

Chapter XXVII. Bastin Discovers a Resemblance

There is little more to tell.

Shortly after our return Bickley, like a patriotic Englishman, volunteered for service at the front and departed in the uniform of the R.A.M.C. Before he left he took the opportunity of explaining to Bastin how much better it was in such a national emergency as existed, to belong to a profession in which a man could do something to help the bodies of his countrymen that had been broken in the common cause, than to one like his in which it was only possible to pelt them with vain words.

"You think that, do you, Bickley?" answered Bastin. "Well, I hold that it is better to heal souls than bodies, because, as even you will have learned out there in Orofena, they last so much longer."

"I am not certain that I learned anything of the sort," said Bickley, "or even that Oro was more than an ordinary old man. He said that he had lived a thousand years, but what was there to prove this except his word, which is worth nothing?"

"There was the Lady Yva's word also, which is worth a great deal, Bickley."

"Yes, but she may have meant a thousand moons. Further, as according to her own showing she was still quite young, how could she know her father's age?"

"Quite so, Bickley. But all she actually said was that she was of the same age as one of our women of twenty-seven, which may have meant two hundred and seventy for all I know. However, putting that aside you will admit that they had both slept for two hundred and fifty thousand years."

"I admit that they slept, Bastin, because I helped to awaken them, but for how long there is nothing to show, except those star maps which are probably quite inaccurate."

"They are not inaccurate," I broke in, "for I have had them checked by leading astronomers who say that they show a marvelous knowledge of the heavens as these were two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, and are today."

Here I should state that those two metal maps and the ring which I gave to Yva and found again after the catastrophe, were absolutely the only things connected with her or with Oro that we brought away with us. The former I would never part with, feeling their value as evidence. Therefore, when we descended to the city Nyo and the depths beneath, I took them with me wrapped in cloth in my pocket. Thus they were preserved. Everything else went when the Rock of Offerings and the cave

mouth sank beneath the waters of the lake.

This may have happened either in the earth tremor, which no doubt was caused by the advance of the terrific world-balance, or when the electric power, though diffused and turned by Yva's insulated body, struck the great gyroscope's travelling foot with sufficient strength, not to shift it indeed on to the right-hand path as Oro had designed, but still to cause it to stagger and even perhaps to halt for the fraction of a second. Even this pause may have been enough to cause convulsions of the earth above; indeed, I gathered from Marama and other Orofenans that such convulsions had occurred on and around the island at what must have corresponded with that moment of the loosing of the force.

This loss of our belongings in the house of the Rock of Offerings was the more grievous because among them were some Kodak photographs which

I had taken, including portraits of Oro and one of Yva that was really excellent, to say nothing of pictures of the mouth of the cave and of the ruins and crater lake above. How bitterly I regret that I did not keep these photographs in my pocket with the map-plates.

"Even if the star-maps are correct, still it proves nothing," said Bickley, "since possibly Oro's astronomical skill might have enabled him to draw that of the sky at any period, though I allow this is impossible."

"I doubt his taking so much trouble merely to deceive three wanderers who lacked the knowledge even to check them," I said. "But all this misses the point, Bickley. However long they had slept, that man and woman did arise from seeming death. They did dwell in those marvelous caves with their evidences of departed civilisations, and they did show us that fearful, world-wandering gyroscope. These things we saw."

"I admit that we saw them, Arbuthnot, and I admit that they are one and all beyond human comprehension. To that extent I am converted, and, I may add, humbled," said Bickley.

"So you ought to be," exclaimed Bastin, "seeing that you always swore that there was nothing in the world that is not capable of a perfectly natural explanation."

"Of which all these things may be capable, Bastin, if only we held the key."

"Very well, Bickley, but how do you explain what the Lady Yva did? I may tell you now what she commanded me to conceal at the time, namely, that she became a Christian; so much so that by her own will, I baptised and confirmed her on the very morning of her sacrifice. Doubtless it was this that changed her heart so much that she became willing, of course without my knowledge, to leave everything she cared for," here he looked hard at me, "and lay down her life to save the world, half of which she

believed was about to be drowned by Oro. Now, considering her history and upbringing, I call this a spiritual marvel, much greater than any you now admit, and one you can't explain, Bickley."

"No, I cannot explain, or, at any rate, I will not try," he answered, also staring hard at me. "Whatever she believed, or did not believe, and whatever would or would not have happened, she was a great and wonderful woman whose memory I worship."

"Quite so, Bickley, and now perhaps you see my point, that what you describe as mere vain words may also be helpful to mankind; more so, indeed, than your surgical instruments and pills."

"You couldn't convert Oro, anyway," exclaimed Bickley, with irritation.

"No, Bickley; but then I have always understood that the devil is beyond conversion because he is beyond repentance. You see, I think that if that old scoundrel was not the devil himself, at any rate he was a bit of him, and, if I am right, I am not ashamed to have failed in his case."

"Even Oro was not utterly bad, Bastin," I said, reflecting on certain traits of mercy that he had shown, or that I dreamed him to have shown in the course of our mysterious midnight journeys to various parts of the earth. Also I remembered that he had loved Tommy and for his sake had spared our lives. Lastly, I do not altogether wonder that he came to

certain hasty conclusions as to the value of our modern civilisations.

"I am very glad to hear it, Humphrey, since while there is a spark left the whole fire may burn up again, and I believe that to the Divine mercy there are no limits, though Oro will have a long road to travel before he finds it. And now I have something to say. It has troubled me very much that I was obliged to leave those Orofenans wandering in a kind of religious twilight."

"You couldn't help that," said Bickley, "seeing that if you had stopped, by now you would have been wandering in religious light."

"Still, I am not sure that I ought not to have stopped. I seem to have deserted a field that was open to me. However, it can't be helped, since it is certain that we could never find that island again, even if Oro has not sunk it beneath the sea, as he is quite capable of doing, to cover his tracks, so to speak. So I mean to do my best in another field by way of atonement."

"You are not going to become a missionary?" I said.

"No, but with the consent of the Bishop, who, I think, believes that my locum got on better in the parish than I do, as no doubt was the case, I, too, have volunteered for the Front, and been accepted as a chaplain of the 201st Division."

"Why, that's mine!" said Bickley.

"Is it? I am very glad, since now we shall be able to pursue our pleasant arguments and to do our best to open each other's minds."

"You fellows are more fortunate than I am," I remarked. "I also volunteered, but they wouldn't take me, even as a Tommy, although I misstated my age. They told me, or at least a specialist whom I saw did afterwards, that the blow I got on the head from that sorcerer's boy--"

"I know, I know!" broke in Bickley almost roughly. "Of course, things might go wrong at any time. But with care you may live to old age."

"I am sorry to hear it," I said with a sigh, "at least I think I am. Meanwhile, fortunately there is much that I can do at home; indeed a course of action has been suggested to me by an old friend who is now in authority."

Once more Bickley and Bastin in their war-stained uniforms were dining at my table and on the very night of their return from the Front, which was unexpected. Indeed Tommy nearly died of joy on hearing their voices in the hall. They, who played a worthy part in the great struggle, had much to tell me, and naturally their more recent experiences had overlaid to some extent those which we shared in the mysterious island of Orofena. Indeed we did not speak of these until, just as they were

going away, Bastin paused beneath a very beautiful portrait of my late wife, the work of an artist famous for his power of bringing out the inner character, or what some might call the soul, of the sitter. He stared at it for a while in his short-sighted way, then said: "Do you know, Arbuthnot, it has sometimes occurred to me, and never more than at this moment, that although they were different in height and so on, there was a really curious physical resemblance between your late wife and the Lady Yva."

"Yes," I answered. "I think so too."

Bickley also examined the portrait very carefully, and as he did so I saw him start. Then he turned away, saying nothing.

Such is the summary of all that has been important in my life. It is, I admit, an odd story and one which suggests problems that I cannot solve. Bastin deals with such things by that acceptance which is the privilege and hall-mark of faith; Bickley disposes, or used to dispose, of them by a blank denial which carries no conviction, and least of all to himself.

What is life to most of us who, like Bickley, think ourselves learned? A round, short but still with time and to spare wherein to be dull and lonesome; a fateful treadmill to which we were condemned we know not how, but apparently through the casual passions of those who went before us and are now forgotten, causing us, as the Bible says, to be born in sin; up which we walk wearily we know not why, seeming never to make

progress; off which we fall outworn we know not when or whither.

Such upon the surface it appears to be, nor in fact does our ascertained knowledge, as Bickley would sum it up, take us much further. No prophet has yet arisen who attempted to define either the origin or the reasons of life. Even the very Greatest of them Himself is quite silent on this matter. We are tempted to wonder why. Is it because life as expressed in the higher of human beings, is, or will be too vast, too multiform and too glorious for any definition which we could understand? Is it because in the end it will involve for some, if not for all, majesty on unfathomed majesty, and glory upon unimaginable glory such as at present far outpass the limits of our thought?

The experiences which I have recorded in these pages awake in my heart a hope that this may be so. Bastin is wont, like many others, to talk in a light fashion of Eternity without in the least comprehending what he means by that gigantic term. It is not too much to say that Eternity, something without beginning and without end, and involving, it would appear, an everlasting changelessness, is a state beyond human comprehension. As a matter of fact we mortals do not think in constellations, so to speak, or in aeons, but by the measures of our own small earth and of our few days thereon. We cannot really conceive of an existence stretching over even one thousand years, such as that which Oro claimed and the Bible accords to a certain early race of men, omitting of course his two thousand five hundred centuries of sleep. And yet what is this but one grain in the hourglass of time, one day in the

lost record of our earth, of its sisters the planets and its father the sun, to say nothing of the universes beyond?

It is because I have come in touch with a prolonged though perfectly finite existence of the sort, that I try to pass on the reflections which the fact of it awoke in me. There are other reflections connected with Yva and the marvel of her love and its various manifestations which arise also. But these I keep to myself. They concern the wonder of woman's heart, which is a microcosm of the hopes and fears and desires and despairs of this humanity of ours whereof from age to age she is the mother.

HUMPHREY ARBUTHNOT.

NOTE By J. R. Bickley, M.R.C.S.

Within about six months of the date on which he wrote the last words of this history of our joint adventures, my dear friend, Humphrey Arbuthnot, died suddenly, as I had foreseen that probably he would do, from the results of the injury he received in the island of Orofena.

He left me the sole executor to his will, under which he divided his

property into three parts. One third he bequeathed to me, one third (which is strictly tied up) to Bastin, and one third to be devoted, under my direction, to the advancement of Science.

His end appears to have been instantaneous, resulting from an effusion of blood upon the brain. When I was summoned I found him lying dead by the writing desk in his library at Fulcombe Priory. He had been writing at the desk, for on it was a piece of paper on which appear these words: "I have seen her. I--" There the writing ends, not stating whom he thought he had seen in the moments of mental disturbance or delusion which preceded his decease.

Save for certain verbal corrections, I publish this manuscript without comment as the will directs, only adding that it sets out our mutual experiences very faithfully, though Arbuthnot's deductions from them are not always my own.

I would say also that I am contemplating another visit to the South Sea Islands, where I wish to make some further investigations. I dare say, however, that these will be barren of results, as the fountain of Life-water is buried for ever, nor, as I think, will any human being stand again in the Hades-like halls of Nyo. It is probable also that it would prove impossible to rediscover the island of Orofena, if indeed that volcanic land still remains above the waters of the deep.

Now that he is a very wealthy man, Bastin talks of accompanying me for

purposes quite different from my own, but on the whole I hope he will abandon this idea. I may add that when he learned of his unexpected inheritance he talked much of the "deceitfulness of riches," but that he has not as yet taken any steps to escape their golden snare. Indeed he now converses of his added "opportunities of usefulness," I gather in connection with missionary enterprise.

J. R. BICKLEY.

P.S.--I forgot to state that the spaniel Tommy died within three days of his owner. The poor little beast was present in the room at the time of Arbuthnot's passing away, and when found seemed to be suffering from shock. From that moment Tommy refused food and finally was discovered quite dead and lying by the body on Marama's feather cloak, which Arbuthnot often used as a dressing-gown. As Bastin raised some religious objections, I arranged without his knowledge that the dog's ashes should rest not far from those of the master and mistress whom it loved so well.

J.R.B.