

BACK THERE IN THE GRASS

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It was spring in the South Seas when, for the first time, I went ashore at Batengo, which is the Polynesian village, and the only one on the big grass island of the same name. There is a cable station just up the beach from the village, and a good-natured young chap named Graves had charge of it. He was an upstanding, clean-cut fellow, as the fact that he had been among the islands for three years without falling into any of their ways proved. The interior of the corrugated iron house in which he lived, for instance, was bachelor from A to Z. And if that wasn't a sufficient alibi, my pointer dog, Don, who dislikes anything Polynesian or Melanesian, took to him at once. And they established a romping friendship. He gave us lunch on the porch, and because he had not seen a white man for two months or a liver-and-white dog for years, he told us the entire story of his young wife, with reminiscences of early childhood and plans for the future thrown in.

The future was very simple. There was a girl coming out to him from the States by the next steamer but one; the captain of that steamer would join them together in holy wedlock, and after that the Lord would provide.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you think I'm asking her to share a very lonely sort of life, but if you could imagine all the—the affection and gentleness, and thoughtfulness that I've got stored up to pour out at

her feet for the rest of our lives, you wouldn't be a bit afraid for her happiness. If a man spends his whole time and imagination thinking up ways to make a girl happy and occupied, he can think up a whole lot. . . . I'd like ever so much to show her to you."

He led the way to his bedroom, and stood in silent rapture before a large photograph that leaned against the wall over his dressing-table.

She didn't look to me like the sort of girl a cable agent would happen to marry. She looked like a swell girl—the real thing—beautiful and simple and unaffected.

"Yes," he said, "isn't she?"

I hadn't spoken a word. Now I said:

"It's easy to see why you aren't lonely with that wonderful girl to look at. Is she really coming out by the next steamer but one? It's hard to believe because she's so much too good to be true."

"Yes," he said, "isn't she?"

"The usual cable agent," I said, "keeps from going mad by having a dog or a cat or some pet or other to talk to. But I can understand a photograph like this being all-sufficient to any man—even if he had never seen the original. Allow me to shake hands with you."

Then I got him away from the girl, because my time was short and I wanted to find out about some things that were important to *me*.

"You haven't asked me my business in these parts," I said, "but I'll tell you. I'm collecting grasses for the Bronx Botanical Garden."

"Then, by jove!" said Graves, "you have certainly come to the right place. There used to be a tree on this island, but the last man who saw it died in 1789—Grass! The place is all grass: there are fifty kinds right around my house here."

"I've noticed only eighteen," I said, "but that isn't the point. The point is: when do the Batengo Island grasses begin to go to seed?" And I smiled.

"You think you've got me stumped, don't you?" he said. "That a mere cable agent wouldn't notice such things. Well, that grass there," and he pointed—"beach nut we call it—is the first to ripen seed, and, as far as I know, it does it just six weeks from now."

"Are you just making things up to impress me?"

"No, sir, I am not. I know to the minute. You see, I'm a victim of hay-fever."

"In that case," I said, "expect me back about the time your nose begins to run."

"Really?" And his whole face lighted up. "I'm delighted. Only six weeks. Why, then, if you'll stay round for only five or six weeks *more* you'll be here for the wedding."

"I'll make it if I possibly can," I said. "I want to see if that girl's really true."

"Anything I can do to help you while you're gone? I've got loads of spare time—"

"If you knew anything about grasses—"

"I don't. But I'll blow back into the interior and look around. I've been meaning to right along, just for fun. But I can never get any of *them* to go with me."

"The natives?"

"Yes. Poor lot. They're committing race suicide as fast as they can. There are more wooden gods than people in Batengo village, and the superstition's so thick you could cut it with a knife. All the manly virtues have perished. . . . Aloiu!"

The boy who did Graves's chores for him came lazily out of the house.

"Aloiu," said Graves, "just run back into the island to the top of that hill—see?—that one over there—and fetch a handful of grass for this gentleman. He'll give you five dollars for it."

Aloiu grinned sheepishly and shook his head.

"Fifty dollars?"

Aloiu shook his head with even more firmness, and

I whistled. Fifty dollars would have made him the Rockefeller-Carnegie-Morgan of those parts.

"All right, coward," said Graves cheerfully. "Run away and play with the other children. . . . Now, isn't that curious? Neither love, money, nor insult will drag one of them a mile from the beach. They say that if you go 'back there in the grass' something awful will happen to you."

"As what?" I asked.

"The last man to try it," said Graves, "in the memory of the oldest inhabitant was a woman. When they found her she was all black and swollen—at least that's what they say. Something had bitten her just above the ankle."

"Nonsense," I said, "there are no snakes in the whole Batengo group."

"They didn't say it was a snake," said Graves. "They said the marks of the bite were like those that would be made by the teeth of a very little-child."

Graves rose and stretched himself.

"What's the use of arguing with people that tell yarns like that! All the same, if you're bent on making expeditions back into the grass, you'll make 'em alone, unless the cable breaks and I'm free to make 'em with you."

Five weeks later I was once more coasting along the wavering hills of Batengo Island, with a sharp eye out for a first sight of the cable station and Graves. Five weeks with no company but Kanakas and a pointer dog makes one white man pretty keen for the society of another. Furthermore, at our one meeting I had taken a great shine to Graves and to the charming young lady who was to brave a life in the South Seas for his sake. If I was eager to get ashore, Don was more so. I had a shot-gun across my knees with which to salute the cable station, and the sight of that weapon, coupled with toothsome memories of a recent big hunt

down on Forked Peak, had set the dog quivering from stem to stern, to crouching, wagging his tail till it disappeared, and beating sudden tattoos upon the deck with his forepaws. And when at last we rounded on the cable station and I let off both barrels, he began to bark and race about the schooner like a thing possessed.

The salute brought Graves out of his house. He stood on the porch waving a handkerchief, and I called to him through a megaphone, hoped that he was well, said how glad I was to see him, and asked him to meet me in Batengo village.

Even at that distance I detected something irresolute in his manner; and a few minutes later when he had fetched a hat out of the house, locked the door, and headed toward the village, he looked more like a soldier marching to battle than a man walking half a mile to greet a friend.

"That's funny," I said to Don. "He's coming to meet us in spite of the fact that he'd much rather not. Oh, well!"

I left the schooner while she was still under way, and reached the beach before Graves came up. There were too many strange brown men to suit Don, and he kept very close to my legs. When Graves arrived the natives fell away from him as if he had been a leper. He wore a sort of sickly smile, and when he spoke the dog stiffened his legs and growled menacingly.

"Don!" I exclaimed sternly, and the dog cowered, but the spines along his back bristled and he kept a menacing eye upon Graves. The man's face looked drawn and rather angry. The frank boyishness was clean out of it. He had been strained by something or other to the breaking-point—so much was evident.

"My dear fellow," I said, "what the devil is the matter?"

Graves looked to right and left, and the islanders shrank still farther away from him.

"You can see for yourself," he said curtly. "I'm taboo." And then, with a little break in his voice: "Even your dog feels it. Don, good boy! Come here, sir!"

Don growled quietly.

"You see!"

"Don," I said sharply, "this man is my friend and yours. Pat him, Graves."

Graves reached forward and patted Don's head and talked to him soothingly.

But although Don did not growl or menace, he shivered under the caress and was unhappy.

"So you're taboo!" I said cheerfully. "That's the result of anything, from stringing pink and yellow shells on the same string to murdering your uncle's grandmother-in-law. Which have *you* done?"

"I've been back there in the grass," he said, "and because—because nothing happened to me I'm taboo."

"Is that all?"

"As far as they know—yes."

"Well!" said I, "my business will take me back there for days at a time, so I'll be taboo, too. Then there'll be two of us. Did you find any curious grasses for me?"

"I don't know about grasses," he said, "but I found something very curious that I want to show you and ask your advice about. Are you going to share my house?"

"I think I'll keep headquarters on the schooner," I said, "but if you'll put me up now and then for a meal or for the night—"

"I'll put you up for lunch right now," he said, "if you'll come. I'm my own cook and bottle-washer since the taboo, but I must say the change isn't for the worse so far as food goes."

He was looking and speaking more cheerfully.

"May I bring Don?"

He hesitated.

"Why—yes—of course."

"If you'd rather not?"

"No, bring him. I want to make friends again if I can."

So we started for Graves's house, Don very close at my heels.

"Graves," I said, "surely a taboo by a lot of fool islanders hasn't upset you. There's something on your mind. Bad news?"

"Oh, no," he said. "She's coming. It's other things. I'll tell you by and by—everything. Don't mind me. I'm all right. Listen to the wind in the grass. That sound day and night is enough to put a man off his feed."

"You say you found something very curious back there in the grass?"

"I found, among other things, a stone monolith. It's fallen down, but it's almost as big as the Empire State Building in New York. It's ancient as days—all carved—it's a sort of woman, I think. But we'll go back one day and have a look at it. Then, of course, I saw all the different kinds of grasses in the world—they'd interest you more—but I'm such a punk botanist that I gave up trying to tell 'em apart. I like the flowers best—there's millions of 'em—down among the grass. . . . I tell you, old man, this island is the greatest curiosity-shop in the whole world."

He unlocked the door of his house and stood aside for me to go in first.

"Shut up, Don!"

The dog growled savagely, but I banged him with my open hand across the snout, and he quieted down and followed into the house, all tense and watchful.

On the shelf where Graves kept his books, with its legs hanging over, was what I took to be an idol of some light brownish wood—say sandalwood, with a touch of pink. But it was the most life-like and astounding piece of carving I ever saw in the islands or out of them. It was about a foot high, and represented a Polynesian woman in the prime of life, say, fifteen or

sixteen years old, only the features were finer and cleaner carved.

It was a nude, in an attitude of easy repose—the legs hanging, the toes dangling—the hands resting, palms downward, on the blotter, the trunk relaxed. The eyes, which were a kind of steely blue, seemed to have been made, depth upon depth, of some wonderful translucent enamel, and to make his work still more realistic the artist had planted the statuette's eyebrows, eyelashes, and scalp with real hair, very soft and silky, brown on the head and black for the lashes and eyebrows. The thing was so lifelike that it frightened me. And when Don began to growl like distant thunder I didn't blame him. But I leaned over and caught him by the collar, because it was evident that he wanted to get at that statuette and destroy it.

When I looked up the statuette's eyes had moved. They were turned downward upon the dog, with cool curiosity and indifference. A kind of shudder went through me. And then, lo and behold, the statuette's tiny brown breasts rose and fell slowly, and a long breath came out of its nostrils.

I backed violently into Graves, dragging Don with me and half-choking him. "My God Almighty!" I said. "It's alive!"

"Isn't she!" said he. "I caught her back there in the grass—the little minx. And when I heard your signal I put her up there to keep her out of mischief. It's too high for her to jump—and she's very sore about it."

"You found her in the grass," I said. "For God's sake!—are there more of them?"

"Thick as quail," said he, "but it's hard to get a sight of 'em. But *you* were overcome by curiosity, weren't you, old girl? You came out to have a look at the big white giant and he caught you with his thumb and forefinger by the scruff of the neck—so you couldn't bite him—and here you are."

The womankin's lips parted and I saw a flash of

white teeth. She looked up into Graves's face and the steely eyes softened. It was evident that she was very fond of him.

"Rum sort of a pet," said Graves. "What?"

"Rum?" I said. "It's horrible—it isn't decent—it—it ought to be taboo. Don's got it sized up right. He—he wants to kill it."

"Please don't keep calling her It," said Graves. "She wouldn't like it—if she understood." Then he whispered words that were Greek to me, and the womankin laughed aloud. Her laugh was sweet and tinkly, like the upper notes of a spinet.

"You can speak her language?"

"A few words—Tog ma Lao?"

"Nal!"

"Aba Ton sug ato."

"Nan Tane dom ud lon aneal!"

It sounded like that—only all whispered and very soft. It sounded a little like the wind in the grass.

"She says she isn't afraid of the dog," said Graves, "and that he'd better let her alone."

"I almost hope he won't," said I. "Come outside. I don't like her. I think I've got a touch of the horrors."

Graves remained behind a moment to lift the womankin down from the shelf, and when he rejoined me I had made up my mind to talk to him like a father.

"Graves," I said, "although that creature in there is only a foot high, it isn't a pig or a monkey, it's a woman and you're guilty of what's considered a pretty ugly crime at home—abduction. You've stolen this woman away from kith and kin, and the least you can do is to carry her back where you found her and turn her loose. Let me ask you one thing—what would Miss Chester think?"

"Oh, that doesn't worry me," said Graves. "But I am worried—worried sick. It's early—shall we talk now, or wait till after lunch?"

"Now," I said.

"Well," said he, "you left me pretty well enthused on the subject of botany—so I went back there twice to look up grasses for you. The second time I went I got to a deep sort of valley where the grass is waisthigh—that, by the way, is where the big monolith is—and that place was alive with things that were frightened and ran. I could see the directions they took by the way the grass tops acted. There were lots of loose stones about and I began to throw 'em to see if I could knock one of the things over. Suddenly all at once I saw a pair of bright little eyes peering out of a bunch of grass—I let fly at them, and something gave a sort of moan and thrashed about in the grass—and then lay still. I went to look, and found that I'd stunned—*her*.

She came to and tried to bite me, but I had her by the scruff of the neck and she couldn't. Further, she was sick with being hit in the chest with the stone, and first thing I knew she keeled over in the palm of my hand in a dead faint. I couldn't find any water or anything—and I didn't want her to die—so I brought her home. She was sick for a week—and I took care of her—as I would a sick pup—and she began to get well and want to play and romp and poke into everything. She'd get the lower drawer of my desk open and hide in it—or crawl into a rubber boot and play house. And she got to be right good company—same as any pet does—a cat or a dog—or a monkey—and naturally, she being so small, I couldn't think of her as anything but a sort of little beast that I'd caught and tamed. . . . You see how it all happened, don't you? Might have happened to anybody."

"Why, yes," I said. "If she didn't give a man the horrors right at the start—I can understand making a sort of pet of her—but, man, there's only one thing to do. Be persuaded. Take her back where you found her, and turn her loose."

"Well, and good," said Graves. "I tried that, and next morning I found her at my door, sobbing—hor-

rible, dry sobs—no tears. . . . You've said one thing that's full of sense: she isn't a pig—or a monkey—she's a woman."

"You don't mean to say," said I, "that that mite of a thing is in love with you?"

"I don't know what else you'd call it."

"Graves," I said, "Miss Chester arrives by the next steamer. In the meanwhile something has got to be done."

"What?" said he hopelessly.

"I don't know," I said. "Let me think."

The dog Don laid his head heavily on my knee, as if he wished to offer a solution of the difficulty.

A week before Miss Chester's steamer was due the situation had not changed. Graves's pet was as much a fixture of Graves's house as the front door. And a man was never confronted with a more serious problem. Twice he carried her back into the grass and deserted her, and each time she returned and was found sobbing—horrible, dry sobs—on the porch. And a number of times we took her, or Graves did, in the pocket of his jacket, upon systematic searches for her people. Doubtless she could have helped us to find them, but she wouldn't. She was very sullen on these expeditions and frightened. When Graves tried to put her down she would cling to him, and it took real force to pry her loose.

In the open she could run like a rat; and in open country it would have been impossible to desert her; she would have followed at Graves's heels as fast as he could move them. But forcing through the thick grass tired her after a few hundred yards, and she would gradually drop farther and farther behind—sobbing. There was a pathetic side to it.

She hated me and made no bones about it, but there was an armed truce between us. She feared my influence over Graves, and I feared her—well, just as some

people fear rats or snakes. Things utterly out of the normal always do worry me, and Bo, which was the name Graves had learned for her, was, so far as I know, unique in human experience. In appearance she was like an unusually good-looking island girl observed through the wrong end of an opera-glass, but in habit and action she was different. She would catch flies and little grasshoppers and eat them all alive and kicking, and if you teased her more than she liked her ears would flatten the way a cat's do, and she would hiss like a snapping-turtle, and show her teeth.

But one got accustomed to her. Even poor Don learned that it was not his duty to punish her with one bound and a snap. But he would never let her touch him, believing that in her case discretion was the better part of valor. If she approached him he withdrew, always with dignity, but equally with determination. He knew in his heart that something about her was horribly wrong and against nature. I knew it, too, and I think Graves began to suspect it.

Well, a day came when Graves, who had been up since dawn, saw the smoke of a steamer along the horizon, and began to fire off his revolver so that I, too, might wake and participate in his joy. I made tea and went ashore.

"It's *her* steamer," he said.

"Yes," said I, "and we've got to decide something."

"About Bo?"

"Suppose I take her off your hands—for a week or so—till you and Miss Chester have settled down and put your house in order. Then Miss Chester—Mrs. Graves, that is—can decide what is to be done. I admit that I'd rather wash my hands of the business—but I'm the only white man available, and I propose to stand by my race. Don't say a word to Bo—just bring her out to the schooner and leave her."

In the upshot Graves accepted my offer, and while Bo, fairly bristling with excitement and curiosity, was

exploring the farther corners of my cabin, we slipped out and locked the door on her. The minute she knew what had happened she began to tear around and raise Cain. It sounded a little like a cat having a fit.

Graves was white and unhappy. "Let's get away quick," he said; "I feel like a skunk."

But Miss Chester was everything that her photograph said about her, and more too, so that the trick he had played Bo was very soon a negligible weight on Graves's mind.

If the wedding was quick and business-like, it was also jolly and romantic. The oldest passenger gave the bride away. All the crew came aft and sang "The Voice That Breathed O'er That Earliest Wedding-Day"—to the tune called "Blairgowrie." They had worked it up in secret for a surprise. And the bride's dove-brown eyes got a little teary. I was best man. The captain read the service, and choked occasionally. As for Graves—I had never thought him handsome—well, with his brown face and white linen suit, he made me think, and I'm sure I don't know why, of St. Michael—that time he overcame Lucifer. The captain blew us to breakfast, with champagne and a cake, and then the happy pair went ashore in a boat full of the bride's trousseau, and the crew manned the bulwarks and gave three cheers, and then something like twenty-seven more, and last thing of all the brass cannon was fired, and the little square flags that spell G-o-o-d L-u-c-k were run up on the signal halyards.

As for me, I went back to my schooner feeling blue and lonely. I knew little about women and less about love. It didn't seem quite fair. For once I hated my profession—seed-gatherer to a body of scientific gentlemen whom I had never seen. Well, there's nothing so good for the blues as putting things in order.

I cleaned my rifle and revolver. I wrote up my notebook. I developed some plates; I studied a brand-new book on South Sea grasses that had been sent out to

me, and I found some mistakes. I went ashore with Don, and had a long walk on the beach—in the opposite direction from Graves's house, of course—and I sent Don into the water after sticks, and he seemed to enjoy it, and so I stripped and went in with him. Then I dried in the sun, and had a match with my hands to see which could find the tiniest shell. Toward dusk we returned to the schooner and had dinner, and after that I went into my cabin to see how Bo was getting on.

She flew at me like a cat, and if I hadn't jerked my foot back she would have bitten me. As it was, her teeth tore a piece out of my trousers. I'm afraid I kicked her. Anyway, I heard her land with a crash in a far corner. I struck a match and lighted candles—they are cooler than lamps—very warily, one eye on Bo. She had retreated under a chair and looked out—very sullen and angry. I sat down and began to talk to her.

"It's no use," I said, "your trying to bite and scratch, because you're only as big as a minute. So come out here and make friends. I don't like you and you don't like me; but we're going to be thrown together for quite some time, so we'd better make the best of it. You come out here and behave pretty and I'll give you a bit of gingersnap."

The last word was intelligible to her, and she came a little way out from under the chair. I had a bit of gingersnap in my pocket, left over from treating Don, and I tossed it on the floor midway between us. She darted forward and ate it with quick bites.

Well, then, she looked up, and her eyes asked—just as plain as day: "Why are things thus? Why have I come to live with you? I don't like you. I want to go back to Graves."

I couldn't explain very well, and just shook my head and then went on trying to make friends—it was no use. She hated me, and after a time I got bored. I threw

a pillow on the floor for her to sleep on, and left her. Well, the minute the door was shut and locked she began to sob. You could hear her for quite a distance, and I couldn't stand it. So I went back—and talked to her as nicely and soothingly as I could. But she wouldn't even look at me—just lay face down—heaving and sobbing.

Now I don't like little creatures that snap—so when I picked her up it was by the scruff of the neck. She had to face me then, and I saw that in spite of all the sobbing her eyes were perfectly dry. That struck me as curious. I examined them through a pocket magnifying-glass, and discovered that they had no tearducts. Of course she couldn't cry. Perhaps I squeezed the back of her neck harder than I meant to—anyway, her lips began to draw back and her teeth to show.

It was exactly at that second that I recalled the legend Graves had told me about the island woman being found dead, and all black and swollen, back there in the grass, with teeth marks on her that looked as if they had been made by a very little child.

I forced Bo's mouth wide open and looked in. Then I reached for a candle and held it steadily between her face and mine. She struggled furiously so that I had to put down the candle and catch her legs together in my free hand. But I had seen enough. I felt wet and cold all over. For if the swollen glands at the base of the deeply grooved canines meant anything, that which I held between my hands was not a woman—but a snake.

I put her in a wooden box that had contained soap and nailed slats over the top. And, personally, I was quite willing to put scrap-iron in the box with her and fling it overboard. But I did not feel quite justified without consulting Graves.

As an extra precaution in case of accidents, I overhauled my medicine-chest and made up a little package for the breast pocket—a lancet, a rubber bandage,

and a pill-box full of permanganate crystals. I had still much collecting to do, "back there in the grass," and I did not propose to step on any of Bo's cousins or her sisters or her aunts, without having some of the elementary first-aids to the snake-bitten handy.

It was a lovely starry night, and I determined to sleep on deck. Before turning in I went to have a look at Bo. Having nailed her in a box securely, as I thought, I must have left my cabin door ajar. Anyhow she was gone. She must have braced her back against one side of the box, her feet against the other and burst it open. I had most certainly underestimated her strength and resources.

The crew, warned of peril, searched the whole schooner over, slowly and methodically, lighted by lanterns. We could not find her. Well, swimming comes natural to snakes.

I went ashore as quickly as I could get a boat manned and rowed. I took Don on a leash, a shot-gun loaded, and both pockets of my jacket full of cartridges. We ran swiftly along the beach, Don and I, and then turned into the grass to make a short cut for Graves's house. All of a sudden Don began to tremble with eagerness and muzzle and sniff among the roots of the grass. He was "making game."

"Good Don," I said, "good boy—hunt her up! Find her!"

The moon had risen. I saw two figures standing in the porch of Graves's house. I was about to call to them and warn Graves that Bo was loose and dangerous—when a scream—shrill and frightful—rang in my ears. I saw Graves turn to his bride and catch her in his arms.

When I came up she had collected her senses and was behaving splendidly. While Graves fetched a lantern and water she sat down on the porch, her back against the house, and undid her garter, so that I could pull the stocking off her bitten foot. Her instep,

into which Bo's venomous teeth had sunk, was already swollen and discolored. I slashed the teethmarks this way and that with my lancelet. And Mrs. Graves kept saying: "All right—all right—don't mind me—do what's best."

Don's leash had wedged between two of the porch planks, and all the time we were working over Mrs. Graves he whined and struggled to get loose.

"Graves," I said, when we had done what we could, "if your wife begins to seem faint, give her brandy—just a very little at a time—and—I think we were in time—and for God's sake don't ever let her know *why* she was bitten—or by *what*—"

Then I turned and freed Don and took off his leash.

The moonlight was now very white and brilliant. In the sandy path that led from Graves's porch I saw the print of feet—shaped just like human feet—less than an inch long. I made Don smell them, and said:

"Hunt close, boy! Hunt close!"

Thus hunting, we moved slowly through the grass toward the interior of the island. The scent grew hotter—suddenly Don began to move more stiffly—as if he had the rheumatism—his eyes straight ahead saw something that I could not see—the tip of his tail vibrated furiously—he sank lower and lower—his legs worked more and more stiffly—his head was thrust forward to the full stretch of his neck toward a thick clump of grass. In the act of taking a wary step he came to a dead halt—his right forepaw just clear of the ground. The tip of his tail stopped vibrating. The tail of itself stood straight out behind him and became rigid like a bar of iron. I never saw a stancher point.

"Steady, boy!" I pushed forward the safety of my shot-gun and stood at attention . . .

"How is your wife?"

"Seems to be pulling through. I heard you fire both barrels. What luck?"