

CHAPTER XIII--THE STONE-FISHING OF BORA BORA

At five in the morning the conches began to blow. From all along the beach the eerie sounds arose, like the ancient voice of War, calling to the fishermen to arise and prepare to go forth. We on the Snark likewise arose, for there could be no sleep in that mad din of conches. Also, we were going stone-fishing, though our preparations were few.

Tautai-taora is the name for stone-fishing, tautai meaning a "fishing instrument." And taora meaning "thrown." But tautai-taora, in combination, means "stone-fishing," for a stone is the instrument that is thrown. Stone-fishing is in reality a fish-drive, similar in principle to a rabbit-drive or a cattle-drive, though in the latter affairs drivers and driven operate in the same medium, while in the fish-drive the men must be in the air to breathe and the fish are driven through the water. It does not matter if the water is a hundred feet deep, the men, working on the surface, drive the fish just the same.

This is the way it is done. The canoes form in line, one hundred to two hundred feet apart. In the bow of each canoe a man wields a stone, several pounds in weight, which is attached to a short rope. He merely smites the water with the stone, pulls up the stone, and smites again. He goes on smiting. In the stern of each canoe

another man paddles, driving the canoe ahead and at the same time keeping it in the formation. The line of canoes advances to meet a second line a mile or two away, the ends of the lines hurrying together to form a circle, the far edge of which is the shore. The circle begins to contract upon the shore, where the women, standing in a long row out into the sea, form a fence of legs, which serves to break any rushes of the frantic fish. At the right moment when the circle is sufficiently small, a canoe dashes out from shore, dropping overboard a long screen of cocoanut leaves and encircling the circle, thus reinforcing the palisade of legs. Of course, the fishing is always done inside the reef in the lagoon.

"Tres jolie," the gendarme said, after explaining by signs and gestures that thousands of fish would be caught of all sizes from minnows to sharks, and that the captured fish would boil up and upon the very sand of the beach.

It is a most successful method of fishing, while its nature is more that of an outing festival, rather than of a prosaic, food-getting task. Such fishing parties take place about once a month at Bora Bora, and it is a custom that has descended from old time. The man who originated it is not remembered. They always did this thing. But one cannot help wondering about that forgotten savage of the long ago, into whose mind first flashed this scheme of easy fishing, of catching huge quantities of fish without hook, or net, or spear. One thing about him we can know: he was a radical. And we can be sure that he was considered feather-brained and anarchistic by his

conservative tribesmen. His difficulty was much greater than that of the modern inventor, who has to convince in advance only one or two capitalists. That early inventor had to convince his whole tribe in advance, for without the co-operation of the whole tribe the device could not be tested. One can well imagine the nightly pow-wow-ings in that primitive island world, when he called his comrades antiquated moss-backs, and they called him a fool, a freak, and a crank, and charged him with having come from Kansas. Heaven alone knows at what cost of grey hairs and expletives he must finally have succeeded in winning over a sufficient number to give his idea a trial. At any rate, the experiment succeeded. It stood the test of truth--it worked! And thereafter, we can be confident, there was no man to be found who did not know all along that it was going to work.

Our good friends, Tehei and Bihaura, who were giving the fishing in our honour, had promised to come for us. We were down below when the call came from on deck that they were coming. We dashed up the companionway, to be overwhelmed by the sight of the Polynesian barge in which we were to ride. It was a long double canoe, the canoes lashed together by timbers with an interval of water between, and the whole decorated with flowers and golden grasses. A dozen flower-crowned Amazons were at the paddles, while at the stern of each canoe was a strapping steersman. All were garlanded with gold and crimson and orange flowers, while each wore about the hips a scarlet pareu. There were flowers everywhere, flowers, flowers, flowers, without out end. The whole thing was an orgy of colour.

On the platform forward resting on the bows of the canoes, Tehei and Bihaura were dancing. All voices were raised in a wild song or greeting.

Three times they circled the Snark before coming alongside to take Charmian and me on board. Then it was away for the fishing-grounds, a five-mile paddle dead to windward. "Everybody is jolly in Bora Bora," is the saying throughout the Society Islands, and we certainly found everybody jolly. Canoe songs, shark songs, and fishing songs were sung to the dipping of the paddles, all joining in on the swinging choruses. Once in a while the cry Mao! was raised, whereupon all strained like mad at the paddles. Mao is shark, and when the deep-sea tigers appear, the natives paddle for dear life for the shore, knowing full well the danger they run of having their frail canoes overturned and of being devoured. Of course, in our case there were no sharks, but the cry of mao was used to incite them to paddle with as much energy as if a shark were really after them. "Hoe! Hoe!" was another cry that made us foam through the water.

On the platform Tehei and Bihaura danced, accompanied by songs and choruses or by rhythmic hand-clappings. At other times a musical knocking of the paddles against the sides of the canoes marked the accent. A young girl dropped her paddle, leaped to the platform, and danced a hula, in the midst of which, still dancing, she swayed and bent, and imprinted on our cheeks the kiss of welcome. Some of the songs, or himines, were religious, and they were especially

beautiful, the deep basses of the men mingling with the altos and thin sopranos of the women and forming a combination of sound that irresistibly reminded one of an organ. In fact, "kanaka organ" is the scoffer's description of the himine. On the other hand, some of the chants or ballads were very barbaric, having come down from pre-Christian times.

And so, singing, dancing, paddling, these joyous Polynesians took us to the fishing. The gendarme, who is the French ruler of Bora Bora, accompanied us with his family in a double canoe of his own, paddled by his prisoners; for not only is he gendarme and ruler, but he is jailer as well, and in this jolly land when anybody goes fishing, all go fishing. A score of single canoes, with outriggers, paddled along with us. Around a point a big sailing-canoe appeared, running beautifully before the wind as it bore down to greet us. Balancing precariously on the outrigger, three young men saluted us with a wild rolling of drums.

The next point, half a mile farther on, brought us to the place of meeting. Here the launch, which had been brought along by Warren and Martin, attracted much attention. The Bora Borans could not see what made it go. The canoes were drawn upon the sand, and all hands went ashore to drink cocoanuts and sing and dance. Here our numbers were added to by many who arrived on foot from near-by dwellings, and a pretty sight it was to see the flower-crowned maidens, hand in hand and two by two, arriving along the sands.

"They usually make a big catch," Allicot, a half-caste trader, told us. "At the finish the water is fairly alive with fish. It is lots of fun. Of course you know all the fish will be yours."

"All?" I groaned, for already the Snark was loaded down with lavish presents, by the canoe-load, of fruits, vegetables, pigs, and chickens.

"Yes, every last fish," Allicot answered. "You see, when the surround is completed, you, being the guest of honour, must take a harpoon and impale the first one. It is the custom. Then everybody goes in with their hands and throws the catch out on the sand. There will be a mountain of them. Then one of the chiefs will make a speech in which he presents you with the whole kit and boodle. But you don't have to take them all. You get up and make a speech, selecting what fish you want for yourself and presenting all the rest back again. Then everybody says you are very generous."

"But what would be the result if I kept the whole present?" I asked.

"It has never happened," was the answer. "It is the custom to give and give back again."

The native minister started with a prayer for success in the fishing, and all heads were bared. Next, the chief fishermen told off the canoes and allotted them their places. Then it was into the canoes and away. No women, however, came along, with the exception

of Bihaura and Charmian. In the old days even they would have been tabooed. The women remained behind to wade out into the water and form the palisade of legs.

The big double canoe was left on the beach, and we went in the launch. Half the canoes paddled off to leeward, while we, with the other half, headed to windward a mile and a half, until the end of our line was in touch with the reef. The leader of the drive occupied a canoe midway in our line. He stood erect, a fine figure of an old man, holding a flag in his hand. He directed the taking of positions and the forming of the two lines by blowing on a conch. When all was ready, he waved his flag to the right. With a single splash the throwers in every canoe on that side struck the water with their stones. While they were hauling them back--a matter of a moment, for the stones scarcely sank beneath the surface--the flag waved to the left, and with admirable precision every stone on that side struck the water. So it went, back and forth, right and left; with every wave of the flag a long line of concussion smote the lagoon. At the same time the paddles drove the canoes forward and what was being done in our line was being done in the opposing line of canoes a mile and more away.

On the bow of the launch, Tehei, with eyes fixed on the leader, worked his stone in unison with the others. Once, the stone slipped from the rope, and the same instant Tehei went overboard after it. I do not know whether or not that stone reached the bottom, but I do know that the next instant Tehei broke surface alongside with the

stone in his hand. I noticed this same accident occur several times among the near-by canoes, but in each instance the thrower followed the stone and brought it back.

The reef ends of our lines accelerated, the shore ends lagged, all under the watchful supervision of the leader, until at the reef the two lines joined, forming the circle. Then the contraction of the circle began, the poor frightened fish harried shoreward by the streaks of concussion that smote the water. In the same fashion elephants are driven through the jungle by motes of men who crouch in the long grasses or behind trees and make strange noises.

Already the palisade of legs had been built. We could see the heads of the women, in a long line, dotting the placid surface of the lagoon. The tallest women went farthest out, thus, with the exception of those close inshore, nearly all were up to their necks in the water.

Still the circle narrowed, till canoes were almost touching. There was a pause. A long canoe shot out from shore, following the line of the circle. It went as fast as paddles could drive. In the stern a man threw overboard the long, continuous screen of cocoanut leaves. The canoes were no longer needed, and overboard went the men to reinforce the palisade with their legs. For the screen was only a screen, and not a net, and the fish could dash through it if they tried. Hence the need for legs that ever agitated the screen, and for hands that splashed and throats that yelled. Pandemonium reigned as the trap tightened.

But no fish broke surface or collided against the hidden legs. At last the chief fisherman entered the trap. He waded around everywhere, carefully. But there were no fish boiling up and out upon the sand. There was not a sardine, not a minnow, not a pollywog. Something must have been wrong with that prayer; or else, and more likely, as one grizzled fellow put it, the wind was not in its usual quarter and the fish were elsewhere in the lagoon. In fact, there had been no fish to drive.

"About once in five these drives are failures," Allicot consoled us.

Well, it was the stone-fishing that had brought us to Bora Bora, and it was our luck to draw the one chance in five. Had it been a raffle, it would have been the other way about. This is not pessimism. Nor is it an indictment of the plan of the universe. It is merely that feeling which is familiar to most fishermen at the empty end of a hard day.