

THOSE WHO WANDER ARE LOST

By Titaÿna

Translated by Janet Lee

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I don't like adventure novels.

I write this novel with no concern for what people will think of it, for I've drowned my vanity . . . I have nothing left but pride.

For several years now I have slid in and out of the shadow that despair casts as it descends the staircase of the too-long days. I had lost everything: my faith, my heart, my family, my money.

I found myself in Morocco one evening. It was hot that night and on the sofa across mine lay a man I'd only just met:

"I've ruined everything," I said to him. "Love? I couldn't love now without an ulterior motive. Money? I'll never have it, nor does it interest me. Talent? I have none, and I don't know how to express what I'm feeling or what thinking. My life is shot to hell."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-five in two years."

"Let's meet again in ten."

Suicide wouldn't have me. Politics, even anarchy, revolted me with its conformism and ambition.

Adventure was the only thing left to me. I decided to try it.

I parted for Oceania with a thousand francs, two suitcases, and the resolve to never return to Europe.

No one was with me on the dock in Marseille.

I was alone.

I left without leaving an address behind.

When I disembarked in Tahiti, I had five hundred francs left.

For one hundred francs a month, I rented a hut in the district, and I dove into the lagoon and caught the first meal of an adventuress.

I indulge no superstition or religion. I detest derision, and irony revolts me, it's so easy. I'd been the derisive one, the ironic one — but in another life, when I was in France.

THE CLOWN-BISHOP

There wasn't a single European in the region. My living space was protected by a wall of bamboo that did not guard me from the eyes of passerby. On the floor, little pebbles polished by the sea, over my head, a roof of coconut tree leaves. A hammock, a straw chair, my bags. My meals were cooked out in the open by a Marquesan who I paid five sou a day. She would scale and slice the fish that I'd eat raw, would peel pineapple, would set to cooking the mayoré or the fei in the earth, then she would sleep.

"I'm thirsty Tahia!"

She would go off into the forest towards the huts, return, holding out to me a split coconut.

"I'm hungry Tahia!"

With her melodious voice she would call out to the band of boys playing in the river. They would rise from the bank, pareos wrapped around their torsos, leaving at my feet shrimp, river crustaceans with wildly large legs whose shells we spritzed with lemon and cracked between our teeth.

I'd swapped my European clothes for a pareo. So dressed, the local girls would accompany me there where the river plunged into the sea. A coconut tree bent over by a hurricane served as our diving board. The water was as clear as our joy and we would play in its petaled surface until the evening hour breeze dried its perfume from our skin. We would make our way towards the song of the ukuleles and our feet left in the black sand a shimmering impression.

In the morning, the sun rose from the sea and stretched across me, whose caress I fled instead for a spring where hibiscus flowers dove. My thirst and hunger satiated by coconut milk, I followed the fishermen. Armed with a harpoon, I dove, but the fire gobies evaded me with ease and I surfaced with but some spiny star fish that carpeted the sea bed. Had I stepped on them with my bare foot, the poisonous wound from their spikes would have killed me. I was not especially attached to living but still when I threw them to the sand I watched their bellies move in and out with fear and disgust.

The sun dried my hair with a heat that crackled the wood of the pirogues, and transformed the pandan trees into a bundle of glaives. I found myself a tree's shadow, had a bit of fruit and slept.

At the hour the shadows of the coconut trees grow long, I joined the women in the river taking their evening swim. My legs were scrapped up high from crossing the pineapple groves.

The five hundred francs that were to last me the rest of the month disappeared from my suitcase and I am surprised by my indifference. If *something* of mine had been stolen instead, I would have wallowed in my misfortune and the thief, moved by my pain, would have returned their spoil... but money? The thief is surely a boy who slipped into my hut while I was out. He and his friends will lose themselves

in an orgy of alcohol and ukulele song, while the girls, drawn by the music and their laughter, will lay in the shadows and wait.

I mourned for a moment the carefree days I would have had left. I need to find work in this leisurely land. What will I live on tomorrow? I thought as I lay down for my nap. The heat puts me to sleep.

This hut where my hammock swung was lent to me by a certain Français de Papeete.

“I never have the time to go there myself,” he’d told me. “It’s where Stevenson used to live. You’ll be well there.”

I was well there. I was alone there. The island before my eyes contorted itself and I could see the ocean and the valley, the waves and the river, the forest and the mountains, all at once.

An old chief, who gave me fish in exchange for gin, explained:

“Do you see that mountain? Our kings had once been giants, as you can see by the stone statues they left in the valleys. But we had a king much larger still. Since no stone matched his height, he raised this mountain, his equal.”

There where *In the South Seas* was written I gathered what remained of what was to be had. There where Stevenson had abandoned his preoccupation, there where he’d also realized that his adventure was in pieces, my life also stood still.

At the welcoming dinner the Taotire organized for me when I arrived, the chief speechified:

“If we adopt you by giving you a Tahitian name, according to custom, why take it? Tii-Tayna ! You take the name of two plants whose story I will tell you.

“*Tii* is the name of that bush whose roots go deep. Its bunched blooms have no scent and its pointy leaves have the power to exorcise the devil. The missionaries use it to ward off our idols. In times of war, those outcast and defeated fleeing in their pirogues brought with them the cooked roots of the *Tii*, for it keeps forever and ensured they’d something to eat. The deeply-rooted *Tii*, unnoticed and rarely sought out in times of joy, *Tii*, a sure friend for those who’ve no more faith in men, who in her place their last hope.

“*Tayna*, on the other hand, is the name of that white and heavily-scented flower that young men put in their hair or slip into their hei. It is, along with the tiaré, the most precious of the island flowers. It is but a thing of beauty, fragrance, joy. As pleasure’s companion, she wilts away as quickly as he. But her life, at least, was nothing but joy...

“May what fate that units in your foreign name the root of fidelity to a fragrant bloom bring you back to us when you ache for our Oceania beaches in your own land.”

On the boat that had brought me here, some merchant marine officers told me:

“There is no such thing as adventure... Oceania is not what it’s cracked up to be!... the congregation of exotic love is composed of a handful of birds, always the same, who climb aboard and dance in the cabarets in the ports. Of royal blood more or less, rotten more or less, just as corrupt as anyone is anywhere, they sing café-concert songs, they’re not beautiful even. Was Tahiti born of a novelist’s imagination? You who live on the island, see for yourself.”

Weeks had passed and, at last, a telegram arrives in Tautira for me three days late. “We’ll be in Papeete May 21.”

Just as well since I don’t have any more money, I must go back to the city, like a wolf forced out of the forest by hunger. I went to Papeete and climbed aboard the ship.

“If you’re free tonight, I’m taking you along, I’ve won them over. Cars will be by to pick you up around five.”

The sailors got in the Torpedos parked along the marina, taking a seat on the springless cushions, and we left Papeete. From the route that ran along the strand, we saw the blue greens of the lagoon between the trunks of the coconut trees and the land crabs running obliquely ahead. The heat of the day lifted in the wind of our velocity, the smell of vanilla lingered, drying off the sweat of the afternoon.

In an open hut, some women were dancing, pulling back their hair to the rhythm of the ukuleles. On the floor, some musicians were singing with a sadness that even their pleasure could not dispel. On the floor, hibiscus and tiaré blossoms shaken from their crowns were dying. Mixed with their fragrance was the peppery stench of the punch. Arms and garlands wound around each other, sticky with sweat and humidity.

We were taken by the greenery and the music. Bodies shaking with a dance contained at the hips and the knees grazed us, and fell at our feet. Empty bottles, thrown into the sea from the awnings sounded against the rocks. The sea contained so much light that I could see the beasts in the water.

With some cries the natives decide to leave the dwelling. Sailors and women pile into the cars with supplied with rum, and the tender calls of farewell and the song of the guitars rang through the night.

Several women were waiting for us at the side of the road: it was Turia, Tétoua, Réva, Hina, and other bathing and fishing companions. Though they’d come all the way from Taotira, from Taonae and even from Morea, they didn’t dare venture all the way to Papeete where the missionaries forbade the native’s paréo.

We were greeted with cries of joy, the boys harmonized their voices, two girls danced one two steps, and Turia improvised:

Here they are our white friends

They have the booze with them

Their smell is sour

We will give them flowers...

With more aboard, our chariots disappeared into the night.

The road turned sharply and the tires skidded over a rut. Heads bent, the drivers pitched us into a clearing cut across by a shadow puppet wood. The palms of the coconut trees over our heads, creased the clouds.

I jumped to the ground, everyone followed.

Suddenly a woman cried out, covered her head with her hands, and her companions screamed in terror, their faces upturned to sky.

“We’re on Pomare ground, we’re cursed, this land is infected with leprosy!”

We had to get back to our friends on the road, frozen with fear. The engines turned over against our silence, all but for the courage of one boy singing low.

We thought we found night’s tranquility at the far end of a bay. Bunches of leaves were lit to ward off devils. Dancers stepped forward before the flames drunk with a fury that rolled back their eyes and shook their stomachs.

The rum was passed around.

Their bodies arched, their faces lifted towards the sky, the women danced crying out, falling to the ground, continuing to dance in their shoulders and the bases of their spines. Their arms stretched forth. Couples slid away from the circle of flame, and their lovemaking moaned to the rhythm of the sea.

“Away with you dogs! You are on the ground of the Good Lord! Away with you!”

A protestant pastor had appeared, blacker than the night, a crucifix in his hand.

“Cursed! You will be cursed! The flames of hell will consume your bowels, and the souls of your ancestors will never find rest. Away with you dogs!”

This corner of the island belonged to “The Mission,” and once more, we had to fly, spurred on by the women’s terror.

“You know,” Turia whispered to me, her voice trembling with fear and unmade love, “The priests are all-powerful you know. Last year, they brought death upon Maranu and rats to the cacao trees!”

We came to rest at the side of a river, far from the law. The women slid into the water to wash the sweat from their skin. Their naked forms materialized on the moon-white rocks. They dove, slipped, played, disappeared. The lapping water swallowed a laugh, beneath the trees a moan undulated, making ripples in the air.

Love forgot the *tupapaus* (the revenants), the cursed lands and the priests.

Seated on a rock, next to some accordion players, I closed my eyes on the Loneliness. I tried to not think of the next day. With or without money, it appeared grey to me.

I sent several articles for publication in France and I took photographs for money. I sold “island vistas” for twenty francs on passenger vessels and, for five francs, “portraits” to the Chinese.

I met Jean Mars in Papeete’s hospital. He too, in his way, had set out for an Adventure. He had just been picked up half dead in the wake of a pearl divers’ rebellion in Tuamotu. I found him laying in a room guarded by a soldier in the doorway.

“Hello!”

One of his eyes opened a little beneath the wrappings, cracked a smile with what of his mouth was visible, then slipped into oblivion. It wasn’t until two weeks later, on a hot afternoon punctuated with rainstorms, that I heard his story.

“Why did I choose to become a clown? I can hardly say. When I was sixteen, I was living in Angoulême, where I was raised, and where my parents and grandparents had died and left me a shop, a tutor, and the thirst for the adventures that they were unable to have. At school, where I was head of my class in gymnastics, my friends would call me Footit, would have me pulling faces, would rile my daredevilries in the alleys. A passing circus sealed my fate — for I followed it.

“What my life of poverty and glitter was, in the hamlets, capitals, the Swiss cantons, I’ll leave to your imagination. I changed my course, my name, my lover each time. It’s possible I might have had a career if I’d stuck with one troupe, but shove off, all it took was the glimpse of an exit, a tour, a voyage, for the money, job, friends, mistresses to fade to the background, and I’d leave. And so I became a member of the wanderers’ troupe who, from one agency to the next, accepts a miserly fee lives for a month on what was earned in eight days.

“I was in London when Opportunity presented itself: a man by the name of John Smith was recruiting for a Far-West circus. I came aboard. For three years, our circus wandered from ranch to ranch entertaining the savages of the West. But as cities were established and grew, the spectators deserted the womb of our tent for the cinema where pure and blond women surrendered to their lovers in white columned palaces. Our circus emigrated, and to pay for our trip to New Zealand and Australia, we thought thought we’d tour the Pacific islands. And so our pauperly troupe disembarked one fine day in Papeete: tightrope walkers in cable-knits and caps, an ageless horseback rider, a tamer followed by a bear who’d been panting since we reached the Tropics. What Tahiti had to offer was exhausted in eight days. The infrequency of the *SS* made relocation impossible. It was a real mess: our boss found himself a position as a kitchen assistant on a cargo ship, the horseback rider married the mestizo schooner captain, and the bear died of heat.

“I found myself one night on the beach. I didn’t know anyone, I had nothing to live on. I was drawn to The Chinese Hut along the road, for there the alcohol was flowing and the glow of the lamp was so soft. This is where I met Paddy, a bandit who sailed from island to island, for mysterious assignments.

‘A clown, Paddy said, is something of an actor. Can you act?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ok, listen.’

“I listened, I listened for awhile, and then accepted the sea rover’s proposition... I was hungry.

“Shortly after we’d lifted anchor for a cluster of small islands beyond the maritime trade routes where no priest had yet established a church. Our sailboat crossed the channel and the islanders gathered, shouting joyfully at the water’s edge to listen to the captain’s speech:

‘Men!’ he called out in Maori, ‘Most of you have been purified with holy water, and are now children of the White Man’s God. A favor is in store for you today. The highest chief of the highest religious order is come before you. This sacred being, that white men approach trembling, has humbled himself in God’s love to come before you. Kneel, fisherman! Bring your goods to this divine minister. Within him is power over death, the power to multiply your harvest, to heal your sick and to calm the storms.’

“At that moment I rose on deck. With a movement of my arms, I blessed the savages. My sleeves billowed around my arms, a cross shimmered on my chest, my collar lifted my chin to the clouds. I lay my hands on the heads of the sick, officiated marriages, settled disputes. Their offerings accumulated at my feet: copra, mother-of-pearl, shells, statues, weapons or sculptures. Laden with treasures wrested from the hands of poverty, our sailboat receded as I, standing next to the mainmast, sent benedictions from the heavens.

“One day, amongst the crowd, there was a pearl diver. He approached, bowed to the ground, and held out to me the most beautiful pink pearl ever in the memory of man that he’d found at the bottom of the lagoon. Blood flooded my cheeks at the sight of it, and overcome by emotion, I forgot my part. In a single bound on a sack of copra, I sent a lord bishop somersaulting through the air! At the sight, the natives rose, a hesitation hovered and suspicion loomed. Gods should be majestic. These neophytes refused to believe in an acrobat-priest. Someone hurled a stone that I caught in the shoulder. Gathering my robe, I ran towards the ship under a hail of coconuts – I would have died a prophet’s death had it not been for the speedy cast off.

“The lesson should have been learned, but the appetite for more was greater. Three days later, we dropped anchor in sight of a small neighboring island. As soon as our dinghy was pulled ashore, we should have been on our guard, for the natives’ curiosity was tempered with jeers and recoil. Accustomed to success, we performed our routine without paying mind to our audience. We were served a meal that was want for nothing, not even vin d’orange. As a priest mustn’t partake of alcohol, a carafe of water was placed next to me. My boss filled it up with gin, since I’d had enough of sitting by abstinent while the other chaps got blotto. Had I had much more to drink that day than I usually did? Did someone mix a drug into my food? In any event, when one of the servers passed close to me, I slid my hand beneath the straw of her skirt and pinched her cheeks. It was a disaster. A priest should never pinch a woman’s ass in in public. What he does is have her come to his hut at night under pretext of bringing fruit, and there, he can treat her like a mortal while talking to her of God, but without witnesses. The natives know that the priests, even the ones from Ithaca, are mindful of appearances: if they live with one or two women, they

call them sisters and give them duties to carry out. But to pinch the ass of a woman in public...no God could ever allow for this.

“A revolt broke out. My boss was killed by the swing of an axe and I was left for dead on the sand. Panic over the murder spread from island to island. You have perhaps learned of the death of a special agent, the massacre of some policemen and the whole ballyhoo. Troops were sent to rescue the survivors, which was me. And here I am.”

“How does it end?”

“Two year in prison probably, but here prisoners work outside, it’s not hard!”

“And after?”

“After? I give it up. A clown. It was good for a time. I’ll return to Angoulême, I’ll set about recovering my shop. And if not, I’ll certainly find something else.”

Jean Mars’s adventure was over.

I received two thousand francs from *Lectures pour Tous*, to whom I’d sent two articles and several photos. Once more I left Papeete to explore the district.

I’ve been sans letters and newspapers since I left France, and I don’t write to anyone. And to who anyway? This hut suits me because it is out of the way.

Furnish it? ... with what? With the curve of a hip... with the emptiness of memory...No.

The bamboo partitions are papered with maps. Are portraits more touching? It would only take me six weeks to get to Sydney. There you’re paid for your writing in pounds and the port harbors cargo and mail. Could I not continue towards Bali? The eyes of babes there are shaped like tulips and every hour the rain drops in petals on the women’s breasts. Or will I go down rather towards the Austral Islands and there destroy the very idea of me.

To leave... to leave again...

What about money? That’s a fortunate thing, what about money... thus Europeans travel.

Where will I go?

Manu has come to live with me. Her fifteen years don’t know anything beyond the river or the lagoon, joy or song. Covered in silver by the moon light drifting over the coconut trees, she sleeps on the veranda. Every day she weaves a crown of hibiscus for me, looks for fruit in the woods, catches crabs in the water, climbs trees without grasping the trunks, and glides after the wavering wake of blue fish.

The days follow the nights, the shadow and light of an invisible beam roving. I lose track. In some years, I’ll be there still, unmoving, in the dark light dark light. Myself or someone else: the coconut trees bud and die, the forest is unchanging.

I found Hino sleeping close to Manu one morning, curled up like a wild thing at the foot of a tree. At the sound of my step, she sat up, moved her hair out of her face, smiled at me and gestured to her companion,

“This is Hino.”

They both live with me now and, at night, Hino pulls ashore our pirogue, like a brown arrow.

Tell of our life in this corner of the world forgotten by men? Could one tell the story of a ray of sun, of a waterfall, of a rock or the blues of the water? We are there, like the rain, like the sand, like the sea. That’s all.

Hino fishes, Manu sings: the two of them love each other, animals healthy and free, and I am close to them.

At the end of the day, Hino dives into the emerald bay, breaking the shimmering surface of the water, but the large gentle motions of his arms would soon bring the pieces back together in one placid now still mirror over which his golden body moved slowly without a ripple.

In my pirogue, Manu wrung out her hair and stared at the clouds. If she were to turn her gaze to the water, she would see a sky just like the other towards which Hino was effortlessly flying as our eyes followed him across the blue and red clouds of blooming coral.

The air was warm, the water was warm, the gardenia on my cheek was warm.

Manu suddenly slid into the water towards her lover and I saw her as she chased him through the brilliant branches. Then in one movement she was coming back up to me and the water in her wake was tinged pink. Her ankle had split open against the coral.

The poison of the animal-flower had crept into her veins, for Manu’s wound didn’t healed. She gnawed at her flesh, ate away at her golden skin, vacantly.

Hino brought her mysteriously gathered plants and livers from fish caught beyond the reef. But neither his tenderness, nor his science, helped. Manu shook with fever on her mat, and no longer recognized us.

“It is *mariri*’,” Hino explained.

One morning, like a bird, Manu was dead.

Looking over the lagoon, grasses and orchids overgrew her grave. When their petals opened to me, I thought of their roots.

Hino spent several nights wailing to scare off the *tapapaus*. He lit fires to drive away the spirits and played his ukulele to quell his fear.

Then he disappeared.

I remained alone until one dawn when, on my veranda, I found as I once had two bodies intertwined. Hino sat up and smile at me and gestured to his companion,

“This is Poma.”

¹ A spirit of death.

Life goes on, the water of the lagoon laps, the coconut trees bend beneath the wind, the birds fall
aslant from one branch to the other.

Hino fished, Poma sang, the two loved each other.

I knew that one day I would leave them, that they wouldn't see me go, and that my journey would
continue.

THE DUKE

I met the Duke of F. while in Panama visiting a French prostitute. As she was telling me stories of the Panama Canal, a young man lifted the drape serving as the door.

“Excuse me,” he said, before she could interject. “Are you a certain Améline Lina?”

“It would seem so. Why?”

“A friend gave me your address. He told me, if you ever traverse the Canal, go visit Améline Lina, she’s the most beautiful whore in the region.”

The young man found a place to sit. His silk shirt was sticking to his chest and sweat made little rivulets on his face where wandered his colorless eyes. He was drunk, and not yet acclimated to the tropics. His presence bothered me, I got up and left. He followed me into the street, matching his step to mine in the night’s heat.

“Goodnight,” I said brusquely. “I’m going to bed.”

“Goodnight, I’m staying in the quarter.”

He’d turned his back to me and I went on alone to the hotel.

I’d taken the train from Cristobal the next morning that runs along the Panama Canal up to the capital. A dispute was had in the station as the train was leaving, but it was so hot that I didn’t dare look by the car’s door the reason for the brouhaha. Two passengers seated in my compartment exclaimed in English, “It’s a French pig getting into the negro car.”

Once in Panama, I saw the “French pig” emerge from the compartment reserved for Blacks. He waved at me from afar. It was the young man who’d entered Améline Lina’s place the evening before.

“I missed my boat,” he said to me under his breath. “I need to catch it. I left the quarter at four last night for the ship. The moment it was about to raise the anchor to cross the Canal, I realized that I’d left my pen at Améline’s. I went back for it and I missed the depart.”

“A pen of some value?”

“I bought it for fifteen francs in Guadeloupe.”

“Which boat?”

“The *Andromède* of the Compagnie des messageries maritimes. A merchant ship of sorts. I’m leaving for Oceania, I absolutely must catch her in Panama; my papers, my bags, my money, everything is aboard. Are you thirsty maybe?”

We’d come upon a small café situated by the Pacific as we were talking. A Panamanian boy had two chairs dusted off for us. Seagulls cried out from the peaks of the waves, a ship was passing several miles off. The boy’s eyes blinked in its direction.

“A French ship, the *Andromède*!”

“Good god!”

All wasn’t lost. But we had to act quickly.

“Do you have a motorboat maybe?”

“No señor, but I know where...”

Fifteen minutes of haggling. At long last a boat was taking us to the *Andromède* who was moving along at her eight knots.

“Has it been some time you left France?” I asked him, to say something.

“Me? I don’t know it. Family troubles. My forebears had ruled in France, so, you understand, we were thrown out of the country. I fought in the Belgium army. These days I’m here and there. I live for the most part in Spain. The king was my cousin. But my mother wants me doing something, so I’m heading to Oceania where seemingly the coconut trees grow themselves.”

The *Andromède* grew before us. The crew’d spotted us, the ship had reduced her speed, a ladder had been thrown over the length of the hull to which our pilot, a bare-chested métis, pulled expertly alongside. Standing at the bow, the duke of F. caught the ladder with one hand, with the other tendered what seemed to be payment to our pilot, scrambled up the rungs hastily, and waved us goodbye from the deck.

“Carajo!” shouted the half-blood.

He showed what had been handed to him as payment: four knicker buttons, a ticket to the cinema, some unknown thing.

I shrugged by shoulders.

“I’ll pay you,” I told him. And to myself I added, “As for F., we’ll meet again.”

We met again in Tahiti. As I was coming back to my hut one night, I noticed that a visitor had been in while I was out: the wheels had left their impression in the sand. As was custom in the region, I never closed the doors or the windows, but Poma would sleep next to Hino on the veranda. When I entered the shower closet, I noticed an empty tin on a plank.

“My powder!”

My powder, a medicinal powder for insect bites, had disappeared.

“Poma, was someone here?”

“Yes. A friend of yours. The car he had broke down. I gave him some water and he pushed. Then he looked for powder and spilled the entire tin and rubbed it on the tires.”

“What?”

“He drank the whiskey.”

“Who was this?”

Poma pulled out a piece of paper folded twice over from her pareo. I read: *F. with such regret he missed you!*

I lucked upon his absence as well when I presented myself at his hotel.

“The duke of F. has sent me for a hundred francs,” I told the métis managing the hotel.

He knew me and had no difficulty tending me the money in his client's name. In exchange, I gave him a note that read: *Receipt of one hundred francs for: rental of a motorboat in Panama, eighty francs; a powder tin in Tahiti, twenty francs.*

When I saw F. again at a café, he came up to me and told me without preamble, "You're just like my mother."

The duke of F., who the people of the island simply called The Duke, lived in out in the bush in a stilt cabin. By a ladder without rails, you enter the room where he lived with three women on never-swept floorboards, through which you could see the ground below. I never understood what charm they might find in living with him — he wasn't giving them money. I think that they hoped to come by some, stealing from his pockets perhaps, all devil-may-care enough to be happy with rides in his car. For he had a car, a Ford missing its cushions, purchased from a Chinese dealer. He parked it under his house between the stilts. It was always full of mice, spiders and crabs, and drove in stops and starts.

F. had caused a scandal in Papeete by taking his constitutional in the nude but for a loincloth. If it hadn't been for his title, his family and friends in high places, the authorities would have expelled him, but the diplomatic channels had appealed to the governor's good graces, who in turn settled on sending report after report to his minister of state.

Word of "The Duke" would reach me from time to time in passing.

"Come for lunch Friday," he wrote to me one day, "Be there at noon."

I arrived at the hour. He was swimming in a spot infested with sharks. His three wives were sleeping under a mango tree.

Around one o'clock he asked me:

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Well that's splendid. I found a river with fish."

He handed me a harpoon and a net, then set about fishing. One of the wives dove and caught shrimp under the rocks by hand. F. was in such form it surprised me. He handled the harpoon with the ease of a native, feared no animal, was completely nonplussed. As soon as a beast was caught, he threw it to the two wives sitting in the sand, who'd gut and scale it.

I caught nothing, the water was cold. Feeling a little feverish, I left the water and set about gathering wood to make a fire.

Around five o'clock, we were able to eat the fish grilled over the flames at the end of a reed and drizzled with a lemon picked in the forest.

"A good lunch," F. said again and again, "Never have I lunched so well. You'll come again."

One day, One of his wives came to me.

“The Duke, you know, is insane.”

She explained to me that “their husband” had fallen into an air pocket and almost drowned. His wives, with considerable difficulty, got him out, but ever since he’s clearly under a spell, for he’s taken to diving into the foulest sludge at every opportunity. His wives were worried that something would happen to him and they’d then have trouble with the police.

I went to find him.

“That there’s a woman’s tale,” he grumbled. “They don’t understand anything. Have you never fallen in an air pocket?”

“No.”

“Well then! Try it, and let me know how you like it. I stumbled on this pleasure by chance. The pocket releases air, gas, little bubbles, that roll over the length of your body. It’s incredible. No caress has ever given me such pleasure. There are also little beasts, grass snakes, toads, all brushing against you, it’s wonderful. Don’t listen to those monkey-women, they’re too stupid, it’s marvelous, believe you me.”

One of his wives became pregnant. He gave me the news by punching her hard in the stomach.

“I can see the dowager’s face from here,” He’d said.

The dowager was his mother. The idea of coming back to her with a little piccaninny threw him into silent laughter whose joke was a mystery to the rest of us. He was a source of increasing annoyance for the governor — the authorities were beginning to worry. Their fears came to nothing: the woman died birthing a cadaver.

“That’s funny,” he told me.

Which was the extent of the funeral oration.

I left Oceania before he did. I don’t know what he’s to now. He was a man of adventure unawares that adventure wouldn’t have.

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