

Get Out Now!

‘They plan to kill you all! You must get out!’ The native who yelled this rushed into the hut, fighting to catch his breath. For a moment he stood still, clutching his aching side. The three people in front of him stared at him, waiting to hear the rest of his message.

‘I heard their plans. They didn’t see me. They say they’ll cut your bodies into pieces for eating in every village!’ At this John snatched up a few things, calling to his friends, ‘This time we must leave the island! Take no food, clothes or anything bulky. I’ll meet you on the beach at daybreak tomorrow.’

The three then ran outside and quickly got under cover in the wild bush nearby.

John hurried through tall grasses, tripping over tree roots in his haste. Spiky leaves cut across his face, drawing tiny spots of blood. After only a mile his shirt was sticking to him in the heat. Perspiration was streaming down his face. He had to keep wiping it away to be able to see clearly where he was going. ‘Well John Paton’, he sighed to himself, ‘What are you going to do now? What does a Scotsman do when he’s running from cannibals? I thought God wanted me to rescue these people. But how can I rescue them when I have to keep fleeing from them?’ John’s questions came thick and fast keeping pace with his frantic heartbeat. But in the end he decided to head for the village of a chief who was actually friendly to him. He would have liked to have charged

through the undergrowth in his haste to get to safety but he was forced to slow down. If he moved too quickly and too loudly he would be easy prey for the marauding cannibals. If he moved more quietly he would reach the village unseen. But could he trust this particular chief? Even Nookamara in the past had often let him down, sometimes even stealing from him. But the doubts passed as in the distance he spotted the smoke from the village fires. He was nearly there ... and then he spotted Chief Nookamara outside his hut.

‘My friend. I need your help’, John gasped, ‘Miaki, the war-chief is after us again.’ Nookamara grunted an acknowledgement. This he already knew! He quickly ushered John into the safety of his hut. John continued with his story. ‘This time there is no turning back. I long to stay on this island. God has called me to Tanna. I want to help your people. Several times my friends have urged me to leave, but I’ve refused to go. Tonight I need your help. Please give me a safe place to sleep and some food to eat. Tomorrow I will meet up with the others to make our escape.’

Suddenly the native tribesman who had charged into John’s own hut just a few hours earlier now charged into Chief Nookamara’s hut brandishing a blood-stained club. His eyes gleamed in his dark face as he grinned at them. ‘I’ve killed one of the enemy! I waited till he lay asleep in his blanket and then struck him over and over with my club.’ John groaned to himself, ‘How many times have I heard this kind of story? They take such pride in their cruelty.’

The chief looked pleased. ‘Sleep here tonight, both of you in this hut for safety. I will send you coconut milk and some special food to honour our hero’, he said. Later, in the darkness, John prayed as usual, then turned on the earthen floor to face the sleeping killer. He was so exhausted by his

hasty journey that he sank quickly into a deep sleep. But it was only a few hours later that John felt someone shaking him roughly. The chief had returned.

‘Look at this trouble you have brought on our village! The war chief Miaki is on the shore. We will all be boiled and eaten today! Look at these men marching against us.’

John followed Nookamara out of the hut. The people were crying and rushing about in despair, expecting the armed warriors to come at any time. John stopped for a moment and took control of the situation.

‘Cut down these trees - lay them out there. Block the route into the village. Take these boulders and place them on the pathways. This will stop Miaki and his men if they charge the village.’

Nookamara looked at the calm focused face of this unusual white man. John Paton was different to others of his race. The men from the trading ships cheated and lied. But John Paton was here helping to protect Nookamara’s tribe. In astonishment he sat down on an upturned canoe. ‘Sit down and pray to God for if he does not send deliverance we are all dead men. Pray and I will watch.’

John stopped, bowed his head and prayed. ‘Lord you are all powerful and you are near. You will do what is best. We trust in you.’

As the enemy advanced to within three hundred yards of the village John wondered where this day would lead. But then Nookamara was on his feet and waving his arms in triumph. ‘Our God listens - the enemy is standing still!’

He was right. And then even better - they turned round and marched away again.

It was now or never. ‘God has answered our prayer but this enemy may be back before the day is over. You must

John G Paton

leave', Nookamara urged. 'You can't stay any longer. It is you they are after and I must protect my village and my people. My son will guide you to a large tree in my plantation. Hide there till the moon rises.'

John wearily got up, picked up his bundle and followed the young man. When he stopped under a chestnut tree John managed a smile. 'You've picked the right tree for me. I could never climb a palm tree but this one is just like the old tree in my Scottish village. I'll soon get up this.' John found some leafy cover on a strong branch and tried to make himself comfortable. From time to time he heard wild cries and gun shots in the distance. He dared not move. All about him were his enemies seeking to kill him.

'Why do these people still threaten me?' John asked himself again and again as he waited in the tree, 'I've used my medicine to help them. I shared the freshwater well I dug. They prefer the traders to me. They only sell them guns and give them beatings. I do love these islanders. I want to give them something better than their murderous savagery. They are constantly fighting and killing even their own people.' John cautiously tried to ease the cramp in his right leg. Suddenly he saw, right below him, the black, white and red stripes on the face of Miaki the war-chief.

As Miaki held up his spear the tribesmen following him stopped as well. Feathers twisted into their hair still shook in the hot breeze. John's heart began to race, for the slightest noise now would betray his presence above them. Beneath him the leader gazed intently at the surrounding trees. After several minutes he seemed satisfied. He turned to his men.

'White men bring only trouble', he told them. 'The fire-god is angry with us for selling land to the mission-man.'

He will throw his hot rocks down on us. We must sacrifice flesh to him. If we do that our crops will grow well again. There will be no more hurricanes.'

From his high perch John could see flashes of fear in the men's eyes at the mention of the fire-god. The sharp point of the spear was raised again and was waved towards the undergrowth. Silently the men walked off behind their leader.

Some time later, when John was sure they were not returning, he carefully moved across the branch. He stretched his aching legs and reached down to rub his feet, nearly numb by now. Soon he spotted the chief's son emerging from the bush. To John's delight he saw that with him was his little dog that had often warned him of danger.

'It is safe to come down now', the young man said. 'So many of our people fear the dark and the evil spirits at night. Even the war-party will soon be inside their huts.' John reached down to rub the ears of his little dog who was leaping up at him and yelping excitedly, pleased to see her master again. John patted her rough coat affectionately. 'I found her outside the hut you slept in', the young native smiled. 'She must have tracked you to the village. I thought it safer to bring her to you as all the islanders know her. I've given her a drink and I've brought you water, too.'

John gratefully took the water-pot from him. At first he drank in great gulps. The water felt so cool, slipping down his parched throat. 'Thank you – that was good of you', said John.

'No, you were good to me', John's helper exclaimed. 'Do you remember that time I was hot all over and felt very ill? You gave me something to drink. Ugh! It tasted bitter

John G Paton

and I didn't want to drink it. I didn't realise that it would save my life. But you were so kind to me. You waited beside me for hours until I drank it all and felt sleepy. I felt well again a week later. Now I will take you by a hidden track down to the shore. You are looking very tired. Shall I carry your bundle?'

As he picked it up he exclaimed in surprise, 'Is this all you have with you? It is so light.'

'I have my Bible and two books translated into your language. They're wrapped up in the blanket with payment for our canoe.'

'You're leaving with so little. Your lovely piano and good medicines are all still in your hut.'

'Yes', sighed John, 'and many things that belonged to my dear wife. She loved to play that piano and sing with the Tannese women and girls. Still, that's nothing new for me.' He smiled. 'When I was a boy, and again when I worked in Glasgow, I often faced trouble and went hungry.' As they crawled and slipped down the narrow path John thought to himself, 'My home and family are thousands of miles away from here. If I told this young man that, he could not possibly imagine a land so far away. Yet, God who cared for me there is still with me here'.