

# THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

## OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

## THE LAST OF THE "RETURNS" LANDED.

### BRISK RECRUITING.

No. VIII.

On Friday (September 22) the Helena shifted to Urassie, 11 miles northward. A comfortable anchorage was found inside long lines of reef, and close to a creek, whence a supply of excellent water was obtained. Next morning a native market was held near by. From half-a-dozen islets which studded the reefs a small army of people, chiefly women, came in canoes to barter fish for yams and tafa from the bush natives. Our boats attended, and around them gathered the male guards of the marketing women. These men paid no attention to the bartering, and the women had no time to notice the boats. The swapping of food was conducted with much chattering, and now and then a fishwife would be seen chasing a bush Mary for an additional yam. In half an hour the business was finished, and the majority of the bush people took their departure. One group of them lingered. A boy belonging to them had shown symptoms of the Queensland "mania," and they stayed to block him from recruiting. At the first step he took in his contemplated bolt for the boats he was seized by a number of men and one Mary, and was held fast. He struggled, but was powerless, and the recruiter had to leave without him.

Rowing along the beach the boats came on another party of natives, and fished in. Two young men stepped on board without hindrance or argument. They said their friends were not present to receive payment, but that, they added, was no matter, as the payment could be made afterwards. And now a scene followed. A young woman was pulled forward by one set of men and women and dragged back by another set. She herself appeared willing to join one of the boys who had entered the boats, but which way she was pulled gave her much less concern than it did to the contending parties. Those who wished us to take her said she was the wife of one of the recruits; those who held her back denied that statement; and between the two her arms were well-nigh pulled from their sockets. The Government agent shouted himself hoarse, calling upon the people to cease their strife, and saying he would have no native dragged to the boats. Moreover, he had been told by the recruit to whom the Mary was said to belong that she was not his wife. Exasperation on both sides brought the struggle to an end, and the Mary remained on shore.

One of the two new recruits proved to be a step-brother of a native named Peter, who was acting as interpreter. Both were new chums, but they went through their initiation in the cabin as if quite familiar with the formula.

When again working the shore in the afternoon the boats got another recruit under rather exciting circumstances. The boy having taken a seat in the recruiter's boat, two Marys, one old enough to be his mother, and the other a mere girl, sought to follow him. For a time their friends held them back by force, amid a great clatter of voices. This took place whilst the recruiter was waiting for an opportunity to pay for the recruits engaged in the morning, and continued until he turned out trade for that purpose. The display of the presents created a diversion, which the two Marys took advantage of to rush the boats, and they climbed on board. The Government agent sternly ordered them ashore again, but they cried loudly, asserted through the interpreter that they were wives of the recruit, and refused to move. The idea of either of them being married to the young fellow was too preposterous to be entertained, and the recruit himself denied that they had any claim on him. In the end the interpreter had to bundle them overboard into the water, where they stood waiting piteously, but they dried their tears and smiled on receiving some tobacco and pipes. This was the second time we had to bribe Marys to cease crying on being refused as recruits. A third Mary, young, matron, and comely, also claimed to be wife of our latest recruit. She took to the water like a duck, swam out, and made a determined effort to board the Government agent's boat. When noticed she was just on the point of laying hold of the steer oar, and the boat pulled away from her to save trouble. This Mary afterwards came off in a canoe to the ship and endeavoured to insinuate herself on board, but as the boy to whom she claimed relationship would not acknowledge her she was refused.

On one occasion, when cruising about, the boats were waylaid by a native, who wanted to buy tobacco with English money. He said he had £10 to spend, but when he produced his purse it was seen that what he meant was ten shillings in half-crowns, for which he received 2lb. of trade tobacco. Immediately afterwards another man put in an appearance with a similar object. This man did have £10 in crisp Bank of Queensland notes, but we could not spare any more tobacco. Both men had recently returned from Queensland.

Our principal visitor at Urassie was the leading local chief, Kwissia, a man renowned throughout the islands for his prowess in warfare. He is a clean-shaven, spare built, wiry man, about 60 years of age. He is proud, sensitive, and taciturn, and he glories in being recognised as a friend of the white man. Many years ago, when he was a stripling under the chieftainship of Kapow, now deceased, a ship's boat with three English sailors was cast ashore at his passage. Two of the castaways died of dysentery; the third, an apprentice named Jack Renton, survived, and Kapow and Kwissia, taking a great liking to him, treated him as a son and brother. Renton lived with them for nine long years, adapting himself to all their savage habits and customs as to the manner born. He married Kapow's daughter, and he and Kwissia were always together in the canoe or on the warpath. Renton managed eventually to return to civilisation. He had always been locked up for safe keeping when sails were sighted, but at last outwitted the natives. He whistled on a piece of board the words "White man held here," and placed the notice on the end of a staff, where it was read by the schooner *Bobtailed Nag*, and his rescue followed, but not immediately. As tradition has it, Kapow would not let Renton go to Queensland until he sent an emissary there to spy the land. When he learned what kind of a place Queensland was, he allowed his white favourite to go, and his humanity was subsequently rewarded by a present of £100 worth of trade by the Queensland Government. Renton was provided with a shore billet, and revisited the old country, but hankered after the South Seas until he was made a Government agent, and when acting in that capacity he was murdered by the natives at Oba, in the New Hebrides. Kwissia was profoundly grieved when he heard of Renton's death, and was keen on going with a large force of his own men to avenge it, but the English authorities to whom he applied refused him means of transport. When Mr. Armstrong, the Government agent of the Ariel, was tomahawked at Manoha, Kwissia, not satisfied with the punishment inflicted by an English man-of-war, went with his own men and smote the offenders. He killed six of them and destroyed all their canoes. Kwissia has himself been to Queensland as an indentured labourer, and he frankly admits that white men are far superior to blacks. Brisbane is the largest city he has ever seen, and he says its greatness is beyond anything he had

imagined. When told that Sydney and Melbourne were each at least 14 times bigger than Brisbane he gazed and whistled in amazement.

On Sunday the ship was signalled from the beach, but in observance of the new Queensland law, that there shall be no recruiting on the first day of the week, the call was not answered. Later, a boy who wished to recruit came off in a canoe, accompanied by a brother, and was allowed to stay on board as a visitor until Monday, when he was enlisted in due form. A smoke raised on shore on the Monday morning was supposed to denote the presence of the last recruits' friends waiting for payment. As it was approached by the boats, however, natives were noticed retreating in a very suspicious manner into the bush, and taking up positions behind trees. "Look out! bullet he come now!" shouted one of our Kanaka crew, who recognised evidences of intended treachery. Thus placed on their guard, the recruiter and the Government agent neared the shore with great caution. If the islanders meant mischief, they lost courage on seeing the white men on the *qui vive*. Most of them slunk entirely out of sight, but two or three came out on the beach with an appearance of innocence. The latter were asked by our interpreter what they meant by raising a smoke, and the explanation given was considered lame and condemnatory. They admitted that their smoke was a signal for the boats, and then said they were looking for a friend who had, as they thought, gone off on a visit to the ship. The recruiter and one of our native crew recognised two of the fellows as Atta men, and the conclusion was then arrived at that the tribe who longed to avenge the deaths in Queensland of their chief's sons were still stalking the Helena's boats for the purpose of spilling the blood of a white man. Kwissia would not admit the possibility of Atta men daring to enter his "passage" against white men, but we considered it wise to be extra careful in all further visits to the beach. We learned afterwards from various sources that they were indeed the Atta avengers.

The friends of the boy who joined us on Sunday turned up later on Monday, and were paid to their own satisfaction. Two more boys were obtained on the same day. They were attended by a large number of their tribe, and in their enlistment there was no interference by friends, or even solicitation on the recruiters' part. When the boats went to bring them off, Kwissia followed in his canoe, and, believing or professing to believe, that the strangers on the beach were the men he had been told were menacing the boats, he leaped on the sands in a frenzy of passion, and rushed at them with uplifted spear, yelling loudly, and bounding about on the beach, in defiant and threatening attitudes. When he eventually paused for a reply, the strangers explained that they had no hostile intentions, and their assurances were accepted by the increased chief.

At dawn on Wednesday (September 28) the Helena's anchor was once more lifted from coral depths, and her sails spread for the morning breeze, and after experiencing some heavy weather she arrived the same afternoon in Sio Harbour, where she landed ten returns. One of the returns left his box on board until he went ashore to find his friends. Another, although he belonged to a village a day's journey inland, found a dozen of his tribe waiting for him on the beach. The boats worked industriously for recruits, but found none. The *Empress* and the *Para* had been here before us, and during the previous four weeks had taken, if reports were true, no fewer than thirty boys. So all the ripe fruit had been gathered; to all appearance not an eligible boy remained. A man from a bush tribe who had heard our advertising gun brought a lad he said was his son. He intended him for Fiji, where "half" boys are accepted—boys, that is, in a literal sense, for which half price is paid. At the same time he was quite willing to let the lad go to Queensland, and when objection was taken on the grounds of youth and size he urged, "He good boy. My word! he get big fellow along Queensland." The father and the son both looked disappointed when the Government agent enforced his veto.

Saturday (Oct. 1) was another day of drenching rain, on which nothing could be done. The next was the one of the week on which recruiting is illegal, but it could be utilised in seeking another field of operations; so sail was set, and, passing between Basakanna and the mainland, we rounded Cape Astrolabe and coasted down the western side of Malaya. For a long distance the mountain wall, now seen in reverse, came sheer to the coast, or nearly so, in a very uniform declivity, whose green face was at one point gemed with a radiant waterfall. The water spring from forest heights and leaped into forest depths, and what we saw of it was a 40ft. streak of dazzling brightness. Farther on the hills increased in height until they reached an altitude of 2,000ft. at Mount Alite, and 4,300ft. at Kolvora, but they receded from the shore, leaving extensive lowlands and miles and miles of saltwater lagoons won from the sea by the coral insects. Twenty-five miles from Cape Astrolabe, Coleridge Bay opened to view with inviting amplitude, but we had business farther on—the landing of our remaining returns—that the captain wished to get off hand. For Monday (October 3) the entry made in the log-book was "light variable winds and fine weather." A log-book is nearly as concise and matter of fact as a weather bulletin. "Fine weather" is a very comprehensive phrase, but it is indefinite and vague, and seemed almost a misapplication of words when applied to the really glorious aspects nature presented on this particular day. The slow swell of the sea was rippled with a gentle breeze. The cloud effects were magnificent—an upper stratum, exquisite in form, reached away seemingly into infinite space; heavy masses of vapour, heaped up and white as snow, rested on the mountain tops; baby clouds rising from their birthplaces in valley and gorge, mingled on their way to higher realms with lazy columns of blue smoke that indicated where natives were busy on yam patches, and seemed to belie the statement that the inhabitants of Northern Malaya are more warlike than industrious. Westward, thirty miles and more, lay the Florida Islands, and beyond them the highlands of Guadalcanar, all veiled with the mists of distance—mere delineations against the sky. Towards evening two heavily-laden clouds burst with their own weight, and fell like curtains on either side of Mount Alite. It was as if the two wings of the Alpine panorama had been painted out in order that attention should be concentrated on the central gem of the picture, with its towering peak and fascinating cloud scapes. Then when there had been time to feast the eyes, the curtains drew together, and all was leaden rainy obscurity. But after sundown, the rain-clouds exhausted themselves with tropical thoroughness, and the moon shone brightly on a fleecy canopy. The ship now lay peacefully at anchor, her loose ropes swinging slowly, keeping time to the regular beating of the ocean's pulse. From this hold came the sound of the recruits crooning themselves to sleep. Recumbent figures all over the deck sought sleep, and soon all but the watch were at rest.

The place we were now anchored at was named Feu. Some little distance farther north a return had been allowed, at his own request, to land with friends in a canoe. Several other canoes came off to us, and a number of the natives clamoured for the billet of interpreter. Whilst the recruiter was still undecided as to whom he should employ, one of them went to the shore on his own motion and returned after sundown with a young man who had served in Fiji, and who now wished to agree in Queensland. This recruit gave his name as Co-ringa, and he was engaged at the rate of £8 per annum. He seemed pleased with the terms, and he told us we might expect a new chum mate of his in the morning. We were not disappointed, for the new chum mate came off to us unthought early next day, and was duly enlisted. Later on another old Fiji hand joined us, and with him the supply of Fiji recruits ceased. One native, himself a former labourer, who badgered the recruiter for employment, affirmed with salubrious persistency that

"plenty, plenty boy" would come down from the bush if the schooner would wait for a few days, and mentioned as proof of the veracity of his statement that he had attended a mission school in Queensland, and now never told a lie. The recruiter, however, was sceptical, and the captain had made his mind up to shift his quarters next day.

Off Langa Langa we parted, with our last three returns. Their boxes, although well packed and weighty when they left Bundaberg, were now remarkably light. For betel-nut and other island luxuries, which to them were irresistibly tempting, they had parted with their goods at our various places of call, and were now in a bankrupt condition. When they were being rowed to the shore, they talked the matter over in their own language, and an interpreter informed us that they agreed to account to their friends for their poverty by saying that they received next to nothing for their labours in Queensland. The recruiter merely smiled at the threatened libel. Although all our outward passengers had now left us, there seemed to be no diminution in the current of life on board ship. There was a decided ebb in the tide at Urassie, but our returns had dwindled to 22, and our recruits could be counted on the fingers of one hand. From this minimum of 27 our total began to increase again. Thus by a gradual process one living freight supplanted the other without any break in the ship's routine.

On Thursday (October 6) and Friday the Helena lay in a snug harbour, charted as Kwa, about half-way down the coast. It was an inlet like the mouth of a river, a third of a mile long, shaded and sheltered by tall trees. On the northern side of this harbour was a stone wall, built evidently as a rampart, and beyond it were cocconut palms, indicative of a native village. The natives themselves were soon in evidence, equipped with bows and arrows. They took bearings of us from their wall, but, although armed as for defence, they came as sightseers rather than as a garrison. At first they were distrustful and timorous, and when our boats were lowered for work would retire from view, leaving their rampart undefended. But a short acquaintance assured them that we were peaceful and well-intentioned visitors, and they not only ceased to fly when the boats approached, but gave the recruiter an audience and an offer. Mr. Mathern having told them the nature of his business, they produced a young married couple who were willing to recruit. The pair were very eligible and desirable, but alas! they were beyond our means. Their tribe would only part with them on receipt of a pig, a Snider, and amputation. The recruiter explained that the Helena carried no pigs or contraband trade of any description, and offered legitimate trade in abundance, but all to no purpose, for the tribe decided to wait for a more accommodating vessel. That night we let off a blast of dynamite and fired a sky-rocket to apprise the bush people of our presence, and waited next day for results. The captain and others were spending an idle hour on the Friday diving for coral on the fringe reef when summoned back to the vessel by a signal gun. The recruiter, ever on the alert, had detected the first tiny curls of blue smoke that rose from a newly-lighted fire at the top of the harbour. This was the first and only answer at Kwa to our pyrotechnic advertisements. By the fire were grouped a number of armed bushmen. One had come to enlist, the others to receive the presents that would be given on his behalf. The business was arranged in this instance without any hitch, no prohibited trade being asked for. The recruit, a full-grown young man, allowed his friends to settle with the recruiter as they pleased, but he was very particular about what did concern himself—viz., the terms of service. When being "signed on" he required the interpreter to repeat distinctly the period of his engagement and the amount of his wages, as if to guard against misunderstanding, and then he took his place amongst our passengers with the assured air of a man who had got all essential points stated in black and white. After having spent seven weeks around Malaya, during which time we had landed 45 returns (and buried one), recruited 43 boys (and buried one), we now sailed in the direction of Maroon Sound, with the view of working the weather-side of Guadalcanar.