

AN INDIAN ROAD-TALE.

Inland they tell the tale of the coast-road, and on the coast they tell it of Pipavao, how the Kir kept the road by force for many years, feared by all, and how he was killed easily.

Morning had not yet come, and the rumble of the mills and low sighing song of the women as they ground the corn fresh for the early meal, was the only sound heard.

Two men left a village and approached by way of the road the tank, on whose banks dwelt the Kir, at a point whence the road could be seen stretching on either hand far along the low coast. All the trade and travellers of the coast paid toll to him, and these men, too, at dusk the day before, on their way to a distant town and a marriage, with many carts and women, had paid their toll, and now came, before journeying on to hear the talk and gain the good-will of one they feared.

They stood before the low house and unfastened the girdle that held their swords. Each sword was pulled till the peace-twine that held the sword to the scabbard was taut and a finger's breadth of metal showed; then they laid scabbard and sword and girdle on the beaten red earth before the door, where unarmed stood the Kir.

They gave greeting, naming Gods and high titles of men; and then, as travellers over long roads, they told of towns and kings, and of what they had seen and heard.

The village where they had rested for the night was temple land, a free gift many generations back to the Temple and its Priests. The Kir spoke of the present holder, asking of the hospitality they had received and whether they had been branded with the holy Temple sign. They bared their arms and showed the brand burned red and white on the flesh. Other brands were there of famous Temples showing the journeys and pilgrimages they had made.

They had found a welcome: it had pleased the Priest to be merry in their company. But in the village and on the lands under him, he ruled hard; and along the coast men jeered at the temple-land villagers, who for the honour of the Temple, kept life sacred and might not hunt or fish. The beauties of the village offered at the Temple, so nets there were indeed—hung near the road Kir's house where none dared rob—left there by those who used them, seeing that they might not bring them to the village. But the Kir spoke not to those women, nor to the brothers and husbands who fished.

One of the travellers said with a laugh that there would soon be another net left for safety outside the village, for the Priest was merry and would not be over vigilant on those who gave good value.

The Kir rose as the laugh sounded; his tongue clicked

to end the talk, and he passed behind the house. The early day was breaking, and he stood there, his eyes seeking the light and the road.

The travellers girdled their swords to return to the village, and passing behind the house they saw him. Hands beat on breast and a sob was heard.

The scabbard-twines were broken before they reached the Kir, and she turned and saw; but her eyes sought the road again; and she had sobbed but once, for the sex she belonged to.

And so they cut her down; and a stone marks the place on the old tank.

There when the cattle stray at dusk, homeward from the fields, the women turn them to the village and the men keep the road.

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