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OUR COLOURED KINDRED. - CHAT WITH MR. F. J. GILLEN.

1898, September 12. *South Australian Register*

You may break, you may scatter, the black if you will; but the charm of the wilderness clings to him still. The sober savage Warioota in the wild wastes, in his summer suit of pipeclay and red ochre, is infinitely more picturesque— to leeward— than semi-civilized Tommy Walker in a secondhand tail coat and top hat qualifying for 'seven days' hard' with the ease of a practiced toper. Knowing less about the manners and customs of the natives of the interior than we do of the degenerate descendants of the tribes on the Adelaide Plains, who welcomed the white man to work him woe, any reliable information on the subject is highly acceptable. Mr. F. J. Gillen, brother of the late lamented legislator, who has spent twenty two years in the interior— the Alice Springs and Charlotte Waters country is on a visit to Adelaide, and in a chat with a reporter of 'The Register' imparted interesting information about the natives. Mr. Gillen has control of the central section of the Overland Telegraph Line, extending from Oodnadatta 'in the south to Attack Creek, celebrated in the annals of Stuart, in the north. A new copper wire of superior resistance is being put up, and will increase

The carrying capacity of the telegraph from Adelaide to Port Darwin. Mr. Gillen says interference from the blacks is scarcely known now. 'They do not trouble their heads about what the white man does; it is beyond them, and they look upon him as a different being.' 'Something like the way the Orientals regard the Englishman, who is mad in their eyes to wash himself, dance, and play cricket, when he can pay people to do it for him?' Yes; that is about it. Nothing the white fellow does astonishes them. In the early days the blacks between Barrow's Creek and Tennant's Creek were troublesome, but now you can travel with out fear or firearms." 'Yes; Murif came through alone on his bike, and he seemed more bothered by 'gibbers than niggers. Ay, a good deal of nonsense has been said and written about the natives. It is very often the white man's fault if there is any trouble. A starving black fellow spears a bullock, and he cannot understand the rights of things. He says, 'You whitefellows come in my country with your guns and dogs and kill my euro. I want meat and kill your bullock, and you send me to Port Augusta Gaol; it does not balance, somehow.' Right through to Port Darwin the blacks are quiet; in fact, I never carry a revolver. A native is a natural reader of character. He can tell by your face whether you are genuine or a humbug, and acts accordingly. It is always best to act squarely with him, and he pretty quickly ' finds it out, for in his native wilds the darkie is no fool. There are tribes up there who have never seen a white man. They will come in parties a distance of 200 miles for information, and as Sub-Protector of Aborigines I have witnessed some of their most secret ceremonies and attended their rites. We issue them blankets, butcher's knives, and tomahawks.

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These latter they appreciate very highly and they are superseding the stone implement, which, indeed, are becoming so rare that only amongst the most remote tribes will you see them in use. The blacks use them very dexterously. 'A system of barter on an extensive scale is practiced amongst the tribes. You will find one tribe, perhaps, exceedingly skilful in making wooden 'pitchies,' for carrying seed or water: another will be noted for the style of their boomerangs, spears, or other weapons, and exchanges therefore take place. Native tobacco is much in request. This is a true tobacco plant and it is a curious thing that the blacks prefer to seek it on the tops of the highest ranges, although it also grows on the plains. Professor Tate says there is no difference in the quality, but the blacks seem to think there is. They do not smoke it, but make snuff of it.' 'They have not made a science of snuff-taking like the Zulu, who shovels it into his nose with a spoon, I suppose.' 'No: they chew the leaf, mixed with ash? One quid will last a man all day. He carries it behind his ear.' 'That may have come from the Malay betel-nut chewers.' 'They have inherited something worse than that from the Malay. Old men may be seen suffering from diseases which must have been contracted before the white man came here.

The Arltunga tribe possess a good physique, but their lower limbs are rather spindly.' 'Yes, we have heard of the 'pipe-legged black.' likewise the 'whistling spider' of the Horn Expedition. There is a peculiar curvature of the tibia commonly called the 'boomerang shin,' but what causes it we do not know, it may point back to the time when man walked less erect. The Arunta tribe is a thousand strong. They range from Oodnadatta to west of the MacDonnell Ranges. They have some social organization. In the north portion of the tribe there are eight classes, and in the south only four. There are eight class names, and there is evidence of a former higher state of social organization; also, that they are moving upwards. The system of relationship is extremely interesting.' Mr. Gillen here mentioned that he had been making a special study of the aborigines of Australia, and in conjunction with Professor Baldwin Spencer, of Melbourne University, was preparing a book on the subject to be issued by McMillans.

The country, he said, was in excellent condition just now— in fact, he had never seen it looking better: for many miles north it was as green as a leaf. In the MacDonnell Ranges the feed was plentiful. After the summer rains the herbage was luxuriant, and game was fairly numerous, but was getting- driven back year by year, whereby the blacks had to come round the stations for rations. The natives were certainly dying out, but they were a decaying race before the white man settled here. Owing to their peculiar system of organization they easily became infected with diseases. The settlement of the country was discouraged by the absence of permanent waters but that was being gradually overcome by artesian well-boring,

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and when that was accomplished the country would be permanently open between Charlotte Waters and Oodnadatta. Mr. Gillen speaks generously of the despised native. He does not deem him treacherous, and says he can be faithful when he is well and firmly treated. He has been judged superficially and under unfavorable circumstances. One cannot expect a mirror of chivalry in a mere savage; his mode of life as a hunter and gatherer makes him suspicious, cautious, and scheming: He is a man of tradition: all his actions are ruled by it, and some of those traditions are very picturesque. There was one associated with Chambers Pillar, on the Finke, the native name of which was Idracowra, meaning something akin to Lot's wife. He denied that the blackfellow in his natural state is sensual; he is in too hard training and fares too simply, for grossness of fleshly desire. He mentions that there is an aged blackfellow up there who speaks proudly of having seen John McDouall Stuart in one of his early expeditions into the desert. Referring to the misconceptions of the native character, Mr. Gillen says the Australian black is very sensitive to ridicule, and if he thinks the white man talking to him is playing with him or seeking idly to find out something about his customs he will cleverly evade all enquiry, but if he thinks that he is being dealt with as man to man he is not a bad fellow. They are a light-hearted race, and very kind to their children. In all his twenty-two years' experience of the blacks he only once saw a child punished, and that was in the case of a halfcaste. The so-called Freemasonry is really a gesture language. A black fellow seeing another twenty or thirty yards away does not consider it worth while to go over to him, or call out, but by a series of ingenious gestures carries on a conversation. This gesture language is fairly copious and convenient. What headaches such a language would avert in Parliament! What the blackfellow respects in the white man is courage and truth, says Mr. Gillen, who fairly exudes information, but is cautious, because he does not want to forestall his book. He has brought to town a number of photographs of scenery and groups of aboriginals of exceeding interest.