



The Curse of Kokova

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Chapter 1: The Man with a Past

From the porch of his bure¹, Joseph Lane watched the white yacht steam into Bekua's crescent bay, and with swan-like grace glide across its crystal waters to dock at the island's rickety jetty, where Fijian wharf hands moored her securely to the bollards.

From the comfort of his hammock, Lane wondered lazily who these strangers were, for he didn't recognize the boat. Indeed, most craft hereabouts were native outriggers and inter-island freighters, certainly not graceful toys of the idle rich as this vessel appeared to be.

Shortly, two figures disembarked, and began the long walk up the hill's palm lined path towards Lane's lonely hut, which nestled among gnarled and scented frangipani.

Lane silently swore. They hadn't taken the dirt road to the native village. He had visitors after all—an unwelcome intrusion into his untroubled, reclusive existence. Reluctantly, he swung his tall frame out of the hammock and stretched.

Well, he thought, grumpily. *I suppose I had better don my mask of civility. They'll be needing a cool drink by the time they get here.*

Lane busied himself. Deft strokes of a razor sharp machete opened two coconuts, their refreshing contents poured into tin mugs. It wasn't much, but it was the best his Spartan existence could offer.

¹ *A bure is a native Fijian house.*

He sat on a long bench by the door, the drinks beside him, waiting with the placid patience of one who has spent long years in the tropics. The strangers arrived shortly, hot and breathless from the climb.

Lane looked them over. The man, a blond Adonis in his early thirties was nearly as tall as he, but not as muscular. It was the woman, though, that caught Lane's attention. She couldn't have been much more than eighteen. The girl was slim, graceful as a willow, and immaculately dressed in green, which set off her flowing red hair to marvelous advantage.

He stared at her. It had been a long time since a woman had that effect upon him. She blushed slightly under his intense gaze. Her eyes dropped. The girl's manicured beauty made Lane suddenly conscious of his own appearance—a black haired giant of a man in his late twenties, rugged features bronzed by the sun to almost the colour of a native's skin.

Barefoot and dressed only in ragged trousers, Lane thought. *What a fine sight I must make.*

"Henry Rosford," spoke the stranger, introducing himself. "My wife, Celia. You are Joseph Lane, I assume?"

Lane forced a smile as he shook hands. For some reason he found the man's cultured accent irritating, perhaps because it reminded him of everything he wasn't.

"I am," he replied with a slight edge to his voice. Then, more politely: "Please sit and have some coconut milk. Both of you look like you need refreshment."

Celia gracefully lowered herself to the bench and daintily sipped her drink. Rosford, however, tossed his back as if it were hard liquor, and then got straight to the point.

"I believe you've been to Kokova—the nearby island where the natives bury their chiefs. I'm an anthropologist in need of a guide. I know the locals won't cooperate be-

cause it's a sacred site, taboo to all but the priests. I'm here to make you an offer."

Lane hid his skepticism. Rosford, despite his outward signs of wealth and breeding, had the air of the rogue about him. Scholar indeed! Still, it wouldn't hurt to play along, at least for now.

"I've been there," admitted Lane. "And nearly lost my life to a strange sickness. The natives say it was the curse of Kokova, which is also the name of their tribal god. Money is no use to a dead man, Mr. Rosford. Take my advice and leave the place well alone."

A woman's tinkling laugh made him turn. Celia was looking at him, a mocking smile curving the fullness of her lips.

"Have you been away from civilization so long, Mr. Lane, that you've started to believe such superstitions? This is 1911, not the Dark Ages."

Lane, nettled by her condescending manner, slowly stood. "When you've been in the tropics as long as I have you begin to realize there are sound reasons behind some native beliefs. There's danger on that island, Mrs Rosford. Perhaps not evil spirits, but danger nonetheless." Then, turning to her husband: "I've given you what hospitality I can. Now, please leave."

The man remained seated, a cold smile upon his lips. "You're a man with a past, Lane. I've done my research well. You've the blood of three men on your hands. If the authorities ever found out who you really are ..."

For a second Lane stood there, pale with sudden shock. His terrible secret, kept hidden for so many years, had been exposed. Then the rush of prickling fear transformed to anger as Rosford laughed at his sick expression.

Rage dug in its burning spurs, and Rosford saw impending violence write hard lines upon Lane's face. Celia glimpsed her husband's hand dart within his jacket, flash

out with a derringer. She gasped. But Lane was already moving, mounted on a lightening bolt of fury. A hammering blow to Rosford's wrist sent the pistol flying. The girl screamed. She cried again as a smashing left knocked her husband to the floor.

Rosford was down, but hardly beaten. He lashed out, his heel striking Lane's shin. Lane swore luridly, crashed to earth. Rosford lunged for the derringer. Lane was on him like a pouncing tiger, grabbed his arm, twisted. His foe gasped in sudden pain.

"Stop it," cried a tremulous feminine voice.

Lane looked up. Celia stood before him, the pistol in her hand, a frightened but determined look upon her face.

"Release my husband, or I swear I'll shoot."

Lane looked at the girl, wondering if she had the stomach to carry out the threat. He wasn't sure, but her hand was trembling so much she might accidentally squeeze the trigger.

He released her husband and slowly backed away, cursing his unruly temper. If Celia had any doubts about him being a killer, he'd certainly removed them in a most dramatic way.

Ah hell, he thought in angry denial. *Why should I care what she thinks? Why should I care what anyone thinks?*

"Come Henry," said Celia. "Mr. Lane is obviously a dangerous felon with whom we should not be dealing."

"This is men's business, Celia," warned her husband as he rose and took the derringer from her. "I know how to handle him."

Lane saw the girl's lips thin in anger at this rebuke. She sat stiffly back on the bench, stared out to sea as Rosford addressed his prisoner.

"There is a hangman's noose waiting for you back in Australia, Lane. Cooperate and I'll forget I've ever seen your face. This is your last chance. What do you say?"

"Well," replied Lane, sourly. "It doesn't look like I have much choice, does it?"

The crossing to Korkova had not been easy. A tropical squall had crossed their line of sail and moved over the dark mass of island which was their destination. The deckhands had launched the yacht's rowboat without too much trouble, but were a little surprised when Henry told them to remain on board.

"Row!" Lane was instructed, which he did in silence.

Celia allowed Lane to assist her from the rowboat and Henry had hauled upon Korkova's sandy beach. Though his hand was gentle as he held her own, she sensed the latent strength behind it. Memories of her childhood came upon her—a day at the zoo when she'd seen her first lion in the flesh. Huge, powerful, pacing its cage and longing for freedom.

Lane reminded her of that creature—wild and dangerous. She shivered a little. Like the lion he was both frightening and exciting. The girl looked out to sea—an attempt to distract herself from these unsettling feelings. She gazed upon their yacht anchored one hundred yards from the shore. Perhaps she should have stayed there as Lane had insisted.

Celia firmed her resolve. No, Lane was a dangerous man. Anything might happen. Being here she would at least know what was going on. Better that than facing nightmare worries borne of her imagination. The girl's thoughts were interrupted by her husband's voice.

"Well, Lane. Lead the way," ordered Rosford, emphasizing the command by brushing imaginary dust from the Webley now holstered at his side.

"Whatever you say, general," replied Lane with un-

disguised sarcasm, determined to show that despite being blackmailed he still had spirit.

They moved off into the jungle, wet and oppressively steamy from the recent tropical downpour that had saturated the island. The trees closed in around them—not coconut palms, but growths resembling giant cycads whose boles sprouted crimson, trumpet shaped blooms that gave off a strong scent reminiscent of almonds.

Lane forced his way through the chest high underbrush of ferns. The going was slow and difficult—Rosford wouldn't trust him with a machete, or any other potential weapon.

Damned fool, Lane thought. It's not me he has to fear. Still, he'll find that out soon enough. Pity about his wife. I'll save her if I can.

Lane dismissed these gloomy thoughts and forged ahead, soon coming upon the stream, now swollen to a raging torrent by the storm. Rosford came up beside him and swore—the rapids were impossible to ford. Celia, tired and disheveled by their arduous trek in the oppressive humidity, decided to simply ignore her husband's uncouth language.

Lane looked about, spotted a storm felled tree that bridged the rushing water.

"That should be strong enough to bear our weight," he observed. "if we cross one at a time."

Rosford nodded. "You first," he said curtly, still brooding on Lane's earlier sarcasm.

Both men crossed easily, followed by Celia. The girl looked down at the racing water beneath her feet. Nervously, she eased her way out upon the trunk. Suddenly, a section of bark broke beneath her boots. She slipped, fell; a cry of terror upon her lips.

Both men watched in horror as she plunged beneath the raging river and disappeared from sight.

Chapter 2: The Mark of the Curse

In an instant Lane dived into the churning water. Surfacing, he saw Celia's head bob up, then disappear again as the rushing current sucked her under. He cleaved the flood with powerful strokes, fear for the helpless girl adding strength to his flashing limbs.

Celia surfaced again, heart pounding in wild terror. Her failing hands grabbed a passing log. She clung to the broken limb, coughing violently and trembling as the current carried her along in its chilly embrace.

The girl looked at the jungle as it flashed by. Such was the speed of the torrent that it seemed she was riding a bolting stallion. She calmed a little. The limb buoyed her up like a life vest, and although she was being carried far from her companions she appeared to be safe from the immediate threat of drowning.

Suddenly, a hissing sound made her turn. The girl froze in terror. She was not the only passenger aboard this makeshift vessel. Not a foot from her head was an enormous serpent. Sinister black eyes bored into her own. The thing coiled itself, prepared to strike.

Something thudded against the limb. The serpent hesitated. Sensing danger, its flat, triangular head swung about. Celia gasped in amazement—Lane was clinging to the log. She screamed as the snake struck at him. The thing was an envenomed streak of hissing fury, but Lane was faster. His hand shot out, caught the serpent behind its head and pounded its skull to bloody ruin against the log.

"Did it bite you?" he asked fearfully as he flung away the mangled carcass.

The girl, weak with relief, shook her head as he moved close and slipped his arm about her waist. "Thank God," he muttered to himself. Then louder: "Let go, and I'll pull you ashore."

Celia nodded, and they were again in the current, Lane kicking vigorously, the girl aiding him as best she could. After what seemed an age of struggle against the torrent's embrace, both gained the muddy riverbank and dragged themselves upon it.

They sat in exhausted silence for a time, Celia gazing meditatively upon her rescuer. At last she was moved to speak.

"My husband says you are a killer, Mr. Lane. But I find it difficult to believe a brutal murderer would risk his life to save me. Do you really have the blood of three men on your hands?"

"We are all potential killers, Mrs Rosford," replied Lane, wearily. "All it takes is the right set of circumstances."

"And what were yours?" prompted the girl, softly.

"The brutal rape and murder of my wife," replied Lane, sharply. Then, more gently: "The police bungled the investigation, and those responsible for the crime got off on a legal technicality. I couldn't accept that, so I hunted them down and killed them like the animals they were."

"I ... I'm sorry. Henry tells me only what he thinks I should know ... I had no idea ..."

"How did your husband find out about me, anyway?" queried Lane, attempting to change the subject, for even after five years the memory of his wife's passing was still painful to him.

"Oh ... Henry subscribes to the *Adventurer*, a magazine that publishes accounts of life in exotic places. That catholic priest who cared for you while you were ill ... He wrote an article for the periodical. Apparently you talked a

lot during your delirium, and although he didn't mention your name, there were enough clues for my husband to guess your identity. Is it really true, what you discovered here?"

The sound of a snapping branch ended further conversation. Both turned and saw Rosford standing behind them, hands on hips.

"It had better be," he growled. "I'll be most annoyed if I've come all this way for nothing."

Celia gasped. When Henry had been courting her he'd been the epitome of a charming gentleman. But as the days had passed during their voyage to the islands, a slow and unsettling change had come upon him. At first she'd put it down to the stress of battling wind and wave. But now she realized the disturbing truth—that his cultured mannerisms were a pleasant mask that hid a far from pleasant nature.

"Really, Henry," cried the girl. "This cruise was suppose to be our honeymoon!" Then, with alarm. "*Oh, your face!*"

"What of it?" snapped her husband.

"It's covered in red spots, that's what," answered Lane, brutally. "It's the mark of the curse, Rosford. If you don't care for yourself, then at least think of your wife and turn back now."

The man uttered a derisive laugh. "I'm not a fool, Lane. These are nothing more than mosquito bites. Keep your stupid superstitions to yourself."

Lane jerked to his full height. "You're the idiot," he shot back savagely.

Celia went cold as Rosford whipped out his revolver. Murder seemed to lurk behind his narrowed eyes. It was further proof of how little she truly knew him. Quickly, the girl interposed herself between the bristling men.

"Please, Henry. Mr. Lane is merely concerned for

our safety. Perhaps it is a misguided concern, but it shows his intentions are good."

"No need to hide him behind your skirts, my dear," sneered Rosford. "All right Lane, take the lead. We've wasted enough time."

Lane gazed at the idol of Kokova. The statue, twelve feet tall and roughly carved in the likeness of a man, squatted tailor fashion upon a huge stone platform some five feet in height. Many niches had been built into the walls of this platform, and in them were the skulls of Bekua's noble chiefs.

Celia shuddered as she peered over the man's shoulder. Rows and rows of grinning human skulls stared back at her, watching with silent menace. The girl stumbled after Lane as he thrust through the final clump of ferns that blocked the way. Suddenly, dizziness assailed her. A faint cry escaped her lips as she fell.

Lane whirled, caught Celia and eased her to the ground. His lips thinned in anger when he saw her blotched and pale face. The girl was breathing heavily, and her limbs gleamed with the unhealthy sheen of fevered perspiration.

Rosford emerged from the verdure. Lane's eyes struck him with a withering glance. "Your wife's ill, and you don't look any better," he rasped. "For God's sake, man. Have some ..."

"To hell with you, Lane. I've reached my goal. Now, help her on her feet."

"Please," gasped Celia. "I can't go on ... It's this terrible heat."

"I've a solution to that, my dear," replied Rosford, coldly. "Lane, strip her naked."

These words, shockingly callous, struck Celia like a brutal slap across the face. The comforting illusion that had been her marriage was completely shattered by the sudden and terrible realization that she was bound in wedlock to an utter beast.

Lane saw the girl crumple, she sagged upon the ground, speechless. He turned on Rosford, disbelief written large upon his face. "Have you gone insane?" he cried.

Rosford drew his Webley, pointed it at Lane. "It's all part of my master plan, as you'll both soon discover," he answered curtly. "Now, set about your task, or do I have to persuade you with a bullet?"

Lane's mind raced, judging distance and his foe's condition. Rosford's voice was steady; not so his hand. It trembled, as did his body. Clearly, an iron will was the only thing that kept him on his feet.

Suddenly, a wave of nausea struck Rosford. He clutched his stomach, groaned. The revolver wavered. Lane saw his chance. He uncoiled like a spring from his crouch, powerful thews launched him like a rocket at his foe. It was a terrible risk, but Lane felt certain Rosford meant to kill them both.

Time seemed to slow for Lane as he leapt. He saw his foe's startled look, the slow opening of his mouth in a curse, the upward drift of the gun. The Webley roared dully, and Lane knew he had made a terrible miscalculation. The last thing he felt was a hot rush of pain as the bullet struck.

Chapter 3: The God Speaks

A brutal kick to the ribs roused Lane. The man groaned, clasped his side, then touched his temple where

the bullet had cut a bloody furrow. Wincing, he jerked his hand away and looked up into the black bore of the Webley Rosford pointed at him.

"Don't test my patience, Lane," he snarled. "I'm not as weak as you think I am. Now, get to work or I swear I'll kill you."

Seeing there was no choice Lane, sick with worry, staggered to the girl. Celia lay quiescent, seemingly in a daze, her eyes staring vacantly at the sky. She brightened a little as he knelt beside her.

"Thank God!" murmured the girl as she touched his hand. "I thought he'd killed you. Please ... Don't risk your life. I ... I'm not ..."

"Enough talk," cut in Rosford, menacing the couple with his revolver.

Celia shuddered, but whether it was from fever, revulsion or fear, Lane couldn't tell. Grim faced, he set about the task in utter silence, the quiet broken only by the sound of ripping cloth and the girls labored breathing as with a stony face she endured her humiliation.

Jesus, thought Lane as he tore away her camisole and drawers, exposing her heaving breasts and the curly triangle of her loins. *I feel like a filthy rapist doing this. By God, I'll kill Rosford if it's the last thing I ever do.*

At Rosford's command Lane helped the girl to rise. She leaned heavily upon him, her naked breasts pressing firmly against his chest. Their eyes touched for a moment, and in that look each glimpsed latent feelings for the other. Celia smiled tremulously, blushed. Lane, embarrassed by desire, briskly swept her into his arms. He hurriedly mounted the temple's stairs without waiting for their captor's order.

The trio ascended, came before the Idol. It towered over them, its stony form delineated in severe and impressive lines that somehow captured nature's elemental

fury. Even Rosford, not the most sensitive of men, sensed its brooding presence and was unnerved.

"Nothing but bloody stone," he muttered angrily to himself, ashamed that even he could be prey to superstitious fears. Then to Lane: "All right. That's far enough."

Lane set the girl on her feet, turned to confront his foe. "I know what you're after. It's the pearls, isn't it? Every chief wears a kind of headdress made from hundreds them, and when he dies it's placed in the bowl on the idol's knees as an offering to the god."

Rosford nodded. "After generations of the practice there's untold riches awaiting those bold enough to take the risk. Does that surprise you, Celia?" The man laughed for a moment. "You see, a series of bad investments has left me virtually penniless. That's why I married you—the heiress to the Browning fortune."

Celia laughed, sank upon her knees. Lane gave her a worried look. Her strength was fading fast. Perhaps her mind was going too, crumbling under the onslaught of these terrible revelations.

"Now, this is where you play your part, Lane," smirked Rosford. "I hired you as a guide, but unbeknown to me you're a vicious criminal. You rape and kill my wife, then try to murder me to cover up the crime. I shoot you in self defense, and so inherit Celia's fortune and the pearls as well. The police will believe me when they find her naked body—and threads from her torn clothes under your fingernails!"

Lane deliberately stepped back as the grinning man raised his Webley. He felt Death's chill hand run cold fingers down his spine and the sweat of fear came upon his brow. Had his searching foot found the spot to cheat grim fate? Rosford's finger was about to squeeze the trigger when suddenly the idol roared.

The noise thundered from its open mouth in a deaf-

ening blast that sounded like the bellow of a Titan. Rosford paled, his jaw dropped, he stared in utter disbelief. Lane felt a surge of hope—his agile mind had gifted him with a desperate plan, half of which had worked. He jerked off his heavy ring and hurled it at the man.

Rosford, distracted by what seemed a manifestation of the supernatural, was caught completely by surprise. The hurtling ring struck him in the eye. He howled, doubled over. Lane slung the startled girl across his shoulder, bolted for the idol's back.

Celia glimpsed her husband raise the Webley. She screamed a warning. Lane swerved his headlong flight. The gun roared twice. One slug nicked his arm, the other kissed his side. He staggered, nearly fell. Another bullet whined in ricochet from the statue's flank as he hurled himself behind it.

Rosford swore. "You can't escape me Lane," he cried, then clutched his stomach as nausea again assailed him.

Celia crouched in terror of death and the unknown. She gazed at the idol, trembled. Was its roaring voice the angry cry of a pagan god? She didn't know, for all normality seemed to ebb away in its rearing presence.

"Leave me and run," whispered the frightened girl, certain of one thing only. "I haven't the strength to go on, and you can't elude his bullets carrying me."

Lane ignored her. "Rosford," he shouted. "You're near death's door. You heard the idol speak. The god is real and his curse is killing you. But I will save you if you promise to spare our lives."

Rosford shuddered. Mere hours ago he would have laughed at such a statement. Now, however, he wasn't so arrogantly dismissive. This was a heathen land peopled by savages steeped in magic. Anything might be possible. Another wave of sickness, more intense than before, convinced him he should listen.

"You have my word," he lied.

"All you have to do is make an offering to Kokova. Take off your wedding ring and place it in the bowl upon the idol's knee. This gift will neutralize the curse. One more thing, Rosford—if you shed blood whilst performing the ritual it will nullify the deed."

"I'll do as you say," replied Rosford. "But I want you out where I can see you, Lane. If you're telling the truth you've nothing to fear."

"Don't trust him," warned Celia.

"I don't," replied Lane, quietly. "But do you trust me?"

The girl nodded. Lane forced a reassuring smile. "Everything will be all right," he said with more confidence than he felt. "Stay here." Then louder: "I'm coming out," he called.

Lane emerged from concealment, hands above his head. "Right," said Rosford, still suspicious. "Stand over there, by the Idol's bowl. I want you directly in my line of fire."

Lane moved slowly, carefully, back pressed to the statue. Rosford approached like a stalking beast, a wild look in his eyes that was as menacing as the gun he held. His face, twisted by a rictus of pain, was frightening to look upon. The sun cast his shadow before him. It seemed to crawl towards Lane like the groping hand of Death. Fear closed its dread hand about Lane's heart. Would his plan succeed?

Rosford was almost upon him. The man flicked his ring into the idol's bowl, grinned malevolently. He cocked the hammer of the Webley, stepped forward laughing. "You fool," he cried.

Lane tensed. The trapdoor opened. Rosford cried in terror, dropping the revolver as he fell. One hand lashed out, grasped Lane's ankle, dragged him down. Lane

caught the pit's edge as he tumbled. He gasped, muscles straining to support his weight and that of the clinging man.

Rosford looked down. Wild fear lanced through him, tore a scream from his throat. Far below he glimpsed a hundred needle-sharp stakes rising from the gloom. He clung to Lane's legs with a strength born of utter terror. Lane could feel his grip weakening. He tried to kick free of Rosford. It was impossible—the gibbering man had both his ankles in a vice-like grip.

"Mr. Lane!" cried a feminine voice. "Joseph, what's happening?"

Lane turned his head, saw Celia stagger around the idol, the look of terror on her face when she realized his predicament. "Get back!" he yelled as the girl began to crawl out upon the narrow edge separating yawning pit and statue.

Celia ignored him. The feverish girl determinedly continued her advance. She knew exactly what she had to do. Lane's fingers began to slip. He cursed, prayed. Rosford screamed in terror. The panting girl dragged herself beside him, hauled off a shoe. Rosford looked up, saw his wife, her countenance now grim as death itself.

"Goodbye, Henry!" she screamed, then hurled her shoe with all the fierceness she possessed. It slammed against Rosford's fear-contorted face. The man fell, screaming madly. He struck the stakes. Celia fainted at the sickening sight.

For Celia a coherent picture of reality gradually emerged upon waking. She now lay on a sleeping mat in Lane's bure, the early morning sun seeping between gaps in the walls of woven bamboo, with its greater light

spilling through unglazed windows.

The girl had drifted in and out of consciousness over several days. The nightmare journey from the island seemed surreal—fragmented images of Lane laboring under her weight, her body again dressed; the man now equally stricken with the curse; jarred memories of trees and ferns swishing by as he'd fled—all haunted by nightmare images, interposed, of Henry's mangled corpse.

Celia turned her head. Lane lay next to her beneath the mosquito net. He'd cared for her during her illness, despite being sick himself. He looked much better now, his face unmarred by ugly red blotches. How very different he was from what she'd first expected—not at all a drunken reprobate with a litter of empty whisky bottles at his feet.

Lane stirred, opened his eyes. "You look much better," he observed. "Another few days you'll be completely well."

"Free of Kokova's curse," she said with a shudder of dread. "it's hard to believe ..."

Lane smiled. "There never was any curse, Celia; or disease for that matter. If our illness was caused by germs then the priests would have carried the sickness back to Bekua long ago. No, I think we were poisoned by the scent of those strange trees on the island. The priests perform a purifying ceremony before going there. My guess is the ritual involves taking some kind of antidote."

"But the idol," gasped the girl. "It spoke."

Again, Lane smiled. "It gave me a terrible fright, too, the first time I was there. I discovered certain stones on the platform sink when stepped upon. There's probably a bellows underneath that pumps air through a conch shell trumpet in the statue, with the noise amplified by a sound box.

"The effect is no doubt designed to impress initiates

and scare off grave robbers foolhardy enough to risk Kokova's curse, with the trap door as the final defence if all else fails. I simply played on Henry's latent fears of the supernatural in an attempt to save our lives."

He paused a moment, wondering how to phrase his thanks. "It was ... It was very courageous ... what you did ..."

Celia turned her face away. "Please," she said bitterly. "I'm not that noble. You see, I never loved Henry. I married him for money. My father became a chronic gambler late in life. He died penniless, leaving me virtually destitute. Rather ironic, isn't it—Henry and I marry; each for pelf, and it turns out we're both as poor as church mice."

The girl sobbed a little. "I suppose you think I'm awful, now."

"You're being too harsh on yourself," corrected Lane, gently. "The important thing is to learn from your mistakes and move on to better things."

"Move on to what?" She sighed, wearily. "When my peers find out how poor I am I'll be a social outcast. You don't know how snobbish and cruel they can be." The girl brightened. "The pearls," she said. "I'll share them with you."

"That's a very generous offer," replied Lane, sincerely. "But the pearls are worthless. Years of exposure to the elements have destroyed their value. But you don't have to be rich to be happy, Celia."

Lane looked intensely at the girl. He never thought he'd feel this way again. His reclusive existence, before so pleasing to him, now seemed intolerable. The man paused for a moment, gathering his courage to make the offer, for he knew they were from very different worlds.

"You can always make a new life for yourself here, as I have ... I can help you if you like."

Celia smiled at him, touched his face. Before she would have laughed at this proposal. But now she saw that wealth was not the yardstick of success, nor class breeding the measure of a man.

"I'd like that," she replied with feeling. "I'd like that very much."

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirk Straughen was born in Papua New Guinea in 1964 which, at the time, was administered by the Australian government. "My first introduction to ERB was at age 13 (*A Princess of Mars*). I do enjoy Planetary Romance novels. Unfortunately, not many people write them these days..."

In this editor's opinion Kirk Straughen has a very bright future!