BECKE LOUIS

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF JAMES SHERVINTON

Louis Becke

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Louis Becke
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CHAPTER I

The night was close and stifling, and the dulled bellowing of the surf on the weather side of the island told me that the calm was about to break at last, and in another hour or so the thirsty, sandy soil would be drenched with the long-expected rain, and the drooping palms and pandanus trees wave their wearied branches to the cooling trade-wind once more.

I rose from my rough bed of cane-work and mats, and, lighting my pipe, went outside, walked down to the beach, and seating myself on a canoe, looked out upon the wide expanse of ocean, heaving under a dark and lowering sky, and wondered moodily why I was ever such an idiot as to take charge of a trading station on such a God-forsaken place as Tarawa Island in the Gilbert Group.

My house—or rather the collection of thatched huts which formed the trading station—stood quite apart from the native village, but not so far that I could not hear the murmur of voices talking in their deep, hoarse, guttural tongue, and see, moving to and fro on the beach, the figures of women and children sent out to see that the fleet of canoes lying on the beach was safe beyond the reach of the waves which the coming storm would send in sweeping, endless lines across the outer reef to the foot of the coco-palms fringing the low-lying, monotonous shore.

The day had been a more than usually depressing one with me; and I had had many depressing days for the last four months. First of all, ever since I had landed on the island, nearly half a year before, I had suffered from bad health. Malarial fever, contracted in the gloomy, rain-soaked forests of New Ireland and New Britain, had poisoned my blood, soured my temper, and all but made me an old man at seven-and-twenty years of age. Violent attacks of ague, recurring with persistent and diabolical regularity every week for many months, had so weakened me, that although I was able to attend to my business and do justice to my employers, I felt that I should never live to see the end of my two years' engagement unless I either shook off the fever or was enabled to leave the torrid regions of the Equatorial Pacific for a cooler climate—such as Samoa or the Marquesas or Society Islands. The knowledge, moreover, of the fact that the fever was slowly but surely killing me, and that there was no prospect of my being relieved by my employers and sent elsewhere—for I had neither money, friends, nor influence—was an additional factor towards sending me into such a morbid condition of mind that I had often contemplated the idea—weak and ill as I was—of leaving the island alone in my whaleboat, and setting sail for Fiji or Samoa, more than a thousand miles distant.

Most people may, perhaps, think that such an idea could only emanate in the brain of a lunatic; but such things had been done, time and time again, in my own knowledge in the Pacific, and as the fever racked my bones and tortured my brain, and the fear of death upon this lonely island assailed me in the long, long hours of night as I lay groaning and sweltering, or shaking with ague upon my couch of mats, the thought of the whale-boat so constantly recurred to me even in my more cheerful moments, when I was free from pain, that eventually I half formed a resolution to make the attempt.

For at the root of the despondency that ever overpowered me after a violent attack of ague there was a potent and never dormant agent urging me to action which kept me alive; and that was my personal vanity and desire to distinguish myself before I died, or when I died.

For ten years I had sailed in the South Seas, and had had my full share of adventure and exciting episode, young as I was, as befell those who, in the "sixties" and "seventies," ranged the Western and North-Western Pacific. But though I had been thrice through the murderous Solomon Group as

"recruiter" for a Fijian labour vessel—"blackbirders" or "slavers" these craft are designated by good people who know nothing of the subject, and judge the Pacific Islands labour trade by two or three dreadful massacres perpetrated by Englishmen in the past—I had "never done anything."

And to have "done something" in those days meant something worth talking about, something that would give a man a name and a place in the ranks of the daring men who had spent nearly all their lives in the South Seas. Little Barney Watt, the chief engineer of the *Ripple*, when the captain and most of the crew had been slaughtered by the niggers of Bougainville Island, had shut himself up in the deck-house, and, wounded badly as he was, shot seventeen of them dead with his Winchester, and cleared the steamer's decks. Then, with no other white man to help, he succeeded in bringing the *Ripple* to Sydney; Cameron, the shark-fisher, after his crew mutinied at Wake Island, escaped with his native wife in a dinghy, and made a voyage of fifteen hundred miles to the Marshall Group; Collier, of Tahiti, when the barque of which he was mate was seized by the native passengers off Peru Island and every white man of the crew but himself was murdered, blew up the vessel's main deck and killed seventy of the treacherous savages. Then, with but three native seamen and two little native girls to assist him, he sailed the barque back safely to Tahiti. And wherever men gathered together in the South Seas—in Levuka, in Apia, in Honolulu, in Papeite—you would hear them talk of "Barney Watt," and "Cameron," and "Jack Collier."

Should I, "Jim Sherry," ever succeed in doing something similar? Would Fate be kind to me and give me a chance to distinguish myself, not only among my fellows, but to make my name known to that outside world from which in a fit of sullen resentment I had so long severed myself?

As I sat on the mat-covered canoe, moody yet feverish, the first squall of rain came sweeping shoreward from the darkened sea-rim, and in a few minutes my burning skin was drenched and cooled from head to foot. Heedless of the storm, however, I remained without moving, watching the curling, phosphorescent breakers tumbling on the reef and listening with a feeling of pleasure to the rush and seethe of the rain squalls as they swept through the dense groves of coco-palms behind me.

Presently I rose, and walking over to my boat-shed, which was but a few yards distant, I endeavoured to close the rough wooden doors so as to prevent the rain from blowing in and flooding the ground. But my strength was not equal to the task, for a puff of more than usual violence not only tore the handle of the door from my hand, but blew me inside the house. Feeling my way in the darkness along the boat's side, I reached her stern, where I was sheltered, and searched my saturated pockets to see if by any chance I had a box of matches, so that I could light my boat's lantern and have a look round the shed. I found a few loose ones, but so wetted as to be useless, and was just about to return to my dwelling-house in disgust, when I heard my name called softly, and a hand touched my knee.

"Who is it?" I said, greatly startled that any one should be in the boat-shed at such a time.

"'Tis I, Niâbon, the Danger Island girl; and Tematau lieth here on the ground near me. His master hath beaten him so that he is near to death. And we have come to seek aid from thee."

I knew the speaker, but did not question her any further at the time, beyond asking her if he whom she called Tematau could rise and walk to the house. She replied in the affirmative, but the injured man was so weak that the girl and I had to support him between us and grope our way over to the house in face of the furious wind and driving rain. The moment we were inside we laid the injured man down, and I struck a match and lit a lamp, whilst Niâbon shut and locked the door, not against any possible intruders, but to keep out the rain and wind. Then, before doing anything else, I went into the store-room and got the woman a change of clothes—a rough, ready-made print gown such as the native women occasionally wear—and a warm rug for the man, who was wearing only the usual *airiri* or girdle of long grass, and then, changing my own sodden garments as quickly as possible, Niâbon and I gave our attention to her companion.

The poor fellow had been fearfully beaten. The whole of his back, arms, and thighs were in a dreadful state, and the rain had caused the wounds to bleed afresh. But the worst injury was a deep

cut on the face, extending from the lower left eyelid to the lobe of the ear, and exposing the bone. My surgery was none of the best, but I succeeded at last in sewing up the wound satisfactorily, the patient bearing the pain without flinching, and pressing my hand in gratitude when I told him I could do no more. As for his other injuries, the girl assured me that she herself would apply proper native remedies in the morning; and, knowing how very clever these natives are in such matters, I attempted nothing further beyond giving the man a glass or two of grog and a tin of sardines and some bread to eat.

"Niâbon," I said to the girl, whose face was stern and set, "thou, too, must eat and then lie on my conch and sleep. I will sit here and read my book and watch the sick man, for the fever is in my bones to-night and I cannot sleep. So eat and rest."

She shook her head. "Nay, I feel no hunger, Simi,[1] and I would sit here with thee if it offend not. And then when the cold seizeth thee at the time when the dawn pushes away the night I can boil thee thy coffee."

I was somewhat surprised that she knew that at dawn I usually had an attack of ague, for she lived ten miles away, and seldom even met any of the natives of the village where I was stationed, though she was well known to them by reputation. However, I was too ill and wearied at the time to think anything more of the matter, so after thanking her for her offer to sit up and attend the unfortunate Tematau I lay down on a cane lounge in the room and watched her making a cigarette.

"Shall I fill thy pipe, Simi?" she asked me as she approached me in a manner so self-reliant and unconcerned, and yet so dignified, that physically and mentally exhausted as I was I could not but feel astonished. For to me she was nothing more—as far as her appearance went—than an ordinary native woman, although I had quite often heard her name spoken in whispers as one who had dealings with the spirits and who had supernatural protection, and all that sort of stuff.

"No, thank you, Niabon," I replied, unintentionally speaking in English, "I must not smoke again tonight."

She smiled and seated herself on a mat beside my couch, then rising suddenly she placed her hand on mine, and said as she looked into my eyes—

"Why do you speak Englis* to me, Simi? Who has been tell you I understan' Englis'?"

"No one, Niâbon. I did not know you could speak English or even understand it. Who taught you?"

"I shall tell thee at some other time," she replied in the Tarawa dialect, and then pointing to the figure of her companion she said she was sure a smoke would do him good. I gave her a new clay pipe, which she filled, lit, and placed in Tematau's mouth. He drew at it with such a deep sigh of satisfaction that the woman's stern features relaxed into a smile.

"My blessing on thee, Simi," said the man, as he blew a stream of smoke through his nostrils; "in but a few days I shall be strong, and then there shall be but one white man alive on Tarawa—thyself."

Niâbon angrily bade him be silent and make no threats; it would be time enough, she said, to talk of revenge when he was able to put a gun to his shoulder or a hand to his knife.

"How came this thing about?" I asked her presently.

"The German sent Tematau away in his boat to one of the little islands at the far end of the lagoon to gather coco-nuts, and bade him hasten back quickly. Tematau and those with him filled the boat with husked coco-nuts, and were sailing homewards in the night when she struck on a reef and tore a great hole in her side. Then the surf broke her in pieces, and Tematau and the other men had to swim long hours to reach the shore. And as thou knowest, the north end of the lagoon hath many sharks, and it is bad to swim there at night even for a little time."

"Bad indeed, Niâbon," I said, with a shudder; "'tis a wonder that any one of them reached the shore."

[1] Jim—pronounced Seemee.

She smiled mysteriously. “They were safe, for each one had around his neck a cord of black cinnet interwoven with the hair of a sea-ghost. So they came to no harm.”

She spoke with such calm assurance that I carefully abstained from even a smile. Then she went on—

“When they reached the white man’s house and told him that the boat was lost he became mad with rage, and seizing a hatchet he hurled it at Tematau and cut his face open. Then as he fell to the ground the German seized a whip of twisted shark-skin and beat him until he could beat no longer.”

Then she went on to tell me that the unfortunate man was carried to the house where she lived, and she, knowing that I should be well able and willing to protect him, decided to bring him to me. The only difficulty that presented itself to her was that the people of the village in which I lived, though not exactly at enmity with the natives of the north end of the island, were distinctly averse to holding any more communication with them than was absolutely necessary, and a refugee such as Tematau would either be turned back or kept as a slave. For, for nearly fifty-five years internecine feuds had been kept alive among the various clans on the island, and had caused terrible slaughter on many occasions. Whole villages had been given to the flames, and every soul, even children in arms, massacred by the conquering party. The advent of white men as traders had, however, been of great advantage to the island generally in one respect—the savage, intractable inhabitants began to recognise the fact that so long as they warred among themselves the white man would be averse to remaining among them, and consequently for the four years previous to my arrival on Tarawa there had been no tribal battle, though isolated murders were by no means uncommon. But owing to the white men’s influence an amicable arrangement was always arrived at by the contending parties, i.e., the relatives of the murdered man and the aggressors.

It was for this reason that Niâbon had brought the injured man to my village by a very circuitous route, so as to avoid meeting any of the people. Once he and she were inside my house to claim my protection there would be no further difficulty. She had succeeded in getting her companion into my boat-shed unobserved, and when the storm burst was patiently awaiting darkness so that she might bring the man to me.

That was her story, and now I will relate something of the woman herself and of the white man of whom she had spoken, the German trader Krause.

CHAPTER II

When I first landed on Tarawa, this man, whose name was Krause, according to the usual custom among us traders, called to see me. He was a big, broad-shouldered, good-looking fellow, and certainly was very civil and obliging to me in many ways, although I was an "opposition" trader; and a new man is never welcome from a business point of view, no matter how much he may be liked for social reasons, especially in the God-forsaken Equatorial Pacific, where whilst your fellow-trader is ready to share his last bottle of grog and his last tin of beef with you, he is anxious to cut your throat from a business point of view. Krause, however, did not seem to—and I honestly believe did not actually—entertain any ill-feeling towards me as a rival trader, although I was landed on the island with such a stock of new trade goods that he must at once have recognised the fact that my advent would do him serious injury, inasmuch as his employers (the big German trading firm in Hamburg) had not sent him any fresh stock for six months. Like most Germans of any education whom one meets in the South Seas, or anywhere else, he was a good native linguist, though, like all his countrymen, he did not *understand* natives like Englishmen or Americans understand wild races. He had no regard nor sympathy for them, and looked upon even the highly intelligent Polynesian peoples with whom he had had much dealing as mere "niggers"—to study whose feelings, sentiments, opinions or religious belief, was beneath the consideration of an European. But although he thus despised the natives generally from one end of the Pacific to the other, he had enough sense to keep his opinions reasonably well to himself, only expressing his contempt for them to his fellow traders, or to any other white men with whom he came in contact.

A few weeks after my arrival on the island I paid him a visit, sailing across the lagoon to his station in my whaleboat. On reaching his place I found that he was away from home on a trip to one of his minor outlying stations, and would not return till the evening. Somewhat disappointed at missing him, I got out of my boat with the intention of at least resting in one of the native huts for half an hour, so as to be out of the intense heat and glare of a torrid sun, when one of Krause's servants came down and said that the trader's wife would be glad if I would come to her husband's station and there await his return.

Glad to accept the invitation, for I was weak and tired out from fever, and ready to lie down almost anywhere out of the sun, I walked wearily along the beach and entered the house.

To my intense surprise, there came to meet me at the door, not the usual style of native wife one generally sees in most traders' houses—a good-looking young woman with a flaming blouse, and more flaming skirt of hideously coloured print, and fingers covered with heavy gold rings—but a slenderly-built pale-complexioned woman of apparently thirty years of age, dressed in a light yellow muslin gown, such as the Portuguese ladies of Macao and the Mariana Islands wear. The moment I saw her I knew that she had but a very slight strain of native blood in her veins, and when she spoke her voice sounded very sweet and refined.

"Will you not come inside and rest, sir?" she said in English. "My husband is away, and will not be back until about sunset; he will be very disappointed to have missed you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Krause," I replied; "I think I must accept your invitation, as I feel a bit shaky, and it has been so very hot crossing the lagoon." "Very, very hot, indeed, Mr. Sherry," she said, as she motioned me to enter the front room; "and I know what malarial fever is; for I once lived at Agana, in Guam, and have seen many people who have come there from the Philippine Islands to recruit. Now, lie down there on that cane lounge, beside the open window, and let me bring you something to drink—something cool. What would you like? There is làger beer, there is very cold water from a canvas water-bag, and there is some hock."

I gratefully took a long drink of the cold water, and then, instead of lying down, seated myself in a wide cane chair, and began to talk to my hostess, who sat on the lounge a few feet away, and

now that I had an opportunity of closer observation, I saw that she was—despite her pallor and worn appearance—a woman of the very greatest beauty and grace.

It was so long since I had even talked to a white woman, even of the commonest class, that I could not but be insensibly attracted to her, and when in a few minutes she smiled at something I said about my longing to get away to Samoa, even if I had to sail there alone in my whaleboat, the faint flush that tinged her cheek seemed to so transfigure her that she looked like a girl of nineteen or twenty. She talked to me for nearly an hour, and I noticed that although we conversed principally about the Line Islands, and the natives, and of our few white neighbours scattered throughout the group, and their idiosyncrasies—humorous and otherwise—she hardly ever mentioned her husband's name, except when I asked her some direct question concerning him, such as the number of his outlying stations, was he fond of fishing or shooting, etc.

In some way I came to the conclusion that she was an unhappy woman as far as her relations with her husband went; and without the slightest reason whatever to guide me to such an inference, felt that he, and not she, was to blame; and even as we talked, there was unconsciously taking possession of me a dislike to a man from whom I had experienced nothing but civility and kindness. Just as she was leaving the room to attend to her household duties, the man Tematau came to the door, carrying a string of freshly-husked young drinking coco-nuts. At a sign from his mistress, he opened one and brought it to me, and then leaving a few beside my chair, took the remainder down to my boat's crew.

"That is Tematau, my husband's head boatman," said my hostess in her soft tones, as she watched him walking down to the beach; "he is so different from these noisy, quarrelsome Tarawa people, that I am always glad to have him about the house when he is not wanted in the boats. He is so quick, and yet so quiet."

"I thought he did not look like a Tarawa native," I said, "and I saw that he is tattooed like a Samoan."

"He has lived in Samoa for a great many years, and is very proud of that tattooing, I am sure. He is a native of Danger Island, a long way to the south-east of this group, and came here about a year ago with a girl named Niàbon." She hesitated a little. "I suppose you have not heard of her?"

"No, I have not. Who is she?"

"They—that is, the natives generally, and some of the whites as well—call her 'the Danger Island witch woman.'"

"Oh, yes," I exclaimed, "I *have* heard of the 'witch woman,' but that was when I was trading at Gallic Harbour on Admiralty Island. There was a poor fellow there, Hairy Willard, who was dying of poison given him by some chief, and I remember quite well his wife, who was a Tahitian, telling me that if the witch woman of Danger Island was near she would quickly render the poison innocuous."

Mrs. Krause's dark eyes lit up with undoubted pleasure—"I must tell her that—"

"Is she living on Tarawa, then?"

"Yes, in this village, and she is in the house at this moment. She would like to speak to you. Do you mind her coming in?" "Indeed, I shall be very pleased." My hostess stood at the table for a few moments, with her face averted from me. Then she turned and spoke to me, and to my astonishment I saw that she was struggling hard to suppress her tears. I rose and led her to a seat.

"You are not well, Mrs. Krause," I said. "Sit down, and let me call one of your servants."

"No, please do not do that, Mr. Sherry. But I will sit down, and—and I should like to ask you a question."

She was trembling as she spoke, but suddenly whipped out her handkerchief, dried her tears, and sat up erect.

"Mr. Sherry, you are an Englishman, or an American—I do not know which—but I am sure that you are a gentleman and will truthfully answer the question I ask. Will you not?"

"I will, indeed, if it is in my power to do so," I replied earnestly.

She placed her hand on mine and looked at me steadily.

"Mr. Sherry, you and I have been talking on various matters for more than an hour. Have I, in your opinion, given you the impression that I am mentally deranged? Look at me. Tell me—for I am an unhappy, heartbroken woman, whose life for two years has been a daily torture and misery—what you *do* think. Sometimes I imagine that what my husband says *may* be true—and then I collapse and wish I were dead."

"What does he say, Mrs. Krause?"

"He says that I am mad, and he says it so persistently that—oh, Mr. Sherry, I feel that before long I *shall* go mad in reality. It is only this woman Niàbon who sustains me. But for her I should have run out along the reef and drowned myself a year ago. Now, tell me, Mr. Sherry, do you think it possible that owing to the continuous strain upon me mentally and physically—for I am really very weak, and had a long illness two years ago when my baby was born—that my mind has become unhinged in any way?"

"I think, Mrs. Krause," I said slowly and very emphatically, "that your husband himself must be mad."

She wept silently, and then, again averting her face, looked away from me towards the wide expanse of the lagoon, gleaming hot and silvery under a blazing sun.

"I wish that what you say were true, Mr. Sherry," she said presently, trying bravely to suppress her tears, "and that my husband were indeed mad."

She rose, extended her hand to me, and tried to smile.

"You will think that I am a very silly woman, Mr. Sherry. But I am not at all strong, and you must forgive me. Now I must leave you."

"But am I not to see the famous witch woman, Mrs. Krause?" I said half jestingly.

"Oh, yes. She shall come to you presently. And you will like her, Mr. Sherry, I am sure. To me she been been the kindest, kindest friend." Then she paused awhile, but resumed in a nervous, hesitating manner, "Niaban is sometimes a little strange in her manner, so—so you most not mind all that she may say or do."

I assured her that I should be most careful to avoid giving any offence to the woman. She thanked me earnestly, and then said she would find Niàbon and bring or send her to me.

Just as she went out I heard some one tapping at the latticed window near which I was sitting. Looking out, I saw the face of the man Tematau, who was standing outside.

"May I come in and speak with thee, gentleman?" he said in Samoan.

"Enter, and welcome."

He stepped round to the front door, and as he entered I saw that he had stripped to the waist; his hair was dressed in the Samoan fashion, and in his hand he carried a small, finely-plaited mat. In an instant I recognised that he was paying me a visit of ceremony, according to Samoan custom, so instead of rising and shaking hands with him, I kept my seat and waited for him to approach.

Stepping slowly across the matted floor, with head and shoulders bent, he placed the mat (his offering) at my feet, and then withdrew to the other side of the room, and, seating himself cross-legged, he inquired after my health, etc., and paid me the usual compliments.

As he spoke in Samoan, I, of course, replied in the same language, thanked him for his call, and requested him to honour me at my own place by a visit.

Then, to my surprise, instead of retiring with the usual Samoan compliments, he bent forward, and, fixing his deep-set, gloomy eyes on mine, he said slowly—

"Master, I shall be a true man to thee when we are together upon the deep sea in thy boat."

"Why dost thou call me 'master'?" I said quickly, "and when and whither do thee and I travel together?" "I call thee 'master' because I am thy servant, but when and whither we go upon the far sea I know not."

Then he rose, saluted me as if I were King Malietoa of Samoa himself, and retired without uttering another word.

"This is a curious sort of a household," I thought. "The mistress, who is sane enough, is told by her husband that she is mad, and fears she will lose her reason; a native who tells me that I am to be his master and travel with him on the deep sea, and a witch woman, whom I have yet to see, on the premises. I wonder what sort of a crank *she* is?"

I was soon to know, for in a few moments she came in, and instead of coming up to me and shaking hands in the usual Line Island fashion, as I expected she would do, she did precisely as my first visitor had done—greeted me in Samoan, formally and politely, as if I were a great chief, and then sat silent, awaiting me to speak.

Addressing her in the same stilted, highly complimentary language that she had used to me, I inquired after her health, etc., and then asked her how long she had been on the island.

She answered me in a somewhat abrupt manner, "I came here with Tematau about the time that the white lady Lucia and her husband came. Tematau is of the same family as myself. And it is of the blood ties between us that we remain together, for we are the last of many."

"It is good that it is so," I said, for want of something better to say, for her curious eyes never left my face for an instant. "It would be hard indeed that when but two of the same blood are left they should separate or be separated."

"We shall be together always," she replied, "and death will come to us together."

Then she rose, walked quickly to the open door, glanced outside to see if any one was about, and returned to me and placed her hand on mine.

"This man Krause is a devil. He seeks his wife's death because of another woman in his own country. He hath tried to poison her, and the poison still rankles in her blood. That is why she is so white of face and frail of body. And now she will neither eat nor drink aught but that of which I first eat or drink myself."

"How know you of this?"

"I know it well," she answered impressively, "and the man would kill me if he could by poison, as he hath tried to kill his wife. But poison can do me no harm. And he hateth but yet is afraid of me, for he knoweth that I long since saw the murder in his heart."

"These are strange things to say, Niâbon. Beware of an unjust accusation when it comes to the too ready tongue."

She laughed scornfully. "No lie hath ever fouled mine. I tell thee again, this man is a devil, and has waited for a year past to see his wife die, for he married her according to the laws of England, and cannot put her away as he could do had he married her according to the native custom."

"Who hath told thee of these marriage laws of England?" I asked.

"What does it matter who hath told me?" she asked sharply. "Is not what I say true?"

"It is true," I said.

"Ay, it is true. And it is true also that she and thee and the man Tematau and I shall together look death in the face upon the wide sea. And is not thy boat ready?"

Her strange, mysterious eyes as she spoke seemed to me—a physically weak but still mentally strong man at the moment—to have in them something weird, something that one could not affect either to ignore or despise. What could this woman know of my desire to leave the island in my boat? What could the man Tematau know of it? Never had I spoken of such an intention to any person, and I knew that, even in my worst attacks of fever and ague, I had never been delirious in the slightest degree. A sudden resentment for the moment took possession of me, and I spoke angrily.

"What is all this silly talk? What have I to do with thee, and for what should my boat be ready?"

"Be not angry with them, Simi, for there is nought but goodwill toward thee in my heart. See, wouldst have me cure the hot fever that makes the blood in thy veins to boil even now?"

"No," I said sullenly, "I want none of thy foolish charms or medicines. Dost think I am a fool?"

“Nay,” and she looked at me so wistfully that I at once repented of my harsh manner—“nay, indeed, Simi. Thou art a man strong in thy mind, and shall be strong in thy body if thou wouldst but let me give thee–”

“No more, woman,” I said roughly. “Leave me. I want none of thy medicines, I say again.”

“Thy wish is my law,” she said gently, “but, ere I leave thee, I pray thee that in a little way thou wilt let me show thee that I *do* mean well to thee.”

I laughed, and asked her what medicine or charm she desired to experiment with upon me.

“No medicine, and no charm,” she answered. “But I know that because of many things thy mind and thy body alike suffer pain, and that sleep would be good for thee. And I can give thee sleep—strong, dreamless sleep that, when thou awakenest, will make thee feel strong in thy body and softer in thy now angry heart to Niâbon.”

“If you can make me sleep now, I’ll give you twenty dollars,” I said in my English fashion.

She took no notice of my rude and clumsy remark, though she had good reason to be offended.

“Simi,” she said, “shall I give thee sleep?”

“Ay,” I replied, “give me sleep till the master of this house returns.”

She rose and bent over me, and then I noticed for the first time that, instead of being about thirty-five or forty years of age, as I had judged her to be by her hard, clear features and somewhat “bony” appearance externally, she could not be more than five-and-twenty, or even younger.

She placed her right hand on my forehead, and held my right hand in her own.

“Sleep,” she said—“sleep well and dreamlessly, man with the strong will to accomplish all that is before thee. Sleep.”

Her hand passed caressingly oyer my face, and in a few minutes I *was* asleep, and slept as I had not slept for many weeks past. When I awakened at sunset I felt more refreshed and vigorous than I had been for many months.

Krause had just returned in his boat, and met me with outstretched hand. His welcome was, I thought, unnecessarily effusive, and, declining his pressing invitation to remain for the night, I left, after remaining an hour or so longer. I noticed that immediately Krause arrived the girl Niâbon disappeared, and did not return.

That was my first meeting with her, and I did not see her again till the evening of the storm, when she brought Tematau to me.

CHAPTER III

We, Niâbon, Tematau and myself, were undisturbed by any visitors during the night, for the storm increased in violence, and, as daylight approached, the clamour of the surf upon the reef was something terrific. About four in the morning, however, there came such a thunderous, sudden boom that the island seemed shaken to its coral foundations, and Niâbon declared that the storm had broken.

"That is what the people of the Tokelau Islands call *O le fati le galu*—the last great wave, that gathering itself together far out on the ocean, rushes to the reef, and curling high up as the mast of a ship, falls and shakes the land from one side to the other."

The girl knew what she was talking about, for from that moment the fury of the wind sensibly decreased, and half an hour later we were able to open the door and gaze out upon the sea, still seething white with broken, tumbling surf?

Walking down to my boat-house, I found that the boat herself was not injured in any way, though most of the roof had been blown away. Then feeling that my usual attack of ague was coming on, I returned to the house, and found that Niâbon had made my coffee.

I drank it, and then wrapped myself up in a couple of blankets in readiness for the first touch of that deadly, terrible chill which seems to freeze the marrow in the bones of any one who is suffering from malarial fever. Niâbon watched me gravely, and then came and stood beside me.

"Mr. Sherry," she said, this time speaking in English, "why don't you let me give you some medicine to cure you of that fever? I *can* cure you."

"I believe you can, Niâbon," I replied; "you certainly mesmerised me when I was at Krause's station that day, and I awakened feeling a lot better."

"What is 'mesmerise'?" she asked quickly.

"Sending any one to sleep, as you did me."

"I can always do that," she said simply, "and so could my mother."

"Can you make me sleep now?"

"Not just now. Wait till the col' fit has gone. And then when you are wake up I shall have some medicine ready for you, and then you shall have no more fever."

My attack of ague lasted about half an hour, and left me with the usual splitting headache and aching bones. When I was able to turn myself, I saw that Niâbon was seated beside Tematau dressing his lacerated back with some preparation of crushed leaves. She heard me move, turned her head, and smiled, and said she would be with me in a few moments. Although my head was bursting with pain, I watched her with interest, noting the tenderness with which her smooth, brown fingers touched her companion's body. When she had finished she rose, carefully washed and dried her shapely hands, and came over to me.

"Give me thy hand," she said in the native dialect, as she knelt beside my couch.

I gave her my left hand. She clasped it firmly but softly, and then the fingers of her right hand gently pressed down my eyelids.

"Sleep, sleep long."

As I felt the gentle pressure of her hand down my face, my throbbing temples cooled, and in a minute, or even less, I sank into a dreamless and profound slumber.

When I awakened it was past nine o'clock, and I found that my own two native servants, who slept in the village, had prepared my breakfast, and were seated beside Tematau, talking to him.

"Where is Niâbon?" I asked.

They told me that she had gone away in search of some plant, or plants, with which to compound the medicine she was making for me. She returned early in the forenoon, carrying a small basket in which I saw a coil of the long creeping vine called '*At 'At* by the natives, and which grows only on the sandiest and most barren soil.

“Have you been sleep well, Mr. Sherry?” she inquired.

“Indeed I did sleep well,” I replied, “and, more than that, I have eaten a better breakfast than I have for many weeks.”

She nodded and showed me the contents of her basket, and then seating herself at the table, ate a small piece of ship biscuit and drank a cup of coffee. It was then that I noticed for the first time that she was, if not beautiful, a very handsome woman. Her face and hands were a reddish brown, darkened the more by the sun, for I could see under the thin muslin gown that she was wearing, that her arms and shoulders were of a much lighter hue, and I felt sure that she had some white blood in her veins. Her hair was, though somewhat coarse, yet long, wavy, and luxuriant, and was coiled loosely about her shapely head, one thick fold drooping over her left temple, and shading half of the smooth forehead with its jet-black and gracefully arched eyebrows. This is as much as I can say about her looks, and as regards her dress, that is easy enough to describe. She invariably wore a loose muslin or print gown, waistless, and fastened at the neck; underneath this was the ordinary Samoan *lava lava* or waist-cloth of navy blue calico. Her gown, however, was better made, and of far better material than those worn by the native women generally; in fact she and Mrs. Krause dressed much alike, with the exception that the latter, of course, wore shoes, and Niâbon’s stockingless feet were protected only by rude sandals of coco-nut fibre such as are still worn by the natives of the Tokelaus and other isolated and low-lying islands of the Equatorial Pacific.

After making and smoking a cigarette she set about compounding my fever mixture by first crushing up the coil of ‘*At ‘At* and then expressing the thick colourless jelly it contained into the half of a coco-nut shell, which she placed on some glowing embers, and fanned gently till it began to give off steam. Then taking half a dozen ripe Chili berries, she pounded them into a pulp between two stones, added them to the ‘*At ‘At*, and stirred the mixture till it boiled.

“That is all, Simi,” she said, as she removed the shell from the fire, and set it aside; “when it is cool enough to drink, you must take one-fourth part; another when the sun is *tu’u tonu iluga* (right overhead), and the rest to-night.”

I thanked her, and promised to carry out her instructions, and then said—

“Why do you talk to me in three different languages, Niâbon? I like to hear you speak English best, you speak it so prettily.”

Not the ghost of a smile crossed her face, and she replied in Samoan that she did not care to speak English to any one who understood Samoan, or indeed any other native language. “I am a native woman,” she added somewhat abruptly, “and English cometh hard to my tongue.”

I said nothing further on the subject, fearing I might vex her, although I felt pretty sure that she was *not* a full-blooded native. However, I had no right to worry her with questions, and if she preferred to be thought a native it was no business of mine.

As soon as my medicine had cooled a little, I took my first dose. It tasted like Hades boiled down, and made me gasp for breath. Then Niàbon bade me wrap myself up in all the rugs and blankets I could procure, and undergo a good perspiration, assuring me that I should have no more attacks of the dreaded ague after the second dose. Calling one of my native servants, a big hulking native named Tepi, to come and roll me up presently, I first went over to Tematau, and asked him how he was doing, and as I stooped down to examine his head, and see if the dressing was all right, a heavy booted footstep sounded outside, and Krause walked in.

One look at his face showed me that he was labouring with suppressed passion, though trying hard to conceal it.

“Good morning,” I said without advancing to him; “take that chair over there, please. I just want to look at this fellow’s head for a moment.”

He stalked over to the chair I indicated and sat down, and a sudden spasm of rage distorted his face when he saw Niâbon. She was seated at the further end of the room, her chin resting on her hand, and looking at him so steadily and fixedly that he could not but have resented her gaze, even if

his mind were undisturbed by passion. Tematau, too, turned his head, and shot his master a glance of such deadly fury that I murmured to him to keep quiet. I rapidly revolved in my mind what course to pursue with our visitor, who, though I could not see his face, was, I felt, watching my every movement.

"That will do," I said to my patient in the island dialect, which Krause understood and spoke thoroughly; "lie down again. In a few days thou wilt be able to walk."

"By God, he's going to walk *now*," said Krause, rising suddenly, and speaking in a low, trembling tone. I motioned to him to sit down again. He shook his head and remained standing, his brawny hand grasping the back of the chair to steady himself, for every nerve in his body was quivering with excitement.

"What is the matter, Mr. Krause?" I said coldly, though I was hot enough against him, for he was armed with a brace of navy revolvers, belted around his waist. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, I won't sit down," he answered rudely.

"Very well, then, stand," I said, seating myself near him.

Then I pointed to the pistols in his belt. "Mr. Krause, before you tell me the business which has brought you here, I should like to know why you enter my house carrying arms? It is a most extraordinary thing that one white man should call on another armed with a brace of pistols, especially when the island is quiet, and white men's lives are as safe here as they would be in London or Berlin."

"I brought my pistols with me because I thought I might have trouble with the natives over that fellow there," he said sullenly, pointing to Tematau.

"Then you might have left them outside; I object most strongly to any one marching into my house in the manner you have done."

He unbuckled his belt, and with a contemptuous gesture threw the whole lot outside the door.

"Thank you, Mr. Krause," I said, "I feel more at ease now, so will you kindly tell me the object of your visit?"

"I've come to get that swine Tematau. I pay him. He is my man. I shall tolerate no interference. I shall take him back to Taritai" (the name of the village where he lived) "if I have to fight my way out of this village of yours and kill fifty of your niggers."

"Steady yourself, Mr. Krause, and don't say 'your niggers' so emphatically. In the first place I have but two native servants, not fifty, but either of those two would very much resent your calling him a 'nigger.' You know as well as I do that to call a native of this island, or of any other island of the group, a nigger, is so grossly insulting that his knife would be out in an instant."

"Ah, you and I have different ideas on the subject," he said sneeringly; "but that does not matter to me at the moment. My paid servant has absconded from my service, and I have come to get him. That is plain enough, isn't it?"

"Quite. But I am an Englishman, Mr. Krause, and not to be easily bluffed because a man comes stamping into my house with a brace of pistols in his belt."

"I did not come here to argue. I came here for that nigger—my property."

"Your *property!* Is the man a slave? Now, look here, Mr. Krause; you have used the man so brutally that he is unable to stand on his feet. He and the girl–"

"I don't want the girl, and I daresay you do," he said, with a sneering laugh that made me long to haul off and hit the fellow between the eyes; "she's a nuisance, and if I ever again see her prowling about my house and practising her infernal fooleries on my wife, I'll put a bullet through her. But the man I *will* have."

"Stop!" I cried warningly, as he took a step toward the sick man, "stop, before you run yourself into mischief. Listen to me. I have but to raise my hand and call, and you will find yourself trussed up fore and aft to a pole like a pig, and carried back to your village."

"Out of my way," he shouted hoarsely, as with blazing eyes he tried to thrust me aside.

"Back, man, back!" I cried. "Are you mad? The natives here will kill you if you attempt to force–"

“And I’ll kill you, you meddlesome English hog,” he said through his set teeth, and, before I could guard, his right hand shot out and grasped me by the throat, and he literally swung me off my feet and dashed me against the centre posts of the house with such violence that I went down in a heap.

When I came to a few minutes afterwards, Tepi was supporting me on his knees, and Niâbon was putting some brandy to my lips. The house was full of natives, who were speaking in suppressed but excited tones. I swallowed the brandy, and then, as Tepi helped me to rise, the natives silently parted to right and left, and I saw something that, half-dazed as I was, filled me with horror.

Krause lay on his back in the centre of the room, his white duck clothes saturated with blood, which was still welling from three or four wounds in his deep, broad chest. I went over to him. He was dead.

“Who hath done this?” I asked.

“I, master,” and Tematau placed an ensanguined hand on mine.

“And I,” said a softer voice, and Niâbon’s eyes met mine calmly. “Tematau and I together each stabbed him twice.”

As soon as I was able to pull myself together, I desired all the natives but three of the head men to leave, and then, after the unfortunate German’s body was covered from view by a large mat, I asked the principal man of the village to tell me what he knew of the tragedy.

“I know nothing,” was his reply. “Niâbon can tell thee.”

Niâbon, in response to my inquiring glance—I was shaking from head to foot as I looked at her, but her calm, quiet eyes as she looked into mine restored my nerve—spoke clearly.

“The German dashed thee against the centre posts of the house, Simi. Then he drew a little pistol from his breast and shot at me, and the bullet struck me on the neck. See,” and she showed us a still bleeding score on the right side of her neck, where a Derringer bullet had cut through the flesh. “And then he sprang at Tematau, but Tematau was on his feet and met him and stabbed him twice; and, as he fell I too stabbed him in the breast.”

“This is an evil day for me,” I said to the three head men, “and I fear it will prove an evil day to the people of this village, for the wife of the man who lies there told me that a ship of war of his country was soon to be here at this island. And how shall we account for his death?”

Niâbon bent forward and spoke—

“Have no fear, Simi. Neither thou, nor Tematau, nor the people of this village, nor I, shall come to any harm from the German fighting-ship. For when it comes thou and I, and Tematau, and Tepi, who know of the blood let out this day upon the floor of thy house, will be far away. And when the captain of the fighting-ship questioneth, and sayeth to the people, ‘Where is my countryman?’ the people will shake their heads and say, ‘We know not. He and his wife, and the Englishman, and Tepi, and Tematau, and the witch woman Niâbon have gone. They have sailed away to beyond the rim of the sea and the sky—we know not whither.”

I listened with all my faculties wide awake, and yet with a strange sense of helplessness overpowering me. Then Niâbon made a swift gesture to the head men. They rose, and lifting the huge body of Krause, carried it away.

She came to me and pressed her hand on my forehead.

“You are tired,” she said in English. “Lie down.”

She took my hand and led me to my couch beside the window and then bent over me.

“Sleep, sleep long. For now the time is near and thou must have strength.”

CHAPTER IV

I slept well on towards four o'clock in the afternoon, and when I awakened I found the house deserted by all but my man Tepi, who was seated cross-legged near me with a cup containing my fever mixture beside him. He held it up to me silently.

Even before I raised myself to drink I felt that I was a stronger man, physically and mentally, than I had been six hours previously, and my veins no longer seemed as if they were filled with liquid fire. I drank the mixture and then looked about me, and saw that every ensanguined trace of the tragedy which had occurred a few hours before had been removed. The coarse and somewhat worn matting which had covered the floor had been taken away and replaced by new squares, and the room presented the usual neat and orderly appearance in which it was always kept by Tepi and my other servant.

"Master," said Tepi, "art hungry?"

"Aye," I replied, "I would eat; but first tell me of the dead man. Who hath taken him away?"

The man, instead of answering me in a straightforward manner, bent his head and muttered something I could not hear.

I jumped off my couch and went outside, and the first person I ran against was my cook, an old grizzled fellow of about sixty years of age named Pai. He was carrying a freshly-killed fowl in his hand, looked at me in an unconcerned manner as if nothing had occurred, and asked me would I have it broiled or boiled.

"As you will," I said impatiently. "Tell me, Pai, whither have they taken the dead white man?"

He made a peculiar and significant gesture—one that is not often used, but when it is it implies that certain matters or things must not be further alluded to, but must be for ever buried in oblivion. I put my hand on his tough, naked, and wrinkled shoulder, and again repeated my question.

"I know of no dead white man," he replied, looking me steadily in the face, and yet answering me in his usual respectful manner. Then he sat down beside the low stone wall surrounding the house, and began to pluck the fowl, casually remarking that it was fat for its age.

Somewhat puzzled at the reticence of my servants, I walked across my compound towards the native village, which, as I have before mentioned, was some distance from my house, and as I walked I felt at every footstep a renewed bodily vigour, and almost unconsciously I took out my pipe, filled it, and began to smoke with an enjoyment denied to me for many months.

The day was gloriously bright and cool, and the westering sun on my right hand shone on a sea of the deepest blue, whose placid bosom was dotted by a fleet of canoes with their mat sails spread to the now gentle trade wind, cruising to and fro catching flying fish. This seemed strange to me, bearing in mind the events of the past few hours. The death of a white man, even from natural causes, was of itself generally a matter of such importance to the natives of any of the mid-Pacific isles, that their daily avocations were suspended, and the house of the deceased man would not only be surrounded on the outside by a circle of people sitting on their mats and awaiting their turn to enter and express their condolences with his wife or children, but filled inside as well.

The first houses I passed on the outskirts of the village were occupied only by women and children, who all gave me their usual cheerful greeting of *Tiakapo, Simi!* ("Good-day, Jim") and one or two of them added a few words of congratulation upon my improved appearance, and then calmly went on with their work, such as mat-making, mending fishing nets, cooking, etc., but no one of them gave the slightest indication of even having heard that anything unusual had occurred.

Crossing the village square—if it could be so called—I directed my steps towards the great open-sided *moniep*, or council house, from which came the sound of many voices, talking in the vociferous manner common to all natives of the Gilbert and Kingsmill groups. As I drew near I saw that there were about twenty men seated inside, smoking, card playing, or making cinnet for fishing

lines by twisting up the strands of coco-nut fibre on their naked thighs. As they heard my footsteps on the gravel, their conversation dropped a little, but they all gave me *Tiakapo!*

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