

PREHISTORIC TALES.

BY CHARLES GLEIG.

III.—THE ORDER OF THE KNUCKLEBONE.

THE prehistoric legends, backed in this instance by geological indications, whisper faintly to us through the ages of an exceptionally hard winter that prevailed during the early manhood of Ug. This terrible winter is thought to have continued in Britain during five or ten years, and is attributed by geologists to the encroachments of the Northern ice-cap, now deservedly banished by His Celestial Majesty the Sun, to the polar regions. During this long winter the Sux tribe, like others in these latitudes, suffered from a certain deficit of revenue. Reindeer, as we should say nowadays, grew "tight," although no aspersion upon the morals of a well-

"They had passed through a long period of
gastronomic depression."

conducted species is intended. Indeed, everything was tight, and the market value of skins rose enormously. Undressed suits for the men became very fashionable, whilst the brief beginnings of the female skirt may be clearly traced to the encroachments of the ice-cap. Skirts went out of fashion again during the "warm" age, commencing about 9980 B.C., the ladies of West Britain reverting then to necklaces, ornate belts, and hairpins. I merely mention this fact in passing, to show that fashions in costume

Copyright, 1906, by Ward, Lock and Co., Limited,
in the United States of America.

have been but slightly influenced by prudery, and very materially by climate.

After some six months on a diet of salted meat, the young men of the tribe grew so discontented that old Sux felt it politic to organise a raid. He was growing infirm and rheumatic, having resided for over half a century in hollow trees and damp caves. It is quite a mistake to suppose that prehistoric man lived to a green old age. He usually died a violent death in his prime; and if he survived the flint hatchets of the enemy, he perished a few years later from pneumonia or consumption, or was unintentionally poisoned by the medicine man of the tribe. The medical degree was difficult to secure even in Ug's day, but when secured, it was deadly. In the Sux tribe, for example, a high fever was treated with cold douche and double rations; and if the illness terminated fatally—as it usually did—the medical practitioners could always put the blame upon malevolent spirits. British dames thought twice about calling in the doctor ages ago.

Some neighbour had to be raided, it grew evident; and the old Chief favoured an attack upon the Muk tribe, whilst Ug and several of the younger chiefs fancied an excursion into Wales.* Old Sux was growing timid, and discouraged distant expeditions. In the absence of all the young warriors, the old men and the women-folk were exposed to considerable risks.

* These modern names are retained for convenience; the prehistoric name for Wales was Taff-mo, or, as we should say, Taffyland.

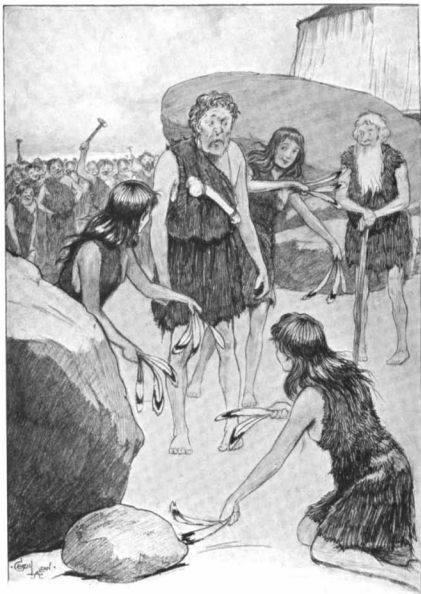
Secondly, he dwelt upon the *entente* which had lately prevailed between the Sux and Muk tribes. The Muks, he argued, would be unprepared. His third reason old Sux kept to himself. The Muks were rather short of young women, and the Chief felt it



"As he went through the skull-splitting exercise."

desirable to guard against alien importation during a period of dearth; besides, he did not admire the Muk type of beauty, the ladies being rather slender.

Ug had been urged by his wife to support the foreign policy of the Chief. She was, you may remember, one of his thirty-three daughters; but filial duty did not greatly



“The Order of the Knucklebone.”

influence her. She had heard that the Welsh women were beautiful, and this greatly simplified her desire for a Muk raid.

"Don't support the Welsh raid, my lord," she had said. "Your little lake eyes would be so anxious if her beloved Ug had to cross the treacherous ice."

"The Channel is as hard as the heart of a Tuff," he assured her.

To content her, however, Ug had promised to support the Chief. The debates in Council were strictly confidential, so that he could vote either way without Zug being any the wiser. Indeed, it was largely due to Ug's influence that the young chiefs at the Council threw out the Muk Raid Bill, and decided upon the Welsh punitive expedition. This being settled, Ug, in a soldierly speech, urged that every other warrior (he meant to be one of the others himself) should carry a young pine tree across the frozen channel. He showed how these could be formed into rafts, if the raiders should happen to strike open water, and so enable them to pass in relative safety to the next ice-field. It was an inspiration of the highest prehistoric military (or, perhaps, naval) genius. And Ug's strategic plan was received with acclamation, for every warrior hoped that his neighbour would be let in for the pine portage. One sees in this plan the genius of Ug. Had he proposed that all should carry wood, the Council would have disparaged his strategy.

Despite the scarcity of provisions, old Sux ordered a State banquet in honour of the raid, and it was held the same evening on the beach. He made the necessary issues of food with reluctance, but the conventions had to be observed. The Chief was growing parsimonious in his age. In generous youth there had been gorges in his cave which were still remembered with enthusiasm; indeed, prior to his election as Head Chief, Sux had even given public feasts, and dispensed bear soup to the aged during hard winters. The Chief was sagacious, and had been a mighty performer with flint hatchets in his prime. Perhaps the burden of a large family may have sapped his liberality in these declining years. He drew a tenth share of all plunder earned by the warriors, but was expected to reward meritorious achievement or conspicuous bravery out of his own larder.

The tribal feast was only a moderate success, for there was some grumbling among the warriors owing to the scarcity of preserved blubber, whilst a deficiency of

oil was resented by the women. Sux, however, bluffed many of the guests by the heartiness of his after-dinner speech, and his confident prediction that the raid would prove not only a military triumph, but a commercial success. They had passed, he said, through a long period of gastronomic depression; but the High Priest and his virtuous assistants were in frequent communication with the ancestors of the tribe, and all the portents were favourable to the raid. The great Jim-Jam (the chief idol of the Suxes) had thrice nodded his head when humbly consulted by the High Priest. In mentioning this very encouraging portent, the Chief hoped that he was not being too frank. ("Go on!" shouted the young warriors encouragingly.) But there were other portents, known to the Council, as to which he (old Sux) was bound to exercise reticence. He concluded by proposing the health of Ug ("his valiant son-in-law"), to whose skilful leadership the tribe had previously owed many a banquet and not a few consignments of slaves.

The next day was devoted to sleeping off the effects of the banquet and to raiding preparations. The heart of many an unfledged youth beat high as he went through the skull-splitting exercises and watched, with the tail of his eye, the admiring glances of the maidens.

At dawn the raiders started, looking, as they disappeared in the fog, like a band of animated scaffolding poles.

It is best to omit a description of the raid, since the gallant deeds of the Sux warriors on the Welsh coast might seem barbarous to modern readers. Let it suffice to say that a prosperous tribe, residing near the place now called Penarth, was successfully surprised, slaughtered, and despoiled. All were flinted or clubbed, except a score of men, the belles of the tribe, and a select few of the younger matrons. On the fourth day the raiders returned, well supplied with foreign food-stuffs, skins, and weapons. Their spoils were carried by the male prisoners, who were afterwards sacrificed to Jim-Jam with much ceremony. One tenth of the booty, including livestock, was duly commandeered by old Sux, another tenth by the priests; and a week or so was pleasantly passed in feasting and sacrificing the male prisoners. It was a very enjoyable time for the Suxes. Ug was happy, for he had increased his military reputation, and felt that he had mounted a long step nearer to the goal of his ambitions. His aim was to succeed old

Sux, none of whose sons inherited the sagacity of the Chief.

But when the revels were ended, Ug very naturally began to consider how large a share of the plunder would be allotted to him in

nor expect the tribe to provide for his family for three generations.

At length Sux assembled the tribe and, having perched himself upon a high boulder, began a long speech. His subjects squatted round him in a circle, the ladies, according to the custom of that robust age, taking buck seats, thankful to get even standing room. They wore their best furs and feathers, for the weather was still terribly cold, despite the cheering forecasts of the High Priest. Zug wore the famous pebble necklace *outside her for collar*. The girls without necklaces, who predominated, said it was vulgar ostentation, but Zug did not care.

In the course of his long-winded speech, the Chief so warmly eulogised the genius of Ug that the gallant young raider would scarcely have felt surprised had two-tenths of the plunder been voted to him. The parsimonious old Chief had devised a more economical plan of rewarding military prowess, and his sage example has been followed by monarchs and governments ever since.

Concluding with a gorgeous bouquet of eulogy, Sux produced from his skins the knucklebone of a reindeer, to which was attached some three feet of sinew.

"Know, O tribesmen!" he said, "that I, your Chief and trusted Councillor, have this day established the Honourable Order of the Knuckle-

bone. Upon my beloved kinsman I bestow the insignia of the Order, which henceforth he shall wear around his neck as a token to all men of his valour and genius in war. I direct, further, that this mighty warrior shall be addressed as 'Ug, wearer of the Knucklebone!'"



"Did him the honour of rubbing noses."

recognition of his public services. These primitive, prehistoric patriots must not be judged by modern ethical standards. Nor, indeed, were Ug's desires conspicuously immoderate. He did not dream of claiming 100,000 pounds of salt meat, for example,

Thus saying, Sux passed the loop of sinew over the head of his perplexed relative and did him the honour of rubbing noses. Thereat a great whoop of acclamation burst from the tribesmen, and—as previously arranged by the wily Chief—a band of pretty maidens, waving feathers and glistening with the best oil, clustered around Ug and paid him homage.

When he had obtained silence, Sux went on to say that "Wearers of the Knucklebone" would be expected to give a feast to the tribe—a rule which was very well received by all, except Ug.

Ug, in his reply, said he was too much overcome by his feelings to be able to express fully the rapture he experienced in becoming a wearer of the distinguished Order. He felt, he confessed, rather lonely on his pinnacle of fame, and hoped that other patriots would speedily be exalted by their gracious Chief. Having kissed the Chief's left elbow, he sat down amidst whoops and yells that might have been audible at Penarth but for the death of the inhabitants of that charred and gutted settlement.

Later in the day, the wearer of the honourable Order sought a private interview with the Chief, and found him in his cave.

Sux rose and courteously offered his visitor half-a-pound of blubber on a skewer.

Ug, curtly refusing the refreshment (a serious breach of etiquette), plunged into his grievance. The Chief heard him with some patience. He could afford to make allowances for Ug's disappointment.

"My dear boy," he said at last, "I can understand your discontent, though you hid it very creditably in public."

"When you let me in for a feast," said Ug, "I could hardly keep my scraper off your august person. That, at least, you might have spared me."

"Son-in-law, be comforted," replied Sux. "The day will come when you will rule over this greedy tribe, and then, believe me, you will feel more grateful to me than you do this evening."

"Shall I indeed succeed you, O Chief?" said Ug.

"I swear it!" replied old Sux, and laid his nose kindly against that of his kinsman.

Breaking the nasal contact, the Chief again spoke words of wisdom that sank like a flint arrow-head into the mind of the young general.

"Ug, my friend," concluded the Chief, "you will save a lot of good food and plunder, after I am gone, by this honourable Order. For knucklebones are many, O Ug, and plunder is always scarce."