

BECKE LOUIS

"MARTIN OF NITENDI";
AND THE RIVER OF
DREAMS

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“MARTIN OF NITENDI”

Half-way up the side of the mountain which overlooked the waters of the little land-locked harbour there was a space clear of timber. Huge, jagged rocks, whose surfaces were covered with creepers and grey moss, protruded from the soil, and on the highest of these a man was lying at full length, looking at the gunboat anchored half a mile away. He was clothed in a girdle of *ti* leaves only; his feet were bare, cut, and bleeding; round his waist was strapped a leather belt with an empty cartridge pouch; his brawny right hand grasped a Snider rifle; his head-covering was a roughly made cap of coconut-nut leaf, with a projecting peak, designed to shield his blood-shot, savage eyes from the sun. Yet he had been a White Man. For nearly an hour he had been watching, ever since the dawn had broken. Far below him, thin, wavering curls of pale blue smoke were arising from the site of the native village, fired by the bluejackets on the previous evening. The ruins of his own house he could discern by the low stone wall surrounding it; as for the native huts which, the day

before, had clustered so thickly around his own dwelling, there was now no trace save heaps of grey ashes.

A boat put off from the ship, and as the yellow-bladed oars flashed in the sunlight the man drew his rifle close up to his side and his eyes gleamed with a deadly hatred.

“Officers’ shootin’ party,” he muttered, as he watched the boat ground on the beach and three men, carrying guns, step out and walk up the beach—“officer’s shootin’ party. Christ A’mighty! I’d like to pot every one o’ the swine. An’ I could do it, too, I could do it. But wot’s the use o’ bein’ a blarsted fool for nothin’?”

The boat’s crew got out and walked about the smouldering remains of the village, seeking for curios which had escaped the fire, pausing awhile to look at a large mound of sand, under which lay seven of the natives killed by the landing-party on the preceding day. Then, satisfied that there was nothing to be had, the coxswain grumblingly ordered the men back to the boat, which pushed off and returned to the ship.

The wild, naked creature lying upon the boulder saw the boat pull off with a sigh of satisfaction. There was, under the ashes of his house, and buried still further under the soil, a 50-lb. beef barrel filled with Chilian and Mexican dollars. And he had feared that the bluejackets might rake about the ashes and find it.

He rose and stepped down the jagged boulder to where, at the base, the thick carpet of dead leaves, fallen from the giant trees which encompassed it, silenced even the tread of his naked feet. Seated against the bole of a many-buttressed *vi*-tree was a native

woman, whose right arm, shattered by a bullet and bound up in the spathe of a coconut-palm, was suspended from her neck by a strip of soft bark. She looked at him inquiringly.

“A boat has come ashore,” he said in the native tongue, “but none of the white men are seeking for my money.”

“Thy money!” The woman’s eyes blazed with a deadly fury. “What is thy money to me? Is thy money more to us than the blood of our child? O, thou coward heart!”

Grasping his Snider by the tip of the barrel the man looked at his wife with sullen, dulled ferocity.

“I am no coward, Nuta. Thou dost not understand. I wish to save the money, but I wish for revenge as well. Yet what can I do? I am but one man, and have but one cartridge left.”

This naked, sun-tanned being was one of the most desperate and blood-stained beachcombers that had ever cursed the fair isles of the South Pacific, and in those days there were many, notably on Pleasant Island and in the Gilbert Group. Put ashore at Nitendi from a Hobart Town whaler for mutinous conduct, he had disassociated himself for ever from civilisation. Perhaps the convict strain in his blood had something to do with his vicious nature, for both his father and mother had “left their country for their country’s good,” and his early training had been given him under the shadow of the gallows and within the swishing sound of the “cat” as it lacerated the backs of the wretched beings doomed to suffer under the awful convict system.

From the simple, loafing beachcomber stage of life to that of

a leader of the natives in their tribal wars was a simple but natural transition, and Jim Martin, son of a convict father and mother whose forbears were of the scum of Liverpool, and knew the precincts of a prison better than the open air, followed the path ordained for him by Fate.

The man's reckless courage won him undoubted respect from his associates; the head chief of the village alone possessed a greater influence. A house was built for him, and a wife and land given him; and within a year of his arrival on the island he signalled himself by a desperate attempt to cut-off a barque bound from Hobart to China as she lay becalmed off the island. The attempt failed, and many of his followers lost their lives. A few months later, however, he was more successful with a Fijian trading cutter, which, anchoring off the village, was carried during the night, plundered of her cargo of trade goods (much of which was firearms), and then burnt. This established his reputation.

Five years passed. But few vessels touched at the island now, for it had a bad name, and those which did call were well armed and able to beat off an attack. Then one day, two years before the opening of this story, a trading schooner called off the village, and Martin, now more a savage native than a white man, was tempted by her defenceless condition, and by the money which the captain carried for trading purposes, to capture her, with the aid of the wild, savage people among whom he had cast his lot. Of what use the money would be to him he knew not. He was

an outcast from civilisation, he was quickly forgetting his mother tongue; but his criminal instincts, and his desire to be a “big man” with the savages among whom he had lived for so long, led him to perpetrate this one particular crime. In the dead of night he led a party of natives on board the schooner, and massacred every one of her crew, save one Fijian, who, jumping overboard, swam to the shore, and was spared. A few months later this man escaped to a passing whaler, and the story of the massacre of the captain and crew of the *Fedora* was made known to the commodore of the Australian station, who despatched a gunboat “to apprehend the murderers and bring them to Sydney for trial.” Failing the apprehension of the murderers, the commander was instructed “to burn the village, and inflict such other punitive methods upon the people generally” as he deemed fit.

So Commander Lempriere, of H.M. gunboat *Terrier*, went to work with a will. He meant to catch the murderers of the crew of the *Fedora* if they possibly could be caught, and set to work in a manner that would have shocked the commodore. Instead of steaming into the bay on which the village was situated—and so giving the natives ample time to clear out into the mountains—he brought-to at dusk, when the ship was twenty miles from the land, and sent away the landing party in three boats. The Fijian—he who had escaped from the massacre of the *Fedora*—was the guide.

“You know what to do, Chester,” said Commander Lempriere to his first lieutenant as the boatswain’s whistles piped the

landing party away; “land on the north point, about two miles from the village, and surround it, and then wait till daylight. You can do it easily enough with thirty men, as it lies at the foot of the mountain, and there is no escape for the beggars unless they break through you and get into the bush. Be guided by the Fijian boy; and, as the Yankees say, ‘no one wants a brass band with him when he’s going duck-hunting,’ so try and surround the village as quietly as possible. I’ll see that none of them get away in their canoes. I’ll work up abreast of the harbour by daylight.”

Guided by the boy, Lieutenant Chester and the landing party succeeded in getting ashore without being seen, and then made a long detour along the side of the mountain, so as to approach the village from behind. Then they waited till daylight, and all would have gone well had not his second in command, just as the order was given to advance, accidentally discharged his revolver. In an instant the village was alarmed, and some hundreds of natives, many of them armed with rifles, and led by Martin, sprang from their huts and made a short but determined resistance. Then, followed by their women and children, they broke through the bluejackets and escaped into the dense mountain jungle, where they were safe from pursuit. But the fire of the seamen had been deadly, for seven bodies were found; among them was a boy of about ten, whom the Fijian recognised as the renegade’s son—a stray bullet had pierced his body as he sat crouching in terror in his father’s house, and another had wounded his mother as she fled up the mountainside, for in the excitement and in the

dim morning light it was impossible for the attacking party to tell women from men.

Then by the commander's orders the village and fleet of canoes was fired, and a dozen or so of rockets went screaming and spitting among the thick mountain jungle, doing no damage to the natives, but terrifying them more than a heavy shell fire.

“Let us away from here, Nuta,” said Martin, “’tis not safe. In the hut by the side of the big pool we can rest till the ship has gone and our people return. And I shall bind thy arm up anew.”

The woman obeyed him silently, and in a few minutes they were skirting the side of the mountain by a narrow leaf-strewn path, taking the opposite direction to that followed by the two officers and bluejackets. Half an hour's walk brought them to the river bank, which was clothed with tall spear-grass. Still following the path, they presently emerged out into the open before a deep, spacious pool, at the further end of which was a dilapidated and deserted hut. Here the woman, faint with the pain of her wound, sank down, and Martin brought her water to drink, and then proceeded to re-examine and properly set her broken arm.

The two officers—the second lieutenant and a ruddy-faced, fair-haired midshipman named Walters—had hardly proceeded a hundred yards along the beach, when the boy stopped.

“Oh, Mr. Grayling, let us turn back and go the other way. There's a big river runs into the next bay, with a sort of a lake

about a mile up; I saw it in the plan of the island, this morning. We might get a duck or two there, sir.”

“Any way you like,” replied the officer, turning about, “and walking along the beach will be better than climbing up the mountain in the beastly heat for the sake of a few tough pigeons.”

Followed by the three bluejackets, who were armed with rifles, they set off along the hard white sand. In a few minutes they had rounded the headland on the north side and were out of sight of the ship. For quite a mile they tramped over the sand, till they came to the mouth of the river, which flowed swiftly and noisily over a shallow bar. A short search revealed a narrow path leading up along the bank, first through low thicket scrub, and then through high spear-grass. Further back, amid the dense forest, they could hear the deep notes of the wild pigeons, but as young Walters was intent on getting a duck they took no heed, but pressed steadily on.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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