

Chapter VII. The Orofenans

To our shame we had a very pleasant supper that night off the grilled fish, which was excellent, and some tinned meat. I say to our shame, in a sense, for on our companions the sharks were supping and by rights we should have been sunk in woe. I suppose that the sense of our own escape intoxicated us. Also, notwithstanding his joviality, none of us had cared much for the captain, and his policy had been to keep us somewhat apart from the crew, of whom therefore we knew but little. It is true that Bastin held services on Sundays, for such as would attend, and Bickley had doctored a few of them for minor ailments, but there, except for a little casual conversation, our intercourse began and ended.

Now the sad fact is that it is hard to be overwhelmed with grief for those with whom we are not intimate. We were very sorry and that is all that can be said, except that Bastin, being High Church, announced in a matter-of-fact way that he meant to put up some petitions for the welfare of their souls. To this Bickley retorted that from what he had seen of their bodies he was sure they needed them.

Yes, it was a pleasant supper, not made less so by a bottle of champagne which Bickley and I shared. Bastin stuck to his tea, not because he did not like champagne, but because, as he explained, having now come in contact with the heathen it would never do for him to set them an example in the use of spirituous liquors.

"However much we may differ, Bastin, I respect you for that sentiment," commented Bickley.

"I don't know why you should," answered Bastin; "but if so, you might follow my example."

That night we slept like logs, trusting to our teak door which we barricaded, and to Tommy, who was a most excellent watch-dog, to guard us against surprise. At any rate we took the risk. As a matter of fact, nothing happened, though before dawn Tommy did growl a good deal, for I heard him, but as he sank into slumber again on my bed, I did not get up. In the morning I found from fresh footprints that two or three men had been prowling about the ship, though at a little distance.

We rose early, and taking the necessary precautions, bathed in the pool. Then we breakfasted, and having filled every available receptacle with water, which took us a long time as these included a large tank that supplied the bath, so that we might have at least a week's supply in case of siege, we went on deck and debated what we should do. In the end we determined to stop where we were and await events, because, as I pointed out, it was necessary that we should discover whether these natives were hostile or friendly. In the former event we could hold our own on the ship, whereas away from it we must be overwhelmed; in the latter there was always time to move inland.

About ten o'clock when we were seated on stools smoking, with our guns by our side--for here, owing to the overhanging cliff in which it will be remembered the prow of the ship was buried, we could not be reached by missiles thrown from above--we saw numbers of the islanders advancing upon us along the beach on either side. They were preceded as before by women who bore food on platters and in baskets. These people, all talking excitedly and laughing after their fashion, stopped at a distance, so we took no notice of them. Presently Marama, clad in his feather cloak, and again accompanied by priests or medicine-men, appeared walking down the path on the cliff face, and, standing below, made salutations and entered into a conversation with us of which I give the substance--that is, so far as we could understand it.

He reproached us for not having come to him as he expected we would do. We replied that we preferred to remain where we were until we were sure of our greeting and asked him what was the position. He explained that only once before, in the time of his grandfather, had any people reached their shores, also during a great storm as we had done. They were dark-skinned men like themselves, three of them, but whence they came was never known, since they were at once seized and sacrificed to the god Oro, which was the right thing to do in such a case.

We asked whether he would consider it right to sacrifice us. He replied:

Certainly, unless we were too strong, being gods ourselves, or unless an arrangement could be concluded. We asked--what arrangement? He replied

that we must make them gifts; also that we must do what we had promised and cure him--the chief--of the disease which had tormented him for years. In that event everything would be at our disposal and we, with all our belongings, should become taboo, holy, not to be touched. None would attempt to harm us, nothing should be stolen under penalty of death.

We asked him to come up on the deck with only one companion that his sickness might be ascertained, and after much hesitation he consented to do so. Bickley made an examination of the growth and announced that he believed it could be removed with perfect safety as the attachment to the neck was very slight, but of course there was always a risk. This was explained to him with difficulty, and much talk followed between him and his followers who gathered on the beach beneath the ship. They seemed adverse to the experiment, till Marama grew furious with them and at last burst into tears saying that he could no longer drag this terrible burden about with him, and he touched the growth. He would rather die. Then they gave way.

I will tell the rest as shortly as I can.

A hideous wooden idol was brought on board, wrapped in leaves and feathers, and upon it the chief and his head people swore safety to us whether he lived or died, making us the guests of their land. There were, however, two provisos made, or as such we understood them. These seemed to be that we should offer no insult or injury to their god, and

secondly, that we should not set foot on the island in the lake. It was not till afterwards that it occurred to me that this must refer to the mountain top which appeared in the inland sheet of water. To those stipulations we made no answer. Indeed, the Orofenans did all the talking. Finally, they ratified their oaths by a man who, I suppose, was a head priest, cutting his arm and rubbing the blood from it on the lips of the idol; also upon those of the chief. I should add that Bastin had retired as soon as he saw that false god appear, of which I was glad, since I felt sure that he would make a scene.

The operation took place that afternoon and on the ship, for when once Marama had made up his mind to trust us he did so very thoroughly. It was performed on deck in the presence of an awed multitude who watched from the shore, and when they saw Bickley appear in a clean nightshirt and wash his hands, uttered a groan of wonder. Evidently they considered it a magical and religious ceremony; indeed ever afterwards they called Bickley the Great Priest, or sometimes the Great Healer in later days. This was a grievance to Bastin who considered that he had been robbed of his proper title, especially when he learned that among themselves he was only known as "the Bellowing," because of the loud voice in which he addressed them. Nor did Bickley particularly appreciate the compliment.

With my help he administered the chloroform, which was done under shelter of a sail for fear lest the people should think that we were smothering their chief. Then the operation went on to a satisfactory conclusion. I omit the details, but an electric battery and a red-hot

wire came into play.

"There," said Bickley triumphantly when he had finished tying the vessels and made everything neat and tidy with bandages, "I was afraid he might bleed to death, but I don't think there is any fear of that now, for I have made a real job of it." Then advancing with the horrid tumour in his hands he showed it in triumph to the crowd beneath, who groaned again and threw themselves on to their faces. Doubtless now it is the most sacred relic of Orofena.

When Marama came out of the anesthetic, Bickley gave him something which sent him to sleep for twelve hours, during all which time his people waited beneath. This was our dangerous period, for our difficulty was to persuade them that he was not dead, although Bickley had assured them that he would sleep for a time while the magic worked. Still, I was very glad when he woke up on the following morning, and two or three of his leading men could see that he was alive. The rest was lengthy but simple, consisting merely in keeping him quiet and on a suitable diet until there was no fear of the wound opening. We achieved it somehow with the help of an intelligent native woman who, I suppose, was one of his wives, and five days later were enabled to present him healed, though rather tottery, to his affectionate subjects.

It was a great scene, which may be imagined. They bore him away in a litter with the native woman to watch him and another to carry the relic

preserved in a basket, and us they acclaimed as gods. Thenceforward we had nothing to fear in Orofena--except Bastin, though this we did not know at the time.

All this while we had been living on our ship and growing very bored there, although we employed the empty hours in conversation with selected natives, thereby improving our knowledge of the language. Bickley had the best of it, since already patients began to arrive which occupied him. One of the first was that man whom Tommy had bitten. He was carried to us in an almost comatose state, suffering apparently from the symptoms of snake poisoning.

Afterward it turned out that he conceived Tommy to be a divine but most venomous lizard that could make a very horrible noise, and began to suffer as one might do from the bite of such a creature. Nothing that Bickley could do was enough to save him and ultimately he died in convulsions, a circumstance that enormously enhanced Tommy's reputation.

To tell the truth, we took advantage of it to explain that Tommy was in fact a supernatural animal, a sort of tame demon which only harmed people who had malevolent intentions towards those he served or who tried to steal any of their possessions or to intrude upon them at inconvenient hours, especially in the dark. So terrible was he, indeed, that even the skill of the Great Priest, i.e., Bickley, could not avail to save any whom once he had bitten in his rage. Even to be barked at by him was dangerous and conveyed a curse that might last for generations.

All this we set out when Bastin was not there. He had wandered off, as he said, to look for shells, but as we knew, to practise religious orations in the Polynesian tongue with the waves for audience, as Demosthenes is said to have done to perfect himself as a political orator. Personally I admit that I relied more on the terrors of Tommy to safeguard us from theft and other troubles than I did upon those of the native taboo and the priestly oaths.

The end of it all was that we left our ship, having padlocked up the door (the padlock, we explained, was a magical instrument that bit worse than Tommy), and moved inland in a kind of triumphal procession, priests and singers going before (the Orofenans sang extremely well) and minstrels following after playing upon instruments like flutes, while behind came the bearers carrying such goods as we needed. They took us to a beautiful place in a grove of palms on a ridge where grew many breadfruit trees, that commanded a view of the ocean upon one side and of the lake with the strange brown mountain top on the other. Here in the midst of the native gardens we found that a fine house had been built for us of a kind of mud brick and thatched with palm leaves, surrounded by a fenced courtyard of beaten earth and having wide overhanging verandahs; a very comfortable place indeed in that delicious climate. In it we took up our abode, visiting the ship occasionally to see that all was well there, and awaiting events.

For Bickley these soon began to happen in the shape of an

ever-increasing stream of patients. The population of the island was considerable, anything between five and ten thousand, so far as we could judge, and among these of course there were a number of sick. Ophthalmia, for instance, was a prevalent disease, as were the growths such as Marama had suffered from, to say nothing of surgical cases and those resulting from accident or from nervous ailments. With all of these Bickley was called upon to deal, which he did with remarkable success by help of his books on Tropical Diseases and his ample supplies of medical necessaries.

At first he enjoyed it very much, but when we had been established in the house for about three weeks he remarked, after putting in a solid ten hours of work, that for all the holiday he was getting he might as well be back at his old practice, with the difference that there he was earning several thousands a year. Just then a poor woman arrived with a baby in convulsions to whose necessities he was obliged to sacrifice his supper, after which came a man who had fallen from a palm tree and broken his leg.

Nor did I escape, since having somehow or other established a reputation for wisdom, as soon as I had mastered sufficient of the language, every kind of knotty case was laid before me for decision. In short, I became a sort of Chief Justice--not an easy office as it involved the acquirement of the native law which was intricate and peculiar, especially in matrimonial cases.

At these oppressive activities Bastin looked on with a gloomy eye.

"You fellows seem very busy," he said one evening; "but I can find nothing to do. They don't seem to want me, and merely to set a good example by drinking water or tea while you swallow whisky and their palm wine, or whatever it is, is very negative kind of work, especially as I am getting tired of planting things in the garden and playing policeman round the wreck which nobody goes near. Even Tommy is better off, for at least he can bark and hunt rats."

"You see," said Bickley, "we are following our trades. Arbuthnot is a lawyer and acts as a judge. I am a surgeon and I may add a general--a very general--practitioner and work at medicine in an enormous and much-neglected practice. Therefore, you, being a clergyman, should go and do likewise. There are some ten thousand people here, but I do not observe that as yet you have converted a single one."

Thus spoke Bickley in a light and unguarded moment with his usual object of what is known as "getting a rise" out of Bastin. Little did he guess what he was doing.

Bastin thought a while ponderously, then said:

"It is very strange from what peculiar sources Providence sometimes sends inspirations. If wisdom flows from babes and sucklings, why should it not do so from the well of agnostics and mockers?"

"There is no reason which I can see," scoffed Bickley, "except that as a rule wells do not flow."

"Your jest is ill-timed and I may add foolish," continued Bastin. "What I was about to add was that you have given me an idea, as it was no doubt intended that you should do. I will, metaphorically speaking, gird up my loins and try to bear the light into all this heathen blackness."

"Then it is one of the first you ever had, old fellow. But what's the need of girding up your loins in this hot climate?" inquired Bickley with innocence. "Pyjamas and that white and green umbrella of yours would do just as well."

Bastin vouchsafed no reply and sat for the rest of that evening plunged in deep thought.

On the following morning he approached Marama and asked his leave to teach the people about the gods. The chief readily granted this, thinking, I believe, that he alluded to ourselves, and orders were issued accordingly. They were to the effect that Bastin was to be allowed to go everywhere unmolested and to talk to whom he would about what he would, to which all must listen with respect.

Thus he began his missionary career in Orofena, working at it, good and earnest man that he was, in a way that excited even the admiration of

Bickley. He started a school for children, which was held under a fine, spreading tree. These listened well, and being of exceedingly quick intellect soon began to pick up the elements of knowledge. But when he tried to persuade them to clothe their little naked bodies his failure was complete, although after much supplication some of the bigger girls did arrive with a chaplet of flowers--round their necks!

Also he preached to the adults, and here again was very successful in a way, especially after he became more familiar with the language. They listened; to a certain extent they understood; they argued and put to poor Bastin the most awful questions such as the whole Bench of Bishops could not have answered. Still he did answer them somehow, and they politely accepted his interpretation of their theological riddles. I observed that he got on best when he was telling them stories out of the Old Testament, such as the account of the creation of the world and of human beings, also of the Deluge, etc. Indeed one of their elders said--Yes, this was quite true. They had heard it all before from their fathers, and that once the Deluge had taken place round Orofena, swallowing up great countries, but sparing them because they were so good.

Bastin, surprised, asked them who had caused the deluge. They replied, Oro which was the name of their god, Oro who dwelt yonder on the mountain in the lake, and whose representation they worshipped in idols. He said that God dwelt in Heaven, to which they replied with calm certainty:

"No, no, he dwells on the mountain in the lake," which was why they never dared to approach that mountain.

Indeed it was only by giving the name Oro to the Divinity and admitting that He might dwell in the mountain as well as everywhere else, that Bastin was able to make progress. Having conceded this, not without scruples, however, he did make considerable progress, so much, in fact, that I perceived that the priests of Oro were beginning to grow very jealous of him and of his increasing authority with the people. Bastin was naturally triumphant, and even exclaimed exultingly that within a year he would have half of the population baptised.

"Within a year, my dear fellow," said Bickley, "you will have your throat cut as a sacrifice, and probably ours also. It is a pity, too, as within that time I should have stamped out ophthalmia and some other diseases in the island."

Here, leaving Bastin and his good work aside for a while, I will say a little about the country. From information which I gathered on some journeys that I made and by inquiries from the chief Marama, who had become devoted to us, I found that Orofena was quite a large place. In shape the island was circular, a broad band of territory surrounding the great lake of which I have spoken, that in its turn surrounded a smaller island from which rose the mountain top. No other land was known to be near the shores of Orofena, which had never been visited by anyone

except the strangers a hundred years ago or so, who were sacrificed and eaten. Most of the island was covered with forest which the inhabitants lacked the energy, and indeed had no tools, to fell. They were an extremely lazy people and would only cultivate enough bananas and other food to satisfy their immediate needs. In truth they lived mostly upon breadfruit and other products of the wild trees.

Thus it came about that in years of scarcity through drought or climatic causes, which prevented the forest trees from bearing, they suffered very much from hunger. In such years hundreds of them would perish and the remainder resorted to the dreadful expedient of cannibalism. Sometimes, too, the shoals of fish avoided their shores, reducing them to great misery. Their only domestic animal was the pig which roamed about half wild and in no great numbers, for they had never taken the trouble to breed it in captivity. Their resources, therefore, were limited, which accounted for the comparative smallness of the population, further reduced as it was by a wicked habit of infanticide practised in order to lighten the burden of bringing up children.

They had no traditions as to how they reached this land, their belief being that they had always been there but that their forefathers were much greater than they. They were poetical, and sang songs in a language which themselves they could not understand; they said that it was the tongue their forefathers had spoken. Also they had several strange customs of which they did not know the origin. My own opinion, which Bickley shared, was that they were in fact a shrunken and deteriorated

remnant of some high race now coming to its end through age and inter-breeding. About them indeed, notwithstanding their primitive savagery which in its qualities much resembled that of other Polynesians, there was a very curious air of antiquity. One felt that they had known the older world and its mysteries, though now both were forgotten. Also their language, which in time we came to speak perfectly, was copious, musical, and expressive in its idioms.

One circumstance I must mention. In walking about the country I observed all over it enormous holes, some of them measuring as much as a hundred yards across, with a depth of fifty feet or more, and this not on alluvial lands although there traces of them existed also, but in solid rock. What this rock was I do not know as none of us were geologists, but it seemed to me to partake of the nature of granite. Certainly it was not coral like that on and about the coast, but of a primeval formation.

When I asked Marama what caused these holes, he only shrugged his shoulders and said he did not know, but their fathers had declared that they were made by stones falling from heaven. This, of course, suggested meteorites to my mind. I submitted the idea to Bickley, who, in one of his rare intervals of leisure, came with me to make an examination.

"If they were meteorites," he said, "of which a shower struck the earth in some past geological age, all life must have been destroyed by them and their remains ought to exist at the bottom of the holes. To me they

look more like the effect of high explosives, but that, of course, is impossible, though I don't know what else could have caused such craters."

Then he went back to his work, for nothing that had to do with antiquity interested Bickley very much. The present and its problems were enough for him, he would say, who neither had lived in the past nor expected to have any share in the future.

As I remained curious I made an opportunity to scramble to the bottom of one of these craters, taking with me some of the natives with their wooden tools. Here I found a good deal of soil either washed down from the surface or resulting from the decomposition of the rock, though oddly enough in it nothing grew. I directed them to dig. After a while to my astonishment there appeared a corner of a great worked stone quite unlike that of the crater, indeed it seemed to me to be a marble. Further examination showed that this block was most beautifully carved in bas-relief, apparently with a design of leaves and flowers. In the disturbed soil also I picked up a life-sized marble hand of a woman exquisitely finished and apparently broken from a statue that might have been the work of one of the great Greek sculptors. Moreover, on the third finger of this hand was a representation of a ring whereof, unfortunately, the bezel had been destroyed.

I put the hand in my pocket, but as darkness was coming on, I could not pursue the research and disinter the block. When I wished to return the

next day, I was informed politely by Marama that it would not be safe for me to do so as the priests of Oro declared that if I sought to meddle with the "buried things the god would grow angry and bring disaster on me."

When I persisted he said that at least I must go alone since no native would accompany me, and added earnestly that he prayed me not to go. So to my great regret and disappointment I was obliged to give up the idea.