

CHAPTER V--THE BATTLE OF MATAUTU

September 1888

The revolution had all the character of a popular movement. Many of the high chiefs were detained in Mulinuu; the commons trooped to the bush under inferior leaders. A camp was chosen near Faleula, threatening Mulinuu, well placed for the arrival of recruits and close to a German plantation from which the force could be subsisted. Manono came, all Tuamasanga, much of Savaii, and part of Aana, Tamasese's own government and titular seat. Both sides were arming. It was a brave day for the trader, though not so brave as some that followed, when a single cartridge is said to have been sold for twelve cents currency--between nine and ten cents gold. Yet even among the traders a strong party feeling reigned, and it was the common practice to ask a purchaser upon which side he meant to fight.

On September 5th, Brandeis published a letter: "To the chiefs of Tuamasanga, Manono, and Faasaleleanga in the Bush: Chiefs, by authority of his majesty Tamasese, the king of Samoa, I make known to you all that the German man-of-war is about to go together with a Samoan fleet for the purpose of burning Manono. After this island is all burnt, 'tis good if the people return to Manono and live quiet. To the people of Faasaleleanga I say, return to your houses and stop there. The same to those belonging to Tuamasanga. If you obey this instruction, then you

will all be forgiven; if you do not obey, then all your villages will be burnt like Manono. These instructions are made in truth in the sight of God in the Heaven." The same morning, accordingly, the Adler steamed out of the bay with a force of Tamasese warriors and some native boats in tow, the Samoan fleet in question. Manono was shelled; the Tamasese warriors, under the conduct of a Manono traitor, who paid before many days the forfeit of his blood, landed and did some damage, but were driven away by the sight of a force returning from the mainland; no one was hurt, for the women and children, who alone remained on the island, found a refuge in the bush; and the Adler and her acolytes returned the same evening. The letter had been energetic; the performance fell below the programme. The demonstration annoyed and yet re-assured the insurgents, and it fully disclosed to the Germans a new enemy.

Captain Yon Widersheim had been relieved. His successor, Captain Fritze, was an officer of a different stamp. I have nothing to say of him but good; he seems to have obeyed the consul's requisitions with secret distaste; his despatches were of admirable candour; but his habits were retired, he spoke little English, and was far indeed from inheriting von Widersheim's close relations with Commander Leary. It is believed by Germans that the American officer resented what he took to be neglect. I mention this, not because I believe it to depict Commander Leary, but because it is typical of a prevailing infirmity among Germans in Samoa. Touchy themselves, they read all history in the light of personal affronts and tiffs; and I find this weakness indicated by the big thumb of Bismarck, when he places "sensitiveness to small disrespects--Empfindlichkeit ueber Mangel an Respect," among the causes

of the wild career of Knappe. Whatever the cause, at least, the natives had no sooner taken arms than Leary appeared with violence upon that side. As early as the 3rd, he had sent an obscure but menacing despatch to Brandeis. On the 6th, he fell on Fritze in the matter of the Manono bombardment. "The revolutionists," he wrote, "had an armed force in the field within a few miles of this harbour, when the vessels under your command transported the Tamasese troops to a neighbouring island with the avowed intention of making war on the isolated homes of the women and children of the enemy. Being the only other representative of a naval power now present in this harbour, for the sake of humanity I hereby respectfully and solemnly protest in the name of the United States of America and of the civilised world in general against the use of a national war-vessel for such services as were yesterday rendered by the German corvette Adler." Fritze's reply, to the effect that he is under the orders of the consul and has no right of choice, reads even humble; perhaps he was not himself vain of the exploit, perhaps not prepared to see it thus described in words. From that moment Leary was in the front of the row. His name is diagnostic, but it was not required; on every step of his subsequent action in Samoa Irishman is writ large; over all his doings a malign spirit of humour presided. No malice was too small for him, if it were only funny. When night signals were made from Mulinuu, he would sit on his own poop and confound them with gratuitous rockets. He was at the pains to write a letter and address it to "the High Chief Tamasese"--a device as old at least as the wars of Robert Bruce--in order to bother the officials of the German post-office, in whose hands he persisted in leaving it, although the address was death to

them and the distribution of letters in Samoa formed no part of their profession. His great masterwork of pleasantry, the Scanlon affair, must be narrated in its place. And he was no less bold than comical. The Adams was not supposed to be a match for the Adler; there was no glory to be gained in beating her; and yet I have heard naval officers maintain she might have proved a dangerous antagonist in narrow waters and at short range. Doubtless Leary thought so. He was continually daring Fritze to come on; and already, in a despatch of the 9th, I find Becker complaining of his language in the hearing of German officials, and how he had declared that, on the Adler again interfering, he would interfere himself, "if he went to the bottom for it--und wenn sein Schiff dabei zu Grunde ginge." Here is the style of opposition which has the merit of being frank, not that of being agreeable. Becker was annoying, Leary infuriating; there is no doubt that the tempers in the German consulate were highly ulcerated; and if war between the two countries did not follow, we must set down the praise to the forbearance of the German navy. This is not the last time that I shall have to salute the merits of that service.

The defeat and death of Saifaleupolu and the burning of Manono had thus passed off without the least advantage to Tamasese. But he still held the significant position of Mulinuu, and Brandeis was strenuous to make it good. The whole peninsula was surrounded with a breastwork; across the isthmus it was six feet high and strengthened with a ditch; and the beach was staked against landing. Weber's land claim--the same that now broods over the village in the form of a signboard--then appeared in a more military guise; the German flag was hoisted, and German sailors

manned the breastwork at the isthmus--"to protect German property" and its trifling parenthesis, the king of Samoa. Much vigilance reigned and, in the island fashion, much wild firing. And in spite of all, desertion was for a long time daily. The detained high chiefs would go to the beach on the pretext of a natural occasion, plunge in the sea, and swimming across a broad, shallow bay of the lagoon, join the rebels on the Faleula side. Whole bodies of warriors, sometimes hundreds strong, departed with their arms and ammunition. On the 7th of September, for instance, the day after Leary's letter, Too and Mataia left with their contingents, and the whole Aana people returned home in a body to hold a parliament. Ten days later, it is true, a part of them returned to their duty; but another part branched off by the way and carried their services, and Tamasese's dear-bought guns, to Faleula.

On the 8th, there was a defection of a different kind, but yet sensible. The High Chief Seumanu had been still detained in Mulinuu under anxious observation. His people murmured at his absence, threatened to "take away his name," and had already attempted a rescue. The adventure was now taken in hand by his wife Faatulia, a woman of much sense and spirit and a strong partisan; and by her contrivance, Seumanu gave his guardians the slip and rejoined his clan at Faleula. This process of winnowing was of course counterbalanced by another of recruitment. But the harshness of European and military rule had made Brandeis detested and Tamasese unpopular with many; and the force on Mulinuu is thought to have done little more than hold its own. Mataafa sympathisers set it down at about two or three thousand. I have no estimate from the other side; but Becker admits they were not strong enough to keep the field in the open.

The political significance of Mulinuu was great, but in a military sense the position had defects. If it was difficult to carry, it was easy to blockade: and to be hemmed in on that narrow finger of land were an inglorious posture for the monarch of Samoa. The peninsula, besides, was scant of food and destitute of water. Pressed by these considerations, Brandeis extended his lines till he had occupied the whole foreshore of Apia bay and the opposite point, Matautu. His men were thus drawn out along some three nautical miles of irregular beach, everywhere with their backs to the sea, and without means of communication or mutual support except by water. The extension led to fresh sorrows. The Tamasese men quartered themselves in the houses of the absent men of the Vaimaunga. Disputes arose with English and Americans. Leary interposed in a loud voice of menace. It was said the firm profited by the confusion to buttress up imperfect land claims; I am sure the other whites would not be far behind the firm. Properties were fenced in, fences and houses were torn down, scuffles ensued. The German example at Mulinuu was followed with laughable unanimity; wherever an Englishman or an American conceived himself to have a claim, he set up the emblem of his country; and the beach twinkled with the flags of nations.

All this, it will be observed, was going forward in that neutral territory, sanctified by treaty against the presence of armed Samoans. The insurgents themselves looked on in wonder: on the 4th, trembling to transgress against the great Powers, they had written for a delimitation of the Eleele Sa; and Becker, in conversation with the British consul, replied that he recognised none. So long as Tamasese held the ground,

this was expedient. But suppose Tamasese worsted, it might prove awkward

for the stores, mills, and offices of a great German firm, thus bared of shelter by the act of their own consul.

On the morning of the 9th September, just ten days after the death of Saifaleupolu, Mataafa, under the name of Malietoa To'oa Mataafa, was crowned king at Faleula. On the 11th he wrote to the British and American consuls: "Gentlemen, I write this letter to you two very humbly and entreatingly, on account of this difficulty that has come before me. I desire to know from you two gentlemen the truth where the boundaries of the neutral territory are. You will observe that I am now at Vaimoso [a step nearer the enemy], and I have stopped here until I knew what you say regarding the neutral territory. I wish to know where I can go, and where the forbidden ground is, for I do not wish to go on any neutral territory, or on any foreigner's property. I do not want to offend any of the great Powers. Another thing I would like. Would it be possible for you three consuls to make Tamasese remove from German property? for I

am in awe of going on German land." He must have received a reply embodying Becker's renunciation of the principle, at once; for he broke camp the same day, and marched eastward through the bush behind Apia.

Brandeis, expecting attack, sought to improve his indefensible position. He reformed his centre by the simple expedient of suppressing it. Apia was evacuated. The two flanks, Mulinuu and Matautu, were still held and fortified, Mulinuu (as I have said) to the isthmus, Matautu on a line

from the bayside to the little river Fuisa. The centre was represented by the trajectory of a boat across the bay from one flank to another, and was held (we may say) by the German war-ship. Mataafa decided (I am assured) to make a feint on Matautu, induce Brandeis to deplete Mulinuu in support, and then fall upon and carry that. And there is no doubt in my mind that such a plan was bruited abroad, for nothing but a belief in it could explain the behaviour of Brandeis on the 12th. That it was seriously entertained by Mataafa I stoutly disbelieve; the German flag and sailors forbidding the enterprise in Mulinuu. So that we may call this false intelligence the beginning and the end of Mataafa's strategy.

The whites who sympathised with the revolt were uneasy and impatient. They will still tell you, though the dates are there to show them wrong, that Mataafa, even after his coronation, delayed extremely: a proof of how long two days may seem to last when men anticipate events. On the evening of the 11th, while the new king was already on the march, one of these walked into Matautu. The moon was bright. By the way he observed the native houses dark and silent; the men had been about a fortnight in the bush, but now the women and children were gone also; at which he wondered. On the sea-beach, in the camp of the Tamaseses, the solitude was near as great; he saw three or four men smoking before the British consulate, perhaps a dozen in all; the rest were behind in the bush upon their line of forts. About the midst he sat down, and here a woman drew near to him. The moon shone in her face, and he knew her for a householder near by, and a partisan of Mataafa's. She looked about her as she came, and asked him, trembling, what he did in the camp of Tamasese. He was there after news, he told her. She took him by the

hand. "You must not stay here, you will get killed," she said. "The bush is full of our people, the others are watching them, fighting may begin at any moment, and we are both here too long." So they set off together; and she told him by the way that she had come to the hostile camp with a present of bananas, so that the Tamasese men might spare her house. By the Vaisingano they met an old man, a woman, and a child; and these also she warned and turned back. Such is the strange part played by women among the scenes of Samoan warfare, such were the liberties then

permitted to the whites, that these two could pass the lines, talk together in Tamasese's camp on the eve of an engagement, and pass forth again bearing intelligence, like privileged spies. And before a few hours the white man was in direct communication with the opposing general. The next morning he was accosted "about breakfast-time" by two natives who stood leaning against the pickets of a public-house, where the Siumu road strikes in at right angles to the main street of Apia. They told him battle was imminent, and begged him to pass a little way inland and speak with Mataafa. The road is at this point broad and fairly good, running between thick groves of cocoa-palm and breadfruit. A few hundred yards along this the white man passed a picket of four armed warriors, with red handkerchiefs and their faces blackened in the form of a full beard, the Mataafa rallying signs for the day; a little farther on, some fifty; farther still, a hundred; and at last a quarter of a mile of them sitting by the wayside armed and blacked.

Near by, in the verandah of a house on a knoll, he found Mataafa seated in white clothes, a Winchester across his knees. His men, he said, were

still arriving from behind, and there was a turning movement in operation beyond the Fuisa, so that the Tamaseses should be assailed at the same moment from the south and east. And this is another indication that the attack on Matautu was the true attack; had any design on Mulinuu been in the wind, not even a Samoan general would have detached these troops upon

the other side. While they still spoke, five Tamasese women were brought in with their hands bound; they had been stealing "our" bananas.

All morning the town was strangely deserted, the very children gone. A sense of expectation reigned, and sympathy for the attack was expressed publicly. Some men with unblackened faces came to Moors's store for biscuit. A native woman, who was there marketing, inquired after the news, and, hearing that the battle was now near at hand, "Give them two more tins," said she; "and don't put them down to my husband--he would growl; put them down to me." Between twelve and one, two white men walked toward Matautu, finding as they went no sign of war until they had passed the Vaisingano and come to the corner of a by-path leading to the bush. Here were four blackened warriors on guard,--the extreme left wing of the Mataafa force, where it touched the waters of the bay. Thence the line (which the white men followed) stretched inland among bush and marsh, facing the forts of the Tamaseses. The warriors lay as yet inactive behind trees; but all the young boys and harlots of Apia toiled in the front upon a trench, digging with knives and cocoa-shells; and a continuous stream of children brought them water. The young sappers worked crouching; from the outside only an occasional head, or a hand emptying a shell of earth, was visible; and their enemies looked on inert

from the line of the opposing forts. The lists were not yet prepared, the tournament was not yet open; and the attacking force was suffered to throw up works under the silent guns of the defence. But there is an end even to the delay of islanders. As the white men stood and looked, the Tamasese line thundered into a volley; it was answered; the crowd of silent workers broke forth in laughter and cheers; and the battle had begun.

Thenceforward, all day and most of the next night, volley followed volley; and pounds of lead and pounds sterling of money continued to be blown into the air without cessation and almost without result. Colonel de Coetlogon, an old soldier, described the noise as deafening. The harbour was all struck with shots; a man was knocked over on the German war-ship; half Apia was under fire; and a house was pierced beyond the Mulivai. All along the two lines of breastwork, the entrenched enemies exchanged this hail of balls; and away on the east of the battle the fusillade was maintained, with equal spirit, across the narrow barrier of the Fuisa. The whole rear of the Tamaseses was enfiladed by this flank fire; and I have seen a house there, by the river brink, that was riddled with bullets like a piece of worm-eaten wreck-wood. At this point of the field befell a trait of Samoan warfare worth recording. Taiese (brother to Siteoni already mentioned) shot a Tamasese man. He saw him fall, and, inflamed with the lust of glory, passed the river single-handed in that storm of missiles to secure the head. On the farther bank, as was but natural, he fell himself; he who had gone to take a trophy remained to afford one; and the Mataafas, who had looked on exulting in the prospect of a triumph, saw themselves exposed instead to a disgrace. Then rose

one Vingi, passed the deadly water, swung the body of Taiese on his back, and returned unscathed to his own side, the head saved, the corpse filled with useless bullets.

At this rate of practice, the ammunition soon began to run low, and from an early hour of the afternoon, the Malietoa stores were visited by customers in search of more. An elderly man came leaping and cheering, his gun in one hand, a basket of three heads in the other. A fellow came shot through the forearm. "It doesn't hurt now," he said, as he bought his cartridges; "but it will hurt to-morrow, and I want to fight while I can." A third followed, a mere boy, with the end of his nose shot off: "Have you any painkiller? give it me quick, so that I can get back to fight." On either side, there was the same delight in sound and smoke and schoolboy cheering, the same unsophisticated ardour of battle; and the misdirected skirmish proceeded with a din, and was illustrated with traits of bravery that would have fitted a Waterloo or a Sedan.

I have said how little I regard the alleged plan of battle. At least it was now all gone to water. The whole forces of Mataafa had leaked out, man by man, village by village, on the so-called false attack. They were all pounding for their lives on the front and the left flank of Matautu. About half-past three they enveloped the right flank also. The defenders were driven back along the beach road as far as the pilot station at the turn of the land. From this also they were dislodged, stubbornly fighting. One, it is told, retreated to his middle in the lagoon; stood there, loading and firing, till he fell; and his body was found on the morrow pierced with four mortal wounds. The Tamasese force was now

enveloped on three sides; it was besides almost cut off from the sea; and across its whole rear and only way of retreat a fire of hostile bullets crossed from east and west, in the midst of which men were surprised to observe the birds continuing to sing, and a cow grazed all afternoon unhurt. Doubtless here was the defence in a poor way; but then the attack was in irons. For the Mataafas about the pilot house could scarcely advance beyond without coming under the fire of their own men from the other side of the Fuisa; and there was not enough organisation, perhaps not enough authority, to divert or to arrest that fire.

The progress of the fight along the beach road was visible from Mulinuu, and Brandeis despatched ten boats of reinforcements. They crossed the harbour, paused for a while beside the Adler--it is supposed for ammunition--and drew near the Matautu shore. The Mataafa men lay close among the shore-side bushes, expecting their arrival; when a silly lad, in mere lightness of heart, fired a shot in the air. My native friend, Mrs. Mary Hamilton, ran out of her house and gave the culprit a good shaking: an episode in the midst of battle as incongruous as the grazing cow. But his sillier comrades followed his example; a harmless volley warned the boats what they might expect; and they drew back and passed outside the reef for the passage of the Fuisa. Here they came under the fire of the right wing of the Mataafas on the river-bank. The beach, raked east and west, appeared to them no place to land on. And they hung off in the deep water of the lagoon inside the barrier reef, feebly fusillading the pilot house.

Between four and five, the Fabeata regiment (or folk of that village) on

the Mataafa left, which had been under arms all day, fell to be withdrawn for rest and food; the Siumu regiment, which should have relieved it, was not ready or not notified in time; and the Tamaseses, gallantly profiting by the mismanagement, recovered the most of the ground in their proper right. It was not for long. They lost it again, yard by yard and from house to house, till the pilot station was once more in the hands of the Mataafas. This is the last definite incident in the battle. The vicissitudes along the line of the entrenchments remain concealed from us under the cover of the forest. Some part of the Tamasese position there appears to have been carried, but what part, or at what hour, or whether the advantage was maintained, I have never learned. Night and rain, but not silence, closed upon the field. The trenches were deep in mud; but the younger folk wrecked the houses in the neighbourhood, carried the roofs to the front, and lay under them, men and women together, through a long night of furious squalls and furious and useless volleys. Meanwhile the older folk trailed back into Apia in the rain; they talked as they went of who had fallen and what heads had been taken upon either side--they seemed to know by name the losses upon both; and drenched with wet and broken with excitement and fatigue, they crawled into the verandahs of the town to eat and sleep. The morrow broke grey and drizzly, but as so often happens in the islands, cleared up into a glorious day. During the night, the majority of the defenders had taken advantage of the rain and darkness and stolen from their forts unobserved. The rallying sign of the Tamaseses had been a white handkerchief. With the dawn, the de Coetlogons from the English consulate beheld the ground strewn with these badges discarded; and close

by the house, a belated turncoat was still changing white for red. Matautu was lost; Tamasese was confined to Mulinuu; and by nine o'clock two Mataafa villages paraded the streets of Apia, taking possession. The cost of this respectable success in ammunition must have been enormous; in life it was but small. Some compute forty killed on either side, others forty on both, three or four being women and one a white man, master of a schooner from Fiji. Nor was the number even of the wounded at all proportionate to the surprising din and fury of the affair while it lasted.