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*The Island
of Desire*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I. DANGER ISLAND

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Chapter VIII

EPILOGUE

PART II. THE HURRICANE

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

THE END

PART I. DANGER ISLAND

[Table of Contents](#)

Chapter I

[Table of Contents](#)

In a past inconceivably remote it must have been the peak of a volcano, jutting from the midst of a sea whose solitude was broken only by flocks of migrating birds, a pod of sperm whales lumbering down from the Austral ice fields, or the intangible things of the mythic world; the spirits of Storm, Fair Weather, Night, Day, and Dawn.

Coral polyps attached themselves to the steep walls of the volcano to build their submarine gardens a mile or more to sea, surrounding the island with a reef and shallow lagoon; then erosion, the battering of the Pacific combers, and subsidence, until finally the volcano had disappeared, leaving a blue lagoon shimmering in the sunlight, a barrier reef threaded with islets and sand cays; Danger Island, or Puka-Puka—Land of Little Hills.

So it was called by the first Polynesians who came here, centuries ago. It appears now much as it did then: a tiny place compared with the vastness of the sea surrounding it. The low hills, scarcely twenty feet high, are shaded by cordia and hernandia trees, groves of coconut palms, thickets of magnolia bushes; and between the hills lie patches of level land where taro is grown in diked swamps and where the thatched houses are half obscured by clumps

of bananas, gardenia bushes, and the gawky-limbed pandanus.

There are three islets on the roughly triangular reef: Ko to the southeast; Frigate Bird to the southwest; and the main islet of Wale to the north. Ko and Frigate Bird are uninhabited eight months of the year, while on the crescent-shaped bay of Wale, facing southward toward the lagoon, are the three villages: Ngake, Roto, and Yato—or Windward, Central, and Leeward.

The trading station is in Central Village. I, Ropati, live in its upstairs rooms, while the two downstairs rooms have been vacant since the station was closed. The building is glaringly white, shaped like a packing case, has an asbestos-cement roof, balconies in front and back, and, leading from the balconies to the living quarters, doorways just high enough so I can crack my head against the lintels.

Across the village road from the station stands the schoolhouse, another boxlike coral building, but with a thatch roof, pleasing to the eye. The great glaringly ugly church, with its red iron roof, stands to one side of the schoolhouse, while elsewhere, to east and west, lagoonward and inland, are the Central Village houses, all save Araipu's native store, attractively built of wattle and thatch.

The rumbling sound that rises and falls fitfully is not caused so much by the surf on the outer reef as it is by the snores of my six hundred and fifty neighbors. All are asleep, for it is midday and they must be refreshed for the night's toil ahead. There is old Mr. Scratch, Deacon Bribery, and Bones piping off the watches under a coconut tree. There is William the Heathen folded on my woodbox, his head

between his bony knees. There is pretty Miss Strange-Eyes, daughter of Bones, without any clothes at all, fast asleep in a canoe, while a rooster on one of the crossbeams stares at her perplexed. And there is Constable Benny, growling like Cerberus as he guards the village in his dreams.

I walk on tiptoe to the lagoon beach lest I waken the toil-exhausted neighbors; but even here there are scores of toddlers, aged one to ten, fast asleep in the shady places.

The beach of the big crescent-shaped bay is not very attractive. The sand is scarcely white, and there is plenty of rubbish strewn about; but the bay itself and the lagoon beyond are clean, blue, sparkling, enticing. Almost daily I explore its submarine mountain ranges and chase the grotesquely beautiful fish among its crevices and caverns.

Today I follow the beach, first eastward, then gradually to the south. The great piles of plaited fronds are coverings for canoes; the dash of red is the iron roof of Araipu's store; Miss Legs sleeps over yonder, in the little house with unnailed floor boards that can be pushed up from below if one is lonely and wants to talk to Miss Legs.

Following the curved beach, I leave Central Village, then turn inland to stop at an excavation ten feet deep and one hundred yards across. It is green with taro leaves that undulate under the puffs of wind; along its border are gardenia bushes. The Windward Village girls stop here, on moonlight nights, to gather flowers for their hair before proceeding to the Place of Love.

After skirting the taro bed and walking a little farther through the groves I come to the southeast point of the main islet—the Point of Utupoa. Here the coconut trees give

place to pandanus, then to magnolia and pemphis bushes, then to pure-white sand with an occasional greasy-leaved tournefortia bush; and finally the sand spills out in the shallows.

Southward from the Point of Utupoa, at low tide, there is a brick-red highway, a quarter of a mile wide and four miles long, leading to a similar point on the far islet of Ko. On the east side of this highway the reef combers form an azure-tinted wall that rises and subsides and roars unceasingly; on the other side is the lagoon, while a half mile across the lagoon is another highway, or shallows, this one leading from the southwest point of the main islet to Frigate Bird Islet.

It is here at Utupoa that the children come to fly their kites; it is under the big tournefortia bush that I spend many an afternoon with M. Michel de Montaigne; it is in the deep pool in the shallows that the village girls duck and turn somersaults, that the wild youth cool their heated bodies, that the Seventh-Day Adventist missionary once a year baptizes his converts; it is here at Utupoa that the Windward Village youths and maidens come on moonlight nights to dance and sing—in a word, this is one of the many places of love.

The sunlight reflected from the sand hurts my eyes. I leave the point to walk along the east side of the islet, at the edge of the pandanus trees, where it is shady; and presently I pass Windward Village, which stretches from the outer beach across an arm of the islet to the lagoon beach. The houses are not very interesting and the place is not very tidy, but I make a little detour inland so as to steal a

wistful glance at Desire, the prettiest Mongolian-eyed girl in the South Seas. She sits in her cookhouse, clothed only in a strip of cloth around her waist; and she does not try to cover herself when I approach, for she is an innocent virgin, bless her! If I ever marry, I hope it will be to a girl like Desire. After telling her this I move back to the beach to pass the stronghold of Christian puritanism: the residence of Horatio and Susanna Augustus, the native resident agent et ux.

The Augustuses are high-island natives, missionary educated, too sanctimonious for my taste, living evidence of the disastrous result of attempting to civilize primitive people. They speak a little English and, as schoolteachers, try to teach it to the children. So far—seven years—they have taught only a few of the brighter scholars that good morning differs from good-by. A couple of days ago on the causeway I met a boy of sixteen who solemnly took off his hat, bowed stiffly, and in perfect seriousness greeted me with "Oh...yes!" spoken slowly, with a longish pause between the words. However, the Augustuses believe they are doing a noble work in teaching English.

They treat me with respect though they are convinced that their government position elevates them above a mere epicurean beachcomber. When I visit them they make a pretense of European culture, such as serving weak tea and remarkable scones flavored with banana extract, but at other times they are simply a native family living in a wattle-and-thatch house on the outer beach. I am, as formerly, the only white man on the island.

Ahead of me, now, is a mile of straight, high beach, unbroken save for a group of huts used by Central Village

when the island reserves are opened for the copra makers. A stretch of brick-red coral, one hundred yards wide, lies between the beach and the barrier reef, which last, now that I am on the windward side of the island, blusters, shakes its white mane, roars mightily. Beyond is the sea, and the horizon clouds, and the fluffy little balls of cotton wool separating themselves from the eastern rack to scud cockily overhead.

Note how the coconut fronds and the pandanus leaves are flung out horizontally in the wind. Note the misty wraiths of reef spray drifting up the beach and into the jungle. Fill your lungs with the clean salty smell of the sea! Would you exchange this for U.S.H.A., Unit 168-b, or even for the flashiest apartment in Metropolis?

The white pebble beach is hurting my eyes, for there is no shade, and at the edge of the trees the beach is covered with lumps of coral too jagged for my bare feet. So through the magnolia bushes I follow a path laid with steppingstones and enter the refreshingly cool shade of the atoll jungle to come to a path leading parallel to the outer beach. Now and then I pass a deserted hut, and taro beds bordered by banana plants and gardenia bushes. I pick blossoms to put behind my ears. No one is in sight; the place seems to have been deserted for months. Inland, doves coo in a note of infinite sadness, and sometimes one flaps noisily among the hernandia trees. Lizards and mice scurry over the fallen fronds; land crabs wave their claws at the passer-by; ghost terris flutter like butterflies in the shadows—but there is no human being save myself.

Just now the inland groves and taro beds are closed. Central Village has put a tapu on them so the people will not steal the nuts or kill the nesting birds. Only a white man dares violate this tapu; if a native did so, the Goddess Taira would cause him to fall when he climbs a coconut tree or would cause death by a tumor in the armpit.

I pick from the ground a young coconut the size of a crab apple; then, tearing a leaf from an overhanging frond, with my fingernail I cut away the tough but pliant midrib and jab the thick end of it into the immature coconut. It is my intention to take it home for some village child to play with, but the temptation to play myself is too great, so, swinging it round my head, I let it fly into the air—as children catapult crab apples with a willow stick. It soars over the highest coconut trees to land in the shore bush. I grin, delighted, and start breaking my way through the bush to retrieve my toy. Do I look silly with a gardenia blossom behind my ear, flinging immature coconuts into the air? Well, we get that way on the atolls; many of the inhibitions of our civilized training are happily lost.

Here is the toy, and here is a wide avenue leading to the Point of Smoking Seas. I walk down the avenue, for the gloomy groves are uncanny and the loneliness preys on my spirits. Beyond the shore bush the wind, the roar of crashing seas, the smell of the ocean break suddenly on my senses.

The trading station is now due south; I am halfway round the islet. Here the barrier reef is close to the beach, forming a point sharper than a right angle. Beyond the point, over a shoal stretch of sea bottom, the current meets the Pacific rollers and they pile up in a furious maelstrom. The sight

sometimes frightens me. Staring at the rearing, plunging patch of sea, I recall how Satyr Bones swam into it to rescue his womarm, who had been washed over the reef. Somehow he lived, but the woman was dead when, like a hairy sea beast, he dragged her out of the breakers.

Beyond the Point of Smoking Seas I pass another group of copra makers' huts, then walk doggedly along the beach, which curves gradually to the west and south. Though my eyes pain me, I grin and bear it, for there is no parallel path inland; and the sand seems less glaringly white when I recall that here, on moonlight nights, is pagan loveliness; here is where the youths and maidens of Central and Leeward villages come for their nightlong dances, their singing, and their love-making. Alas! now under the disillusioning sunlight I can see only little paths leading into the magnolia bushes— leading to the love nests of the young unmarried.

At the edge of the shallows is a conglomerate of sand and shells that has somehow caked into a limestone-like rock so that the wild youth can carve their names for posterity to read: Mr. Horse, Mr. Coconut, Jack Dempsey, Eagle-wing, Mr. Banana, Messrs. Achilles and Ajax, Mr. Casanova; Princess X, Miss White Tern, Miss Flower, Miss Love, Miss Mermaid, Miss Memory— fraternity names that the young people take when they enter the House of Youth or the House of Young Women—between puberty and marriage.

A little farther along the outer beach and I come suddenly to Yato-Leeward Village. I have nearly finished the circuit of the main islet.

Yato Point is on the west side of the crescent-shaped bay. A half mile away is the Point of Utupoa, where I stood a couple of hours ago; and here is the wide reef highway leading to Frigate Bird Islet, flooded now, for the tide is coming in; and there, on the outer edge of the reef, is the beacon of the boat passage, while beyond it, at sea, is the offing where the trading schooners lie. Far out at sea, to the southwest, breakers are sometimes visible; they are on Te Arai Reef, which stretches four miles due west from Frigate Bird and ends in a barren sand cay.

Leeward Village is spotlessly clean. About half the houses are built of chipped coral blocks; the rest are of wattle and thatch, with one red iron roof where an Aitutaki carpenter lives. This prominent citizen came here to remove the only beautiful feature from our church, the thatch roof, and put a galvanized iron one in its place. During the four years of exhausting toil required to complete this great innovation, the carpenter fell in love with a Leeward Village maiden. Now she has claimed him: he is happily lost forever. All day long he sweats in his iron-roofed house, and, judging by the husky and wanton appearance of his wife, all night long too.

On the east side of Yato Point I stop to glance at my house site and for the thousandth time visualize the wattle-and-thatch palace I have always planned to build here. I feel the cool trade wind blowing on me from across the bay; I hear the wind singing in the palm fronds, and the thundery combers far away on the Point of Smoking Seas; I gaze across the lagoon toward Frigate Bird Islet, Ko Islet, the eastern reef, Utupoa Point, the cloud mountains of the sky, the entire littoral of the bay, the villages, the causeway, and

the fishpond beyond it. This is indeed an Ogygian place for a renegade Ulysses to forget the world, and eat lotus, and love a South Sea Calypso.

The causeway is six feet high, six wide, and about three hundred yards long. Made of coral blocks gray with age, it stretches across an arm of the bay from Leeward to Central Village, and thus it fences off a fishpond belonging to Leeward Village and full of milk mullet and young turtles.

When a trading schooner is in the offing and the hard-doers of the South Seas are drinking deeply they habitually fall from the causeway into the fishpond. In fact groups of natives often camp at one end of the causeway solely to observe South Sea traders falling into the fishpond, when, the natives having had their money's worth, they become a rescue gang.

Safely across the causeway, I enter the walled compound of Parson Sea Foam. I smile at his pretty daughters, examine his huge coral-lime parsonage with its silly little four-foot verandas in front and in back, and shake hands and yarn for a little space with the parson himself. He is partially bald, has pendulous cheeks, several chins, and elephantiasis. Presently he swings an elephantiac leg through the doorway, follows it, then reappears with an ancient tin of beans. He gives it to me, with a suitable text—for he is always giving me perished provisions, which in turn I bury quickly, before they explode.

Finally I pass the hut of that terrible loudmouthed creature, Pilala-woman; then the house of First-Born, son of Sea Foam; and at last I enter my own cookhouse at the

lagoon side of the trading station, where old Mama has the teakettle boiling and greets me with an interrogative smile.

To me several features of this walk have seemed remarkable. There has been an appearance and a feeling of cleanness. I have been aware of the sea as an enclosing presence, both sheltering and dangerous. But, most important, I have noticed that the atoll belongs to the organic world; it is a living island. Some stretches of beach have appeared to be fine yellow sand, but if I had examined it closely I should have found that each grain was a minute shell or the skeleton of a coral polyp. Think of the untold billions of creatures that have lived and died for ages to build up a coral atoll! And think of the untold billions of creatures that are laboring even now, as I close my journal, so that Danger Island may grow slowly upward at precisely the same rate that the sea bottom subsides! Here is a land becoming rather than one become, a land functioning in Time rather than in Space!

The other morning Araipu, who is both the storekeeper and vicar of Puka-Puka Atoll, came to the cookhouse while I was having coffee. I asked him to join me, which he did; but before he had tasted his coffee he started talking about Abraham.

"This Abraham," he said, "worshipped the sun. He was a heathen like William. He would get up in the morning at dawn"—here Araipu pointed to the sun rising over the coconut trees of Windward Village—"and would pray to the sun! He thought the sun was a god! He was a foolish heathen like that old fellow William!"

"I don't recall anything about Abraham worshiping the sun," I broke in. "It isn't in the Bible, is it?"

"No," Araipu replied; "I read it in a book Parson Sea Foam brought from Tahiti. The book says that Abraham would kneel facing the east, and bow down to the sun, like this," and here the vicar bowed.

"Araipti, let's go for a picnic. I'm fed up with sanctimonious resident agents, village smells, noise, heat. Let's go bird hunting on Frigate Bird Islet."

"He had a son called Isaac," Araipu went on, paying me not the slightest attention; "and when Abraham was an old man, and had learned how foolish it was to worship the sun, he agreed to sacrifice Isaac to Jehovah. Then the Lord was very pleased, and gave Abraham great power. Abraham could command the east wind, 'Blow from the north!' and the east wind would switch round to the north. Or Abraham could command the hurricane, 'Stop blowing!' or 'Blow easy!' and the hurricane would stop blowing or blow easy. You see, he got all his power because he stopped worshiping the sun and started worshiping the True God instead."

A hundred yards from the station Bone's daughter Strange-Eyes was bathing at the back of her house without any clothes or shelter. So naturally I stared at her. Pretty soon Araipu found he had lost my attention. Turning his head, he saw Strange-Eyes in a lather of soapsuds.

"Hm!" the vicar muttered, and shook his head meditatively for a little time; then, brightening, "David was of the seed of Abraham," he said.

Tentatively I mentioned that David had seen a beautiful maiden bathing.

"Yes, of course," Araipu interrupted quickly; "that was Bath-sheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then he started telling how David had sent Uriah into the front of battle so he should be killed; but again I interrupted, this time to suggest our immediate departure for Frigate Bird.

Araipu vaguely consented, as though he would of course go with me to the islet, but the sail four miles across the lagoon would be only incidental to a flowing comment on the seed of Abraham, which apparently he would talk about for the next few days, oblivious betimes to all else in the physical world.

I told my old cook Mama I was going. Then we launched Araipu's canoe and brought it round to the trading station. We stepped the mast and took aboard a basket of provisions as well as a pound of twist tobacco for the Leeward villagers, who were temporarily living on the islet. When our sail was set and we had moved a few yards from the beach there was a great screaming ashore. We saw old Bosun-woman dashing down the beach, a basket of taro on her head, a bundle of clothes in her hands. We dug our paddles in the sandy bottom to hold back the canoe and waited for her to wade out.

"The taro is for Pilala-woman!" she screamed, her lips within an inch of my ear. "The clothes are for Bones!"

"Better come along with us," I suggested ironically.

"Whee-ee!" she screamed—the Puka-Pukan ejaculation. "Me go to Frigate Bird! I've never been there once!"

Think of it! A woman living on this island for some seventy years and never visited Frigate Bird Islet, four miles across the lagoon! It reminds me of a pair of darling old

maids who lived near our ranch in the foothills of California. They were in their forties, alone on a farm only a few miles from Fresno, the lights of which place they could see, on a clear night, from a hill beyond their house—yet they had never been to Fresno nor to any city! Once I tried to take them, and I remember that one old dear couldn't go because she had a hen setting and her sister was "no hand at poultries"; the other one couldn't go because she was afraid to leave her sister alone—"something might happen." So it is with lots of Puka-Pukans. We have only three islets on this reef, yet many of the neighbors have set foot on only one.

Well, it must be otherwise with the coming generation, for while Bosun-woman was screaming at us a half-dozen urchins, aged three to seven, came charging down the beach, splashed out to our canoe, and, naked and without luggage, tumbled aboard. God knows whose children they were.

"Where are you going?" I asked like a silly white man.

"I dunno," a squint-eyed Tartar replied. "Where you going?"

"We are going to Frigate Bird Islet."

"That suits me," said the hoyden, and apparently the others concurred, for they didn't even discuss the matter. Picking up paddles or using their hands, they sent the canoe scudding out of the lee of the land.

Lucky we were to have those extra hands, for presently we saw coming down the beach the rest of the gang, about fifty strong—and their noise was like the yelping of a pack of coyotes, I pulled in the sheet, we dug our paddles in the

water, and escaped by the skin of our teeth. Dozens of the urchins plunged in the bay and tried to overtake us, but, what with our half-dozen wild man-eating sailors, we managed to escape.

That's the way with the Puka-Pukan toddlers. They run over this island like a vandal horde controlled, I'll swear, by a sort of group impulse. Perhaps a few of the women know to whom certain toddlers belong; it is even possible that fathers can isolate their own brats and name them. Araipu was pretty certain of the names of two of our sailors, but he admitted that he was better versed in the seed of Abraham than in the seed of his neighbors.

Soon the wind took hold of our sail; we dodged about the coral beads, scudded through a crooked passage leading to the lagoon, and drove like a racing yacht—faster than a racing yacht—toward Frigate Bird Islet, the urchins whooping so loudly that Araipu didn't have half a chance to get a word in edgewise about Abraham. Within thirty minutes we had nosed the canoe's bow into the beach of the far islet.

Four and a half seconds before the canoe touched the shore six naked toddlers described six graceless parabolas in six different directions. Some landed like spiders—all arms and legs—in the water; one or two landed on the beach; but, wheresoever they landed, within another four and a half seconds not a single one was in sight. For a little space we could hear them yelling as they plundered land crabs, coconuts, mummy apples—or as they flung stones at fledglings, terns, boobies. Presently they would be breaking

the law by broiling young birds and gorging themselves with burnt flesh and coconuts.

Constable Ears, who alone met us, eyed with displeasure the streaks of brown skin cutting across the beach and into the bush. "They should not have come to our islet," he said severely; then he scowled, raised his eyebrows in a manner almost sanctimonious, and approached to shake hands with Araipu and me.

The constable is tall, long-faced, very very serious in all things, and given to long silences before replying to the simplest questions. If one asks him, "When do we eat?" or "Will it rain?" or "What do you think of the universe" Ears will knit his brow, gaze meditatively nowhere, cock his head to one side, and, after a full moment of silence, reply gravely: "Now," or "Perhaps," or "I think it is a good thing."

Not another soul was in sight. This annoyed me, for usually when I go to Frigate Bird Islet the young men run into the shoal water, pick up my canoe with me in it, and carry it ashore. Being accustomed to this kind of a welcome, I was peeved when only the constable met us; in fact I was on the point of stepping the mast in the other end of the canoe and returning to the main islet. I said as much to Araipu; but Ears, overhearing me, assured me that the inhabitants would be overjoyed at my coming, but just now they were playing cricket, so of course they could not welcome me with songs, dances, wreaths of gardenias, and welcoming orations.

I should have understood this at once, but for some reason my pride was hurt. In a huff I walked through the deserted copra makers' village, following the sound of

whoops, groans, and guffaws; and presently, in a little clearing, I came upon the hundred and fifty people of Leeward Village, playing or watching a studied game of cricket. Two or three men glanced at me in a vaguely preoccupied way, then jerked their heads around to watch the game. Happy-go-lucky old Tapipi, his eyes shifting between me and the players, explained hurriedly that for six hours they had been playing to decide which half of the village should gather coconuts tomorrow for the other half. I then realized that if the British Navy were target practicing in the offing no one would leave the game. Like children that can play for two hours but cannot work for two minutes, these atoll people can play cricket all day to determine who shall work an hour tomorrow. I mentioned as much to Tapipi. He knitted his brow, pondered my words, and finally opined that it would be hard work gathering coconuts tomorrow, for the people would be stiff and tired from the cricket game.

Presently I went to the parson's house, and there I found Araipu telling Ears about the seed of Abraham, while betimes the constable scowled and nodded his head gravely.

"You see those coconut trees," the vicar was saying, pointing through the open side of the house to where straight rows of young trees stretched seaward. "All those trees to the right are bearing nuts, and all the trees to the left are barren."

"Maybe it would be a good idea to drive some spikes in the barren ones," I suggested. "The rusty iron sometimes makes them bear."

Araipu eyed me severely and mumbled something about driving spikes into Sarah; then I divined that I had broken into a carefully planned metaphor, so I held my peace.

"Yes, they are barren," the constable said. "And yet the fruitful trees and the barren trees were planted at the same time. They are twenty-four years old."

"It may be many years before they bear," the vicar said. "They may not bear until they are ninety years old...You needn't snicker, Ropati. If you read your Bible you would know that Sarah laughed when the Lord told her she would have a child in her old age—but she had one just the same. That was Isaac, the half brother of Ishmael. He married Rebekah and had two sons by her, Esau and Jacob..."

"The game's finished!" Ears exclaimed suddenly, jumping to his feet. "My half of the village has won!",

"How do you know?"

"Can't you hear them?"

"I can hear only a noise like a massacre of the seed of Abraham," I replied; then, as Araipu beamed on me, I watched the constable dash toward the cricket ground, his long legs and arms swinging, his head thrust forward. A moment later the vicar and I followed with the leisurely dignity befitting strangers. We arrived just in time to see the grand ceremony of "insulting the losers."

At the far side of the clearing stood the winners in attitudes of Roman conquerors, while under the trees, in groups hushed and expectant, sat the entire remaining population, including, of course, the losers. First-Born moved to the front of the winning team, squatted on the ground, and rattled off a dance rhythm with a pair of sticks on his

homemade cricket bat; then the important young man, Luluia, walked mincingly, affecting timidity, to the center of the glade. The dance tempo became more rapid, and Luluia, flinging out his arms, seemed with the same gesture to fling away his timidity. With brazen effrontery he went through contortions that I shall call "dancing" for lack of a better word. It was utterly obscene and insulting—and was enjoyed by winners and losers alike.

After the first "dance" Luluia walked back and forth between the wickets, shouting, "Aha!...I?...Who am I?" He paused to laugh in a way that reminded me of a villain in a cheap melodrama. "I?...Who am I?...Ask the losers...Ask the winners...Ask the frigate birds that roost in the hernandia trees...Ask the fish in the sea! Who am I?...I am Lu-lu-i-a!" Here he made an awful noise, something between a bellow and a shriek, then continued: "I am Lu-lu-i-a! I am the man that made the most runs today! I am the man that blackened the faces of the losers! I am Lu-lu-i-a!...Yip!...Wow!...Whoop!" and with that the cricket-bat drum sounded again, while the champion—oh well, he "danced."

Presently the people returned to their village, two hundred paces away, but Araipu held me back. "Give them time," he whispered. "They will want to greet us in a becoming manner, like the sons of Jacob were greeted by Joseph the second time they went into Egypt."

"We'll walk this way and come up to the village from the lagoon beach."

And so we did, Araipu betimes giving me some further details concerning Joseph's brethren.

We found every last villager awaiting us, and every one of them in an awkward, expectant attitude. They stood in groups, as though they had casually met, were passing the time of day, and had not the foggiest idea that Ropati himself had arrived with no less a person than the vicar. When we were close to them they glanced up suddenly, as though at a prearranged signal, and, "Hello!" they exclaimed. "It is Ropati! It is Araipu!" Their faces wreathed in smiles, they rushed forward, relieved from the anticipatory waiting, hands outstretched.

"When the King of Israel visited the Pharaoh of Egypt," the vicar cried, "he sent his spokesman before him, bearing presents for Pharaoh—jars of honey, spices, gems, frankincense, and myrrh. Thus he softened the heart of Pharaoh...Now Ropati has come to your islet to hunt sea birds with the young men of your village, and he has sent me, his spokesman, before him, bearing this pound of Lord Beaconsfield Twist Tobacco so that your hearts may be softened toward him."

Araipu then handed the package of twist to the "supercargo" of Leeward Village, and immediately we turned to hurry away. As we left the village we could hear the supercargo shouting:

"Gather by the House of Youth! The old men! The first-born! The deacons! The fathers! The youths! the naked ones! Gather by the House of Youth! We are dividing a pound of Lord Beaconsfield Twist Tobacco presented by the King of Israel to the Pharaoh of Egypt!"

There were whoops of laughter, and bellows of delight from tobacco-hungry old men; then the atoll jungle

deadened the sound. We moved inland, following a crooked path; the branches of cordia and hernandia trees met overhead, and above them interlaced the fronds of coconut palms; below was an undergrowth of bird's-nest ferns, magnolia bushes, pipturus, and pandanus, walling us in.

Presently we entered the clearing where Leeward Village's lime tree grows, then moved on to the outer beach and followed it to Pilato the androgyne's Place of Love. The Place was deserted; it seemed almost drab in the afternoon sunlight; it would waken to life and beauty when the moonlight slanted across the magnolia bushes, gleamed on the white coral sand, and the dancers were there. Leaving the Place, we walked around the islet's west point and returned by an inland path. It was night by then, but the moon lighted our way. Araipu left me, to follow the lagoon beach to the parson's house, while I wandered among the houses, wondering if I could escape the vicar and spend the night in the House of Youth. I decided I couldn't, so I turned toward the community house, in the center of the village, and, crawling in, stretched out on a heap of logs used as seats by the Village Fathers.

I could see the copra makers' huts lit up fitfully by tiny fires. Each open-sided hut had a sleeping platform raised a foot or two off the ground. They looked like the counters in a shooting gallery or a hoopla concession. No; they were platforms in the cages of a zoo. Over yonder sat gorilla-like Bones, staring sullenly out of the open side of his house, firelight from coconut shells flashing on his huge and hairy face. And there was lion-maned King-of-the-Sky, recumbent on his platform, a veritable Lion of Lucerne. And there was

old Mr. Scratch, a baboon if ever there was one. The hippopotamuslike Sacred Maid moved sluggishly about the Great House of King Toka, while shrew-like, Pilala-woman, in her cage to seaward, screamed at the passers-by; and close to the community house, in the House of Youth, a dozen monkey boys chattered and laughed and ogled the monkey girls in the adjoining House of Young Women.

One of the youths left the house to dive into the community house and alight beside me, on hands and knees, his face within a few inches of mine. "Come to the House of Youth tomorrow night,' Ropati," he whispered. "After the bird hunting, when the south reef is dry, the girls of Ko Islet will come to our Place of Love!"

Then he was gone, a shadow blown through the fitful night. I thought of little auburn-haired Desire and wondered if she would be among those who crossed the south reef at low tide.

Then I felt incapable of thinking of anything, even of Desire, for I was at peace with the whole world. Everything was good: the lions and monkeys, the sound of surf beating on the outer reef, the smell of grilling fish. The light puffs of wind were just cool enough to add to my feeling of well-being. There were no mosquitoes. The voices of the villagers did not come in the usual undisciplined screams, or, if they did, I did not mind it. My nerves were asleep. When I rolled a cigarette and smoked it slowly the tobacco tasted fragrant, mellow, delicious. The flashing fires, which usually hurt my eyes, now had a lulling effect. The hard logs beneath me, pressing into my back, my head, my legs, only added to my sensuous enjoyment.

A little girl of about four years came toddling along the road, crawled into the community house, stared at me for a little space, and then cuddled close beside me. She seemed as happy as I. She did not find it necessary to speak; she simply lay by me, communing with me in spirit. Then the toddler snuggled closer; then she threw her little body across me and almost instantly fell asleep.

Now that I could not courteously or conveniently rise and leave, I should have felt ill at ease; but through some rational quirk of the brain I continued to feel at peace with the world. I appreciated the pretty confidence of this child. I felt her to be an old friend who had come to me for security and sleep. I was nearly asleep myself when Constable Ears stalked past the Great House and, stopping by the House of Youth, asked my whereabouts. Having been told, he came to the community house and called my name.

"Yes."

Ears cleared his throat, nodded thoughtfully for a full minute, then told me that a feast had been prepared and was awaiting me in the parson's house.

"All right," I replied. "I will come when I can find someplace to put this child."

"Child, you said? What child? Whose child?"

"Take her to her mama," I added. "She is lying on top of me."

With a good deal of diffidence Ears crawled under the eaves. When he was close I grasped his hand and laid it on the toddler.

"Oh!" he muttered. "It's a baby!" Then gruffly, affecting anger, he shouted: "Here's a child! Here's somebody's brat

annoying Ropati! Whose brat is this? Has anybody lost a child?"

"Bring it to the fire!" Pilala-woman screamed.

Ears carried the child to the shrew's fire and leaned over so the light was on the child's face. Then he straightened up, and, in an apologetic tone, "Oh! I see it's mine!" he muttered. "Hey! Woman! Come here, woman! Take away the brat!"

"I hope you're not annoyed," I said when the constable had returned.

"Oh no," he muttered in an absent-minded way. "But I came here to tell you something, and now I've forgotten it."

"Food?" I queried.

"Ah yes, that's it! You are to feast at the parson's house."

Araipu and I had expected to rough it in the South Seas, but the villagers had thought differently. When we had left to watch the insulting of the losers the house had been empty, for the parson himself was on the main islet. Now it was furnished. Mats covered the coral-gravel floor; there were pillows whose slips were embroidered with all the flowers of the field and the flags of the nations; there were patchwork quilts; a lantern swung, flickered, and smoked from one of the timbers, and spread under the eaves was a picnic for a gourmand.

The villagers were aware that they had served us well. They told us about it. The dancer Luluia gave a before-dinner speech in which he modestly omitted mentioning himself but spoke instead of the generosity of his village.

"When the King of Israel visited the Pharaoh of Egypt," Luluia shouted, "Pharaoh set before him all the choice

delicacies of his realm! Here is food for the King of Israel and his spokesman the Vicar Araipu! Here is coconut sauce! Here are drinking nuts! Here are grilled sea birds, lobsters, and fish! Here are taros, bananas, utos, mummy apples! Here is a basin of water, and smell soap, and a towel! When you have feasted you can wash your hands, then lie back on our mats, with our lantern lighting your house; and you can smoke and gossip until our maidens come to sing you to sleep!"

There being a vicar among us, Luluia then gave a few short and snappy texts. Araipu replied with some appropriate remarks about manna in the wilderness, and we fell to.

The people left while we were picnicking. When we had eaten our fill we gathered the remnants in frond food mats and hung them to the tic beams; then we lay down to cigarettes and sleep.

Some toddlers came to the house during the night to sleep here, there, or most anyplace—or, better, they went to sleep here, rolled about the house from here to there, and woke up in the morning most anyplace. A strong wind came up; the coconut trees beat their wings against the sky; but in the morning Araipu woke me with a cheerful, "The sun is up, Ropati! Did I tell you that the sun was the God of Abraham?" and then he kept doggedly on the ancient Hebrew genealogies until we had finished our breakfast and I had escaped from him.

"The young men! The tree climbers! The bird hunters! Gather at the Point of Hernandia Trees tonight! The King of Israel and the Pharaoh of Egypt will go a-hunting tonight!

Gather at the Point of Hernandia Trees! The young men! The tree climbers! The bird hunters!"

At sundown thirty of us walked from the copra makers' village to the western point, where for a little space we lay on the beach between the wall of hernandia trees and the shallows. The great combers rolling across the barrier reef, a hundred yards away, thundered mightily, but they did not drown the lonely cries of the thousands of boobies, terns, and frigate birds circling over us, flock above flock, until they were lost in the confused cloud masses that streaked and blotched the sky.

"The birds are roosting," someone said; then, later: "Look—the tops of the trees are black with them!"

They were a strange sight, belonging to the world of demonology. Lying on the beach, with my binocular to my eyes, I could see on the topmost branches of the hernandia trees crowds of boobies, frigate birds, and terns. The frigate birds were seizing the places of honor. Often one would flap down to a twig where a booby was roosting and make a great to-do until he had frightened the booby away and taken the perch for himself. Black, long-beaked, evil-eyed, the frigate birds stared this way and that, stretched their necks and spread their wings as though to straighten out the kinks. Above the roosting birds thousands of others circled and squawked in a note both lonely and petulant. Seeing them roost so high, I wondered how the men could climb to them.

I turned my eyes from the birds to see, in the now dim evening light, a dozen naked boys squatting on the sand. They had come from nowhere, without sound; they had

been materialized out of the spirit of this desolate place. With mouths open slightly, bodies motionless, they stared fixedly at the roosting birds. I fancied them mischievous idols squatting on the sand, and when I turned my eyes back to the wall of hernandia trees I fancied the birds were malevolent pagan idols perching in the trees.

A mosquito buzzed in my ear. I slapped.

"What's that?" came First-Born's voice from behind me.

"Mosquitoes."

"Mosquitoes!" First-Born cried in a note of indignation. "That's impossible. There are no mosquitoes on Frigate Bird Islet!" The last words had been said dogmatically, brooking no contradiction; but I replied nevertheless that one had buzzed in my ear and that now I could feel one biting my ankle.

First-Born laughed sardonically. "Oh," he muttered, "perhaps just now, at dusk, with a moon, on the beach," and then, raising his voice, "but there are no mosquitoes on Frigate Bird Islet!"

"Mosquitoes?" Constable Ears called from the group of bird hunters. "Hm! Mosquitoes, you said?"

"Ropati says there are mosquitoes on Frigate Bird Islet!"

Everyone had a good laugh over that, for one of their pet delusions, actuated by village patriotism, is that there are no mosquitoes on Frigate Bird Islet—though the other (and inferior) islets are swarming with them. If you swat a mosquito and hold its carcass before their eyes the villagers will dismiss the evidence with contempt. "Oh, one or two, perhaps, just at this time, with the moon nearly full," they