

Chapter XIII. Oro Speaks and Bastin Argues

The reader of what I have written, should there ever be such a person, may find the record marvelous, and therefore rashly conclude that because it is beyond experience, it could not be. It is not a wise deduction, as I think Bickley would admit today, because without doubt many things are which surpass our extremely limited experience. However, those who draw the veil from the Unknown and reveal the New, must expect incredulity, and accept it without grumbling. Was that not the fate, for instance, of those who in the Middle Ages, a few hundred years ago, discovered, or rather rediscovered the mighty movements of those constellations which served Oro for an almanac?

But the point I want to make is that if the sceptic plays a Bickleyan part as regards what has been written, it seems probable that his attitude will be accentuated as regards that which it still remains for me to write. If so, I cannot help it, and must decline entirely to water down or doctor facts and thus pander to his prejudice and ignorance. For my part I cannot attempt to explain these occurrences; I only know that they happened and that I set down what I saw, heard and felt, neither more nor less.

Immediately after Oro had triumphantly vindicated his stellar calculations he turned and departed into the cave, followed by his daughter, waving to us to remain where we were. As she passed us,

however, the Glittering Lady whispered--this time to Bastin--that he would see them again in a few hours, adding:

"We have much to learn and I hope that then you who, I understand, are a priest, will begin to teach us of your religion and other matters."

Bastin was so astonished that he could make no reply, but when they had gone he said:

"Which of you told her that I was a priest?"

We shook our heads for neither of us could remember having done so.

"Well, I did not," continued Bastin, "since at present I have found no opportunity of saying a word in season. So I suppose she must have gathered it from my attire, though as a matter of fact I haven't been wearing a collar, and those men who wanted to cook me, pulled off my white tie and I didn't think it worth while dirtying a clean one."

"If," said Bickley, "you imagine that you look like the minister of any religion ancient or modern in a grubby flannel shirt, a battered sun-helmet, a torn green and white umbrella and a pair of ragged duck trousers, you are mistaken, Bastin, that is all."

"I admit that the costume is not appropriate, Bickley, but how otherwise could she have learned the truth?"

"These people seem to have ways of learning a good many things. But in your case, Bastin, the cause is clear enough. You have been walking about with the head of that idol and always keep it close to you. No doubt they believe that you are a priest of the worship of the god of the Grove--Baal, you know, or something of that sort."

When he heard this Bastin's face became a perfect picture. Never before did I see it so full of horror struggling with indignation.

"I must undeceive them without a moment's delay," he said, and was starting for the cave when we caught his arms and held him.

"Better wait till they come back, old fellow," I said, laughing. "If you disobey that Lord Oro you may meet with another experience in the sacrifice line."

"Perhaps you are right, Arbuthnot. I will occupy the interval in preparing a suitable address."

"Much better occupy it in preparing breakfast," said Bickley. "I have always noticed that you are at your best extempore."

In the end he did prepare breakfast though in a distraught fashion; indeed I found him beginning to make tea in the frying-pan. Bastin felt that his opportunity had arrived, and was making ready to rise to the

occasion.

Also we felt, all three of us, that we were extremely shabby-looking objects, and though none of us said so, each did his best to improve his personal appearance. First of all Bickley cut Bastin's and my hair, after which I did him the same service. Then Bickley who was normally clean shaven, set to work to remove a beard of about a week's growth, and I who wore one of the pointed variety, trimmed up mine as best I could with the help of a hand-glass. Bastin, too, performed on his which was of the square and rather ragged type, wisely rejecting Bickley's advice to shave it off altogether, offered, I felt convinced, because he felt that the result on Bastin would be too hideous for words. After this we cut our nails, cleaned our teeth and bathed; I even caught Bickley applying hair tonic from his dressing case in secret, behind a projecting rock, and borrowed some myself. He gave it me on condition that I did not mention its existence to Bastin who, he remarked, would certainly use the lot and make himself smell horrible.

Next we found clean ducks among our store of spare clothes, for the Orofenans had brought these with our other possessions, and put them on, even adding silk cumberbunds and neckties. My tie I fastened with a pin that I had obtained in Egypt. It was a tiny gold statuette of very fine and early workmanship, of the god Osiris, wearing the crown of the Upper Land with the uraeus crest, and holding in his hands, which projected from the mummy wrappings, the emblems of the crook, the scourge and the crux ansata, or Sign of Life.

Bastin, for his part, arrayed himself in full clerical costume, black coat and trousers, white tie and stick-up clergyman's collar which, as he remarked, made him feel extremely hot in that climate, and were unsuitable to domestic duties, such as washing-up. I offered to hold his coat while he did this office and told him he looked very nice indeed.

"Beautiful!" remarked Bickley, "but why don't you put on your surplice and biretta?" (Being very High-Church Bastin did wear a biretta on festival Sundays at home.) "There would be no mistake about you then."

"I do not think it would be suitable," replied Bastin whose sense of humour was undeveloped. "There is no service to be performed at present and no church, though perhaps that cave--" and he stopped.

When we had finished these vain adornments and Bastin had put away the things and tidied up, we sat down, rather at a loose end. We should have liked to walk but refrained from doing so for fear lest we might dirty our clean clothes. So we just sat and thought. At least Bickley thought, and so did I for a while until I gave it up. What was the use of thinking, seeing that we were face to face with circumstances which baffled reason and beggared all recorded human experience? What Bastin did I am sure I do not know, but I think from the expression of his countenance that he was engaged in composing sermons for the benefit of Oro and the Glittering Lady.

One diversion we did have. About eleven o'clock a canoe came from the main island laden with provisions and paddled by Marama and two of his people. We seized our weapons, remembering our experiences of the night, but Marama waved a bough in token of peace. So, carrying our revolvers, we went to the rock edge to meet him. He crept ashore and, chief though he was, prostrated himself upon his face before us, which told me that he had heard of the fate of the sorcerers. His apologies were abject. He explained that he had no part in the outrage of the attack, and besought us to intercede on behalf of him and his people with the awakened god of the Mountain whom he looked for with a terrified air.

We consoled him as well as we could, and told him that he had best be gone before the god of the Mountain appeared, and perhaps treated him as he had done the sorcerers. In his name, however, we commanded Marama to bring materials and build us a proper house upon the rock, also to be sure to keep up a regular and ample supply of provisions. If he did these things, and anything else we might from time to time command, we said that perhaps his life and those of his people would be spared. This, however, after the evil behaviour of some of them of course we could not guarantee.

Marama departed so thoroughly frightened that he even forgot to make any inquiries as to who this god of the Mountain might be, or where he came from, or whither he was going. Of course, the place had been sacred among his people from the beginning, whenever that may have been, but

that its sacredness should materialise into an active god who brought sorcerers of the highest reputation to a most unpleasant end, just because they wished to translate their preaching into practice, was another matter. It was not to be explained even by the fact of which he himself had informed me, that during the dreadful storm of some months before, the cave mouth which previously was not visible on the volcano, had suddenly been lifted up above the level of the Rock of Offerings, although, of course, all religious and instructed persons would have expected something peculiar to happen after this event.

Such I knew were his thoughts, but, as I have said, he was too frightened and too hurried to express them in questions that I should have found it extremely difficult to answer. As it was he departed quite uncertain as to whether one of us was not the real "god of the Mountain," who had power to bring hideous death upon his molesters. After all, what had he to go on to the contrary, except the word of three priests who were so terrified that they could give no coherent account of what had happened? Of these events, it was true, there was evidence in the twisted carcass of their lamented high sorcerer, and, for the matter of that, of certain corpses which he had seen, that lay in shallow water at the bottom of the lake. Beyond all was vague, and in his heart I am sure that Marama believed that Bastin was the real "god of the Mountain." Naturally, he would desire to work vengeance on those who tried to sacrifice and eat him. Moreover, had he not destroyed the image of the god of the Grove and borne away its head whence he had sucked magic and power?

Thus argued Marama, disbelieving the tale of the frightened sorcerers, for he admitted as much to me in after days.

Marama departed in a great hurry, fearing lest the "god of the Mountain," or Bastin, whose new and splendid garb he regarded with much suspicion, might develop some evil energy against him. Then we went back to our camp, leaving the industrious Bastin, animated by a suggestion from Bickley that the fruit and food might spoil if left in the sun, to carry it into the shade of the cave. Owing to the terrors of the Orofenans the supply was so large that to do this he must make no fewer than seven journeys, which he did with great good will since Bastin loved physical exercise. The result on his clerical garments, however, was disastrous. His white tie went awry, squashed fruit and roast pig gravy ran down his waistcoat and trousers, and his high collar melted into limp crinkles in the moisture engendered by the tropical heat. Only his long coat escaped, since that Bickley kindly carried for him.

It was just as he arrived with the seventh load in this extremely dishevelled condition that Oro and his daughter emerged from the cave. Indeed Bastin, who, being shortsighted, always wore spectacles that, owing to his heated state were covered with mist, not seeing that dignitary, dumped down the last basket on to his toes, exclaiming:

"There, you lazy beggar, I told you I would bring it all, and I have."

In fact he thought he was addressing Bickley and playing off on him a troglodytic practical joke.

Oro, however, who at his age did not appreciate jokes, resented it and was about to do something unpleasant when with extraordinary tact his daughter remarked:

"Bastin the priest makes you offerings. Thank him, O Lord my father."

So Oro thanked him, not too cordially for evidently he still had feeling in his toes, and once more Bastin escaped. Becoming aware of his error, he began to apologise profusely in English, while the lady Yva studied him carefully.

"Is that the costume of the priests of your religion, O Bastin?" she asked, surveying his dishevelled form. "If so, you were better without it."

Then Bastin retired to straighten his tie, and grabbing his coat from Bickley, who handed it to him with a malicious smile, forced his perspiring arms into it in a peculiarly awkward and elephantine fashion.

Meanwhile Bickley and I produced two camp chairs which we had made ready, and on these the wondrous pair seated themselves side by side.

"We have come to learn," said Oro. "Teach!"

"Not so, Father," interrupted Yva, who, I noted, was clothed in yet a third costume, though whence these came I could not imagine. "First I would ask a question. Whence are you, Strangers, and how came you here?"

"We are from the country called England and a great storm shipwrecked us here; that, I think, which raised the mouth of the cave above the level of this rock," I answered.

"The time appointed having come when it should be raised," said Oro as though to himself.

"Where is England?" asked Yva.

Now among the books we had with us was a pocket atlas, quite a good one of its sort. By way of answer I opened it at the map of the world and showed her England. Also I showed, to within a thousand miles or so, that spot on the earth's surface where we spoke together.

The sight of this atlas excited the pair greatly. They had not the slightest difficulty in understanding everything about it and the shape of the world with its division into hemispheres seemed to be quite familiar to them. What appeared chiefly to interest them, and especially Oro, were the relative areas and positions of land and sea.

"Of this, Strangers," he said, pointing to the map, "I shall have much

to say to you when I have studied the pictures of your book and compared them with others of my own."

"So he has got maps," said Bickley in English, "as well as star charts. I wonder where he keeps them."

"With his clothes, I expect," suggested Bastin.

Meanwhile Oro had hidden the atlas in his ample robe and motioned to his daughter to proceed.

"Why do you come here from England so far away?" the Lady Yva asked, a question to which each of us had an answer.

"To see new countries," I said.

"Because the cyclone brought us," said Bickley.

"To convert the heathen to my own Christian religion," said Bastin, which was not strictly true.

It was on this last reply that she fixed.

"What does your religion teach?" she asked.

"It teaches that those who accept it and obey its commands will live

again after death for ever in a better world where is neither sorrow nor sin," he answered.

When he heard this saying I saw Oro start as though struck by a new thought and look at Bastin with a curious intentness.

"Who are the heathen?" Yva asked again after a pause, for she also seemed to be impressed.

"All who do not agree with Bastin's spiritual views," answered Bickley.

"Those who, whether from lack of instruction or from hardness of heart, do not follow the true faith. For instance, I suppose that your father and you are heathen," replied Bastin stoutly.

This seemed to astonish them, but presently Yva caught his meaning and smiled, while Oro said:

"Of this great matter of faith we will talk later. It is an old question in the world."

"Why," went on Yva, "if you wished to travel so far did you come in a ship that so easily is wrecked? Why did you not journey through the air, or better still, pass through space, leaving your bodies asleep, as, being instructed, doubtless you can do?"

"As regards your first question," I answered, "there are no aircraft known that can make so long a journey."

"And as regards the second," broke in Bickley, "we did not do so because it is impossible for men to transfer themselves to other places through space either with or without their bodies."

At this information the Glittering Lady lifted her arched eyebrows and smiled a little, while Oro said:

"I perceive that the new world has advanced but a little way on the road of knowledge."

Fearing that Bastin was about to commence an argument, I began to ask questions in my turn.

"Lord Oro and Lady Yva," I said, "we have told you something of ourselves and will tell you more when you desire it. But pardon us if first we pray you to tell us what we burn to know. Who are you? Of what race and country? And how came it that we found you sleeping yonder?"

"If it be your pleasure, answer, my Father," said Yva.

Oro thought a moment, then replied in a calm voice:

"I am a king who once ruled most of the world as it was in my day,

though it is true that much of it rebelled against me, my councillors and servants. Therefore I destroyed the world as it was then, save only certain portions whence life might spread to the new countries that I raised up. Having done this I put myself and my daughter to sleep for a space of two hundred and fifty thousand years, that there might be time for fresh civilisations to arise. Now I begin to think that I did not allot a sufficiency of ages, since I perceive from what you tell me, that the learning of the new races is as yet but small."

Bickley and I looked at each other and were silent. Mentally we had collapsed. Who could begin to discuss statements built upon such a foundation of gigantic and paralysing falsehoods?

Well, Bastin could for one. With no more surprise in his voice than if he were talking about last night's dinner, he said:

"There must be a mistake somewhere, or perhaps I misunderstand you. It is obvious that you, being a man, could not have destroyed the world. That could only be done by the Power which made it and you."

I trembled for the results of Bastin's methods of setting out the truth. To my astonishment, however, Oro replied:

"You speak wisely, Priest, but the Power you name may use instruments to accomplish its decrees. I am such an instrument."

"Quite so," said Bastin, "just like anybody else. You have more knowledge of the truth than I thought. But pray, how did you destroy the world?"

"Using my wisdom to direct the forces that are at work in the heart of this great globe, I drowned it with a deluge, causing one part to sink and another to rise, also changes of climate which completed the work."

"That's quite right," exclaimed Bastin delightedly. "We know all about the Deluge, only you are not mentioned in connection with the matter. A man, Noah, had to do with it when he was six hundred years old."

"Six hundred?" said Oro. "That is not very old. I myself had seen more than a thousand years when I lay down to sleep."

"A thousand!" remarked Bastin, mildly interested. "That is unusual, though some of these mighty men of renown we know lived over nine hundred."

Here Bickley snorted and exclaimed:

"Nine hundred moons, he means."

"I did not know Noah," went on Oro. "Perhaps he lived after my time and caused some other local deluge. Is there anything else you wish to ask me before I leave you that I may study this map writing?"

"Yes," said Bastin. "Why were you allowed to drown your world?"

"Because it was evil, Priest, and disobeyed me and the Power I serve."

"Oh! thank you," said Bastin, "that fits in exactly. It was just the same in Noah's time."

"I pray that it is not just the same now," said Oro, rising. "To-morrow we will return, or if I do not who have much that I must do, the lady my daughter will return and speak with you further."

He departed into the cave, Yva following at a little distance.

I accompanied her as far as the mouth of the cave, as did Tommy, who all this time had been sitting contentedly upon the hem of her gorgeous robe, quite careless of its immemorial age, if it was immemorial and not woven yesterday, a point on which I had no information.

"Lady Yva," I said, "did I rightly understand the Lord Oro to say that he was a thousand years old?"

"Yes, O Humphrey, and really he is more, or so I think."

"Then are you a thousand years old also?" I asked, aghast.

"No, no," she replied, shaking her head, "I am young, quite young, for I do not count my time of sleep."

"Certainly you look it," I said. "But what, Lady Yva, do you mean by young?"

She answered my question by another.

"What age are your women when they are as I am?"

"None of our women were ever quite like you, Lady Yva. Yet, say from twenty-five to thirty years of age."

"Ah! I have been counting and now I remember. When my father sent me to sleep I was twenty-seven years old. No, I will not deceive you, I was twenty-seven years and three moons." Then, saying something to the effect that she would return, she departed, laughing a little in a mischievous way, and, although I did not observe this till afterwards, Tommy departed with her.

When I repeated what she had said to Bastin and Bickley, who were standing at a distance straining their ears and somewhat aggrieved, the former remarked:

"If she is twenty-seven her father must have married late in life, though of course it may have been a long while before he had children."

Then Bickley, who had been suppressing himself all this while, went off like a bomb.

"Do you tell us, Bastin," he asked, "that you believe one word of all this ghastly rubbish? I mean as to that antique charlatan being a thousand years old and having caused the Flood and the rest?"

"If you ask me, Bickley, I see no particular reason to doubt it at present. A person who can go to sleep in a glass coffin kept warm by a pocketful of radium together with very accurate maps of the constellations at the time he wakes up, can, I imagine, do most things."

"Even cause the Deluge," jeered Bickley.

"I don't know about the Deluge, but perhaps he may have been permitted to cause a deluge. Why not? You can't look at things from far enough off, Bickley. And if something seems big to you, you conclude that therefore it is impossible. The same Power which gives you skill to succeed in an operation, that hitherto was held impracticable, as I know you have done once or twice, may have given that old fellow power to cause a deluge. You should measure the universe and its possibilities by worlds and not by acres, Bickley."

"And believe, I suppose, that a man can live a thousand years, whereas we know well that he cannot live more than about a hundred."

"You don't know anything of the sort, Bickley. All you know is that over the brief period of history with which we are acquainted, say ten thousand years at most, men have only lived to about a hundred. But the very rocks which you are so fond of talking about, tell us that even this planet is millions upon millions of years of age. Who knows then but that at some time in its history, men did not live for a thousand years, and that lost civilisations did not exist of which this Oro and his daughter may be two survivors?"

"There is no proof of anything of the sort," said Bickley.

"I don't know about proof, as you understand it, though I have read in Plato of a continent called Atlantis that was submerged, according to the story of old Egyptian priests. But personally I have every proof, for it is all written down in the Bible at which you turn tip your nose, and I am very glad that I have been lucky enough to come across this unexpected confirmation of the story. Not that it matters much, since I should have learned all about it when it pleases Providence to remove me to a better world, which in our circumstances may happen any day. Now I must change my clothes before I see to the cooking and other things."

"I am bound to admit," said Bickley, looking after him, "that old Bastin is not so stupid as he seems. From his point of view the arguments he advances are quite logical. Moreover I think he is right when he says that we look at things through the wrong end of the telescope. After all

the universe is very big and who knows what may happen there? Who knows

even what may have happened on this little earth during the aeons of its existence, whenever its balance chanced to shift, as the Ice Ages show us it has often done? Still I believe that old Oro to be a Prince of Liars."

"That remains to be proved," I answered cautiously. "All I know is that he is a wonderfully learned person of most remarkable appearance, and that his daughter is the loveliest creature I ever saw."

"There I agree," said Bickley decidedly, "and as brilliant as she is lovely. If she belongs to a past civilisation, it is a pity that it ever became extinct. Now let's go and have a nap. Bastin will call us when supper is ready."