

THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

COMPETITION BETWEEN LABOUR SHIPS.

RE-VICTUALLING NECESSARY.

No. IX.

When we left Kwa on Friday evening (October 7), Malaya was a present and substantial reality, its hills and valleys spread out in all the details of nearness, whilst Guadalcanar was but a dim vision on our western horizon. On Saturday morning Guadalcanar, with nobler peaks and deeper gorges, was the vivid reality, and Malaya but a spectral island in our wake. Marou Sound was circumnavigated with a brisk wind—its exits and entrances, its commanding peak, its brood of islets and cays, passing rapidly under view with features familiarised to us by our three days' stay there two months ago. How the time had flown. And as yet we had only got half our complement of recruits, and even that half was diminished by a death. There was a feeling that the Helena had not had a fair share of luck—a feeling that was aggravated by reports at various places that the Empress and Para had been filling up before us with tens and twenties. Some consolation, however, was derived from the fact that these reports varied into vagueness, and we could at least hope that some clearings had been left for us to gather. Besides there were reasons why we should be sanguine that our new departure would have satisfactory results. The weather side of Guadalcanar—that part of it which trends southwards until it nearly reaches the tenth degree of latitude at Cape Henslow, a distance of 15 miles, and then north-westerly for about fifty miles to Cape Hunter—was known to be a good field for recruits, weather permitting. Native food, too, could be had here in any quantities, and we could depend on our requirements in that respect being amply supplied, for, even if we found the coast inaccessible to our boats, the natives would bring their produce in canoes. So with good heart we gave Marou Sound the go-by and headed for Cape Henslow. During the afternoon the wind changed about in a rather despiriting manner, and heavy squalls were encountered. The boats managed to take a run to the beach, and returned with a load of yams. At 8 p.m. a thunderstorm passed over the vessel and left her becalmed. During the night the captain was able to stand out for 15 miles or so, and on Sunday he got back to within rowing distance of the beach. The boats paid another visit to the shore and bought a ton and a half of native food. Supplies were also brought by canoes, and in a short space of time our lockers and bins were packed, and the deck remained strewn with yams as large as the enormous pumpkins that lay beside them, woffle, taro, coconuts green and dry, plenty of bananas, and some Indian corn that would be readily consumed by our Malaya boys, who are said to be omnivorous. All these good things were purchased with tobacco and pipes, nothing else being asked for in return. The natives we saw were superior to those of Malaya in several respects. They were decidedly tamer and comparatively civilised. There was not a man without some drapery. Most of them had their hair powdered as white as barristers' wigs. Personal ornaments were not much affected, but their canoes, which excelled all others we had seen in build and finish, were elaborately decorated with cowrie shells and neatly inlaid with pearl.

On Monday the recruiter made a fair start. At a beach village named *Copew*, where the boats were sheltered from the full force of the ocean rollers by outlying reefs, he found himself thronged with natives. It was a lively crowd, chiefly intent on selling produce, birds, and the discarded European clothing of former recruits—all for tobacco and pipes. Two boys offered as recruits. One was refused on the score of youth; the other was accepted at the apprentice wage of £5 a year. The next "passage" called at a village named *Obo*. Here two recruits were secured. The first was a native named *Bak-kar*, who had worked in Samoa for five years, and now desired to try Queensland. He expected that his Samoan experience would be considered a sufficient apprenticeship for Queensland, and asked £9 a year. This wage was agreed to, and he took his seat in the covering boat. A youth, named *Rap-po* followed suit, but not having the consent of his friends he had to bolt away. He waited until the Government agent's boat was an easy distance from the shore; then he cleared the sandy beach with a bound or two, plunged into the water, and swimming off, joined *Bak-kar*. Another youth tried to follow his example, but was seized and held on shore. No attempt was made to recover *Rap-po*, or to induce him on shore—once he was in the boat, and his friends received trade for him as if they had parted with him willingly. The obtaining of these three boys was considered satisfactory as a first day's work on Guadalcanar, and as we stood out to sea for the night we were fain to anticipate an early date on which the Helena, a full ship, would turn her prow seawards for the home voyage.

In the night hours, when the Helena was tacking off and on, Guadalcanar rose huge and impressive in the light of an effulgent moon, the head of Mount Lammas, 8,000ft. high, surmounting other hills which formed a range of Alpine boldness. Where the vessel returned in the morning the hills were uniformly conical, and were huddled together like a jostling crowd of enormous pyramids, all verdant from base to summit. A white sandy beach stretched in a sweeping curve for miles on either side. On his first trip ashore the recruiter got one boy in a colourless way at a place called *Bella*. Then, after rounding a crater-like reef two miles off the coast, we proceeded to hug the shore. The weather was propitious, clear, with wind enough to handle the ship without raising too much surf on the beach. So the boats went off again on a recruiting expedition, and commenced to work along the shore. They had not been long gone, however, when it fell a dead calm, and the vessel rolled helplessly in what the captain considered too close proximity to the land, so the boats were recalled by flag signal, and getting a whiff of a land breeze the vessel stood out to sea again. And now a strong E.S.E. breeze set in which raised a sea that soon made the shore inaccessible east of Cape Hunter, so the helm was kept up and we headed for Wanderer Bay. We hove-to over night off the Cape, and next day had but light and variable airs with occasional showers. The captain had intended to water at Wanderer Bay, but finding that impracticable or inadvisable held on his northerly course. Whilst off this bay, however, the Helena was visited by a white man—Captain Robinson, at one time skipper of a Fiji labour vessel, and now the resident agent of a Sydney prospecting syndicate. He had been shepherding a reef on the island since February, and was wearily waiting for instructions from his syndicate. He told us that the labour vessels *Empress* and *Para* had been at Wanderer Bay for water and native food, and that there appeared to have been a competition for recruits between the barque and the brig. When labour vessels meet at the islands they usually steer in different directions. This is an unwritten law of trade dictated by etiquette and self-interest. It stands to reason that a trader has a better chance by himself than with a competitor alongside, and when there is scope enough to work separately it is considered bad form to shadow a rival. I was not concerned about the motive of the alleged rivalry between the barque and the brig, but the fact that a competition had apparently taken place seemed to be of importance, for competition is apt to breed

trivialities, and to look for irregularities adverse to the kanakas was part of my mission. The Helena had been, unintentionally and to her own disadvantage, following at a distance in the tracks of the barque and brig. At nearly every place we visited they had been there before us, and nearly everywhere we heard of them and their doings as seamen. Now, if in their haste to outvie each other these two vessels, or either of them, had infringed the humanitarian law passed for the control of the traffic by the Queensland Parliament we should have heard of it. At every "passage" there are dozens of natives who can speak intelligibly in broken English, and they are nearly all garrulous. If there had been a single breach of the regulations injurious to the Polynesians, we should have been told of it not once but a score of times. But so far from conveying any complaint, the reports were complimentary—often fulsomely so. "My word! three fellow mast good fellow ship; two fellow mast more better," or *vice versa*, was their wearying and tantalising refrain, for whatever else it might signify it meant that the Helena would be libelled as a ship that was "no good," unless we at least equalled what our predecessors were said to have done in the matter of presents and payments. From my mission point of view this was, of course, very satisfactory, showing as it did that in what had evidently partaken more or less of a game of grab the islanders had not suffered, and must have benefited.

An effort was made to enter Popan Bay on Thursday afternoon, but when we were close to the anchorage a land breeze drove us to sea again, and morning found us once more in the vicinity of Wanderer Bay. During the forenoon we forged northwards, and were tempted by appearances to enter an unnamed bay by Cape Beaufort. The captain and Government agent christened it in their log-books after the cape. It was easy to enter or leave, cosy enough too, and seemed a likely place for water. The boats went to prospect, and found a fair-sized creek of fresh water, but it was not very handy, so the replenishing of our tanks was postponed. The shore was a delightful solitude. A soft beach of clean black sand rose to level ground, which was covered with ornamental trees, and carpeted with a trailing vine that had broad leaves of living green and a wealth of purple bloom. There were small tracts of naked soil, and on these the spoor of more than one alligator was deeply impressed in huge claw-marks and sinuous tail lines. An opening in the bush led to a deep water-hole alive with sportive fish, and on its sandy bank a large alligator had stretched itself to bask in the sun. The monster was about 20ft. long, and it was apparent that he had only just settled for a siesta, as he was still wet enough to glisten. Fortunately for himself he was yet awake, and he popped out of sight before the captain had time to raise his gun. There were also numerous birds, large and small, and myriads of insects, but so far as man was concerned we found the place an utter solitude. Not a single native was in evidence.

On the Saturday we shifted to Popan, the chartered harbour. The captain anchored at a spot where, according to the chart, there was depth enough and to spare, and then discovered that only nine feet below his keel was a rock, on which the vessel would drop when the tide fell. This was only one of a number of instances that had occurred during the voyage showing the charts of the Solomons to be lamentably deficient and misleading. Captain Doig removed without loss of any time to safer ground, and settled down for a stay until Monday. Here there were numerous natives, who were very amiable and respectful. There was no rude overcrowding of our deck as at Malaya, and no insatiable cadging—no begging in fact of any kind. A select few brought canoes loaded with the choicest fruits of their gardens, which they offered at prices that could not be cavilled at. They did not expect anything for nothing, and in selling as their produce were a cut above huckstering. Their chief called on the captain in a quiet and unpretentious way, and said he could help himself to supplies of fresh water and firewood freely. If assistance were wanted in the cutting of firewood, he would be supplied at the rate of two sticks of tobacco and a clay pipe per diem. At Malaya exactly five times as much payment had been asked for similar services, and in addition the chiefs expected a royalty. We helped ourselves quite freely to wood and water, but required no assistance outside our own recruits.

On Saturday the boats made a tour round the bay, inquiring for recruits. They passed along sandy beaches strewn with coral and shells, glided in and out of secluded coves, where the air was still and laden with the perfume of blossoming trees, rounded jutting points of woodland, jumped on breaking waves over obstructing reefs, and skirted a long sweep of sylvan shore, lapped by the wavelets of a sea lake held in a huge coral basin, and over the mile distant brim of the basin the ocean billows were pouring themselves in a semi-circle of snow-white foam. All round the bay the foliage was richly varied in form and colour. There were trees that were tall and stately, trees that were umbrageous and graceful, trees that were shrub-like and chaste, and they mingled their leaves in a harmony of blended greenery. There were no villages in sight, but natives were camping under the shade of the trees like family parties at picnic assembled, happy and contented. Men lounged by the camp fires, youths strolled on the beach, and women wearing short thick petticoats of silvous fringe, and daisy columbines, passed to and fro with baskets of fruit balanced on their heads. Hailed by the boats, the men assented to the water's edge and answered questions with native courtesy. Neither of them had any desire at present for a change of scene, being quite satisfied with their lot. Back in the bush there might be some boys who would like to recruit, but just then they were all very busy on the yam gardens. The Sunday was devoted to rambling on the beach. The whole population of the vessel went ashore between meal times, bathed in the sea and the fresh water creek to their heart's content, angled off the reefs, or went shell gathering, natives joining them in a friendly and helpful spirit, and looking for no lure for their polite attentions. The more I saw of these Guadalcanar folk the less did I wonder at Captain Robinson's nerve in settling amongst them as a solitary white man.

We had now an abundance of food for our recruits for a long time to come, but that was not sufficient. Butchers' meat was indispensable for the crew, and unless we could make good a quantity thrown overboard on account of rottenness, the cruise would have to be prematurely ended. It was imperative that some effort should be made to battle with the circumstances. The puzzling question was, which way to turn—back to Marou or Ugi, where traders or a man-of-war might supply our want, or keep on northwards and get round Guadalcanar to Florida, where a trader named Nelson might happen to have meat for sale. Florida, *sine Negis*, was nearest; sometimes it yielded recruits in large numbers, and the captain decided to give it a trial. So on Monday, October 17, we sailed from the pleasant harbour of Popan and steered northwards. Head-winds kept us tacking for two days and nights between Cape Nagle and Russell Islands. On Wednesday morning we had the island of Savo ahead—an extinct volcano, 1,800ft. high, standing in mid-channel between Guadalcanar and Isabel, Russell and Florida Islands, and looking over Florida to Malaya. On the other side of Indispensable Strait. The scene had changed as if by magic. There were islands all around—lands everywhere. In that there was nothing unusual, but there was one very novel and refreshing feature—new in our island experiences, and refreshing as the face of an old and homely friend. This was green grass on Florida and Guadalcanar—meadows and hills of it, not pocket-handkerchief clearings like yam patches, but miles of bladed country smiling in the sunshine, a gladness relief to eyes satiated with the monotony of unbroken bush. But for the conspicuous absence of certain adjuncts of rural life we could have

imagined that we had suddenly passed from the darkness of barbarism into the light of civilisation. The grassed lands were in their virgin state—unfenced and without stock. We looked in vain for railed-in paddocks and browsing cattle, but in spite of these deficiencies the prospect was bright and pleasing.

Nelson's trading station, the good Captain Doig was now aiming for, lay about the middle of Florida, on the side facing Guadalcanar, only twenty or thirty miles from Savo, but, still having a head wind, the Helena had to spend another day beating. Next morning an anchorage near Nelson's station was reached, and there-luck for once smiled on the Helena, for close to Nelson's jetty lay a brigantine, whose presence was sufficient to remove all fear or doubt about our meat supply.