

# THE KANAKA-LABOUR TRAFFIC.

## OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS.

### STRINGENCY OF THE REGULATIONS.

### THE COST OF A KANAKA.

No. XIII.

The cruise of the *Helena* made it very clear that malpractice in the recruiting of islanders is, practically, impossible under the existing system. The traffic is hedged in by legislation in every direction. A ship-owner who intends to bring islanders to Queensland must give a preliminary notice, stating where the vessel is lying, what condition she is in, how many islanders it is desired to carry, what islands she is to visit, and what limit he will place on the duration of the voyage. He has then to apply for a license. His application must be in duplicate, and must contain full particulars of the tonnage, accommodation and ventilation of the vessel, and the names in full of master, mate, recruiting agent, and crew. Sureties are also required, and their names have to be supplied. One copy of the application is countersigned by the local inspector of Pacific Islanders at the intended port of departure; the other is forwarded by that officer to the immigration agent at Brisbane, with a report on the several statements in the application and on the character of the officers and men intended to be employed. In the cases of officers not previously known to the Immigration department, certificates of character must accompany the application. The local shipping inspector, too, has to supply a certificate as to the seaworthiness of the ship and the number of passengers she may carry under the provisions of the Pacific Island Labourers Act. Every person embarking in any capacity has to make a declaration of his British nationality before the license is issued. There are still other provisions which have to be complied with before the license is delivered to the master. The local inspector of islanders, for instance, must obtain from the medical officer a certificate that sufficient provision is made for ventilation, and that the ship is properly supplied with medicines and an approved medical work on the treatment of diseases. The shipping inspector has to supply a similar certificate as to ventilation, cooking utensils, water tanks, and other details as to the accommodation for islanders.

Then intending employers of islanders have to apply for a license to introduce labourers, and this application is scrutinised with as much care by the Government officials as the one for a shipmaster's license. It has to be accompanied with a schedule giving the name of the employer's estate and its situation, the area under cultivation and the crop intended to be cultivated, the number of islanders already employed, the nature of the work at which the labourers for whom the license is applied for are to be engaged, and other particulars. Moreover, an application for a license to introduce islanders has to be accompanied by a bond for a sum equal to £5 for every islander proposed to be introduced, to pay for the return passage of each islander to his native island at the expiration of his term of service. This bond has to be executed by the applicant and two approved sureties. Previous also to the issue of a license the applicant has to pay the sum of £3 for each islander proposed to be introduced to meet the expenses incurred by the immigration agent in supervising the introduction and subsequent return of the islanders. Provision is, of course, made for refunds in cases of short shipments.

The ship-owner and the planter having complied with the law in the preliminary steps, the vessel, it may be thought, would now be at liberty to sail. But not so. Her master has now to supply a bond for £500, signed by himself and two sufficient sureties, for the prevention of kidnapping and the due observance of the requirements of the law, and another bond for £500 for the return of his passengers to their respective villages on their native islands. Even this is not all. Every imaginable phase of recruiting has been provided for in regulations, which in number might be almost described as legion, and to see that they are carried out to the letter and in spirit a Government agent is appointed to accompany the vessel. Very great care is now exercised in the appointment of this official, and his duties are covered by such special instructions that if he were to allow any irregularity he would be acting suicidally.

"Government agents," say the instructions, "are especially to remember that the position in which they are placed renders them responsible to the Queensland Government alone. If the master or officers of the ship interfere with them in the performance of their duties, or refuse to obey their directions, it will be their duty to report the matter to the Government by the first available opportunity, and immediately upon the ship's return to the colony. . . . If any islander is recruited contrary to the provisions of the regulations, or if the master is guilty of any other violation of them, the Government agent is to refuse to permit any further recruiting, and to require the ship to return to Queensland as soon as the return passengers (if any) have been landed." Between these two comprehensive clauses are a multitude of minor, but very essential, rules. The Government agent has to see on final departure from Queensland that all the preliminary regulations have been complied with, and until then the recruiting licenses are withheld by him from the master. He has to keep a jealous eye over the passengers and their effects, and to see that they are well and adequately fed on the voyage. He is supplied with a log-book which he has to enter up carefully each day, noting therein every occurrence of consequence. He is required to see that every return passenger is duly landed, along with his property, not only on his own island, but at his own village or district, unless an islander may expressly wish to be landed elsewhere, in which case a full explanation of the circumstances must be entered in his log. In the work of recruiting he has to see that all recruits are engaged for service in a certain locality in accordance with the licenses issued to the ship, and that each one fully understands the nature of the agreement he is about to enter into as to rate of pay, and especially as to duration of service. Generally, he is responsible for the welfare of all island passengers. As the recruiting proceeds he has to prepare and deliver to the master certificates of the engagements, for delivery to the inspector on arrival in Queensland. It is also the duty of the Government agent to accompany the boats whenever they are employed in recruiting or landing islanders, and in procuring native food, or in trading in any other way with the natives on the islands. Other regulations he has to see carried out, or to give effect to himself, have been alluded to and illustrated in previous articles.

It will be seen, then, that the Government agent holds the key of the position on board ship. Only with his consent or through his culpable negligence could wrongs be perpetrated, and any collision between him and the master to infringe the laws would be fatal to both, for in these days of enlightenment the islanders know how and where to find redress. In every tribe we met with there were men who could express themselves intelligently in broken English, and British men-of-war are recognised throughout the islands as ocean police. Even if injured islanders did not complain to war vessels, they would not fail to talk of their grievances to the coops traders,

in whom they would find sympathetic listeners willing to help them. And if recruits happened to be badly treated with the connivance of the Government Agent, the fact could not be kept a secret long after their arrival in Queensland, where the inspectors not only invite them to state any complaints they may have, but by fair and friendly intercourse encourage the boys to confide in them. But the management and protection of kanakas in Queensland belongs to quite another branch of the subject. In recruiting, the master who attempted to kidnap or cheat the islanders, and the Government Agent who tolerated any wrongful act, would be held to recklessness and foolish in the extreme. The natives, nowadays, understand all about the business, and are not to be taken by force or fraud, and the idea of stealing them is so out of date that it was rare to meet with a tribe that betrayed any shyness in meeting the recruiter unarmed. The natives know exactly what they are wanted for—how many yam seasons make three years. If some of them cannot tell how many shillings there are in a pound they know that their wages are to be at least equal to what convulses they desire to imitate got for their first term of service, and they soon learn to say, "Six poun one year," and to see that they get it. Those who enlist may sometimes be urged to do so by friends who covet trade presents, but it was clear to me that the great majority of the *Helena's* boys recruited of their own free will and as a matter of choice, and that the recruiter had no power to influence them unduly. I say "great majority" advisedly. So far as appearances went I might be absolutely correct in saying that "all" were perfectly free agents. It may, however, have happened that some recruited at the instigation of friends, whose influence it was impossible for me to gauge. As for their treatment on board ship, judging from their high spirits and happy demeanour, the voyage must have been without exception one of the happiest chapters in their lives.

But whilst kidnapping and fraud in the traffic has been made by wise and elaborate laws, by strict supervision, and by enlightenment amongst the islanders themselves, as impracticable as crime is in a well-governed, civilised community, the desire on the part of the natives to recruit for Queensland is so pronounced that kidnapping is rendered unnecessary. It is true that at certain places and times during a voyage business will be dull, but at other times and places during the same voyage it will be brisk, and if a vessel has only an average enlistment of one recruit per diem for the voyage she does splendidly from a business point of view. In one of the latest published books on the Solomon Islands, *A Naturalist Among the Head-hunters*, being an account of three visits to the Solomons in 1886, 1887, and 1888—the author, Mr. C. M. Woodford, F.L.G. (who happens to be opposed to the traffic), tells of islanders looking in vain for labour vessels. During his last visit he visited the island of Yasbel in a small vessel belonging to a coops trader.

"Three canoes came off (at Muga), and I was surprised to hear myself addressed in Fiji by one of the natives who claimed my acquaintance. He said he had worked three years in Fiji, and told me being his tribe lived in the bush, but that he liked to live on the shore, in company of head-hunters. They had seen us coming along the coast during the morning, and had come off to see who we were. He said that there were many boys ashore who wanted to go away to work in Fiji or Queensland. Just no labour ship had visited them for some time. . . . In the afternoon we anchored a mile or two west of the shore, in company of several natives expressed a wish to go to Fiji or Queensland, and appeared disappointed when we told them that, as the island of Yasbel had been closed as a recruiting ground to ships from Queensland and Fiji since its nominal annexation by Germany, they would have no more opportunities of going to those places. Five boys of about 14 years of age, having divested themselves of everything in the shape of ornaments, as the custom is when they enter on a labour engagement, came and seated themselves upon a rock that was nearest to the ship, and shouted to us until it was dark to send a boat and take them away. It mattered not to them there."

I found the same spirit displayed again and again amongst the natives of Malaya, Guadalcanar and Florida, and, as already shown, although the *Helena* had seasons of what seemed to be bad luck, she not only secured her full complement in the end after rejecting 23 candidates, but had to leave 13 eligible natives behind, for whom she had no accommodation. When the traffic is in full swing about fifteen vessels are engaged sailing from Brisbane, Maryborough, Bundaberg, Mackay, and Townsville. That was the number in 1891, and they had accommodation for 1,088 islanders. The time occupied by the voyages averages 120 days. As no new licenses were issued after December 31, 1890 (until the trade was resumed this year), the vessels were only able to make one voyage each in 1891. Between them that year they brought to Queensland 1,600 island labourers, viz., 900 males and 700 females. Four ships working the New Hebrides obtained 976 recruit per diem, five working the Solomons 676, and six working both groups 941. The *Helena's* average on the present occasion was 676 per diem, and her trip was regarded as more than satisfactory from a shipowner's point of view.

There are two terms constantly in use in the labour traffic which need a little explanation. Traders and natives talking with each other speak of "catching" and "buying" boys. Our first native visitor told us that another ship had gone before us to "catch him boy along islands," and "catch" was invariably the word used for the act of recruiting. It is the only English equivalent the natives use or understand, and is never intended to mean anything illegal. If kidnapping were meant the word "steal" would be used. If you ask a native how many children he has got, he replies that "he catch him" so many picannies, and in bartering the natives use "catch" so many yams for so many fish. The term "buying," as applied to the presents made on behalf of recruits has not so clear a meaning. The friends of many recruits no doubt regard the presents made in trade as purchase money, and in cases would say a boy was "stolen" if they received no solatium. But even on this point enlightenment is coming gradually but surely to the native mind. The presents so given are not recognised by the Queensland law as part of the bargain. A boy may recruit and desert at pleasure, and for the £3 worth of trade given to his friends the ship would have no redress. Recruiting vessels have been frequently bled in that way by cute natives. Nothing of the kind occurred in the cruise of the *Helena*, but we had six boys who had knowledge and courage enough to make their just demand for money in lieu of presents to friends. These presents are, in fact, part of the cost of recruiting, and it is recognised that they are in a sense part of the prospective earnings of the recruits (for they are covered by the amount planters pay the vessel), and so when a boy asks for money if Queensland in place of presents to island friends his wishes are at once acceded to. Meanwhile the appearance of "buying" the boys is kept up as an expedient which facilitates recruiting. If the cost were abolished vessels would, for some years, require much more than an average of three months to find their complements, and what might seem to be saved in presents or "purchase" money so-called, would be swallowed up in the extra cost of a prolonged voyage. There would thus be no saving to the planters or the shipowners, and there would be a direct loss to the recruits or their island friends. In the light of these explanations, it will be seen that it would be a mistake to consider the use of the terms "catching" and "buying" as indicative of anything in the nature of slavery.

It has been frequently urged against the Queensland system of island labour that in the importation of kanakas a due proportion of the sexes is ignored, and that this neglect leads to harmful results. I am not in a position to say authoritatively whether the results are harmful or otherwise, but I can witness to the rejection of at least eight females who wished to recruit on the *Helena*. Two of them were intelligent, being young, and the others were refused in consequence of the regulation that "a woman is not to be re-

cruted unless accompanied by her husband, not without the consent of the chief of the island or of the village or district from which she is brought." Under this rule female recruits must always be in a very striking minority. It involves the presence of the chief, which in the case of bush tribes, from which most of the recruits are now drawn, is often quite impracticable. A married couple may leave their bush home bent on recruiting, and, passing through hostile territory, eventually present themselves at the ship's anchorage, but if they are not accompanied by their chief the Government agent has no option but to refuse both or accept the man and reject the woman. If a married bush couple attending a native market on the coast desired to seize an opportunity to enlist, their chief would have first to be found, and this would mean the employment of natives to search for the chief in the wild interior. In many cases the search would be often futile, and it would always involve a delay which few skippers would brook. In the case of boys or single men the chief's request is not asked for, and in the case of a man with a woman the principal thing the chief is wanted for is to say that the woman belongs to the man. When presents are in evidence his consent is not a matter to be very anxious about. What his testimony as to wedlock is worth can only be known to the natives themselves. Certificates of marriage are not in vogue in the savage islands, and although I questioned a number of islanders on the subject, I was unable to discover the existence of anything in the form of a marriage ceremony. To a large extent women are treated as goods and chattels or slaves. When a "boy" is rich enough he buys a girl he may fancy from her father, pays for her with porpoise teeth or bead money, and leads her away to his own hut. "Sam," the Manokivi chief, wore a saah of bead money, which contained over 10,000 coins of his realm. Having such a treasure I thought he must be a sort of millionaire in his own country, but the extreme value he put upon the venture was two wives, or £2 in English money. If his quotation were correct, the presents given by traders for one recruit amount in value to the local market price of two native women. It was remarked during our voyage that many women could be obtained if the Government agent was empowered to marry female candidates who might be "willing" to male volunteers or boys already recruited, or to return desirous of re-engaging with a wife for Queensland. In that case the boys would be relieved of the difficulty of providing the purchase money, as the presents the ship would give parents or friends on behalf of the female recruit would be an equivalent. Many returns would be glad to avail themselves of any such arrangement, for though they invariably carry to the islands more than enough to buy a wife, they are not always able to retain their property for that purpose. The question is difficult and delicate, and it is easy to see how any relaxation of the present law might lead to serious abuses. And, after all, it is only a side issue on which opinions differ. Whilst some people see an objectionable disproportion of sexes amongst the kanakas in Queensland, others take quite a different view. Moreover, as the majority of recruits are below the ordinary matrimonial age, it stands to reason that wives must necessarily be always in a small minority on the plantations.

In a recent letter to *The Argus*, Mr. David Conens suggested, as an additional regulation of great importance to returned Kanakas, that when their homes are a few miles inland they should be provided with an escort to within reach of their friends. It occurred to me when we were landing returns that it was a pity to have to leave ex-labourers with the fruits of their toil to the mercy of tribes, who might be more or less hostile, but what more could be done than taking care to land them at their own "passages," or extending to them opportunities of landing secretly if so desired, I failed to see. To escort them to inland villages would be impracticable unless every labour vessel carried an armed force, and that of course would be out of the question, and if it were practicable would probably lead to much bloodshed. Such measures as the appointment of resident Government agents or the establishment of a native police force would only be possible if the islands were annexed. In matters of the kind neither the Queensland nor the Imperial Government can go beyond their own jurisdiction, and the colonial authorities have to be content to do the best within the limits of their power for returning labourers. And if numbers of returns are robbed by their own countrymen they but suffer an injustice which is incidental to a savage life from which the labour traffic itself is materially aiding to lift the natives of the Solomons.

Here a few facts I learned about the kanakas in Queensland on my return to Bundaberg may not be unacceptable. First as to their wages and their cost to the planters. As has been already explained, no kanaka, man or woman, is allowed to be recruited at a smaller wage than £5 a year. All "new chums" and "Matys" are paid at that rate, but boys who have, as it were, already served their apprenticeship are engaged at higher rates, the exact amount of which is, in practice, regulated by the Government agent. Of the recruits brought by the *Helena*, 43 were at £5, six at £6, six at £8, and fifteen at £10, and the average wage was consequently exactly £7 per annum. Kanakas who have been re-engaging for term after term without leaving Queensland received, I was informed, much more than the highest wage given by the *Helena*, and some of them are so rich that they can cash cheques for hundreds of pounds. But in order to be within the mark I will assume that the average wage of kanaka labourers in Queensland is what the *Helena's* record showed, viz., £7 a year. The planter has also to pay sometimes more and sometimes less than £30 a head to the recruiting vessel, £5 as return passage money, £3 as a capitation fee for Government expenses, and £1 per annum as a hospital capitation fee. He has also to bind himself to supply his island labourers with dwelling-places and, with clothing and rations as follows:—

CLOTHING PER ANNUM.	
Hats	2
Shirts (flannel)	4
Trousers, pairs (mole skin or serge)	4
Blankets, pairs	1
RATIONS PER DIEM.	
Bread or flour	1 lb. 0
Boat or station	2 0
Sugar	0 5
Tea	0 0 1/2
Potatoes (or rice fish)	3 0
Tomatoes per week	0 2
Salt	0 2
Soap, per week	0 4

The cost of a kanaka labourer might, therefore, be roughly reckoned up as follows:—

Recruiting	£20
Wages (three years at £7)	21
Return passage	5
Capitation Fee	3
Hospital Fee	3
Tomatoes, per year	2
Rations, per year	47

Total for three years . . . £116  
This would make the average cost per head £38, or 15s. 6d. a week. These figures, moreover, show that the planters do not prefer kanaka labour because it is "slave" cheap. In the Bundaberg district alone there are 3,000 kanakas, over 1,500 of them attend Sunday-schools, and 798 of them have deposits in the Savings Bank totalling £3,500. On the 1st of January of this year there were in the whole of Queensland 8,327 island labourers, and the total amount at their credit in the Savings Bank was £19,346. Many British subjects would envy the lot of the kanaka labourer in Queensland.

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