



The Gates of Morning/Book 1/Chapter 4

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CHAPTER IV

THE GATES OF MORNING

THE break on the reef of Karolin faced due east. Like a harbour mouth it stood, the only entrance to the lagoon, and through it at ebb and flood the sea raced dancing round the coral piers, pouring in and out swift as a river in spate.

When the sun rose he looked straight through the break, and the river of gold from him came level across the dancing waves of the outer sea, rose at the break, as a river rises to flood the coral piers and palms, passed through and spread on the quiet waters of the lagoon.

Mayay amyana—(the way—or the gates—of morning). Ages ago the name had been given to the break and the people who gave it were not speaking in the language of poetry, but of truth, for the one great thing that entered these gates was not the moon, now shrivelled, now full, now absent; nor the tides that altered in time and size; but the morning, eternal, changeless and triumphant.

This great sea gate was more to the people of Karolin than a way of ingress and outgoing; it had a significance deep, almost religious, and based on the experiences of a thousand years, for it was the way to an outer world of which they knew little or nothing, and through it came not only the tides of the sea and the first light of the sun, but also whatever they knew or had known of the world beyond.

The Spanish ship had come in, strange beyond belief, and canoes from the Paumotus had brought war through it—trouble came through the gates of morning no less than joy, and all the dead who had died at sea had passed through them never to return.

To Le Moan just as to Aioma and the others, the sea gate of Karolin was a way and a mystery, a road, yet almost a temple.

But through the gates of morning came other things than ships and men.

Sometimes on a dead calm night and generally at full of moon Karolin lagoon would wake to the sound of thunder, thunder shaking the coral and rolling back in echoes from the far reef, not the thunder of nature, but the thunder of big guns as though fleets were at war on the outer sea.

Then if you came out on the beach you would see the shells bursting in the lagoon, columns of spray rising ghostlike and dissolving in the moonlight whilst the gulls, absolutely indifferent and roosting, stirred never a feather, and the pirate crabs, white as ivory, stood like carved things or went on their business undisturbed.

Natives waking from their sleep, if they woke at all, would turn on the other side and close their eyes again. It was only the *Matura*.

Whip rays twenty feet broad and four feet thick, a school of them at play, flinging themselves ten feet in the air and falling back in a litter of foam and with a concussion striking the lagoon floor and the reef, circling, pursuing one another in their monstrous play, they would keep the echoes rolling beneath the stars, till, as if at a given signal, silence would fall and the great fleet put out to sea again bound for where no man could know.

Awakened from sleep one night, Dick came out on the beach with Katafa. Used to the *Matura* from childhood, she knew and told him, and standing there beside her he had to believe that all this thunder and disturbance was caused by fish.

It was his first real initiation into the wonders of Karolin and the possibilities of the lagoon water. Then, as time went on, in the intervals of the tree-felling, a business in which nearly all the women and boys took part, he would put out by himself to explore the depths and shallows of this great lake that was yet a sea in itself.

On the mind of Dick, almost unstained by the touch of civilization, yet vigorous and developed owing to his civilized ancestry, the world of Karolin exercised a fascination impossible to describe.

Sight, that bird of the soul, could roam here unchecked through the vast

ebb and flood the sea raced dancing round the coral piers, pouring in and out swift as a river in spate. When the sun rose he looked straight through the break, and the river of gold from him came level across the dancing waves of the outer sea, rose at the break, as a river rises to flood the coral piers and palms, passed through and spread on the quiet waters of the lagoon.