

FURTHER DOINGS OF THE MAJOR.

By F. BLAKE CROFTON.

(Author of "The Major's Big Talk Stories," "The Bewildered Querists," &c.)

THE STIFF NECKS.

"When I next returned to Lotoli, I was hanged by that spiteful brute, Pip. But my neck was not broken, nor had my arms been pinioned; and so, when the spectators dispersed, I cut myself down and walked off.

I had not been a captive for six months among the Stiff Necks in vain.

This singular tribe, whom I prefer to call by their nickname, practise no industry but stealing. As a natural result, many of them die at the hands of the neighbours whom they rob. Among these neighbours hanging happens to be the prevailing form of capital punishment. But the Stiff Necks usually elude the consequences of this penalty by strengthening their necks through a systematic course of training.

Soon after birth their infants are subjected to the test of being lifted by their heads, and those who give way under the strain are deemed unfitted for the needs of existence. Those who survive the Spartan ordeal are often slung on the backs of their nurses and carried about by a string encircling their necks. The schools of the Stiff Necks are models of good order. There the children stand in rows on tiptoe, half-suspended by ropes attached to the rafters. Troublesome boys are promptly lifted off the ground, for the other ends of the ropes, which move on pulleys, concentric at the teacher's desk. The ordinary strain is not much felt by the children, who are relieved from it every now and then, and are besides allowed a long recess at noon to practise the precepts of their instructors, in stealing their dinners. The boys are even occasionally hanged with weights, increasing with their age, attached to their feet.

Nor are adults exempted from a similar discipline. I myself, for they fondly hoped to make me one of them, was obliged to undergo a daily increasing strain upon my neck. I stood it, they said, uncommonly well, for an outsider. In fact the natural strength of my neck seems to show that, in spite of all the deaths I have escaped, I was never born to be hanged.

Bowing is a minor exercise and strengthener for the neck among these people. It is their only mode of greeting an acquaintance, of bidding good-bye, and even of expressing thanks or veneration. I had occasion to regret bitterly the prevalence of this custom.

I forget who it was that threw a doubt upon the boasted painlessness of the guillotine, as compared to the gallows, by applying galvanism to a cut-off head and finding the nerves active for a number of seconds. Reading of this experiment, I thought at the time that, if a guillotined head could be instantly and hermetically rejoined to the trunk, life might be preserved. While I was with the Stiff Necks one of their chiefs was beheaded for treason, hanging of course not being a serious punishment among them. I had now a means of proving my theory, for was I not agent for ———'s Invisible Cement?

A second after the execution, I had united the severed chief, and fitted his head accurately on its old stand. With a liberal application of the magic cement I exhausted the air between the lately parted portions of the Stiff Neck, and this without interrupting the course of the veins. He drew a long breath, and opened his eyes with an unutterable expression of gratitude. He had been told that I was going to attempt his restoration, and had secured a pardon for him if I succeeded.

But the excess of his gratitude proved fatal to him. Before the cement was hardened, or his neck permanently united, he began to bow his thanks after the manner of his tribe; and he nodded so very vehemently that at the seventh nod he sent his head flying into my face, in such a way that he almost succeeded in committing murder and suicide at the same instant! It was the most impolite piece of politeness I ever saw—to fling back one's gift at one in this violent way!

This unfortunate finale, for which I was in no way responsible, interfered disastrously with the sale of "Mondaxo's Mond-neck," as I had thought of re-christening my cement. And, failing to induce anybody to have himself executed by way of illustrating its efficacy in a more satisfactory way. I gave up the idea of starting in business as a joiner among the Stiff Necks.

In consequence of my training among this strange people, I had not trembled for myself when Pip had me seized. But I felt horribly afraid at first that he might have somebody else hanged with me. For it was one of his ghastly refinements of cruelty to string up two wretches face to face, and then promise to release the one who should smile first! The brute could gaze at their abortive efforts! He never seemed to feel any presentiment of his own approaching fate."

(To be continued).

It is a no less fatal error to despise labor, when regulated by intellect, than to value it for its own sake. We are always in these days trying to separate the two; we want one man to be always working, and we call one a gentleman and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising his brother, and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers. Now, it is only by labor that thought can be made happy; and the profession should be liberal, and there should be less pride felt in peculiarity of employment, and more in excellence of achievement.

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