

CHAPTER LIII

The Chamois Ashore

Until now, enveloped in her robe, and crouching like a fawn, Yillah had been well nigh hidden from view. But presently she withdrew her hood.

What saw the Islanders, that they so gazed and adored in silence: some retreating, some creeping nearer, and the women all in a flutter? Long they gazed; and following Samoa's example, stretched forth their arms in reverence.

The adoration of the maiden was extended to myself. Indeed, from the singular gestures employed, I had all along suspected, that we were being received with unwonted honors.

I now sought to get speech of my comrades. But so obstreperous was the crowd, that it was next to impossible. Jarl was still in his perch in the air; his enthusiastic bearers not yet suffering him to alight. Samoa, however, who had managed to keep out of the saddle, by-and-by contrived to draw nearer to the Chamois.

He advised me, by no means to descend for the present; since in any event we were sure of remaining unmolested therein; the Islanders regarding it as sacred.

The Upoluan attracted a great deal of attention; chiefly from his style of tattooing, which, together with other peculiarities, so interested the natives, that they were perpetually hanging about him, putting eager questions, and all the time keeping up a violent clamor.

But despite the large demand upon his lungs, Samoa made out to inform me, that notwithstanding the multitude assembled, there was no high chief, or person of consequence present; the king of the place, also those of the islands adjacent, being absent at a festival in another quarter of the Archipelago. But upon the first distant glimpse of the Chamois, fleet canoes had been dispatched to announce the surprising event that had happened.

In good time, the crowd becoming less tumultuous, and abandoning the siege of Samoa, I availed myself of this welcome lull, and called upon him and my Viking to enter the Chamois; desirous of condensing our forces against all emergencies.

Samoa now gave me to understand, that from all he could learn, the Islanders regarded me as a superior being. They had inquired of him, whether I was not white Taji, a sort of half-and-half deity, now and then an Avatar among them, and ranking among their inferior ex-officio demi-gods. To this, Samoa had said ay; adding, moreover, all he could to encourage the idea.

He now entreated me, at the first opportunity, to announce myself as Taji: declaring that if once received under that title, the unbounded hospitality of our final reception would be certain; and our persons fenced about from all harm.

Encouraging this. But it was best to be wary. For although among some barbarians the first strangers landing upon their shores, are frequently hailed as divine; and in more than one wild land have been actually styled gods, as a familiar designation; yet this has not exempted the celestial visitants from peril, when too much presuming upon the reception extended to them. In sudden tumults they have been slain outright, and while full faith in their divinity had in no wise abated. The sad fate of an eminent navigator is a well-known illustration of this unaccountable waywardness.

With no small anxiety, therefore, we awaited the approach of some of the dignitaries of Mardi; for by this collective appellation, the people informed us, their islands were known.

We waited not long. Of a sudden, from the sea-side, a single shrill cry was heard. A moment more, and the blast of numerous conch shells startled the air; a confused clamor drew nearer and nearer; and flying our eyes in the direction of these sounds, we impatiently awaited what was to follow.