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Author: Louis Becke

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"MARTIN OF NITENDI" and THE RIVER OF DREAMS

By Louis Becke

T. Fisher Unwin, 1901

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“MARTIN OF NITENDI”

Half-way up the side of the mountain which overlooked the waters of the little land-locked harbour there was a space clear of timber. Huge, jagged rocks, whose surfaces were covered with creepers and grey moss, protruded from the soil, and on the highest of these a man was lying at full length, looking at the gunboat anchored half a mile away. He was clothed in a girdle of *ti* leaves only; his feet were bare, cut, and bleeding; round his waist was strapped a leather belt with an empty cartridge pouch; his brawny right hand grasped a Snider rifle; his head-covering was a roughly made cap of coconut-nut leaf, with a projecting peak, designed to shield his blood-shot, savage eyes from the sun. Yet he had been a White Man. For nearly an hour he had been watching, ever since the dawn had broken. Far below him, thin, wavering curls of pale blue smoke were arising from the site of the native village, fired by the bluejackets on the previous evening. The ruins of his own house he could discern by the low stone wall surrounding it; as for the native huts which, the day before, had clustered so thickly around his own dwelling, there was now no trace save heaps of grey ashes.

A boat put off from the ship, and as the yellow-bladed oars flashed in the sunlight the man drew his rifle close up to his side and his eyes gleamed with a deadly hatred.

“Officers' shootin' party,” he muttered, as he watched the boat ground on the beach and three men, carrying guns, step out and walk up the beach—“officer's shootin' party. Christ A'mighty! I'd like to pot every one o' the swine. An' I could do it, too, I could do it. But wot's the use o' bein' a blarsted fool for nothin'?”

The boat's crew got out and walked about the smouldering remains of the village, seeking for curios which had escaped the fire, pausing awhile to look at a large mound of sand, under which lay seven of the natives killed by the landing-party on the preceding day. Then, satisfied that there was nothing to be had, the coxswain grumblingly ordered the men back to the boat, which pushed off and returned to the ship.

The wild, naked creature lying upon the boulder saw the boat pull off with a sigh of satisfaction. There was, under the ashes of his house, and buried still further under the soil, a 50-lb. beef barrel filled with Chilian and Mexican dollars. And he had feared that the bluejackets might rake about the ashes and find it.

He rose and stepped down the jagged boulder to where, at the base, the thick carpet of dead leaves, fallen from the giant trees which encompassed it, silenced even the tread of his naked feet. Seated against the bole of a many-buttressed *vi*-tree was a native woman, whose right arm, shattered by a bullet and bound up in the spathe of a coconut-palm, was suspended from her neck by a strip of soft bark. She looked at him inquiringly.

“A boat has come ashore,” he said in the native tongue, “but none of the white men are seeking for my money.”

“Thy money!” The woman's eyes blazed with a deadly fury. “What is thy money to me? Is thy money more to us than the blood of our child? O, thou coward heart!”

Grasping his Snider by the tip of the barrel the man looked at his wife with sullen, dulled ferocity.

“I am no coward, Nuta. Thou dost not understand. I wish to save the money, but I wish for revenge as well. Yet what can I do? I am but one man, and have but one cartridge left.”

This naked, sun-tanned being was one of the most desperate and blood-stained beachcombers that had ever cursed the fair isles of the South Pacific, and in those days there were many, notably on Pleasant Island and in the Gilbert Group. Put ashore at Nitendi from a Hobart Town whaler for mutinous conduct, he had disassociated himself for ever from civilisation. Perhaps the convict strain in his blood had something to do with his vicious nature, for both his father and mother had “left their country for their country's good,” and his early training had been given him under the shadow of the gallows and within the swishing sound of the “cat” as it lacerated the backs of the wretched beings doomed to suffer under the awful convict system.

From the simple, loafing beachcomber stage of life to that of a leader of the natives in their tribal wars was a simple but natural transition, and Jim Martin, son of a convict father and mother whose forbears were of the scum of Liverpool, and knew the precincts of a prison better than the open air, followed the path ordained for him by Fate.

The man's reckless courage won him undoubted respect from his associates; the head chief of the village alone possessed a greater influence. A house was built for him, and a wife and land given him; and within a year of his arrival on the island he signalled himself by a desperate attempt to cut-off a barque bound from Hobart to China as she lay becalmed off the island. The attempt failed, and many of his followers lost their lives. A few months later, however, he was more successful with a Fijian trading cutter, which, anchoring off the village, was carried during the night, plundered of her cargo of trade goods (much of which was firearms), and then burnt. This established his reputation.

Five years passed. But few vessels touched at the island now, for it had a bad name, and those which did call were well armed and able to beat off an attack. Then one day, two years before the opening of this story, a trading schooner called off the village, and Martin, now more a savage native than a white man, was tempted by her defenceless condition, and by the money which the captain carried for trading purposes, to capture her, with the aid of the wild, savage people among whom he had cast his lot. Of what use the money would be to him he knew not. He was an outcast from civilisation, he was quickly forgetting his mother tongue; but his criminal instincts, and his desire to be a “big man” with the savages among whom he had lived for so long, led him to perpetrate this one particular crime. In the dead of night he led a party of natives on board the schooner, and massacred every one of her crew, save one Fijian, who, jumping overboard, swam to the shore, and was spared. A few months later this man escaped to a passing whaler, and the story of the massacre of the captain and crew of the *Fedora* was made known to the commodore of the Australian station, who despatched a gunboat “to apprehend the murderers and bring them to Sydney for trial.” Failing the apprehension of the murderers, the commander was instructed “to burn the village, and inflict such other punitive methods upon the people generally” as he deemed fit.

So Commander Lempriere, of H.M. gunboat *Terrier*, went to work with a will. He meant to catch the

murderers of the crew of the *Fedora* if they possibly could be caught, and set to work in a manner that would have shocked the commodore. Instead of steaming into the bay on which the village was situated—and so giving the natives ample time to clear out into the mountains—he brought-to at dusk, when the ship was twenty miles from the land, and sent away the landing party in three boats. The Fijian—he who had escaped from the massacre of the *Fedora*—was the guide.

“You know what to do, Chester,” said Commander Lempriere to his first lieutenant as the boatswain's whistles piped the landing party away; “land on the north point, about two miles from the village, and surround it, and then wait till daylight. You can do it easily enough with thirty men, as it lies at the foot of the mountain, and there is no escape for the beggars unless they break through you and get into the bush. Be guided by the Fiji boy; and, as the Yankees say, 'no one wants a brass band with him when he's going duck-hunting,' so try and surround the village as quietly as possible. I'll see that none of them get away in their canoes. I'll work up abreast of the harbour by daylight.”

Guided by the boy, Lieutenant Chester and the landing party succeeded in getting ashore without being seen, and then made a long detour along the side of the mountain, so as to approach the village from behind. Then they waited till daylight, and all would have gone well had not his second in command, just as the order was given to advance, accidentally discharged his revolver. In an instant the village was alarmed, and some hundreds of natives, many of them armed with rifles, and led by Martin, sprang from their huts and made a short but determined resistance. Then, followed by their women and children, they broke through the bluejackets and escaped into the dense mountain jungle, where they were safe from pursuit. But the fire of the seamen had been deadly, for seven bodies were found; among them was a boy of about ten, whom the Fijian recognised as the renegade's son—a stray bullet had pierced his body as he sat crouching in terror in his father's house, and another had wounded his mother as she fled up the mountainside, for in the excitement and in the dim morning light it was impossible for the attacking party to tell women from men.

Then by the commander's orders the village and fleet of canoes was fired, and a dozen or so of rockets went screaming and spitting among the thick mountain jungle, doing no damage to the natives, but terrifying them more than a heavy shell fire. *****

“Let us away from here, Nuta,” said Martin, “'tis not safe. In the hut by the side of the big pool we can rest till the ship has gone and our people return. And I shall bind thy arm up anew.”

The woman obeyed him silently, and in a few minutes they were skirting the side of the mountain by a narrow leaf-strewn path, taking the opposite direction to that followed by the two officers and bluejackets. Half an hour's walk brought them to the river bank, which was clothed with tall spear-grass. Still following the path, they presently emerged out into the open before a deep, spacious pool, at the further end of which was a dilapidated and deserted hut. Here the woman, faint with the pain of her wound, sank down, and Martin brought her water to drink, and then proceeded to re-examine and properly set her broken arm.

The two officers—the second lieutenant and a ruddy-faced, fair-haired midshipman named Walters—had hardly proceeded a hundred yards along the beach, when the boy stopped.

“Oh, Mr. Grayling, let us turn back and go the other way. There's a big river runs into the next bay, with a sort of a lake about a mile up; I saw it in the plan of the island, this morning. We might get a duck or two there, sir.”

“Any way you like,” replied the officer, turning about, “and walking along the beach will be better than climbing up the mountain in the beastly heat for the sake of a few tough pigeons.”

Followed by the three bluejackets, who were armed with rifles, they set off along the hard white sand. In a few minutes they had rounded the headland on the north side and were out of sight of the ship. For quite a mile they tramped over the sand, till they came to the mouth of the river, which flowed swiftly and noisily over a shallow bar. A short search revealed a narrow path leading up along the bank, first through low thicket scrub, and then through high spear-grass. Further back, amid the dense forest, they could hear the deep notes of the wild pigeons, but as young Walters was intent on getting a duck they took no heed, but pressed steadily on.

“By jove! what a jolly fine sheet of water!” whispered the midshipman as they emerged out from the long grass and saw the deep, placid pool lying before them; then he added disappointedly, “but not a sign of a duck.”

“Never mind,” said Grayling consolingly, as he sat down on the bank and wiped his heated face, “we'll get plenty of pigeons, anyway. But first of all I'm going to have something to eat and drink. Open that bag, Williams, and you, Morris and Jones, keep your ears cocked and your eyes skinned. It's lovely and quiet here, but I wouldn't like to get a poisoned arrow into my back whilst drinking bottled beer.”

“I'm going to have a swim before I eat anything,” said Walters, with a laugh. “Won't you, sir?” he asked, as he began undressing.

“Looks very tempting,” replied the officer, “but I'm too hot. Take my advice and wait a bit till you're cooler.”

The youngster only laughed, and, having stripped, took a header from the bank, and then swam out into the centre of the pool where it was deepest.

“Oh, do come in, sir,” he cried; “it's just splendid. There's a bit of a current here and the water is delightfully cool.”

Martin was aroused from his sleep by the sound or voices. He seized his rifle, bent over his wife, and whispered to her to awake; then crawling on his hands and knees from the hut he reached the bank and looked out, just as young Walters dived into the water.

Hardened murderer as he was, he felt a thrill of horror, for he knew that the pool was a noted haunt of alligators, and to attempt to swim across it meant certain death.

His wife touched his arm, and crouching beside him, her black eyes filled with a deadly hatred, she showed

her white teeth and gave a low, hissing laugh.

"Before one can count ten he will be in the jaws," she said, with savage joy.

"Nuta," whispered Martin hoarsely, "'tis but a boy," and the veins stood out on his bronzed forehead as his hand closed tighter around his rifle.

"What wouldst thou do, fool?" said the woman fiercely as she seized the weapon by the barrel; "think of thy son who died but yesterday... ah! ah! look! look!"

Tearing the rifle from her grasp he followed the direction of her eyes; a swiftly-moving black snout showed less than thirty yards from the unconscious bather, who was now swimming leisurely to the bank.

"He must not die," he muttered; "'tis but a boy!" Then turning to the woman he spoke aloud. "Quick! run to the forest; I shall follow."

Again she sought to stay his hand; he dashed her aside, raised the rifle to his shoulder and took a quick but steady aim; a second later the loud report rang out, and the monster, struck on his bony head by the heavy bullet, sank in alarm; and then, ere Martin turned to run, two other shots disturbed the silence and he pitched forward on his face into the long grass.

"We just saw the beggar in time, sir," cried Jones. "I happened to look across and caught sight of him just as he fired at Mr. Walters. Me and Morris fired together."

Grayling had sprung to his feet. "Are you hit, Walters?" he shouted.

"No," replied the boy as he clambered up the bank; "what the deuce is the matter?"

"A nigger took a pot-shot at you! Get under cover as quick as you can. Never mind your clothes!"

Ten minutes passed. No sound broke the deathly stillness of the place; and then, cautiously creeping through the grass, the officer and Morris crawled round to where the latter had seen the man fall. They came upon him suddenly. He was lying partly on his face, with his eyes looking into theirs. Morris sprang up and covered him with his rifle.

"I'm done for," Martin said quietly "my back is broken. Did the crocodile get the boy?"

"Crocodile!" said Grayling in astonishment. "Did you fire at a crocodile? Who are you? Are you a white man?"

"Never mind who I am," he gasped; "let me lie here. Look," and he pointed to a bullet-hole in his stomach; "it's gone clean through me and smashed my backbone. Let me stay as I am."

He never spoke again, and died whilst a litter was being made to carry him down to the beach.

THE RIVER OF DREAMS

I

There is a river I know which begins its life in a dark, sunless canyon high up amid the thick forest-clad spurs of the range which traverses the island from east to west. Here, lying deep and silent, is a pool, almost encompassed by huge boulders of smooth, black rock, piled confusedly together, yet preserving a certain continuity of outline where their bases touch the water's edge. Standing far up on the mountainside you can, from one certain spot alone, discern it two hundred feet below, and a thick mass of tangled vine and creepers stretching across its western side, through which the water flows on its journey to the sea.

A narrow native path, used only by hunters of the wild pigs haunting the depths of the gloomy mountain forest, led me to it one close, steaming afternoon. I had been pigeon shooting along the crests of the ridges, and having shot as many birds as I could carry, I decided to make a short cut down to the level ground, where I was sure of finding water, resting awhile and then making my way home along the beach to the village.

I had descended scarcely more than fifty yards when I struck the path—a thin, red line of sticky, clay soil, criss-crossed by countless roots of the great forest trees. A brief examination showed me that it had been trodden by the feet of natives quite recently; their footprints led downward. I followed, and presently came to a cleared space on the mountainside, a spot which had evidently been used by a party of hunters who had stayed there to cook some food, for the ashes of a fire lay in the ground-oven they had made. Laying down my gun, I went to the edge and peered cautiously over, and there far below I could see the pool, revealed by a shaft of sunlight which pierced down through the leafy canopy.

Feeling sure that the track would lead me to the water, where I should have the satisfaction of a long drink, I set out again, and after narrowly escaping pitching down headlong, I at last reached the bottom, and, with a sigh of relief, threw down my gun and birds, and in another moment was drinking eagerly of the ice-cold, crystal water in one of the many minor pools which lay everywhere amid the boulders.

After a few minutes' rest I collected some dead wood and lit a fire, being hungry as well as thirsty; then leaving it to burn down, I climbed one of the highest boulders to get a good view, and sighed with admiration at the scene—there lay before me a deep, almost circular sheet or water, about thirty yards across. Directly beneath me I could see the rocky bottom; fifty feet further out towards the centre it was of unfathomable blueness. On the opposite side a tree of enormous girth had fallen, long years before, yet it was still growing, for some of its mighty roots were embedded in the rich red soil of the mountain-side.

As I looked, a fish, and then another, splashed just beside the fallen tree. Slipping down from the boulder, I made my way round, just in time to see scores of beautiful silvery fish, exactly like English grayling in shape, dart away from under the tree out into the deep water. In other streams of the island I had caught many of these fish, but had never seen any so high up inland; and, elated at the prospect of much future sport, I went on with my explorations.

I was about to climb over the tree, when I discovered that I could pass underneath, for here and there it was supported on boulders standing out two or three feet above the water. On the other side a tiny stream trickled over a flat ledge of rock, to fall into a second but much smaller pool ten or fifteen feet below; beyond that lay a long, narrow but shallow stretch of crystal water, running between highly verdured banks, and further away in the distance I could hear the murmur of a waterfall.

Turning over a stone with my foot, a crayfish darted off and tried to hide. There were scores, hundreds of them, everywhere—fine, fat, luscious fellows, and in ten minutes I had a dozen of the largest in my bag, to roast on the now glowing fire beside a juicy pigeon. Salt I had none, but I did possess a ship biscuit and a piece of cold baked taro, and with pigeon and crayfish, what more could a hungry man desire?

The intense solitude of the place, too, was enchanting. Now and then the booming note of a pigeon, or the soft *coo-coo* of a ringdove, would break the silence; overhead there was a sky of spotless blue; an hour before I had sweltered under a brazen sun; here, under the mountain shade, though there was not a breath of wind to stir a leaf, it was surprisingly cool.

To lean against the soft white moss clothing the buttresses of a giant maruhia-tree and smoke a pipe, was delightful after a tramp of six or eight miles through a mountain forest; and to know that the return journey would be through easy country along the banks of a new river was better still.

I set off with a feeling of joyful expectancy, taking a last glance at the beautiful little lake—I meant to return with some native friends to fish it on the morrow—ere I struck into the forest once more to pick up the path.

Every now and then I caught glimpses of the river, now gradually widening as it was joined by other streamlets on either side. Some of these I had to wade through, others I crossed on stones or fallen trees.

Half-way to the beach I came to a broad stretch of shallow water covered with purple water-lilies; three small ducks, with alarmed quacking, shot upward from where they had been resting or feeding under the bank, and vanished over the tree-tops; and a sudden commotion in the water showed me that there were many fish. Its beautiful clearness tempted me to strip off and swim about the floating garden resting on its bosom, and I was just about to undress when I heard a shot quite near. The moment after, I fired in return, and gave a loud hail; then the high reedy cane grass on the other side parted, and a man and a woman came out, stared at me, and then laughed in welcome. They were one Nalik and his wife, people living in my own village. The man carried a long single-barrelled German shot-gun, the woman a basket of pigeons. Stepping down the bank, they waded across and joined me.

“How came ye here?” they asked, as we sat down together to smoke.

I told them, and then learnt that the river ran into the sea through the mangroves at a spot many miles from the village. Then I asked about the big pool. Nalik nodded.

“Ay, ‘tis deep, very deep, and hath many fish in it. But it is a place of *jelon* (haunted) and we always pass to one side. But here where we now sit is a fine place for fish. And there are many wild pigs in the forest.”

“Let us come here to-morrow. Let us start ere the sun is up, and stay here and fish and shoot till the day be gone.”

“Why not?” said Sivi his wife, puffing her cigarette, “and sleep here when night comes, for under the banks are many thousand *unkar* (crayfish), and I and some other women shall catch them by torchlight.”

And that was how I began to learn this island river and its ways, so that now it has become the river of my dreams.

II

But with the dawn there came disappointment keen and bitter, for in the night the north-east trade had died away, and now wild, swooping rain squalls pelted and drenched the island from the westward, following each other in quick succession, and whipping the smooth water inside the reef into a blurred and churning sheet of foam, and then roaring away up through the mountain passes and canyons.

With my gear all ready beside me, I sat on the matted floor of the hut in which I lived, smoking my pipe and listening to the fury of the squalls as the force of the wind bent and swayed the thatched roof, and made the cinnet-tied rafters and girders creak and work to and fro under the strain. Suddenly the wicker-work door on the lee side was opened, and Nalik jumped in, dripping with rain, but smiling good-naturedly as usual.

“*Woa!*” he said, taking his long, straight black hair in his hands and squeezing out the water, “‘tis no day for us.”

I ventured an opinion that it might clear off soon. He shook his head as he held out his brown hand for a stiff tot of Hollands, tossed it off, and then sat down to open a small bundle he carried, and which contained a dry jumper and pair of dungaree pants.

Then quickly divesting himself of the soddened girdle of grass around his loins, he put on the European garments, filled his pipe, and began to talk.

“The wind will soon cease, for these squalls from the westward last not long at this time of the year; but when the wind ceases, then comes rain for two days sometimes—not heavy rain such as this, but soft rain as fine as hair, and all the forest is wetted and the mountain paths are dangerous even to our bare feet, and the

pigeons give no note, and the sun is dead. So we cannot go to the river to-day. To-morrow perhaps it may be fine; therefore let us sit and be content."

So we sat and were content, remaining indoors in my own house, or visiting those of our neighbours, eating, drinking, smoking, and talking. I was the only white man on the island, and during my three months' residence had got to know every man, woman, child, and dog in the village. And my acquaintance with the dogs was very extensive, inasmuch as every one of the thirty-four families owned at least ten dogs, all of which had taken kindly to me from the very first. They were the veriest mongrels that ever were seen in canine form, but in spite of that were full of pluck when pig hunting. (I once saw seven or eight of them tackle a lean, savage old wild boar in a dried-up taro swamp; two of them were ripped up, the rest hung on to him by his ears and neck, and were dragged along as if they were as light as feathers, until a native drove a heavy ironwood spear clean through the creature's loins.)

During the evening my native friends, in response to my inquiries about the river, told me that it certainly took its rise from the deep pool I have before described, and that had I made a more careful examination I should have seen several tiny rivulets, hidden by the dense undergrowth, flowing into it from both sides of the gorge. During severe rains an immense volume of muddy water would rush down; yet, strangely enough, the two kinds of fish which inhabited it were just as plentiful as ever as soon as the water cleared.

About four o'clock in the morning, when I was sound in slumber, a voice called to me to awaken. It was Nalik.

"Come out and look."

I lifted (not opened) my Venetian-sashed door of pandanus leaf, and stepped out.

What a glorious change! The rain had ceased, and the shore and sea lay bright and clear under a myriad-starred sky of deepest blue; the white line of surf tumbling on the barrier reef a mile away seemed almost within stone-throw. A gentle breeze swayed the fronds of the coco-palms above us, and already the countless thousands of sea birds, whose "rookery" was on two small islets within the reef and near the village, were awake, and filling the air with their clamour as they, like us, prepared to start off for their day's fishing.

Our party consisted of—

- (1) Nalik, his wife and five dogs.
- (2) Three young women, each with several dogs.
- (3) Old Sru, chief of the district, with numerous dogs.
- (4) Two boys and three girls, who carried baskets of food, crayfish nets, boar-spears, &c. Large number of dogs, male and female.
- (5) The white man, to whom, as soon as he appeared, the whole of the dogs immediately attached themselves.
- (6) Small boy of ten, named Toka, the terror of the village for his illimitable impudence and unsurpassed devilry. But as he was a particular friend of the white man (and could not be prevented) he was allowed to come. He had three dogs.

Before we started old Sru, Nalik, and myself had some Hollands, two bottles of which were also placed in the care of Nalik's wife. The "devil," as Toka was called, mimicked us as we drank, smacked his lips and rubbed one hand up and down his stomach. One of the big girls cuffed him for being saucy. He retaliated by darting between her legs and throwing her down upon the sand.

Presently we started, the women and children going ahead, with the exception of the "devil," who stuck close to me, and carried my Snider in one hand and my double-barrel muzzle-loader in the other.

For the first two or three miles our way lay along the hard, white beach, whose sands were covered everywhere by millions of tiny, blue-backed, red-legged soldier crabs, moving to and fro in companies, regiments, and divisions, hastening to burrow before the daylight revealed their presence to their dreaded enemies—the golden-winged sand plovers and the greedy sooty terns, who yet knew how to find them by the myriad small nodules of sand they left to betray their hiding-place.

Oh, the sweet, sweet smell of the forest as it is borne down from the mountains and carried seaward, to gladden, it may be, the heart of some hard-worked, broken-spirited sailor, who, in a passing ship, sees from aloft this fair, fair island with its smiling green of lea, and soft, heaving valleys, above the long lines of curving beach, showing white and bright in the morning sun! And, as you walk, the surf upon the reef for ever calls and calk; sometimes loudly with a deep, resonant boom, but mostly with a soft, faint murmur like the low-breathed sigh of a woman when she lies her cheek upon her lover's breast and looks upward to his face with eyes aglow and lips trembling for his kiss.

Far, far above a feint note. 'Tis but a snow-white tropic bird, suspended in mid-air on motionless wing, his long scarlet pendrices almost invisible at such a height. Presently, as he discerns you, he lets his aerial, slender form sink and sink, without apparent motion, till he is within fifty feet, and then he turns his graceful head from side to side, and inquiringly surveys you with his full, soft black eye. For a moment or two he flutters his white wings gently and noiselessly, and you can imagine you hear his timid heart-beats; then, satisfied with his scrutiny, his fairy, graceful form floats upward into space again, and is lost to view.

Leaving the beach and the sound of the droning surf behind us we turned to the starboard hand, and struck through the narrow strip of littoral towards the mountains. For the first mile or so our way was through a grove of pandanus-palms, nearly every one of which was in full fruit; on the branches were sitting hundreds of small sooty terns, who watched our progress beneath with the calm indifference borne of the utter confidence of immunity of danger from any human being.

Once through the sandy stretch on which the pandanus loves to grow, we came to the outlier of the mountain lands—low, gently undulating ridges, covered on both sides of the narrow track with dense thickets of pineapples, every plant bearing a fruit half-matured, which, when ripened, was never touched by the hand of man, for the whole island was, in places, covered with thickets such as this, and the wild pig only revelled among them.

"They grow thickly," I said to Nalik.

"Ay, *tahina** they grow thickly and wild," he replied, with some inflection of sadness in his voice; "long, long ago, before my father's father lived, there was a great town here. That was long before we of this land had ever seen a white man. And now we who are left are but as dead leaves."

* *Friend*.

"How came it so to be?"

He shook his head. "I cannot tell. I only know that once we of this land numbered many, many thousands, and now we are but hundreds. Here, where we now walk, was once a great town of houses with stone foundations; if ye cut away the *fara* (pineapples) thou wilt see the lower stones lying in the ground."

We pressed onward and upward into the deeper forest, then turned downwards along a narrow path, carpeted thick with fallen leaves, damp and soft to the foot, for the sun's rays never pierced through the dense foliage overhead. And then we came out upon a fair, green sward with nine stately coco-palms clustered, their branches drooping over the river of my dreams, which lay before us with open, waiting bosom.

III

Under the shade of the nine cocos we made our camp, and old Sru and the women and children at once set to work to build a "house" to protect us in case it rained during the nights. Very quickly was the house built. The "devil" was sent up the cocos to lop off branches, which, as they fell, were woven into thatch by the deft, eager hands of the women, who were supervised by Sivi, Nalik's handsome wife, amid much chatter and laughter, each one trying to outvie the other in speed, and all anxious to follow Nalik and myself to the river.

The place was well chosen. For nearly a hundred yards there was a clear stretch of water flowing between low, grassy banks on which were growing a few scattered pandanus-palms—the screw pine. Half a mile distant, a jagged, irregular mountain-peak raised high its emerald-hued head in the clear sunshine, and from every lofty tree on both sides of the stream there came the continuous call of the gentle wood-doves and the great grey pigeons.

With Nalik and myself there came old Sru and the imp Toka, who at once set to work and found us some small crayfish for bait. Our rods were slender bamboos, about twelve feet long, with lines of the same length made of twisted banana fibre as fine as silk, and equally as strong. My hook was an ordinary flatted Kirby, about half the size of an English whiting hook; Nalik preferred one of his own manufacture, made from a strip of tortoise-shell, barbless and highly polished.

Taking our stand at a place where the softly-flowing current eddied and curled around some black boulders of rock whose surfaces were but a few inches above the clear, crystal stream, we quickly baited our hooks and cast together, the old chief and the boy throwing in some crushed-up crayfish shells at the same time. Before five seconds had passed my brown-skinned comrade laughed as his thin line tautened out suddenly, and in another instant he swung out a quivering streak of shining blue and silver, and deftly caught it with his left hand; almost at the same moment my rod was strained hard by a larger fish, which darted in towards the bank.

"First to thee, Nalik; but biggest to the *rebell*!"* cried old Sru, as with some difficulty—for my rod was too slight for such a fish—I landed a lovely four-pounder on the grass.

* *White man*.

Nalik laughed again, and before I had cleared my hook from the jaw of my prize he had taken another and then a third, catching each one in his left hand with incredible swiftness and throwing them to the boy. The women and girls on the opposite bank laughed and chaffed me, and urged me to hasten, or Nalik would catch five ere I landed another. But the *rebelli* took no heed of their merriment, for he was quite content to let a few minutes go whilst he examined the glistening beauty which lay quivering and gasping on the sward. It was nearly eighteen inches in length, its back from the tip of the upper jaw to the tail a brilliant dark blue flecked with tiny specks of red, the sides a burnished silver, changing, as the belly was reached, to a glistening white. The pectoral and lower fins were a pale blue, flecked with somewhat larger spots of brighter red than those on the back, and the tail showed the same colouring. In shape it was much like a grayling, particularly about the head; and altogether a more beautiful fresh-water fish I have never seen.

We fished for an hour or more, and caught three or four dozen of this particular fish as well as eight or nine dark-scaled, stodgy bream, which haunted the centre of the pool where the water was deep. Then as the sun grew fiercer they ceased to bite, and we ceased to tempt them; so we lay down and rested and smoked, whilst the women and children made a ground-oven and prepared some of the fish for cooking. Putting aside the largest—which was reserved for the old chief and myself—Nalik's kindly, gentle-voiced wife, watched the children roll each fish up in a wrapper of green coconut leaf and lay them carefully upon the glowing bed of stones in the oven, together with some scores of long, slender green bananas, to serve as a vegetable in place of taro or yams, which would take a much longer time to cook. On the top of all was placed the largest fish, and then the entire oven was rapidly covered up with wild banana leaves in the shape of a mound.

The moment Nalik and I had laid down our rods, and whilst the oven was being prepared, Toka and the two other boys sprang into the water at one end of the pool and began to disturb the bottom with their feet. The young girls and women, each carrying a small finely-meshed scoop-net, joined them, and in a few minutes they had filled a basket with crayfish, some of which were ten inches in length, and weighed over a pound, their tails especially being very large and fleshy.

"Shall we boil or bake them?" asked Nalik as the basketful was brought up to me for examination.

"Boil them," I replied, for I had brought with me several pounds of coarse salt taken from our wrecked ship's harness cask and carefully dried in the sun, and a boiled crayfish or crab is better than one baked—and spoiled.

A tall, graceful girl, named Seia, came forward with a large wooden bowl, nearly eighteen inches in diameter at the top, and two feet in depth—no light weight even to lift, for at its rim it was over an inch thick. Placing it on the ground in front of Sru and myself, she motioned to the other girls to bring water. They brought her about two gallons in buckets made of the looped-up leaves of the taro plant, and poured it into the vessel; then Nalik and old Sru, with rough tongs formed of the midrib of a coconut branch, whipped up eight or ten large red-hot stones from a fire near by, and dropped them into the vessel, the water in which at once began to boil and send up a volume of steam as Seia tipped the entire basketful of crustacean delicacies into the bowl, together with some handfuls of salt. Then a closely-woven mat was placed over the top and tied round it so as to keep in the heat—that is the way they boil food in the South Seas with a wooden pot!

From time to time during the next quarter of an hour more red-hot stones were dropped into the bowl until old Sru pronounced the contents to be *tunua*, *i.e.*, well and truly cooked, and then whilst the now bright red crayfish were laid out to cool upon platters of green woven coconut leaf, the first oven of fish and bananas was opened.

What a delightful meal it was! The fat, luscious fish, cooked in their own juices, each one deftly ridden of its compact coating of silvery scales by the quick hands of the women, and then turned out hot and smoking upon a platter of leaf, with half a dozen green, baked bananas for bread! Such fish, and so cooked, surely fall to the lot of few. Your City professional diner who loves to instruct us in the daily papers about "how to dine" cannot know anything about the real enjoyment of eating. He is *blasé* he regulates his stomach to his costume and to the season, and he eats as fashion dictates he should eat, and fills his long-suffering stomach with nickety, tin-pot, poisonous "delicacies" which he believes are excellent because they are expensive and are prepared by a *chef* whose income is ten times as much as his own.

So we ate our fish and bananas, and then followed on with the crayfish, the women and children shelling them for us as fast as we could eat, the largest and fittest being placed before the old chief and the white man. And then for dessert we had a basket of red-ripe wild mangoes, with a great smooth-leaved pineapple as big as a big man's head, and showing red and green and yellow, and smelling fresh and sweet with the rain of the previous night. Near by where we sat was a pile of freshly-husked young coconuts, which a smiling-faced young girl opened for us as we wanted a drink, carefully pouring out upon the ground all the liquid that remained after Sru and myself had drunk, and then putting the empty shells, with their delicate lining of alabaster flesh, into the fire to be consumed, for no one not of chiefly rank must partake even of that which is cast aside by a chief or his guests.

Our first meal of the day finished, we—that is, Nalik, Sru, and myself—lay down under the shade of the newly-built thatched roof and smoked our pipes in content, whilst the women and children, attended by the dogs, bathed in the deepest part of the pool, shouting, laughing, and splashing and diving till they were tired. The dogs, mongrel as they were, enjoyed the fun as much as their masters, biting and worrying each other playfully as they swam round and round, and then crawling out upon the bank, they ran to and fro upon the grassy sward till they too were glad to rest under the shade of the clump of coco-palms.

In the afternoon—leaving the rest of our party to amuse themselves by catching crayfish and to make traps for wild pigs—Sru, Nalik, Toka, and myself set out towards *the* pool at the head of the river, where, I was assured, we were sure to get a pig or two by nightfall. The dogs evidently were equally as certain of this as Nalik and Sru, for the moment they saw the two men pick up their heavy hunting-spears they sprang to their feet and began howling and yelping in concert till they were beaten into silence by the women. I brought with me a short Snider carbine—the best and handiest weapon to stop a wild pig at a short range—and a double-barrelled muzzle-loading shot-gun. The latter I gave to the "devil" to carry, and promised him that he should fire at least five shots from it at pigeons or mountain fowl before we returned to the village.

Following a narrow footpath which led along the right bank of the stream, we struck directly into the heart of the mountain forest, and in a few minutes the voices, shouts, and laughter of our companions sounded as if they were miles and miles away. Now and then as we got deeper into the dark, cool shade caused by the leafed dome above, we heard the shrill cry of the long-legged mountain cock—a cry which I can only describe as an attempt at the ordinary barnyard rooster's "cock-a-doodle-do" combined with the scream of a cat when its tail is trodden upon by a heavy-booted foot. Here in these silent, darkened aisles of the forest it sounded weird and uncanny in the extreme, and aroused an intense desire to knock the creature over; but I forebore to fire, although we once had a view of a fine bird, attended by a hen and chicks, scurrying across the leaf-strewn ground not fifty feet away. Everywhere around us the great grey pigeons were sounding their booming notes from the branches overhead, but of these too we took no heed, for a shot would have alarmed every wild pig within a mile of us.

An hour's march brought us to the crest of a spur covered with a species of white cedar, whose branches were literally swarming with doves and pigeons, feeding upon small, sweet-scented berries about the size of English haws. Here we rested awhile, the dogs behaving splendidly by lying down quietly and scarcely moving as they watched me taking off my boots and putting on a pair of cinnet (coir fibre) sandals. Just beneath us was a deep canyon, at the bottom of which, so Nalik said, was a tiny rivulet which ran through banks covered with wild yams and *ti* plants.

"There be nothing so sweet to the mouth of the mountain pig as the thick roots of the *ti*," said Nalik to me in a low voice. "They come here to root them up at this time of the year, before the wild yams are well grown, and the *ti* both fattens and sweetens. Let us start."

At a sign from Sru, Nalik and the boy Toka, followed by the dogs, went off towards the head of the canyon, so as to drive down to the old man and myself any pigs which might be feeding above, whilst we slipped quietly down the side of the spur to the bank of the rivulet. Sru carried my gun (which I had loaded with ball) as well as his spear. I had my Snider.

We had not long to wait, for presently we heard the dogs give cry, and the silence of the forest was broken by the demoniac yells of Nalik and the "devil," who had started a party of two boars and half a dozen sows with their half-grown progeny, which were lying down around the buttressed sides of a great tika-tree. They (the pigs) came down the side of the rivulet with a tremendous rush, right on top of us in fact. I fired at the leader—a great yellow, razorbacked boar with enormous tusks—missed him, but hit a young sow who was running on his port side. Sru, with truer aim, fired both barrels of his gun in quick succession, and the second boar dropped with a bullet through both shoulders, and a dear little black and yellow striped four-months'-old porker went under to the other barrel with a broken spine. Then in another three or four minutes we were kicking and "belting" about half of the dogs, who, maddened by the smell of blood from the wounded animals, sprang upon them and tried to tear them to pieces; the rest of the pack (Heaven save the term!) had followed the flying swine down the canyon; they turned up at the camp some three or four hours later with bloodied jaws and gorged to distension.

The boar which Sru had shot was lean enough in all conscience, but the young sow and the four-months'-old porker were as round-bodied as barrels, and as fat as only pigs can be fat. After disembowelling them, we hoisted the carcasses up under the branch of a tree out of the reach of the dogs, and sent Toka back to the camp to tell the women to come and carry them away.

Then, as we had still another hour or two of daylight, and I longed to see the deep, deep pool at the head of the river, even if it were but for a few moments, the old chief Nalik and I started off.

It lay before us with many, many bars of golden sunlight striking down through the trees and trying to penetrate its calm, placid bosom with their warm, loving rays. Far below the sound of the waterfall sung to the dying day, and, as we listened, there came to us the dulled, distant murmur of the combing breakers upon the reef five miles away.

"'Tis a fair, good place this, is it not?" whispered Nalik, as he sat beside me—"a fair, good place, though it be haunted by the spirits."

"Aye, a fair, sweet place indeed," I answered, "and this pool aid the river below shall for ever be in my dreams when I am far away from here."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "MARTIN OF NITENDI"; AND THE RIVER OF DREAMS ***

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