THE QUEENSLAND SLAVE TRADE.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE AGE.

SIR,—A letter in a contemporary has drawn my attention to the interest taken in Melbourne in the Queensland slave trade. I do not use this word in any claptrap sense, it is the way we always speak of the trade on board the schooners engaged in the trade itself. In one of these schooners I served an apprenticeship; I am, therefore, writing about the labor traffic on the strength of a practical acquaintance with it. As a rule I am convinced that the slave captains do not encourage kidnapping unless under very exceptional circumstances. The great majority of the boys—every Kanaka is indiscriminately termed a boy—are obtained for the sugar plantations under false pretences, by a way at once simple, effective and easily told. When a schooner arrives at an island its two whaleboats are at once sent ashore for recruits. In one is the recruiting agent paid by the owners of the vessel to get boys, in the other is the Government agent paid by the Government of Queensland to see that the boys are obtained fairly. Each boat has its black crew of four or five men, natives of Maré Lifou and Tauna being preferred for their greater fearlessness. The boats pull in to the shore, and while the recruiting agent's boat backs into the beach, the one in which is the Government agent keeps 50 yards or more away, so as to cover in case of an attack. Then the bargaining commences. At every island there are beachcombers, cunning natives, who have been carefully trained to decoy boys off to the schooner. The recruiting agent quickly engages in conversation with one of these, and enters into a compact by which the beachcomber undertakes to sneak off a certain number of boys, his success to be substantially rewarded. He is given a present to cheer him on his task, and the boats put back to the schooner. Nothing further is done until a smoke is seen on the beach—a preconcerted signal—whereupon the recruiting agent calls out his crew and goes ashore to find out what information the beachcomber has now gained for him. How often have I seen the latter tell, with a glee he could not conceal, that a smoke will be made at a certain point about sundown, and if the boat from the schooner can be there before the other islanders it will be able to take back two or three, as the case may be, sneaked off boys. The recruiting agent is satisfied and a second time returns to the schooner. A careful watch is kept, the boat is ready and the crew on the alert. The moment the smoke becomes visible we jump into the boat and pull for it with all our might. The recruiter urges us by promises of grog if there in time. Perhaps while we are rowing over the water the natives—friends of the boys—opposed to their going, are running along the beach to intercept them. The boat must be there first even though the recruiter has to fire on these friends to compel them to cease running. Just as the keel grates on the sand the boys, who all this time have been waving us to come quick, step into the boat and are pulled leisurely off to the schooner. Most of the boys are recruited in this way. They have not been kidnapped, they have come of their own free will deceived by the lies the beachcomber has been bribed to tell them, and the Government agent assists in the deception. His duty is to see that a certain document drawn up by the Queensland Government to be their infallible protection is translated to these boys, and if after it has been explained to them they still express their willingness to go, their names are formally taken by the Government agent, who certifies that they have been honestly and fairly recruited in accordance with the directions furnished him by the Government. Now, listen. This document has to be translated to these boys, and who is hired as interpreter but the very beachcomber who has sneaked them off; so that actually he can, under Government authority, reiterate those selfsame lies by which in the first place he decoyed them from their homes and friends. They have come willingly, but they have no idea in the world what they may be coming to. An excellent Queensland immigration regulation is that "no trade or remuneration is to be given to the chief friends or relations of the men engaging by way of barter or purchase, the master or agent doing so being liable to punishment and the vessel debarred from again going to the islands." But if this regulation were enforced no labor vessel would ever make a second voyage. No boat ever goes recruiting without its box of trade with which to purchase boys from the chief, their friends or relations. Fully 20 per cent. of the natives are bought in this way, and, next to the sneaking off principle, it is the mode most relied on for filling the schooner. Again, no native can by any chance go back from the schooner when once he has joined it as a recruit. And, should he become aware of the treatment in store for him and seek to escape from it, the orders are to shoot him. On board the slavers, when at anchor for the night, the men on watch are armed. Loaded rifles and cutlasses are kept at hand in the forecastle. No native belonging to the island at which we may be anchored is allowed to walk the deck, except under cover of a revolver, and should he jump overboard the watch will vie with each in the sport of shooting him. So that in this traffic in flesh, encouraged by the Queensland Government and fostered by the Imperial Government, a native, if he attempt to regain a liberty of which he has been fraudulently deprived, is to be shot like a dog, and the sailor who held the rifle that slaughtered him is to be honored on the schooner as a hero.

As to the treatment of the Kanakas on the sugar plantations, much has been written. At some they are treated kindly, at others most shockingly; and just as a schooner on arriving at an island does not blab out at once the port to which it belongs, but first artfully discovers what port in Queensland the natives of that particular place seem most in favor of, so do we make ourselves conversant with the plantations and the individual treatment of the Kanaka at each. Then see to what advantage we can turn this information. We are always surprised to learn that the very port the natives mention most favorably is the one to which we are engaged in taking boys; and we always recruit boys for the kind masters, and never for those plantations where they are terrorised with the stockwhip. At one of the finest sugar plantations in Queensland the owner shows his guest with pride a terrible prickly hedge, through which he compelled a naked Kanaka to pass under fear of braining him with a tomahawk. He also, when showing a guest over his mill, or a newly engaged engineer, calls up some of his boys, hits one a smack over the head, gives another a kick, and sends them all flying with fear, then laughingly tells you that you must have no compunction in treating the Kanaka, but little better than a brute. This man is known in the trade as responsible—solely and personally responsible—for one of the most awful massacres in the slave trade, and at the present day were you to mention in some parts of the island of Aoba that you were recruiting boys for his plantation, not only would they shrink from you in fear, but you would run a very fair chance of being fired on as well. The death rate of the Kanakas on the plantations is often as high as 10 per cent. per annum, and this at the age when their vital power is strongest. Doctors appointed by Government found that this mortality was due to "poor feeding, bad water, overwork and absence of proper care when sick." The Kanakas have been sold at a uniform price per head, and as the cost of each is the same similar work is required of each. The delicate boy has to do his 12 or 14 hours a day, the same as a full-grown man. A strong argument of the planters in their defence is that a Kanaka so often recruits a second time. But this is easily explained. "He has returned to his village to find his hut a ruin, or not existing at all, his plantations neglected or destroyed, and his wife or wives in possession of other men." So that, as Baron Maclay points out, he prefers to go away rather than stay at home a beggar. Righteous-minded men favor this labor traffic so long as they make money out of it, but surely they cannot justify the recruiting of women. This is a subject that cannot be written about. A nice, pretty chaste girl leaves for Queensland, and a year or two later she is sent to her home an ugly, wrinkled, diseased hag. It is the diseases brought back by the women that are depopulating the islands, no less than the taking away of the men at the very time when they should be at home rearing families. When a number of women are recruited by a vessel the ship becomes a brothel. Not even a depraved sailor, and there are more than one or two in this trade, will have anything to do with a woman returning from Queensland. The Government agent, you will say, is on the schooner to protect the women. But the Government agents, I can testify from personal knowledge, connive at every misdeed, and even were they conscientious men, there are 1000 ways besides making them drunk and intimidating them by which they can be kept ignorant of all that is going on. I will give an instance. A schooner of which I was one of the crew recruited four women with their husbands. One of these, Remnestelesa, a pretty woman from Vanua Lava, was an especial favorite on board—she was so bright and happy. A sailor conceived an unholy passion for her, and thrashed her husband every day until he was compelled in self-defence to forfeit his wife's honor. That sailor communicated to the poor girl a disease which she will carry to her grave. Our Government agent was a most conscientious man, yet he heard nothing of it, and had the native told him he would have made a point of not believing him. I said in an earlier part of this letter that no kidnapping is allowed by the captains unless in exceptional cases. The so-called recruiting of women must come under the latter head. A woman is not her own property. She belongs to her husband and by taking her of her own free will but against his consent you are guilty in the eyes of the natives of gross and unpardonable robbery. But that is nothing. Her chief value, independent of the higher price she brings in the Queensland slave market, lies in this, that two men are sure to come off and claim her back again; the schooner then quietly walks off with all three. A Government agent told me this. His schooner, whose recruiting he had undertaken to see fairly conducted, was anchored in Thousand Ship Bay, the Island of Espiritu Santo, and in the course of trafficking, a woman was sneaked off to the schooner. She was the wife of a leading man, who got two chiefs to take to the captain a ransom of two boys. The latter were detained and the chiefs so adroitly landed among a crowd of incensed natives that they had not time to give an explanation before the boat was out of danger. A cargo of return islanders have a lively time of it while on board the schooner. They are crowded into a small hold, the scanty air space of which is still further restricted by the piles of boxes containing their three years' earnings. I slept in one of these infernal holds with 80 islanders—we were licensed to carry 20 more—in a brigantine of 110 tons, and the atmosphere was so pestilential that no matter how cold it may have been on deck, the moment I turned in for my watch below, I became bathed in a horrible sickly sweat, as if I had had a malignant fever. It seems that no laborer can proceed to sea without a clearance from the health officer, but our vessel was owned by the health officer. His duty was to grant no certificate to any native, unless he was satisfied that he was strong and well enough to undergo the fatigue of the voyage. Three of our boys were hauled dead out of the hold within the first thirty-six hours, and four more were flung overboard before the schooner could reach their home. Did we not know how trifling is the cost of feeding them we might be inclined to think that the conscience of this health officer was satisfied by the increased profit he would make out of the £5 fare paid for each boy. On board the natives are fed on rice and weevils, potatoes and yams. The great policy is to give them just enough to exist on till they are to be landed, and then send them ashore with their belly full. On the spur of the moment the grateful sensation of at last having a good square feed, combined with the joy of meeting their friends, makes it most likely that they will speak well of the schooner. When a native falls sick he may die for aught anyone cares, indeed, if he is a passenger—in distinction to a recruit—his death is rather welcome than otherwise. When a Kanaka is reported to be dead he is hauled out of the hold hand over hand by a rope round his neck and another round his heels, a bag of stones is made fast to his feet, and without further ceremony he is pitched overboard. I saw an Aoba boy called Garrambang pulled in this way out of our hold, and was sickened to find by the heaving of his chest that he was still alive. He was laid then in the weather scuppers so that his corpse might be handy, while the little brutal skipper was quite annoyed because he took such a long time dying. As I have already told in *The Leader*, that boy was thrown overboard when I was below, and it was a common joke among the sailors that he was not dead even then. A Fijian planter has, it is said, published a pamphlet in defence of the labor trade with Fiji. The pamphlet I regard as an excellent joke. No schooner ever recruits boys for Fiji. Not a boy on the Fijian sugar plantations but has had it represented to him that he was being taken to Queensland. Should two or three slavers chance to reach an island about the same time, it is a universal trick of the trade for the advance boat to pull along the shore, apprising all natives to beware of the other vessels, as they are men of Fiji, the result being that the islanders treat all the boats but the first one with the most curious suspicion, though perhaps the boat they think belongs to Queensland is the only one of them all which hails from the much dreaded Fiji. I have been recruiting at 20 islands in the New Hebrides and Banks Group, and at every one did I hear the same hatred expressed for Fijian schooners. The boys tell you that they are openly kidnapped. They are badly treated in Fiji—the seat of the Sovereign Lord Protector of the South Sea Islanders—and after being paid the £9 for their three years' labor—paid with goods worth a third of the money—they are sent home, and landed on the first part of the island the schooner may happen to call at, no attention being paid as to whether that part of the island is hostile to where they live or not. Fiji recruiters know well that they must never mention the place they really belong to if they wish to get boys; and I well remember when we were recruiting at Mallicollo the effect it had on the natives round the boat when our bow began talking Fiji to a man he recognised in the crowd. Most of the men in the New Hebrides have rifles. There is an excellent regulation of the Queensland Government, prohibiting the exportation of arms and ammunition, but it is a dead letter. On our schooner the 73 boys able to carry a musket had between them 78 Sniders, 6 Spencers, 29 Enfields, 47 muskets, 9 shot guns and 2 revolvers; a total of 172 weapons. For ammunition they had 1861 lb. of powder, 7800 Snider cartridges, 800 Spencer do., 200 Enfield do., 300 revolver do. and 200 shot cartridges; a total number of rounds of 9300. *Verb. sap.* To conclude, it has been urged that this traffic should be abolished, owing to the treatment of the Kanakas on the sugar plantations, and the fearful death rate, and their treatment on the slave ships is worse. One would think that the recent atrocities brought to light, as in the case of the Clara at Erromango, the details of which are fresh in the ears of all of us, would be sufficient to stop this traffic, for if men would commit such atrocities at islands where missionaries were known to be settled, how much more likely are they to commit even greater at those islands where they could do so with impunity. Finally, the missionaries testify, and surely we cannot doubt the word of men we all hold in such honor, of the very evil effects the trade has upon the natives themselves, and upon the islands they are taken from. Yet, the trade prospers, and is termed a humanising influence. It may be so, but it has not an honest leg to stand on.—Yours, &c.,

GEO. ERNEST MORRISON.

Geelong College, 6th May.

P.S.—I shall place in your hands information which, to the best of my belief, may lead to the disproof or verification of every statement contained in this letter.