

## DEATH AND LIFE.

As sole white man in charge of 10,000 brown men, a District Officer in the Gilbert Islands must learn to be versatile. He is the father and mother, advocate and judge of his people; he marries, advises, divorces ~~them~~ <sup>them, plays</sup> their games, collects their taxes, imprisons them - and, if they murder, sees that they are decently hanged.

I had fixed Wednesday morning for the hanging of Tata. It was a secret I had kept from my wife, for a small stranger was expected to arrive at any minute: you must have no gloom in a house at such a time.

My wife's voice awakened me just before dawn: "There's the Sergeant-major outside", she said: "He wants you ..... he won't say why .... I wonder what's the matter".

I hurried out to the verandah, whispered with the native N.C.O., and returned: "Nothing much", I lied: "only a prisoner who thinks he's dying and wants to make a will".

"Why couldn't he have told me that?" murmured my wife suspiciously. I held my tongue, threw on some clothes, and went out into the glimmer of breaking day.

The condemned cell and scaffold were reached after a ten minutes' walk through the sanctuaried stillness of the coconut grove. I found the prisoner calm with the princely calm of all island men brought face to face with the inevitable. His only sign of emotion was a movement of distaste when a constable went to bandage his eyes. "Sir", he said to me, "if your mercy will grant a slave's last wish, I would die with eyes undarkened".

He stepped on the trap. I watched his face as the moving bolt grated beneath his feet: the dreamlike repose of his features remained unshattered. Not an eyelid quivered as he plunged down to death.

We waited half an hour, then cut the poor clay down and disposed it decently for burial. I left the gallows, deeply shaken.

I was hardly well on my way home when my houseboy came running full tilt towards me:

"Oh, make haste, Sir, make haste", he panted: "the lady is in pain ..... she calls for you". I ran.

Within an hour, I, who had helped to slay a man was ushering a new life into this queer world of twisted shadow and sunlight.

*Arthur Gumble*