

BECKE LOUIS

THE FLEMMINGS AND
"FLASH HARRY" OF
SAVAIT

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*The Flemmings And «Flash Harry» Of Savait / From «The Strange Adventure
Of James Shervinton and Other / Stories» – 1902:*

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THE FLEMMINGS

CHAPTER I

On a certain island in the Paumotu Group, known on the charts as Chain Island, but called Anaa by the people themselves, lived a white man named Martin Flemming, one of those restless wanderers who range the Pacific in search of the fortune they always mean to gain, but which never comes to them, except in some few instances—so few that they might be counted on one's fingers.

Two years had come and gone since Flemming had landed

on the island with his wife, family, and two native servants, and settled down as a resident trader at the large and populous village of Tuuhora, where he soon gained the respect and confidence—if not the friendship—of the Anaa people, one of the proudest, most self-reliant, and brave of any of the Polynesian race, or their offshoots. For though he was a keen business man, he was just and honest in all his transactions, never erring, as so many traders do, on the side of mistaken generosity, but yet evincing a certain amount of liberality when the occasion justified it—and the natives knew that when he told them that tobacco, or biscuit, or rice, or gunpowder had risen in price in Tahiti or New Zealand, and that he would also be compelled to raise his charges, they knew that his statement was true—that he was a man above trickery, either in his business or his social relations with them, and would not descend to a lie for the sake of gain.

Flemming, at this time, was about forty years of age; his wife, who was an intelligent Hawaiian Islander, was ten years his junior, and the mother of his three half-caste children—a boy of thirteen, another of ten, and a girl of six. Such education as he could give them during his continuous wanderings over the North and South Pacific had been but scanty; for he was often away on trading cruises, and his wife, though she could read and write, like all Hawaiian women, was not competent to instruct her children, though in all other respects she was everything that a mother should be, except, as Flemming would often tell her, she was too indulgent and too ready to gratify their whims and

fancies. However, they were now not so much under her control, for soon after coming to the island, he found that one of the three Marist Brothers living at the mission was able to, and willing to give them a few hours' instruction several times a week. For this, Flemming, who was really anxious about his children's welfare, made a liberal payment to the Mission, and the arrangement had worked very satisfactorily—Father Billot, who was a good English scholar, giving them their lessons in that language.

I must now make mention of the remaining persons constituting the trader's household—the two servants—one a man about thirty years of age, the other not more than eighteen or nineteen. They were both natives of Arorai (Hurd Island), one of the Eingsmill Group, and situated something less than three degrees south of the Equator. They had both taken service with him on their own island six years previously, and had followed his and his family's fortunes ever since, for they were both devotedly attached to the children; and when, a year after he had settled on their island, misfortune befell him through the destruction of his trading station by fire, and he found himself a ruined man, they refused to leave him, and declared they would work for him without payment until he was again in a position to begin trading—no matter how long it might be ere that took place.

For some months after the loss of all his property, Flemming worked hard and lived meanly. Most fortunately for him, he had a very good whaleboat, and night after night, and day after day, he and his two faithful helpers, as long as the weather held fine,

toiled at the dangerous pursuit of shark-catching, cutting off the fins and tails, and drying them in the sun, until finally he had secured over a ton's weight of the ill-smelling commodity, for which he received £60 in cash from the master of a Chinese-owned trading barque, which touched at the island, and this amount enabled him to leave Arorai, and begin trading elsewhere—in the great atoll of Butaritari, where owing to his possessing a good boat, sturdy health, and great pluck and resolution, his circumstances so mended that he came to look on the incident of the fire as the best thing that could have happened.

In appearance these two men were like nearly all the people of the Kingsmill Group—dark-skinned, strongly built, and with a certain fierceness of visage, born of their warlike and quarrelsome nature, and which never leaves them, even in their old age. The elder of the two, whose native name was Binoké, but who had been given the nickname of “Tommy Topsail-tie,” had this facial characteristic to a great degree, and was, in addition, of a somewhat morbid and sullen disposition, disliking all strangers. But he was yet the veriest slave to Flemming's children, who tyrannised over him most mercilessly, for young as they were, they knew that his savage heart had nothing in it but adoration and affection for both them and their parents. Nobal, the younger man, who also had a nickname—“Jack Waterwitch” (taken from a colonial whaler in which he had once sailed) was of a more genial nature, and had constituted himself the especial guardian and playmate of the little girl Medora, who spoke his native

tongue as well as himself; while Tommy Topsail-tie was more attached, if it were possible, to Flemming's eldest boy Robert, than to any other member of the family.

After two or three years' successful trading in the northern islands of the Kingsmill Group, Flemming had sold out his trading interests very satisfactorily, and, always eager to go further afield, had sailed for the Paumotu Group, choosing Anaa as his home, for he thought he should like the people, and do very well as a trader, for the island was but a few days' sail from Tahiti in the Society Group, where there was always a good market for his produce, and where he could replenish his stock of trade goods from the great mercantile firm of Brander—in those days the Whiteleys of the South and Eastern Pacific.

One afternoon, about six o'clock, when work at the trading station had ceased for the day, and the store door had been shut and locked by Mrs. Flemming, the trader was seated on his shady verandah, smoking a cigar and listening to the prattle of his little daughter, when his two boys raced up to him from the beach, and noisily asked him permission to take the smallest of the boats (a ship's dinghy) and go fishing outside the reef until the morning. They had just heard some natives crying out that a vast shoal of *tau tau*—a large salmonlike fish, greatly prized throughout the South Seas—had made their appearance, and already some canoes were being got ready.

“Who is going with you, boys?” asked Flemming, looking at their deeply-bronzed, healthy faces—so like his own, though his

hair had now begun to grizzle about his sunburnt temples.

“Jack and Tom, and two Anaa men,” they replied, “they sent us to ask you if they could come. They have finished the new roof for the oil-shed, and want to go very badly. Say ‘yes,’ father.”

“All right boys. You may go. Tell your mother to give you plenty to eat to take with you—for it’s only six o’clock, and I suppose you won’t be home till daylight.”

The delighted boys tore into the house to get their fishing tackle, whilst their mother, telling them to make less clamour, filled an empty box with biscuit, bread, and tinned meats enough for the party of six, and in less than ten minutes they were off again, shouting their goodbyes as they raced through the gate, followed by a native woman carrying the heavy box of food.

Martin Flemming turned to his wife with a smile lighting up his somewhat sombre face.

“We shall have a quiet house to-night, Kaiulani,” he said, calling her by her Hawaiian name.

“Which will be a treat for us, Martin. Those boys really make more noise every day. And do you know what they have done now?”

He shook his head.

“They have a live hawkbill turtle in their room—quite a large one, for I could scarcely move it—and have painted its back in five or six colours. And they feed it on live fish; the room smells horribly.”

Flemming laughed. “I thought I could smell fresh paint about

the house yesterday. Never mind, 'Lani. It won't hurt the turtle."

CHAPTER II

At seven o'clock on the following morning the boys had not returned, and Martin Flemming, just as his wife brought him his cup of coffee, was saying that they probably were still fishing, when he heard a sound that made him spring to his feet—the long, hoarse, bellowing note of a conch shell, repeated three times.

“That’s a call to arms!” he cried, “what does it mean, I wonder. Ah, there is another sounding, too, from the far end of the village. I must go and see what is the matter.”

Scarcely, however, had he put his foot outside his door when he heard his boys’ voices, and in another moment he saw them running or rather staggering along the path together with a crowd of natives, who were all wildly excited, and shouting at the top of their voices.

“Father, father,” and the eldest boy ran to him, and scarcely able to stand, so exhausted was he, he flung himself down on the verandah steps, “father, Jack and Tom, and the two Anaa men... been stolen by a strange ship... we must... we must save them.”

Hastening inside, Flemming returned with a carafe of cold water, and commanding the boys not to try to speak any more just then, he poured some over their wrists, and then gave them a little in a glass to drink. When they were sufficiently “winded,” they told him their story, which was, briefly, this.

In company with two canoes, they had put out to sea and began fishing. Then they parted company—the boat pulling round to the other side of Anaa, where they fished with fair success till daylight. Suddenly a small white-painted barque appeared, coming round the north end of the island. She was under very easy canvas, and when she saw the boat, backed her main-yard, and ran up her ensign.

“They want us to come aboard,” said Bob, hauling in his line. “Up lines everybody.”

His companions at once pulled up their lines, and took to the oars, and in a few minutes they were alongside the ship, and an officer leant over the side of the poop, and asked them to come aboard.

The boys ascended first, the four natives following; the former were at once conducted into the barque’s cabin, where the captain, an old man with a white moustache, asked them their names, and then began to question them as to the number of natives on the island, &c., when they started to their feet with alarmed faces as they heard a sudden rush of feet on deck, followed by oaths and cries, and Walter the younger of the two, fancied, he heard his brother’s name called by Jack Waterwitch.

“Sit down, boys, sit down,” said the captain, dropping his suave manner, and speaking angrily, “you can go on deck and be off on shore presently.” As he spoke a man came below, and made a sign to him.

“All right, sir.”

The captain nodded, and then told the boys to go on deck and get into their boat. They at once obeyed, but the moment they reached the deck they were surrounded by five or six of the crew, who hustled them to the gangway, and forced them over the side, despite their struggles, and their loud cries to their native friends, of whom they could see nothing whatever.

The boat's line was cast off, and as she fell astern the boys saw that a number of sailors were aloft, loosing her light sails, and in a few minutes she was some distance away from them, heading to the eastward with a light breeze. As quickly as possible the two boys set the boat's sail, and sailing and pulling, they ran straight for the weather side of the island, crossed over the reef into the lagoon, and gave the alarm to the first people they met.

“Good lads,” said Flemming, “you have done all that you could do. We shall see presently what can be done to save our men.”

Then turning to his wife, he bade her get ready enough provision for his three boats, and have them launched and manned by their usual crews, whilst he went to the mission to consult with Father Billot and the chiefs, for he had already heard from one of the excited natives that the barque was still very near the land, and almost becalmed; and he knew that the Anaa natives would to a man assist him in recovering the four men from captivity.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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