

# THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

## SPECIAL INVESTIGATION BY "THE ARGUS."

### A REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

The vast importance of the kanaka labour question is generally admitted. It affects not merely Queensland in a material as well as a sentimental sense, but the whole of Australasia. The range may indeed well be extended to the Empire, since the subject has been discussed by Imperial statesmen, and will continue to be a topic on which the Imperial Parliament will have a deep interest. The "bed rock," so to speak, of the discussion is the assertion made far and wide that the traffic is a form of slavery, the labourers being decoyed into servitude and cruelly treated. If there were no such accusation there would be no agitation worthy of the name, but the charge has been made and persistently repeated. With a view, therefore, to obtaining an absolutely reliable insight into the manner in which the traffic is conducted, the proprietors of *The Argus* determined upon a bold and difficult enterprise. They resolved, if possible, to send a representative secretly to the scene of the recruiting, so that every phase of the work might be watched and impartially and fully reported upon. A capable, experienced, and trusted journalist, who has been very successful in many important ventures requiring tact, discrimination, and perseverance, was selected for the duty, and he has just returned to Melbourne after a four months' cruise in the Solomon Islands in the labour schooner *Helena*, of Bundaberg. He has completed a series of articles giving a vivid description of the manner in which 60 kanakas who had completed terms of service in Queensland were returned to their homes, and in which 90 new labourers were obtained for the plantations. The first of the series will be published on Monday, and the remainder as soon thereafter as practicable.

The directions to our representative were that he was to proceed to Bundaberg, and engage in some capacity on the first outward-bound labour vessel. He was then to watch closely every point in the recruiting work, to note particularly the means employed to induce labourers to accept service, so as to discover if questionable tactics were resorted to; he was to make himself familiar with the manner in which the "boys" were treated on shipboard, and generally to supervise the whole traffic. And above all he was to be fearless and impartial in his reports. The desire was for an irreproachable record, and what he has written, we are convinced, meets that requirement. He succeeded after much trouble in obtaining a berth as "supercargo" on board the *Helena*, assuming the rôle of a man "down on his luck," willing to give his services on board ship for a few months, by the end of which time he hoped to receive a remittance from friends in Scotland. This illusion was heightened by the fact that, as a swagman, he had visited the neighbouring plantations searching for work, on some of which he had been temporarily engaged. His incognito was complete, and not one person on board the *Helena* knew that he was a journalist engaged on a secret mission. The vessel left the Burnett River on July 30, and returned on November 18, having in the meantime recruited at the Solomon group, the islands visited being San Christoval, Guadalcanar, Malayta, and Florida. Our representative performed miscellaneous duties, from the dispensing of medicine to pulling an oar in one of the recruiting boats. He saw every one of the ninety recruits engaged, and concerned himself particularly with the means taken to inform them as to the nature of the service they were entering upon. In a word, the proceedings may be described as unexceptionable, as will appear later on. His reports should form a valuable contribution to the discussion of this important question, and should assist to remove misconceptions as to the nature of the traffic.