongs to the whole subject and business.

Some time since in one of the very small villages that dot the hills of Tembuland

A LITTLE CHILD FELL SICK.

About a mile away from the hut in which it was being nursed in the crude native fashion was a river. The ground sloped steadily from the location to the river. A Transkeian road, of the usual sort made by the wheels of a wagon and by the footsteps of people, led to a drift and was continued on the other side. The hut on the mountain side was sheltered from the winds and was quite comfortable. Its door looked down towards the river. Around it were other huts. On the mountain slope goats and sheep grazed and lower down the cattle. At certain parts of the year the location

seemed an ideal spot, full of charm, poetry and rusticity, at other parts it was dry, bleak and unæsthetic. How far the poetic situation and its natural surroundings appealed to the inmates of the various huts cannot be told, for the Tembu hides a good deal of his nature from those who wish to understand him, his aspirations and his outlook on life.

The drift was one of the usual type; the sand on each side of it had been made into deep ruts by various wagons that had crossed. In the rainy season these ruts had been deepened by the water carrying the loosened sand into the river, where it either sank or was carried down stream into a larger river that flowed into the Indian Ocean. The embankment had been partly washed away by the water seizing the opportunity afforded by the ruts leading to the drift.

The ailing child grew worse to the consternation of the mother and the other women of the village.

SHE WAS A CHRISTIAN WOMAN

living amongst the reds or Heathen. Her husband was a heathen. The attitude of mind that ruled in that home can be imagined. Two influences, the Christian and the Heathen, were in conflict in the mind of the woman in that home. It was seen in the actions recommended by neighbours and finally adopted by the woman in the interests of the life of her child. None of these Tembus believed in the European doctor or in his medicines. They rarely visited one who lived at a distance twenty or thirty miles from them, and if they did it was to ask him to discover what ailed them, if they were ailing, and to get a large bottle of medicine that they believed to be omnipotent over all diseases. The native and the early European doctor would form a bright commentary on medical practice and its interpretation by a primitive people. No one has examined into this subject

fully or collected the stories from the native standpoint about the wonderful medicines, the cure-alls of the European doctor.

As the child grew worse the mother became desperate. It was a hopeless task to carry the child forty miles in its state of weakness and helplessness. Her neighbours and her husband pressed upon her to send for the witchdoctor. After much hesitation the interests of her child predominated over the conflict between Christian teaching and heathen practice and she consented for her husband to bring the witchdoctor. It is needless to go into the state of mind that was compelled to accept this measure of relief. The woman fell back upon her Christian training, and with others of a like character who had come to sympathise with her, she had prayed much for the restoration of her little boy. She was prepared to submit her will to the Providence of God and to look to Him for consolation and comfort in the event of the death of her child. She trusted that the witchdoctor would be able to do something to relieve her of her great anxiety and to restore her boy to health. Her early training, however, acted as a conscious influence against her faith and resignation. Therein lay the intellectual conflict, brought to birth,

TO BE DETERMINED AND TESTED BY HER
LOVE FOR HER LITTLE ONE.

She knew that her mental and spiritual experiences were not confined to herself but that other women in similar circumstances had been through the same, some without having recourse to the votary of witchcraft and the witchdoctor. At last after a conflict and swayed by the advice of the people around and her husband, she consented for them to send for the witchdoctor.

The conflicts of Christianity and Heathenism in the minds of the thoughtful amongst the native people are actual facts and reveal themselves now

and again in conversations amongst all classes of the community and in letters between the better educated. Some of the most pathetic utterances, dramatic in their statement and tragic in their emotionalism, have arisen from the conflict between belief in God and belief in witchcraft. A dramatist would find full scope for his inventive genius in poetising and moralising upon the soul of a man as he is faced with two choices, and the soul of a woman as she is forced in her love to decide between the influences of a hereditary spiritism and the Christian Faith. In days to come the psychologist will have his work cut out for him unless witchcraft vanishes from the minds of men, like malarial fever, suddenly, without warning at the break of day.

As soon as the messenger had been dispatched for the witchdoctor, the woman sat down beside her child and was soon asleep. What was wrong with the little boy was pneumonia, so fatal to so many native children. The sufferings of the child had been great; the home medicines and imperfect nursing had failed to relieve the little one of its pain. There is no need to describe its sufferings but only to remark upon the strange calmness, brightness, trustfulness and confidence that shone on the face of the child. The little one apparently could not understand all the activities around him, nor the many people who came to look at him. One could imagine that he was interested, even amused, at all the women and even the grown up girls that appeared to be interested in him.

IT WAS A NEW EXPERIENCE AND HE
DELIGHTED IN IT.

Yes, to an onlooker this might be so but to the physician these symptoms meant something different; they signified the closing in of the natural laws upon mind and body, the transformation of

the conscious into a strange stage of unconsciousness whereby nature prepares the mind and the body for their final dissolution. The parents of course knew nothing of this. A mother recognises no scientific laws of nature but only laws of love. She has no interest in the process but in the deed accomplished, and she desired health for her little son.

Not far from the village there lived with his parents

A NATIVE LAD WHO HAD BEEN TRAINED IN ONE OF THE NATIVE INSTITUTIONS

in the Transkeian Territories. Like most boys he had taken no interest in the customs of his people although their significance was brought before him in the course of his studies. He had as a teacher one who knew fairly well several of the customs of the Bantu and who had his own opinions concerning those connected with witchcraft. He had learned from his teacher about the history of witchcraft in other countries, about its influence and about its disappearance. His history lesson had been most interesting to him although like most natives he had great difficulty in grasping those parts of it that the teacher was not able to relate to the surroundings of the Territories. One of the frequent remarks that he had heard was that witchcraft was a species of mental disease that took hold of primitive people and that took a long time to cure, but that there was nothing in it. The lad thought the teacher erred because he considered that there must be a great deal in it as all his friends believed it, some at times in terror, never at any time with doubt. As a boy, he had been brought up in the atmosphere that belief in witchcraft had created, had seen the witchdoctor in his panoply and had hidden himself behind bushes as the great man passed on the road, either to his home or to some patient. He had also

learned that his teacher regarded the witchdoctor as a fraud, a play-actor, a kind of clown, fascinating his hearers and observers by dramatic actions of a peculiarly elementary sort. The boy had become a Christian, or rather had been baptised while a child and had been trained in the village school as well as in the Institution. He had not broken with the conventional customs of his people but

HE HAD GONE THROUGH A COURSE OF TRAINING that had raised doubts in his mind especially in matters of witchcraft and witchdoctors. He was on vacation when the sickness of the child became the topic of conversation in the village and in the surrounding homes, for the illness of the little boy was the conversation and the news of the day. On hearing that the parents had sent for the witchdoctor, he thought that he would put some of the white man's knowledge to a test as well as his opinion, and so on the arrival of the witchdoctor he went over with the crowd to witness what was done and what said. Dressed like his neighbours he was perfectly inconspicuous and appeared in the eyes of some as a lad whom curiosity had brought to see the witchdoctor, his performances and his cure. What follows is an extended account of his actions in a most interesting episode of witchcraft.

HIS AIM WAS TO GET BEHIND THE ANTICS OF THE WITCHDOCTOR

and to convince himself whether the subject was hollow and the witchdoctor a quack. It might be thought that the mind which carried with it these intentions would be biased or critical; that was not so for ideas borrowed from books and expressive of the experience of others have but little sensible effect upon the minds of young natives. It is only when they enter into circumstances that will create the same experiences which create the ideas that they really understand them and make use of

them. Of course, these young minds are not alone in this for bookish ideas are easily forgotten until they are consciously restored in similar circumstances from which they originally sprang to existence. Besides, the actions on the part of the lad himself wiped out of his mind any bias one way or another, for fear played as much a part in his actions as design.

The witchdoctor reached the hut where the sick child lay about four o'clock in the afternoon. The weather had been dry for some time past and the dying sun shot its rays over the beautiful scene to which reference has already been made. In the late afternoon the doctor was seen suddenly to emerge up the bank of the river. He walked at a slow pace up the slope with a certain swing characteristic of native walking and expressive of self-dignity. As he came along, the observer was able to study him and his dress. A man of forty-five years of age he appeared, of middle height but dignified as many Tembus are.

DRESSED IN THE USUAL PARAPHERNALIA THAT MARKS THE PROFESSION

he would have been considered of such material in physique as drill instructors turn into good soldiers. In this he differed much from the other men in the crowd that had assembled quickly from neighbouring huts on his appearance up the river bank. A dozen men, with more women, had congregated at the top of the slope. They hailed his approach quietly and followed him at a distance as he drew near to the hut. The schoolboy was amongst the men and watched all the proceedings with as cute an eye as he had been trained to use in distinguishing one like ox from another. Every action on the part of the witchdoctor was interesting to him and was lodged in his mind in as great clearness as curiosity and novelty create. The witchdoctor was not very long in the hut. When he came out

and looked at the dying sun, he stood for some time, gazing down at the river, and thus waited for the friends of the child to come to him.

THE CROWD WATCHED INTENTLY ALL HIS
DOINGS IN SILENCE,

mingled with some fear on the part of the women. As soon as the husband appeared with two or three men the witchdoctor quietly told them that he would be able to cure the child the next day after he had killed a spirit that had bewitched the child and was slowly taking away his life. It subsequently transpired that on entering the hut the witchdoctor had looked at the little boy and had asked a few questions. Amongst them was one concerning the last place where the child had been playing before he fell ill. It was said that he had been playing near the river one afternoon. The diagnosis of the case on the part of the doctor was obviously an inference from this fact which he had discovered without the knowledge of the mother or the father by the number of questions he had put to them. His statement was heard in silence by the men. A water-spirit had bewitched the child and was slowly consuming its life away. That creature had to be destroyed, killed outright, if the life of the child was to be spared. He allowed this statement of his to sink deep into the minds of his hearers and he then declared that it would be necessary for them to supply him with a goat, for it was only by means of the sacrifice of a goat that he could call up the water-spirit and ultimately kill him. Soon the knowledge of the conversation reached the silent crowd and the murmur of conversation was then heard. It was plain to all that the first duty was to get hold of a goat.

A GOAT WAS FORTHCOMING AND PRESENTED
TO THE WITCHDOCTOR.

The sun had set by this time and darkness began to cover mountain, slope and stream. Now that

the news and the cure were known, the people made off to their huts; the witchdoctor dragged his goat down the mountain slope by means of a tether which had been put around its neck.

The schoolboy had witnessed all these things and heard with his ears, and seen with his eyes everything that was performed and every conversation that was spoken. The curious thing in all this lay in the fact that he escaped the notice of the witchdoctor who had been too intent on his own business. It was well for the lad that this was so for what followed might have been somewhat tragic to him; at least he supposed so. In the darkness of the evening he followed the witchdoctor and the goat in a parallel footpath to the one that led both to the stream and the drift. Soon the three reached the embankment above the river, the goat and the witchdoctor being on one side of the drift and the schoolboy on the other. The latter made for the shelter of bushes that covered the river bank near the drift and peering through the darkness watched his friend the witchdoctor as he came down to the brook. He was a bit terrified at what he had done, and, as he said afterwards, he did not realise at first what might befall him had he been found by the witchdoctor, sheltering himself under bushes by the stream. In the darkness, he looked for the two to pass over the drift but they did not do so.

HIS CURIOSITY WAS THEREFORE GREATLY AROUSSED

and was thoroughly satisfied, when he saw both figures of man and goat appear near the water. The doctor seized the goat and in a moment killed it with his long knife. He collected the blood, then proceeded, like the butcher he was, to obtain the bladder of the goat. He washed the latter in the river and then poured the blood into it. Tying it with a string of some length, he left it on the bank and walked along its side until he found a

stone of some weight. Very quickly and skilfully he tied the bladder to the stone and went into the drift. Now, the water had washed away all the sand of the river and had revealed the usual trap rock on which the soil of the Transkei rests. At the north end of the drift the trap rock had been worn away by the water of the stream and had left a pool where water continually lay. Into this pool the doctor dropped the stone-anchored bag, carefully examined the spot and then returned to the slaughtered goat. During all this time the school-boy was in a fit of terror lest he should be found, but still he enjoyed himself in seeing how the witchdoctor played his game.

As soon as he had anchored the bladder in the pool the witchdoctor returned to the carcass of the goat. The observer in the bushes did not see very clearly what he did although the rays of the moon had begun to appear on the top of the hill; indeed a deeper darkness seemed to have fallen upon the stream and its banks. It is often the case with the rising moon to throw into deep shadow streams at the bottom of a towering mountain. Anyhow, the lad lay on the ground in some suspense as he was not able to watch the actions of the witchdoctor beside the goat. Ten minutes seemed to have passed when a dark figure appeared on the brow of the hill. The growing moonlight produced its usual effect and by the time the figure reached the summit the boy realised that

THE WITCHDOCTOR WAS ON HIS WAY HOME
CARRYING THE CARCASS OF THE GOAT.

He felt safe now that he realised what his friend, the object of his observations, had been doing. But still to make certain that everything was clear and no one was about, he lay for another quarter of an hour under the dark shelter of the bushes. He then rose and went to the drift. In a few minutes he got hold of the anchored-bladder, pulled it out of the water, returned to the bank

and, then carrying it down the stream, he threw bladder and anchor into a deep pool. By this time the moon, nearing its first quarter, was touching the summit with its rays, but these had not reached the stream to lighten its waters and the darkness of the bushes. The lad, therefore, walked along the bank under the shelter of the darkness for more than a mile and then made up the mountain slope to his home. His actions of course were dictated by the fear that the witchdoctor had rested himself at the top of the hill or that some others were in hiding like himself, either along the stream or on the hill-top. Patience and dilatoriness carry their own reward and more, in the peculiar circumstances of the physical and social conditions of Africa.

By 10 o'clock the next day the same people who had met the doctor near the hut where the little boy lay sick assembled at the drift to see how the witchdoctor would kill the water spirit that had bewitched the little child. The men of the party were very quiet, and even the women, generally in crowds exceedingly noisy, held their tongues in restraint as if in fear. The circumstances of the day had their influence upon the crowd of some forty people for they realised that

THE LIFE OF THE LITTLE CHILD WAS AT STAKE and that its safety lay in the destruction of the water-spirit. Amongst the crowd was the school-boy who was greatly interested both in the demeanour of his people and in the quiet utterances of the man. No one knew anything about the lad's doings the night before, as he had kept dead silent, even in his home. This of course was a remarkable feature in him for restraint and self-control are virtues of but few in matters of the tongue. At 10 o'clock, the witchdoctor appeared on the brow of the hill dressed in his full regalia or rig out. There is no need to describe him in matters of dress as most witchdoctors follow the

same fashion. He had been trained in the usual school and after the usual manner, and was considered exceedingly expert in his business. He came somewhat slowly down the hill, with native movements of dignity and self-possession. He carried a spear in his hand which enhanced the impressive picture he made, as if he were a soldier about to fight an enemy. As soon as he had crossed the drift, he began to make preparations for the battle between himself and the water-sprite in accordance with the interpretation of the crowd who had drawn back a few yards from the bank.

HE BEGAN HIS USUAL HYPNOTIC DANCES,

rushed into the water of the drift, rushed out and along the bank for a few yards and then returned to his first dancing-ground. These and other performances of a similar nature kept the eyes of all the crowd upon him. It was obvious that they were hypnotised by his energy and his antics. It was exciting, and excited every man, woman and child. Resting for a moment, he again began his dancing and his rushes into the river, not into the centre of the drift as hitherto but towards the pool in which he had anchored the goat's bladder. While dancing near the edge of the pool, he made a sudden leap in the air and while falling on his feet in the pool, he bent his body and with a yell stabbed the water deeply with his assegai in the place where he had left his bag of tricks. Yelling he stabbed the water right and left and then returned to the bank. All these actions were watched partly in fear and partly in amazement by the people on the bank who awaited in eagerness the verdict of the witchdoctor. It was short and to the point. He had not been able to kill the water-sprite; they had seen him fighting it and the fight had been very strenuous; they saw how exhausted he was in trying to kill his enemy but he had failed. It had rushed down the stream and so

had escaped but he would fight again the next day at the same time; only he would require another goat to be given him and he would call for it about half-past four in the afternoon. He had other work elsewhere and so would leave them. He would still save the child's life from the enchantment of the water-sprite. The crowd then dispersed to their homes, but in the afternoon returned to the hut to await the arrival of the witchdoctor. A goat had been provided in accordance with his instructions and was tethered not far from the village.

During the day the child had become worse and the heart of the mother in particular was rent in twain.

SHE WAS MORE INTENT ON NURSING HER CHILD
THAN ON METHODS OF WITCHCRAFT.

She had kept by her child day and night and had nursed him with the assistance of two or three of her friendly neighbours. Her husband had followed the instructions of the witchdoctor and the advice of his neighbours implicitly, for what else could he do in the circumstances? The mother had one consolation that her boy had been baptised into the Christian Church by the missionary of the district. Whatever the rite of baptism meant intellectually to her, it meant morally a consolation and a hope. Light and love thus played around the little bed of the sick boy, notwithstanding the strife between Christian belief and heathen practice.

At the time appointed the witchdoctor appeared and met the head of the kraal and other men for a few moments. He waited until the darkness set in and then went off with the goat to the bank of the stream near the drift. He did not go to the same place where he had killed the first goat the day before, but to a place many yards further up the stream. The lad, who had been watching his friend, the object of his fear and interest, made a

way for himself through the darkness at an angle of forty-five degrees to the line followed by the witchdoctor and ultimately reached, a good way down the stream, the shelter of the bushes. He then made his way up the stream until he reached a suitable pinnacle, from which in safety, he could see what the witchdoctor would do as soon as he had prepared his medicine for the destruction of the water-sprite. He waited fully half-an-hour before his friend appeared with a goat's bladder filled with blood attached to a stone. Needless to say the observer was soon in a heat of excitement through fear that he might be discovered. However, he controlled himself, and his interest in the proceedings strengthened his powers of restraint.

THE WITCHDOCTOR EXAMINED VERY CAREFULLY THE POOL

and then selected near the bank that part of the pool which was in shadow even in the day-time. He dropped the bladder with its anchor and made sure that it was thoroughly secured against any whirl of the waters that were passing down the stream. What he had done the day before, he performed again, but took a much longer time to do it. It was the length of time that somewhat scared the observer, seeing that he was not able to watch the movements of the witchdoctor up the stream. The lad waited and waited to see whether his friend would take the same road to his home. Some time elapsed before he saw the dark figure making for the summit of the hill by means of a path that rose up from the higher reaches of the stream. Just as the figure reached the summit, the first rays of the rising moon appeared and revealed the witchdoctor returning home. He had taken an hour more than before to his work and had made sure that his preparations were safe. The lad thought that he ought to play the same trick as he had done the night before but he was anxious

to see the whole performance, and so left his retreat, moved down the river bank by a second footpath and returned to his home. He kept silent about his adventures and listened to the conversations over the wonderful fight of the witchdoctor with the water-spirit and about the state of the child's health.

On the following morning a crowd of people both men, women and children assembled to see the witchdoctor kill the water-sprite that was considered the cause of the sickness of the child.

PROMPT TO THE HOUR THE WITCHDOCTOR

APPEARED AT THE TOP OF THE HILL

and came slowly down to the drift. He was dressed in his usual paraphernalia and carried in his hand a spear. The people waited his arrival in intense excitement which was greatly increased when he began his performance. The people stood on the left bank of the stream a few yards back from the drift. This allowed the witchdoctor to cross easily and to take up his stand a few yards in front of the crowd. He began his performance with a sort of dance, went into the river, glancing here and there into the water, as if peering for something. According to the intelligence and knowledge of the onlookers he was looking for the water-sprite. Suddenly he jumped into the air over the ledge of the drift into the water below and then began to fight. Rushing up and down he struck the water with his spear, first near the right bank and then beneath the ledge of the drift. He stabbed vigorously for some moments, jumping now and again into the air, and shouting as he bent himself and stabbed with his spear. During the performance the onlookers ejaculated words of astonishment now and again. He carried on this performance for a few minutes, at the end of which he suddenly made a dart to the place where he had anchored the goat's bladder and with a shout stabbed vigorously into the water beneath the

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ledge. In a moment blood appeared on the surface to the amazement of the people. He had killed the water-sprite and the life of the child was safe. There could be no doubt about his prowess in the imaginery fight he had had with the water-sprite. There could be no doubt that he had conquered and killed the evil influence that was bewitching the little boy. After his exertions he returned to the left bank and walked up towards the hut with the crowd following him. The boy, who had been observing him very carefully, went with the crowd as he was afraid of results that might occur to him were he to go into the water and pull forth the empty anchored bladder. No one seemed to have the curiosity to examine the water or the place where the water-sprite had been killed.

ALL WERE AFRAID OF THE ART AND TRICKERY
OF THE WITCHDOCTOR.

The man himself was quite bold in his victory and marched to the hut where he received his payment, two head of cattle, from the father of the child. By one o'clock, he was over the hill, driving in front of him his fees, on his way home. We suppose that he had confidence, from his former experiment, in his belief that the running water would carry down the stream the anchored bladder, for his belief must have been that his first attempt had miscarried owing to the action of the whirling stream. He thus hoped, and that not in vain, that his trick would not be discovered.

The lad who had witnessed all the performances threaded his way to the Mission house of the district and related the whole episode to the missionary. He confessed that his teacher had not been far out in declaring that a good deal of trickery and fear, hypnotism and credulity lay behind witchcraft as practised by its performers.

At sunset, the little boy passed away to the grief and agony of his mother.

BLYTHSWOOD



PRESS,

BLYTHSWOOD.