

Mrs. Thompson Among the Cannibals

By Thomas Henry Huxley

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The most remarkable occurrence that has yet befallen us happened yesterday. A large party of natives came on from the islands and shortly after their arrival Scott (the captain's coxswain) and several seamen wandering about fell in with a party of them—gins—among whom was a white woman disfigured by dirt and the effect of the sun on her almost uncovered body; her face was nevertheless clean enough, and before the men had time to recover from their astonishment she advanced towards them and in hesitating broken language cried "I am a Christian—I am ashamed." The men immediately escorted her down to Heath's party, ashore watering, who of course immediately took her under their protection, and the cutter arriving very shortly to take the party on board, she found herself once more safe among her own people. Three natives accompanied her off in the canoe whom she called her brothers and who appeared much interested in her.

This is her story, told in half Scotch, half native dialect, for she has been so long among these people as nearly to forget her mother tongue.

Her name is Thompson and her maiden name was Crawford. She was born in Aberdeen and her father was a tin-smith who emigrated when she was about eight years old to Australia. From her account he appears to have been at first in very good business in Sydney but latterly became unsteady and consequently descending lower in the scale, was, when she left him, only a journeyman.

When between fifteen and sixteen she left her father's house without his knowledge or consent and making her way up to Moreton Bay with a lover of hers was there married to him. She wrote to her father to tell him that she was happy and doing well but has never since heard anything of him. The husband was a sailor and appears to have been a very handy sort of man; according to her account he could make everything for himself from the shoes on his feet to the hat on his head and furthermore fitted up very well a small cutter rather larger than our *Asp*.

She tells me he was a great favorite with Captain Wickham and might have done very well at Moreton Bay. However, the tempter came, in the shape of an old sailor who had been wrecked in a large ship, well laden, on an island in Torres Straits, and he gave Thompson such brilliant ideas of the profit to be obtained by any one who should take the trouble to visit the wreck and walk off with "jetsam and flotsam" that the latter resolved to go in his cutter and either return to Moreton Bay or go on to Port Essington (at which place he seems to have had some idea of settling). About this time Dr. Leichhardt was starting on his overland expedition and it appears that he wished Thompson to join him, but the latter, the worse for him, preferred his own exploration, only promising on his arrival at Port Essington to inform the people of the coming expedition and induce them to send a party to meet it.

After living, then, about eighteen months at Brisbane, Thompson with his wife and three men started in the cutter on their ill-omened journey. They had nearly reached the desired island when a heavy squall came on, and their little vessel was utterly wrecked upon a reef running out from the island.

Two native canoes which were out turtle fishing were similarly distressed by the squall but the natives easily reached the shore. Not so with the unfortunate tenants of the cutter: the three men were drowned, and Mrs. Thompson was drowning when one of the blackfellows (Aliko who came on board with her) swam out, and seizing her arm brought her safely to land.

They treated her very kindly, fed her and protected her from insult. One of the old chiefs, who had lately lost a daughter, persisted, according to their common belief that white people are the ghosts of black, that she was this very daughter "jump alive again" and she seems to have been regularly adopted among them, so that she talks of her brothers, nephews, etc. Years rolled on, and by degrees she approximated towards her friends, adopting their language so that she speaks it fluently and at present evidently thinks in it, having in talking to you to translate her native thoughts into plain English, sometimes a matter of considerable difficulty, and at the same time adopting their ways so that her manners present a most ludicrous graft of the gin upon the white woman.

For the first twelvemonth she kept some account of time but afterwards lost it, so that she has no idea of dates at present, and indeed, as she says herself, she would have forgotten her own language had she not been accustomed to sing to herself at night all the old fragments of songs and ballads she could remember.

The natives appear to have treated her quite as a pet; she never shared in the labors of the women but stayed in the camp to look after the children while they went out on "hospitable cares intent." Of the kindness and good disposition of the men she speaks in the highest terms, and of the women too she speaks well but says that some of them were not so kind.

Year after year she saw the English ships sail by on their way to China but never had any opportunity of communicating with them, and sometimes she says she was very sorrowful and despairing.

Last year she knew of our being here but the natives would not let her come, and when the canoes were setting out from the islands to visit us for the purpose of getting tobacco, etc., the women were very unwilling to let her come, and it was only partly by promises to return, partly by the influence of "Toma-gogi," one of her brothers, a gentleman about six feet two and doubtless proportionately respected, that she got away.

So far as we can judge she has been five years among these people, and is therefore even now a very young woman; and indeed notwithstanding the hard life she must have led, she looks young, and I have no doubt when she is appropriately dressed, and gets rid of her inflamed eyes, she will be not bad-looking.

Poor creature! we have all great compassion for her and I am sure there is no one who would not do anything to make her comfortable. Captain Stanley gives her his workshop for a cabin, and as soon as she recovers herself sufficiently to understand the use of a needle, she can have as much calico and flannel as she wants, to make mysterious feminine toggery.

She must be content to take a long cruise with us, but it will be at any rate, I should think, preferable to her late circumstances.