

CHAPTER XL

Sire And Sons

Seeing flight was useless, the Islanders again stopped their canoe, and once more we cautiously drew nearer; myself crying out to them not to be fearful; and Samoa, with the odd humor of his race, averring that he had known every soul of them from his infancy.

We approached within two or three yards; when we paused, which somewhat allayed their alarm. Fastening a red China handkerchief to the blade of our long mid-ship oar, I waved it in the air. A lively clapping of hands, and many wild exclamations.

While yet waving the flag, I whispered to Jarl to give the boat a sheer toward the canoe, which being adroitly done, brought the bow, where I stood, still nearer to the Islanders. I then dropped the silk among them; and the Islander, who caught it, at once handed it to the warlike old man with the sling; who, on seating himself, spread it before him; while the rest crowding round, glanced rapidly from the wonderful gift, to the more wonderful donors.

This old man was the superior of the party. And Samoa asserted, that he must be a priest of the country to which the Islanders belonged; that the craft could be no other than one of their sacred canoes, bound on some priestly voyage. All this he inferred from the altar-

like prow, and there being no women on board.

Bent upon conciliating the old priest, I dropped into the canoe another silk handkerchief; while Samoa loudly exclaimed, that we were only three men, and were peaceably inclined. Meantime, old Aaron, fastening the two silks crosswise over his shoulders, like a brace of Highland plaids, crosslegged sat, and eyed us.

It was a curious sight. The old priest, like a scroll of old parchment, covered all over with hieroglyphical devices, harder to interpret, I'll warrant, than any old Sanscrit manuscript. And upon his broad brow, deep-graven in wrinkles, were characters still more mysterious, which no Champollion nor gipsy could have deciphered. He looked old as the elderly hills; eyes sunken, though bright; and head white as the summit of Mont Blanc.

The rest were a youthful and comely set: their complexion that of Gold Sherry, and all tattooed after this pattern: two broad cross-stripes on the chest and back; reaching down to the waist, like a foot-soldier's harness. Their faces were full of expression; and their mouths were full of fine teeth; so that the parting of their lips, was as the opening of pearl oysters. Marked, here and there, after the style of Tahiti, with little round figures in blue, dotted in the middle with a spot of vermilion, their brawny brown thighs looked not unlike the gallant hams of Westphalia, spotted with the red dust of Cayenne.

But what a marvelous resemblance in the features of all. Were they born at one birth? This resemblance was heightened by their uniform marks. But it was subsequently ascertained, that they were the children of one sire; and that sire, old Aaron; who, no doubt, reposed upon his sons, as an old general upon the trophies of his youth.

They were the children of as many mothers; and he was training them up for the priesthood.