

Chapter IX. The Island in the Lake

We made the canoe fast and landed on the great rock, to perceive that it was really a peninsula. That is to say, it was joined to the main land of the lake island by a broad roadway quite fifty yards across, which appeared to end in the mouth of the cave. On this causeway we noted a very remarkable thing, namely, two grooves separated by an exact distance of nine feet which ran into the mouth of the cave and vanished there.

"Explain!" said Bickley.

"Paths," I said, "worn by countless feet walking on them for thousands of years."

"You should cultivate the art of observation, Arbuthnot. What do you say, Bastin?"

He stared at the grooves through his spectacles, and replied:

"I don't say anything, except that I can't see anybody to make paths here. Indeed, the place seems quite unpopulated, and all the Orofenans told me that they never landed on it because if they did they would die. It is a part of their superstitious nonsense. If you have any idea in your head you had better tell us quickly before we breakfast. I am very

hungry."

"You always are," remarked Bickley; "even when most people's appetites might have been affected. Well, I think that this great plateau was once a landing-place for flying machines, and that there is the air-shed or garage."

Bastin stared at him.

"Don't you think we had better breakfast?" he said. "There are two roast pigs in that canoe, and lots of other food, enough to last us a week, I should say. Of course, I understand that the blood you have shed has thrown you off your balance. I believe it has that effect, except on the most hardened. Flying machines were only invented a few years ago by the brothers Wright in America."

"Bastin," said Bickley, "I begin to regret that I did not leave you to take part in another breakfast yonder--I mean as the principal dish."

"It was Providence, not you, who prevented it, Bickley, doubtless because I am unworthy of such a glorious end."

"Then it is lucky that Providence is a good shot with a pistol. Stop talking nonsense and listen. If those were paths worn by feet they would run to the edge of the rock. They do not. They begin there in that gentle depression and slope upwards somewhat steeply. The air machines,

which were evidently large, lit in the depression, possibly as a bird does, and then ran on wheels or sledge skids along the grooves to the air-shed in the mountain. Come to the cave and you will see."

"Not till we have breakfast," said Bastin. "I will get out a pig. As a matter of fact, I had no supper last night, as I was taking a class of native boys and making some arrangements of my own."

As for me, I only whistled. It all seemed very feasible. And yet how could such things be?

We unloaded the canoe and ate. Bastin's appetite was splendid. Indeed, I had to ask him to remember that when this supply was done I did not know where we should find any more.

"Take no thought for the morrow," he replied. "I have no doubt it will come from somewhere," and he helped himself to another chop.

Never had I admired him so much. Not a couple of hours before he was about to be cruelly murdered and eaten. But this did not seem to affect him in the least. Bastin was the only man I have ever known with a really perfect faith. It is a quality worth having and one that makes for happiness. What a great thing not to care whether you are breakfasted on, or breakfast!

"I see that there is lots of driftwood about here," he remarked, "but

unfortunately we have no tea, so in this climate it is of little use, unless indeed we can catch some fish and cook them."

"Stop talking about eating and help us to haul up the canoe," said Bickley.

Between the three of us we dragged and carried the canoe a long way from the lake, fearing lest the natives should come and bear it off with our provisions. Then, having given Tommy his breakfast off the scraps, we walked to the cave. I glanced at my companions. Bickley's face was alight with scientific eagerness. Here are not dreams or speculations, but facts to be learned, it seemed to say, and I will learn them. The past is going to show me some of its secrets, to tell me how men of long ago lived and died and how far they had advanced to that point on the road of civilisation at which I stand in my little hour of existence.

That of Bastin was mildly interested, no more. Obviously, with half his mind he was thinking of something else, probably of his converts on the main island and of the school class fixed for this hour which circumstances prevented him from attending. Indeed, like Lot's wife he was casting glances behind him towards the wicked place from which he had been forced to flee.

Neither the past nor the future had much real interest for Bastin; any more than they had for Bickley, though for different reasons. The former was done with; the latter he was quite content to leave in other hands.

If he had any clear idea thereof, probably that undiscovered land appeared to him as a big, pleasant place where are no unbelievers or erroneous doctrines, and all sinners will be sternly repressed, in which, clad in a white surplice with all proper ecclesiastical trappings, he would argue eternally with the Early Fathers and in due course utterly annihilate Bickley, that is in a moral sense. Personally and as a man he was extremely attached to Bickley as a necessary and wrong-headed nuisance to which he had become accustomed.

And I! What did I feel? I do not know; I cannot describe. An extraordinary attraction, a semi-spiritual exaltation, I think. That cave mouth might have been a magnet drawing my soul. With my body I should have been afraid, as I daresay I was, for our circumstances were sufficiently desperate. Here we were, castaways upon an island, probably uncharted, one of thousands in the recesses of a vast ocean, from which we had little chance of escape. More, having offended the religious instincts of the primeval inhabitants of that island, we had been forced to flee to a rocky mountain in the centre of a lake, where, after the food we had brought with us by accident was consumed, we should no doubt be forced to choose between death by starvation, or, if we attempted to retreat, at the hands of justly infuriated savages. Yet these facts did not oppress me, for I was being drawn, drawn to I knew not what, and if it were to doom--well, no matter.

Therefore, none of us cared: Bastin because his faith was equal to any

emergency and there was always that white-robed heaven waiting for him beyond which his imagination did not go (I often wondered whether he pictured Mrs. Bastin as also waiting; if so, he never said anything about her); Bickley because as a child of the Present and a servant of knowledge he feared no future, believing it to be for him non-existent, and was careless as to when his strenuous hour of life should end; and I because I felt that yonder lay my true future; yes, and my true past, even though to discover them I must pass through that portal which we know as Death.

We reached the mouth of the cave. It was a vast place; perhaps the arch of it was a hundred feet high, and I could see that once all this arch had been adorned with sculptures. Protected as these were by the overhanging rock, for the sculptured mouth of the cave was cut deep into the mountain face, they were still so worn that it was impossible to discern their details. Time had eaten them away like an acid. But what length of time? I could not guess, but it must have been stupendous to have worked thus upon that hard and sheltered rock.

This came home to me with added force when, from subsequent examination,

we learned that the entire mouth of this cave had been sealed up for unnumbered ages. It will be remembered that Marama told me the mountain

in the lake had risen much during the frightful cyclone in which we were wrecked and with it the cave mouth which previously had been invisible.

From the markings on the mountain side it was obvious that something of

the sort had happened very recently, at any rate on this eastern face. That is, either the flat rock had sunk or the volcano had been thrown upwards.

Once in the far past the cave had been as it was when we found it. Then it had gone down in such a way that the table-rock entirely sealed the entrance. Now this entrance was once more open, and although of course there was a break in them, the grooves of which I have spoken ran on into the cave at only a slightly different level from that at which they lay upon the flat rock. And yet, although they had been thus sheltered by a great stone curtain in front of them, still these sculptures were worn away by the tooth of Time. Of course, however, this may have happened to them before they were buried in some ancient cataclysm, to be thus resurrected at the hour of our arrival upon the island.

Without pausing to make any closer examination of these crumbled carvings, we entered the yawning mouth of that great place, following and indeed walking in the deep grooves that I have mentioned. Presently it seemed to open out as a courtyard might at the end of a passage; yes, to open on to some vast place whereof in that gloom we could not see the roof or the limits. All we knew was that it must be enormous--the echoes of our voices and footsteps told us as much, for these seemed to come back to us from high, high above and from far, far away. Bickley and I said nothing; we were too overcome. But Bastin remarked:

"Did you ever go to Olympia? I did once to see a kind of play where the people said nothing, only ran about dressed up. They told me it was religious, the sort of thing a clergyman should study. I didn't think it religious at all. It was all about a nun who had a baby."

"Well, what of it?" snapped Bickley.

"Nothing particular, except that nuns don't have babies, or if they do the fact should not be advertised. But I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking that this place is like an underground Olympia."

"Oh, be quiet!" I said, for though Bastin's description was not bad, his monotonous, drawling voice jarred on me in that solemnity.

"Be careful where you walk," whispered Bickley, for even he seemed awed, "there may be pits in this floor."

"I wish we had a light," I said, halting.

"If candles are of any use," broke in Bastin, "as it happens I have a packet in my pocket. I took them with me this morning for a certain purpose."

"Not unconnected with the paraffin and the burning of the idol, I suppose?" said Bickley. "Hand them over."

"Yes; if I had been allowed a little more time I intended--"

"Never mind what you intended; we know what you did and that's enough," said Bickley as he snatched the packet from Bastin's hand and proceeded to undo it, adding, "By heaven! I have no matches, nor have you, Arbuthnot!"

"I have a dozen boxes of wax vestas in my other pocket," said Bastin.

"You see, they burn so well when you want to get up a fire on a damp idol. As you may have noticed, the dew is very heavy here."

In due course these too were produced. I took possession of them as they were too valuable to be left in the charge of Bastin, and, extracting a box from the packet, lit two of the candles which were of the short thick variety, like those used in carriage-lamps.

Presently they burned up, making two faint stars of light which, however, were not strong enough to show us either the roof or the sides of that vast place. By their aid we pursued our path, still following the grooves till suddenly these came to an end. Now all around us was a flat floor of rock which, as we perceived clearly when we pushed aside the dust that had gathered thickly on it in the course of ages, doubtless from the gradual disintegration of the stony walls, had once been polished till it resembled black marble. Indeed, certain cracks in the floor appeared to have been filled in with some dark-coloured cement. I stood looking at them while Bickley wandered off to the right

and a little forward, and presently called to me. I walked to him, Bastin sticking close to me as I had the other candle, as did the little dog, Tommy, who did not like these new surroundings and would not leave my heels.

"Look," said Bickley, holding up his candle, "and tell me--what's that?"

Before me, faintly shown, was some curious structure of gleaming rods made of yellowish metal, which rods appeared to be connected by wires. The structure might have been forty feet high and perhaps a hundred long. Its bottom part was buried in dust.

"What is that?" asked Bickley again.

I made no answer, for I was thinking. Bastin, however, replied:

"It's difficult to be sure in this light, but I should think that it may be the remains of a cage in which some people who lived here kept monkeys, or perhaps it was an aviary. Look at those little ladders for the monkeys to climb by, or possibly for the birds to sit on."

"Are you sure it wasn't tame angels?" asked Bickley.

"What a ridiculous remark! How can you keep an angel in a cage? I--"

"Aeroplane!" I almost whispered to Bickley.

"You've got it!" he answered. "The framework of an aeroplane and a jolly large one, too. Only why hasn't it oxidised?"

"Some indestructible metal," I suggested. "Gold, for instance, does not oxidise."

He nodded and said:

"We shall have to dig it out. The dust is feet thick about it; we can do nothing without spades. Come on."

We went round to the end of the structure, whatever it might be, and presently came to another. Again we went on and came to another, all of them being berthed exactly in line.

"What did I tell you?" said Bickley in a voice of triumph. "A whole garage full, a regular fleet of aeroplanes!"

"That must be nonsense," said Bastin, "for I am quite sure that these Orofenans cannot make such things. Indeed they have no metal, and even cut the throats of pigs with wooden knives."

Now I began to walk forward, bearing to the left so as to regain our former line. We could do nothing with these metal skeletons, and I felt that there must be more to find beyond. Presently I saw something

looming ahead of me and quickened my pace, only to recoil. For there, not thirty feet away and perhaps three hundred yards from the mouth of the cave, suddenly appeared what looked like a gigantic man. Tommy saw it also and barked as dogs do when they are frightened, and the sound of his yaps echoed endlessly from every quarter, which scared him to silence. Recovering myself I went forward, for now I guessed the truth. It was not a man but a statue.

The thing stood upon a huge base which lessened by successive steps, eight of them, I think, to its summit. The foot of this base may have been a square of fifty feet or rather more; the real support or pedestal of the statue, however, was only a square of about six feet. The figure itself was little above life-size, or at any rate above our life-size, say seven feet in height. It was very peculiar in sundry ways.

To begin with, nothing of the body was visible, for it was swathed like a corpse. From these wrappings projected one arm, the right, in the hand of which was the likeness of a lighted torch. The head was not veiled. It was that of a man, long-nosed, thin-lipped, stern-visaged; the countenance pervaded by an awful and unutterable calm, as deep as that of Buddha only less benign. On the brow was a wreathed head-dress, not unlike an Eastern turban, from which sprang two little wings resembling in some degree those on the famous Greek head of Hypnos, lord of Sleep. Between the folds of the wrappings on the back sprang two other wings, enormous wings bent like those of a bird about to take flight. Indeed the whole attitude of the figure suggested that it was springing from

earth to air. It was executed in black basalt or some stone of the sort, and very highly finished. For instance, on the bare feet and the arm which held the torch could be felt every muscle and even some of the veins. In the same way the details of the skull were perfectly perceptible to the touch, although at first sight not visible on the marble surface. This was ascertained by climbing on the pedestal and feeling the face with our hands.

Here I may say that its modelling as well as that of the feet and the arm filled Bickley, who, of course, was a highly trained anatomist, with absolute amazement. He said that he would never have thought it possible that such accuracy could have been reached by an artist working in so hard a material.

When the others had arrived we studied this relic as closely as our two candles would allow, and in turn expressed our opinions of its significance. Bastin thought that if those things down there were really the remains of aeroplanes, which he did not believe, the statue had something to do with flying, as was shown by the fact that it had wings on its head and shoulders. Also, he added, after examining the face, the head was uncommonly like that of the idol that he had blown up. It had the same long nose and severe shut mouth. If he was right, this was probably another effigy of Oro which we should do well to destroy at once before the islanders came to worship it.

Bickley ground his teeth as he listened to him.

"Destroy that!" he gasped. "Destroy! Oh! you, you--early Christian."

Here I may state that Bastin was quite right, as we proved subsequently when we compared the head of the fetish, which, as it will be remembered, he had brought away with him, with that of the statue. Allowing for an enormous debasement of art, they were essentially identical in the facial characteristics. This would suggest the descent of a tradition through countless generations. Or of course it may have been accidental. I am sure I do not know, but I think it possible that for unknown centuries other old statues may have existed in Orofena from which the idol was copied. Or some daring and impious spirit may have found his way to the cave in past ages and fashioned the local god upon this ancient model.

Bickley was struck at once, as I had been, with the resemblance of the figure to that of the Egyptian Osiris. Of course there were differences. For instance, instead of the crook and the scourge, this divinity held a torch. Again, in place of the crown of Egypt it wore a winged head-dress, though it is true this was not very far removed from the winged disc of that country. The wings that sprang from its shoulders, however, suggested Babylonia rather than Egypt, or the Assyrian bulls that are similarly adorned. All of these symbolical ideas might have been taken from that figure. But what was it? What was it?

In a flash the answer came to me. A representation of the spirit of

Death! Neither more nor less. There was the shroud; there the cold, inscrutable countenance suggesting mysteries that it hid. But the torch and the wings? Well, the torch was that which lighted souls to the other world, and on the wings they flew thither. Whoever fashioned that statue hoped for another life, or so I was convinced.

I explained my ideas. Bastin thought them fanciful and preferred his notion of a flying man, since by constitution he was unable to discover anything spiritual in any religion except his own. Bickley agreed that it was probably an allegorical representation of death but sniffed at my interpretation of the wings and the torch, since by constitution he could not believe that the folly of a belief in immortality could have developed so early in the world, that is, among a highly civilised people such as must have produced this statue.

What we could none of us understand was why this ominous image with its dead, cold face should have been placed in an aerodrome, nor in fact did we ever discover. Possibly it was there long before the cave was put to this use. At first the place may have been a temple and have so remained until circumstances forced the worshippers to change their habits, or even their Faith.

We examined this wondrous work and the pedestal on which it stood as closely as we were able by the dim light of our candles. I was anxious to go further and see what lay beyond it; indeed we did walk a few paces, twenty perhaps, onward into the recesses of the cave.

Then Bickley discovered something that looked like the mouth of a well down which he nearly tumbled, and Bastin began to complain that he was hot and very thirsty; also to point out that he wished for no more caves and idols at present.

"Look here, Arbuthnot," said Bickley, "these candles are burning low and we don't want to use up more if we can prevent it, for we may need what we have got very badly later on. Now, according to my pocket compass the mouth of this cave points due east; probably at the beginning it was orientated to the rising sun for purposes of astronomical observation or of worship at certain periods of the year. From the position of the sun when we landed on the rock this morning I imagine that just now it rises almost exactly opposite to the mouth of the cave. If this is so, to-morrow at dawn, for a time at least, the light should penetrate as far as the statue, and perhaps further. What I suggest is that we should wait till then to explore."

I agreed with him, especially as I was feeling tired, being exhausted by wonder, and wanted time to think. So we turned back. As we did so I missed Tommy and inquired anxiously where he was, being afraid lest he might have tumbled down the well-like hole.

"He's all right," said Bastin. "I saw him sniffing at the base of that statue. I expect there is a rat in there, or perhaps a snake."

Sure enough when we reached it there was Tommy with his black nose pressed against the lowest of the tiers that formed the base of the statue, and sniffing loudly. Also he was scratching in the dust as a dog does when he has winded a rabbit in a hole. So engrossed was he in this occupation that it was with difficulty that I coaxed him to leave the place.

I did not think much of the incident at that time, but afterwards it came back to me, and I determined to investigate those stones at the first opportunity.

Passing the wrecks of the machines, we emerged on to the causeway without accident. After we had rested and washed we set to work to draw our canoe with its precious burden of food right into the mouth of the cave, where we hid it as well as we could.

This done we went for a walk round the base of the peak. This proved to be a great deal larger than we had imagined, over two miles in circumference indeed. All about it was a belt of fertile land, as I suppose deposited there by the waters of the great lake and resulting from the decay of vegetation. Much of this belt was covered with ancient forest ending in mud flats that appeared to have been thrown up recently, perhaps at the time of the tidal wave which bore us to Orofena. On the higher part of the belt were many of the extraordinary crater-like holes that I have mentioned as being prevalent on the main island; indeed the place had all the appearance of having been subjected

to a terrific and continuous bombardment.

When we had completed its circuit we set to work to climb the peak in order to explore the terraces of which I have spoken and the ruins which I had seen through my field-glasses. It was quite true; they were terraces cut with infinite labour out of the solid rock, and on them had once stood a city, now pounded into dust and fragments. We struggled over the broken blocks of stone to what we had taken for a temple, which stood near the lip of the crater, for without doubt this mound was an extinct volcano, or rather its crest. All we could make out when we arrived was that here had once stood some great building, for its courts could still be traced; also there lay about fragments of steps and pillars.

Apparently the latter had once been carved, but the passage of innumerable ages had obliterated the work and we could not turn these great blocks over to discover if any remained beneath. It was as though the god Thor had broken up the edifice with his hammer, or Jove had shattered it with his thunderbolts; nothing else would account for that utter wreck, except, as Bickley remarked significantly, the scientific use of high explosives.

Following the line of what seemed to have been a road, we came to the edge of the volcano and found, as we expected, the usual depression out of which fire and lava had once been cast, as from Hecla or Vesuvius. It was now a lake more than a quarter of a mile across. Indeed it had been

thus in the ancient days when the buildings stood upon the terraces, for we saw the remains of steps leading down to the water. Perhaps it had served as the sacred lake of the temple.

We gazed with wonderment and then, wearied out, scrambled back through the ruins, which, by the way, were of a different stone from the lava of the mountain, to the mouth of the great cave.