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CHAPTER V

CIVILIZATION PEEPS IN

WITHOUT looking back, she turned the nose of her canoe straight for the southern beach. To left of her as she paddled lay the sea gate where the tide was flooding round the coral and the breeze blowing the gulls like snowflakes against the blue; to right the limitless expanse of the lagoon; ahead the desolate beach, the ruined village and the wild tangle of pandanus trees, their limbs wide-spreading as the limbs of an elm, their fronds tossing like ill-kempt hair.

She hauled the light canoe above tide mark, then, turning to the right along the sands, she passed the trees and climbed the coral, standing for a moment facing the south and the empty sea. Then, turning, she gazed across the lagoon to where the far-away northern beach showed its trees above the water dazzle.

It was near full flood and the lagoon was brimming, the outer sea coming in great sheets of smoky blue, whirls of amethyst and streaks of cobalt between the piers of the break. Le Moan could hear the suck of the water through the gates as distinct from the sound of the breakers on the coral, beyond the sound of the breakers the voices of the gulls, beyond the gulls the silence reaching to the white trade clouds on the rim of the purple sea.

She was alone, but for the matter of that, she had always been alone, Aioma and the two old men and the women and children who formed the last remnant of the southern tribe had never been her companions; she had fished with them and helped in the cooking and mat-making, talked with them, lived with them, yet in a way, dwelt apart.

It was the race difference, perhaps, or some bent of soul owing to the fusion of races in her that made her a being quite alone, relying on no one but herself—a creature apart, almost a spirit. She had the power to lose herself utterly when gazing down into clear water as on the day when Dick first saw her gazing into the pond by the trees. Great distances held her in the same way should she give herself over to them, and that strange flair for direction which she shared with the gulls was less perhaps instinctive than psychic, for the mind of Le Moan, eternally in touch with the wind, the sea, the sun and the stars, was clairvoyant to the coming of storm and the sea changes that brought the great tiger sharks into the lagoon, altered the course of the mullet or drove the palu far from the fishing banks to northward of the reef.

Having stood for a while gazing to the north, she came back towards the deserted houses and began to prepare herself some food; after that there were lines to be mended and oap to be cleared from the paraka patch and then came sunset and then the stars, and sleep deeper than the great depths beyond the palu bank.

Had Le Moan looked back across her past, she would have seen a succession of days coloured like the day just dead, brilliancy stretching away into years and opalled by rainy seasons and storms, nights when dreams were unhaunted by human form till to-night, when, towards dawn, a ghostly canoe man showed in the mirror of sleep paddling towards her across a shimmering lagoon.

Then as the dream broke up and the vision vanished, Le Moan awoke beneath the last of the stars, awoke suddenly with fear clutching at her heart and with eyes wide but still half-blinded with sleep.

She sat up. The dawn was breaking and the fishing gulls were putting out to sea; she could hear their voices through the sound of the breakers on the reef. Nothing more, yet she listened, listened with her eyes fixed on the great fan of light showing in the eastern sky against which the gulls showed like withered leaves tossed on the wind.

Nothing. The sea breeze stirred the leaves of the breadfruit and the branches of the pandamus palms and then fell flat, died out and changed to the first stirring of a land breeze, the highest flying gulls took colour and the ghostly lagoon took form.

The girl rising to her feet swept the lagoon water with her eyes. Nothing. Then, turning, she passed between the trees to the coral of the outer beach and there, out on the ghostly sea and touched by the light of dawn, she saw a ship.

Years after the destruction of the Spanish ship, which had happened before her birth, a whale man had put into the lagoon, cut wood, taken on water, been attacked by Uta Matu, the chief of Karolin, and escaped to the outer sea by a miracle.

Uta would have sent her to the bottom of the lagoon after the Spaniard, for in the depth of his ignorant but instinctive heart lay the knowledge that the black man's burden is the white man and that civilization to the savage means death.

Le Moan could still see as in a glass darkly the fight and the escape of the whale man, and here again was a ship, different in shape from the one of long ago, but arousing in her mind, from association, an instinct of antagonism and dread.

The ship, which had been standing off and on all night, was a schooner, and now as the great sun heaved himself higher and golden ripples broke the sea line, Le Moan watched her take fire, sail after sail catching the light till on the newborn blue of the sea a golden ship lay heaving to the swell, flown round by golden gulls, whose voices came chanting against the breeze like the voices of ghostly sailormen hauling in chorus.

Then as she altered her helm and the wind shivered out of her canvas, a boat was dropped, it ran up a sail and Le Moan, her eyes shaded against the risen sun, saw the boat heading for the break. She ran back amongst the trees and stood for a moment, her hand pressed against her forehead, her mind in confusion, with one idea only fixed and steadfast—Taori.

Here was danger, recollection backed instinct, the powerful instinct of a mind that could tell the north from the south without star or compass, the coming changes of weather, the movement of the fish shoals—the instinct that had awakened her with fear clutching at her heart

Le Moan is a French song.