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Gods of Bastol

by H. P. Holt

THERE were four of us sitting in the cabin of the Tumbril, filling it with tobacco smoke—four men who had just sworn to cling together like the ivy on the old garden wall. And I fear we were not a very practical quartet, either. There was Thurston, the doctor, who could have charmed flocks of patients toward him in any civilized city, but cities bored him; there was Finny, assistant manager of the late, lamented Company that had just gone up in smoke and left us all stranded; Ingle, the Tumbril's chief engineer; and I had been mate of the Tumbril.

Finney's weakness was a delusion that he ought to be growing oranges in Florida. Ingle's acquaintance with bottled goods had retarded his advance on the road to fortune.

That morning, after a rusty old freighter had called at the island and dropped a bag of mail, Ditson, the resident manager of the Company, a very decent sort of a chap, had given us news of the crash. He also gave us the straight tip that there weren't any funds left, that everything had gone to the demnition bow-wows, and that the best thing we could do was to look after ourselves as well as we could.

The Tumbril belonged to the Company, and was used for pottering about. Her skipper got wind of the crash before the old mail-boat left again, so he packed up his traps and cleared out in her to seek pastures new. We four had drifted together on the Tumbril by common instinct to weigh up the situation. Ratoa, our island home, and also the home of the Company's affair, was so far from Broadway as the crow flies that that crow would never have arrived there even if it carried a spare pair of wings.

We four were all suffering from temporary financial embarrassment in consequence of the Company having failed to pay any salaries for two consecutive months. And because we had all been inseparable for so long while fortune had seemed to smile on us, we now solemnly swore to sink or swim together. It was heroic, for all we had to swim in was the broad Pacific Ocean, and our plight was thus peculiar. With the last of a bottle of rum distributed among four tumblers, we rose,

hoisted our glasses, and drank our pledge. After which, for some unaccountable reason, we felt better.

But that was not all. There was a complication, or rather a series of complications. One of them was the disappearance of Dimmick, the best of pals and the whitest man that ever drew breath. He was the Company's mechanical expert. The only fault we had to find about him was that he had a girl in the background, and that made him seem different from us. There wasn't a maiden on earth who would have shed a single tear if we four had all gone to glory. Dimmick didn't really bore us very much by talking about his girl, but, from what he did say we knew he had it badly. The description he gave of her sounded as if it would have fitted something straight out of heaven, but we discounted that because he was in love with her, and forgave him because, though we didn't say so, we all loved him.

Well, Dimmick's girl was a sea-captain's daughter and a distant relation of Ditson, the Company's resident manager. She used to travel with her father on the Flying Sylph a lot, and it was arranged that, as they were in that part of the South Pacific just then, she was to come to the island of Ratoa and stay there as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Ditson for a while. Naturally, Dimmick exhibited symptoms of hysterical insanity; but a couple of months ago news had come from Fiji that the Flying Sylph had been lost with all hands. There was no question about the authenticity of the information. The steamer had been found floating bottom up, and no trace had been found of anybody on board.

When he heard this Dimmick walked about dazed for a week and we thought he was going mad. He would have taken the next boat to Fiji, but there wasn't any boat to Fiji, and it wouldn't have done any good anyway. He tried to settle down to work, but it was a dismal failure, so the chief told him to take a vacation and fish. Dimmick was an enthusiastic fisherman. At first he refused, but we persuaded him into it, and so he went off in a ketch with two Kanakas who could have kept the vessel afloat in a typhoon.

They came back without him. That was on the day before the Company's crash. According to the Kanakas' story, Dimmick was in the ketch's small boat, angling for *tappi*, quite close to the island of Bastol, when he fell overboard and was drowned. If a Kanaka tells you a lie you generally don't know it, so when you are accustomed to them you assume they tell nothing but lies and you act accordingly. Therefore we had grave doubts whether Dimmick had died in the way the Kanakas said.

And now, on the mail steamer, came the staggering surprise. I won't call her an angel, because you couldn't kiss an angel if she'd let you. And I won't call her a fairy, because after all you know a fairy would make a most unsatisfactory and uncertain wife. She came off the gangway the minute the steamer tied up, with her wonderful eyes just ablaze with happy expectation. She looked all around and seemed a bit disappointed at not finding what she sought. Then Thurston, who has more self-possession than any of us, drifted up alongside of her, and went as white as a sheet when she asked for Tom Dimmick.

"Tom Dimmick!—oh—ah—yes," I heard him stutter. "Tom's not here just now. Are you—er—"

I could see he was anticipating the worst. Somehow I myself felt sure of it.

"I am Nancy Carew," she said.

That was the name of Dimmick's girl. And Dimmick's death had just been reported.

"Of course—of course." said Thurston, bending his helmet all out of shape, "You're going to stay with the Ditsons, aren't you? Pardon me, I'll slip up to their place and see

about a conveyance. Would you mind waiting here a moment?"

His face was like a piece of uncooked bread but he actually worked up a smile. Then he came over to me.

"Here's Dimmick's girl in the flesh, and if any of the follows blurt out the fact that he's dead it'll probably half kill her," he said in a low voice. "For God's sake pass the word around, quick, to be careful. Maybe we can break it gently—or—oh, I don't know!"

The color was coming back to his face, but he was a badly worried man. While I slipped along and told the rest of the boys, he shot up to the resident manager's house and put the matter squarely up to little Mrs. Ditson. She was a dear soul and a jewel but she was no fool and saw the folly of hiding the bad news too long.

"Not a word about it this afternoon," she declared. "We'll let her understand that he has gone fishing. Then somehow to-night I will try to tell her."

And so Nancy Carew landed at Ratoa under the impression that the man she loved would be with her next day; but Mrs. Ditson, with a task in hand that nobody else on the island would have cared to tackle, did her part bravely and gently. They both had a good cry, and when we saw Nancy Carew next day—the day of the crash—we voted severally and collectively that she was the pluckiest damsel between Siam and Seattle. She was very pale and seemed to have grown thin since the previous day, but she kept a stiff upper lip, and absolute adoration for her came to us all quite naturally.

The mystery of her appearance after the loss of her father's steamer was explained simply enough. The Flying Sylph, which, by the way, was fully insured, struck a mass of floating wreckage, had her plates stove in, and began to founder. The crew took to the boats and were picked up by a vessel which did not touch port for a couple of weeks. Hence the erroneous belief that all had perished.

They landed eventually at Fiji, where the girl's father took a temporary job as shore superintendent for a shipping company, and when Miss Carew learned that a trading steamer was leaving there for Ratoa she gleefully sought that opportunity of paying us a visit, without knowing we even dreamed that her father's vessel had come to grief.

Meanwhile we four had found sorrow of our own, though sorrow of a very small order compared with hers, in the demise of the Company. We had just gone through the ceremony with the rum and sprawled in our respective seats once more when Thurston thumped the table with his fist.

"I've got an idea—an idea about Dimmick," he said.

"Well?" Finney invited.

"If he'd been here and alive he would have been the first one among us to suggest that pledge, wouldn't he?"

"But he isn't here," drawled Ingle.

Thurston whipped round to face the ship's engineer.

"*Are you sure he's dead?*" the doctor asked slowly; and there was a queer silence.

"Why, I dunno," replied Ingle at length. "I've wondered. He probably is dead, but there's no believing these darned dagoes."

"And I've wondered too," declared Thurston, "especially since-since Miss Carey landed here. It's a damnable, situation for her. There's a mystery about the thing, to my mind."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" queried Finney, a little more awake than usual.

"First of all," said Thurston, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "the Kanakas swore that Dimmick fell out of the small boat and was drowned, but they came back without the small boat. What happened to it? They say it disappeared. That sounds fishy, because the

sea must have been fairly calm. Then, Dimmick wasn't a bad swimmer. He could have kept afloat for fifteen minutes at least, unless, of course, he got tangled up, or a shark grabbed him. Also, this happened near the island of Bastol, and we don't *know* Dimmick never got ashore there. As far as I can make out from the Kanakas, they weren't so far off the island."

"Well?" said Finney, sitting bolt upright.

"I propose," said Thurston calmly, "that we run over to Bastol in the old Tumbril and see if we can find any trace of him."

"I'm game," Finney replied.

"Count me in," agreed Ingle. "We've coal a plenty aboard for the trip. As there's no Company left I don't know who owns this boat now, but that's a small matter."

"What about navigation?" Thurston shot at me.

"That's easy," I replied. "Bastol is about three hundred miles away, to the so'west."

"Then we'll start now," said Thurston decisively; and nobody questioned the point.

But it took three hours to get steam up, and after a consultation we had decided to tell Miss Carew what we were up to—to tell her there was nothing for her to base optimism on, but that we meant to have a look around in the neighborhood of Bastol. To our surprise Nancy Carew immediately packed a small bag and announced her intention of going with us. She agreed that it was a hopeless sort of task, but said if there remained a single stone worth overturning she meant to have a hand in the overturning of it. Also, naturally, we took with us the two Kanakas who had gone with Dimmick on his fishing excursion.

The clanking Tumbril reached Bastol in thirty-six hours. Up to the time its shores loomed up, not a word had been said to the Kanakas about our destination, but the moment they recognized the island they began to chatter together in their own lingo. Our plan was to drop anchor near the beach, and when Thurston asked the blacks to point out the spot where Dimmick had been lost, their manner gave us the first clew that something peculiar was in the wind. One of them indicated a place about a mile to the west of Bastol, but, prompted by his companion, he then pointed away out to sea and began to exhibit signs of fear.

"They're lying, and lying badly for Kanakas," declared Thurston. "There's something wrong, you may depend on it. However, I'm going ashore. Meanwhile," he added, reaching for the siren lanyard and hanging on to it, "if Dimmick's alive and on the island it'll do him good to hear this."

The wail of the siren rose piercingly, fell, rose again and ended in five long ear-splitting shrieks. It was the signal with which the fussy Tumbril had always announced, from afar, her return to Ratoa; and it was unmistakable.

Then, for a considerable time, we scanned the coast-line, hoping against hope for some answering signal. Again the siren screamed. There was something gruesome about it all. I noticed that Thurston glanced more than once from the skimmering beach to the two Kanakas.

"I don't pretend to understand the inside of niggers' heads any better than the next fellow," he said, "but those two chaps are guilty of something, and the Lord only knows what! If I find they've done Dimmick in they'll have about five minutes left to live."

Nancy Carew would have joined the landing party, but Thurston would not hear of it, being distinctly uncertain what kind of reception the natives might offer. One of us had to stay behind with her, and Ingle who had recently sprained his knee, was chosen for that purpose.

When the two Kanakas were ordered to man the rowboat, they refused point blank to go any way near Bastol. I took them each by

an ear and was prepared to deal with them none too gently, when they howled out that Bastol was full of devil-devils.

"Better leave them alone," Thurston suggested "They'd only be a nuisance."

We each took a revolver and in five minutes reached the sandy beach, where we were not altogether surprised to find the remains of the ketch's boat. It had a jagged hole in the bottom. But what did surprise us was a clearly defined trail of footprints in the sand above high-water mark.

For the footprints were those of a man who wore shoes!

"Dimmick wasn't drowned, evidently," exclaimed Finney. "But why the dickens—"

"Come on you fellows" urged the practical-minded Thurston. "There's a trail here going into the center of the island. Let's see if we can follow it."

Shouting at the top of our lungs every few minutes, we advanced about half a mile on rising ground, the footprints being visible where the surface was soft. Then they disappeared altogether, but there were others. And those others were made by feet that had never wore a shoe!

Though none of us said so at the time, each feared that Dimmick must have fallen into the hands of savages and been murdered, and we felt a common desire to hand out punishment to the natives there. But none appeared until we reached the top of the hill. Suddenly from behind a tree stepped an almost naked nigger, and before we had time to realized what he was up to, he hurled a long spear into our midst. It grazed Finney's shoulder and then became embedded in a tree behind him.

Simultaneously our three revolvers cracked, and the black, with a yell, disappeared. But immediately afterward, two other spears shot through the air and then half a dozen. By a series of miracles we dodged them and, dropping into the long grass, blazed away at the natives, who showed themselves more freely as soon as we got to earth. Several of them were hit, and the rest, either bewildered by the effect of firearms, took to their heels.

We lay still for a minute or two, wondering what might happen next, when a faint voice reached us. It seemed muffled and distant, but we leaped to our feet, knowing it must be Dimmick. Answering with a roar in concert, we moved away to the right, from which direction the sound seemed to have come. I was at Thurston's heels, with Finney close up behind, when the doctor gave a cry of warning and, clutching at a sapling, just managed to avoid blundering headlong down into a yawning chasm. He was still balanced perilously when I reached for his coat and pulled him back to safety. As I did so we heard Dimmick again. He was at the bottom of the chasm. "Hello!" he called.

"Where are you?" I bellowed back, going close to the edge, and peering down but unable to see far on account of the foliage.

"Can you hear me?" came from Dimmick.

"Yes. How can we get down there?" I replied. There seemed to be no way of descending the edges, which were apparently almost sheer.

"Don't try," Dimmick called up. "You'll have to make a rope somehow. Plenty of vines growing there. Fasten one end to a rock and lower it. You'll want about sixty or eighty feet."

Already we were slashing away from the trees close by us long vine stems which were strong enough to lift a horse. "And say," Dimmick added in a cheery voice, "if you happen to have a plate of beef-steak and onions handy you might drop it down now."

It took me the best part of an hour to fashion a cable which I felt sure could be trusted, and when the end was lowered it was

just long enough. Dimmick called out that he was beginning to climb, and we waited anxiously until, grunting and panting, he came over the end. We helped him to safety without a word, waiting for him to recover his breath, for it had been a hard fight out of the chasm.

"Did those devils throw you down there?" Finney asked.

"No. The rope I made broke, and so did my neck, nearly, when I fell. Gee, it's good to see you fellows! When I heard the old Tumbril squeaking though, I thought there was a chance you might find me. Then I heard shots, so I knew you were around and had met my friends the natives. You shouldn't hurt 'em. They're not a bad bunch, in a way; they don't go in for any of this torturing business, I mean. It's straight-away killing and eating with them. At least that's what I understood, though they don't know any *beche-de-mer* lingo, and I only knew an odd word or two of their dialect. They were saving me up for the full moon feast, I gathered."

"Well, let's get out of this." urged Thurston, "or we'll be at the feast yet. We've got a surprise for you on the Tumbril."

Dimmick looked up quickly, a wild hope shining in his eyes; but he checked a question that sprang to his lips, for it seemed so futile. Then he smiled somewhat wearily, thinking there was some joke.

"Let me rest a minute or two." he said. "I've had nothing to eat for days."

"How did you *get* down there?" asked Thurston.

"Fell down. Didn't I tell you once! The vines broke."

"What on earth were you going into that hole for?"

"I'll tell you," Dimmick said. "The niggers here are heathen. By that I mean they make their own gods—carved wooden things that they stick up in their huts and worship. And they think those little wooden gods are perfectly marvelous, until something goes wrong, such as when the man who carved it breaks his leg or if his new wife turns out a failure. Then he just makes a new god and throws the old one down into this hole. They keep the place sacred to the memory of gods for which they have no further use.

"Well, when you started kicking up a row with the Tumbril's whistle, all the niggers got together and left me kind of lonely and I broke out of the hut they'd fastened me in; and I made a bee-line for the gods' hole—"

As he was speaking, a spear glistened in the sun for a moment in its rapid flight through the air and narrowly missed me. We fired half a dozen shots into the trees.

"See that rock?" said Dimmick, pointing to a jagged peak that appeared above water now the tide was low. "That must be the one I ran into, tearing the bottom out of the boat. I had to swim from it to the beach, and those darned Kanakas wouldn't come anywhere near. They think it's full of devil-devils. They hung about till next day and then disappeared. I'd have swam off to the ketch but there were altogether too many sharks around."

We were half-way out to the Tumbril by now, and the three of us were bursting to tell Dimmick about somebody who was waiting on board for him, but we intended to save it as a surprise. Dimmick was sitting with his back to the steamer.

"You haven't told us," said Thurston, trying to look as if nothing unusual was going to happen, "what in the name of Pete made you bolt into that hole?"

"Oh. I didn't finish, did I?" he remarked. "These natives take no end of trouble in making their wooden gods, and they finish 'em off with a pair of eyes. I thought maybe if I could get down and dig the eyes out of a few dozen—"

Dimmick dipped into each of his bulging coat pocket, and fetched out two hands full of

virgin pearls.

"It was a bit dark down there, and I broke my penknife digging 'em out," he said, "but I think I got all there were. Aren't they beauties? Don't they make your mouth water? I'd never have got away with it, though, but for you fellows, so we'll share the proceeds."

The little boat drew alongside the Tumbril, and Dimmick, glancing up, saw leaning over the rail the loveliest specimen of womanhood that ever drew breath in the South Seas.

For half a minute he didn't speak. Pearls worth a fortune trickled through his fingers and dropped into the bottom of the boat. Then a queer sound came from the back of his throat and we made way for him as he dashed over the side up the rope ladder on to the Tumbril.