THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

NATIVES HOMEWARD BOUND.

THE VOYAGE TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS.

I.

Commissioned by the proprietors of *The Argus* to secretly investigate the present system of recruiting South Sea islanders for the Queensland sugar plantations, I hastened to Brisbane with the object of joining, if possible, a labour vessel as one of its crew, so that I might be able to watch the proceedings and give a strictly independent and impartial account as from behind the scenes. Although I travelled by express, it was a few days too late for the first two vessels despatched under the new Queensland act. The Para had sailed from Brisbane, the May from Bundaberg. The former I would meet later on, from the latter place, so I hied to Bundaberg by first steamer. In the Burnett River two vessels of the description I sought were lying at anchor. Painted a dull slate colour, with a black streak running fore and aft below the covering board, their character could not be mistaken. They were according to the prescribed pattern of Queensland labour vessels. One was the brigantine Helena, 126 tons, Captain James P. Doig; the other the barquentine Lochiel, 216 tons, Captain Pearl. Both were owned by local planters, and had been long engaged in the labour traffic, which latterly had been restricted to the conveyance of islanders whose terms of service had expired back to their homes. They were now awaiting more "returns" and orders for fresh recruits. When they would leave was a matter of great uncertainty. Pending development, I classed myself with the men in the town who were looking for employment, registered myself at the labour bureau, visited some of the plantations as a swagman, got a job or two branding and filling sugar bags and cutting timber, and eventually secured an appointment as supercargo on the Helena, which proved the first of the two vessels to sail. Labour schooners do not usually carry supernumeraries, but I was willing to go and be "generally useful" for a nominal wage, and a good word from a planter who had befriended me paved the way.

On Friday, July 22, Captain Doig and his crew attended at the shipping office to sign articles. We all signed as seamen in our respective capacities, from the skipper himself, at a shilling "as per agreement," the mate and engineer at £12 a month, down to myself at one shilling a month, to be paid—well, it was not said whether I would receive my money quarterly or half-yearly. We agreed to go to any ports or islands in the South or North Pacific, within certain specified limits, and to serve for a term not to exceed six months. It was expected, however, that the trip would be accomplished in a little over three months, and it was said that if it occupied much more than four months the captain, and perhaps the owners, too, would not be well pleased. The Government agent, as indispensable a man as the captain himself, had not yet arrived from Brisbane, but he might come by that night's train, in which case an effort would be made to despatch the Helena on the following day.

So far as the vessel was concerned, all was in readiness to trip the anchor. She was a seasoned craft, built 18 years ago in New Zealand, and this would be her 26th voyage in the island labour trade. In appearance she was somewhat weather worn, and her slate-coloured sides were iron-stained, but much of her rigging had been recently renewed, and the owners had so much confidence in Captain Doig that they considered insurance quite unnecessary. The stores and trade were on board, and there were 64 returning islanders in the hold for the Solomons. Every man, or so-called "boy," of them was individually examined by the medical officer (Dr. May), and with the exception of three all had been found healthy and robust. Of the three on the sick list one had but an innocent affection of the mouth, for which an alum lotion was prescribed. Another required a mixture for a slight attack of bronchitis. The third, a youth named Oleseema, had the wasted form, the shrunken features, and that brilliant lustre of the eyes which mark the victims of consumption. He was to have a simple cough mixture and nourishing food, but it was doubtful whether we would be able to land him alive at his home on Malaita.

There was a further delay of a week, due to various reasons it is unnecessary to detail. The crew were kept busy enough during this waiting time, but with two exceptions slept on shore. A watchman was myself, and told off to take charge over night. Weird nights were those, anchored mid-stream in the Burnett River. Figures nearly dark as night would constantly flitting during the evening from hatches to shrouds, and grouped themselves on the deckhouses. One evening it seemed as if Bedlam had been suddenly let loose. What a babel of strange noises meant was at first difficult to guess at. A pounding on the lower deck like the tread of a regiment was mixed at intervals with volleys of pistol shots, as it seemed. There was another intermingled and indescribable sound, resembling most of all the noise of a crosscut saw in full swing, and above all were voices raised in a barbaric tune, which might be either a chant or a war song. My eye fell on the stacks of Sniders and Winchesters, safe and handy in the cabin, and, thus reassured, I ventured on deck. Down the main hatch, which reeked with tobacco smoke, the dusky islanders were seen dancing in the dim light of a kerosene lamp. If their faces were not quite a frenzy of delight, they were in very high spirits, and what they were engaged in was a rehearsal of the "sing-songs" they expected to soon join in again on their islands in the Coral Sea. In their "sing-songs" they not only sing but dance, and keep time with graceful gestures and handclapping, and with deep guttural sounds, which give to their performances a fierce and savage effect that to a white man is decidedly "creepy." By 9 o'clock most of them were stretched on the broad enclosed benches provided as sleeping accommodation for them in the hold. A dozen or so lingered by the lamp with much-worn and miscellaneous packs of cards, and spent an hour or two at euchre, at which they are as keen players as the proverbial heathen Chinee.

By daylight, too, they were interesting folk. Although all Solomon boys, they varied in colour from rich cinnamon to nut-brown, and a smoky hue not so pleasing. All were sleek, their hair woolly, neatly trimmed, and thick as a mat. Only one of the 64 wore hair on his chin. Some were quite barefaced, but most of them gloried in "masher" moustaches and "sideboards." They shaved themselves with the primitive cockle-shells, a piece of broken bottle, or a European razor. The shell process is a perpetual shave requiring patience and nerve, but with a pocket looking-glass they carry on the operation without wincing, and with much evident self-admiration. They were an intelligent and good-natured looking lot, shy mild of speech. Only a few of them could spend a good bass note, the majority having voices soft and feminine to a degree. The faces of a few might have excited distrust under adverse circumstances, and there were two or three instances of a decidedly low type of features, the savagery of which was exaggerated by black teeth, stained by the chewing of betelnut. There were three old men, wrinkled and grey, but the average age was about four and twenty. The majority were artistically tattooed on the face with distinctive devices—spots, circles, half-moons, and ornate scroll-work. As Mucrland, Manly had their nostrils adorned with beads or shells, and nearly all had holes in the lobes of their ears, ranging in size from the diameter of a gimlet to that of a 2in. auger. Their holes are not originally so abnormally big as to give space for pendants by an auger, but small holes are enlarged by weights and plugs until the ear flesh is stretched to a loop of the thickness of a tape. These ear-holes are handy not only for decorative purposes but for the carrying of tobacco pipes, match-boxes, and small articles of the same time of use. Ear-rings are for ornament than for use, and earrings were the leading pendants. In earrings beads and tortoise-shell pins predominated. The lobes of the "boys" had so many tortoiseshell spikes bent into their lobes that they seemed to have a miniature porcupine attached to each ear. Male or female, trousers, shirt, hat, necklace, and armlets completed their toilet, and the *tout ensemble* was decidly picturesque.

They had, whilst in port, three meals a day, and between these intervals some of them played cards, strummed on jew's-harps, or indulged in siestas on the deck-house and dreamed dreams. Two of their number were told off to receive their allowances of food and to do their cooking. For this work those two would be rewarded with tobacco or other kinds of trade at the end of their voyage. The galley was divided into two parts, over one of which Jimmie, the cook, did service for the cabin and forecastle, presided with a genius begot in Her Majesty's navy. The other compartment was devoted to the kanakas, and was of Jimmie's design, but was a very rough, more than ample for the cooking of the meat and sweet potatoes, which formed the staple item in the diet of the "boys." Bread in loaves, and cut up into 2lb. pieces, was served out in two hands, were also frequently served out to the islanders with *tea ad libitum* to wash this food down. The boys were not allowed to cook for themselves, but they were strongly, and plenty to spare for the gluttons, of which there were a few. The meals were served and consumed in a very primitive fashion, but in good order. Tins were brought with apparent gusto. With the deck for a table and empty bags for a cloth, the cooked potatoes were apportioned out in heaps by the native cooks, and to each heap a junk of boiled meat was assigned. Then the boys, by pre-arrangement, stepped forward and helped themselves. In the main, the division of the good things was conducted fairly, but a deft hand occasionally appropriated more than his share. Then the feeding! Some people would consider the sight worth paying for. Knives and forks there were none. It was hand to mouth in earnest, and everything was devoured except the potato skins, which were given to the fishes. The loaves were eaten as the potatoes—that is, they were broken in halves, and the bread swallowed, and the crusts discarded. On rice days half a dozen might be seen sitting round one pot scooping with their hands; while others stood by waiting their turn. When one appeared to dig out a handful in one piece he ran off and enjoyed it in a secluded corner. There was withal no rush for the food or anxiety betrayed by any waiting one lest he should be deprived of his mess.

The Government agent, in the person of Mr. Arthur H. Neville Ussher, arrived on Wednesday evening. Mr. Ussher holds a master mariner's certificate, has been trained in the navy and merchant marine, and this would be his eighth trip as a Government agent in connection with the Queensland kanaka traffic. It was not necessary to compel men like Mr. Ussher to dress as a gentleman, but the elovenly habits of other "G.A.'s" in former years necessitated the issue of an instruction that the Government agent must be decently and becomingly attired, and wear a distinguishing badge. Mr. Ussher, therefore, arrived not only, as usual, in respectable attire, but in all the dignity of a quiet but impressive uniform. As the uniform is new it may be worth a description, which consists simply of a coat after the pattern of the mess jackets of the Irish rifles, two gold bands on the sleeves, and crown and anchor buttons, with a cap having gold bands and the crown and anchor badge of the Royal Navy. On Thursday morning the G.A. visited the Helena, and approved of the quarters provided for the boys. The arrangement of the berths in two tiers. It is stipulated by act of Parliament that they shall be raised 6in. at least from the lower deck, and that the interval between two tiers shall not be less than 2ft. 6in., with a space of at least 18in. between the lower tier and the lower deck. I took an opportunity of measuring the spaces with a 2ft. rule, and found that the lowest tier in the Helena's hold was raised 22in. from the floor, and that the interval between the tiers was 2in. more than is required. The legal height between decks is 6ft. 6in.; on the Helena it is 7ft. 3in. A special compartment was provided for the married women are all termed "Marys," and this was therefore known as the "Marys" cabin. It was in the after part of the hold, caged in with 3in. stanchions 3in. apart, and the entrance was by a lowered companion on the poop. As there were no female returns, this compartment was utilised for the time being as a store.

Thursday was a busy day. Responsible men from the agents' office, the Custom-house, and the Immigration office having business on board came and went. The medical officer came off for the special purpose of examining our medicine chest and surgical appliances. For this purpose he disappeared with the captain and the "G. A." into the cabin, to reappear in a few minutes with the paper and return to shore. The chief event of the day, however, was a visit by Mr. H. St. George Caulfield, the local inspector of Pacific Islanders, who came to finally muster the returns, examine their boxes, and hand over his responsibility to Mr. Ussher. This was no light task. Sixty and odd boxes, averaging 2cwt. each, had to be carried from the main deck, and the boys had to present themselves, with their boxes, on the poop as their names were called. In this work I had to assist. It was a bustling and noisy one. The extraordinary names of the islanders, distinctly and rapidly pronounced by Mr. Caulfield, would be "passed on" by a dozen voices with such variations that before they were heard by the owners they would be turned, twisted, and mutilated beyond recognition. Confusion would follow, and the gangways became blocked by a rush of young persons. And little wonder—Fancy trying to "pass on" such boxes bearing such names as "Quarloomiddmiddy," "Doranandover," "Baroofunnu," "Gurrilooooo," "Angungugu!" The confused jargon that resulted was as really imagined as that described. Despite all drawbacks, however, the work proceeded with considerable despatch. The boxes had to be searched for such contraband articles as firearms, ammunition, and dynamite. In spite of the law forbidding anyone to supply or sell these things to islanders, "returns" sometimes obtain them surreptitiously, and stow them away in innocent-looking parcels, or cutting them under false bottoms in their boxes. It was not considered necessary to quite empty all the boxes, but were invited an exhaustive scrutiny. The goods were not particularly remarkable for their variety. In value, and sometimes in bulk, tobacco was the most important item. There were cases of the "weed" weighing over 20lb., for which £5 sterling each was said to have been paid. Clay pipes, from the common clay to the stylish briar, and a gross or two of matches were natural corollaries. Assortments of axes, hatchets, cutlery, calico, and coloured handkerchiefs were common to all. Sauceepans and billycans were also in evidence. Amongst the uncommon articles were marsigal boxes, a bundle of score music, bathing pants, ginghams, pomatum, fancy soap, and similar articles taken back to were they had been gathered. Nothing contraband was discovered. The examinations over, Mr. Caulfield found that one name on his list had not been represented by man or box. But this occasioned no surprise, for the missing "return" had confessed to an indiscretion which made it dangerous to return to his native isle. The "boy" felt safer in Queensland than he would at the Solomons, and had at the last moment decided to remain. The living freight and their belongings were now transferred to the custody of Mr. Ussher, and preparations were made for weighing our long-postponed departure on the morrow.

The departure of a labour vessel from Bundaberg is said to be an exciting event at all times. That of the Helena was no exception. Her outfit had given a fillip to trade, and her charter betokened a renewal of enterprise on the part of local planters, and consequently of prosperity. In his colonial labour manifesto Sir Samuel Griffith said his anti-kanaka scheme was hampered by malcontent planters, who set their face against any change, as it would tie their power to return to the old state of things. The Lochiel and the Helena had lain so long idle for the planters, who thought the local planters, by whom they are owned, had been amongst the alleged malcontents, and were still sulky even under the new permissive act. There were honest and sound reasons to account for the delay in despatching the vessels without blaming or reflecting on the owners. Whilst the prohibitive law was in force between times important events had taken place in the sugar mills, and the islanders thus driven out of doors were extra hands for field work. Consequently orders for fresh recruits were not so large as usual, and were to be obtained under other circumstances. But on Friday, July 29, the Helena was at last under weigh not only with 64 returning islanders, but with orders for 90 fresh recruits. Townspeople lined the bank of the river to flutter handkerchiefs and shout adieus. Our departure signified the disbursement of an immense amount of money, the expenditure of the advances made to the crew, the paying up of debts to boardinghouse keepers, the purchase of clothing and other necessaries for the voyage. In addition, our 64 returns must have spent about £300 in filling their boxes. Business, in short, had been made suddenly brisk in Bundaberg. It was with reason then that the townspeople assembled on the river bank and cheered as our anchor rose to the merry clank of the windlass and the Helena dropped down stream in tow of the Lady Musgrave, whilst the returns swarmed the rigging and screamed shrill responses to the folks on shore. We were detained for a night inside the Burnett Heads by an ebb tide. The pilot (Captain Neal) appropriated my bed that night—the top of a locker in the cabin, and I had to camp under the table, where numerous cockroaches, big as mice, had the fatal temerity to seek my acquaintance. In the morning Mr. Ussher mustered the returns on his own account, and wired Mr. Caulfield that all were on board. Then, under the pilot's guidance, the brigantine crossed the bar, and was left in Captain Doig's hands with plenty of sea room.

The Helena started in gallant style to cross the Coral Sea, and, despite periods of calm weather, accomplished the voyage in 10 days. Duties of a very miscellaneous character fell to my lot. There was little actual storeroom work to be done, but my shilling a month billet was to be no sinecure. Extra shelves were required for the cabin; I had to make and fix them. The fiddles for the dining-table had to be extended; this was another job for the supercargo. Cleets were wanted for the trade box and one of the boats; I had to chisel them out of hardwood. Restitching old sails was a work I was also called upon to take my part in. The medicine chest required a presiding genius, and I was installed as dispenser. To qualify me for this position of responsibility the captain handed me an exhaustive work, entitled, *The Practical Home Physician and Encyclopedia of Medicine*, which contained over a thousand pages, was 4in. thick, and weighed 3lb. avoirdupois. But so numerous and urgent were the calls made on the dispensary, that the study of this ponderous tome had to be postponed, and reliance placed on a more handy manual, *The Ship Captain's Medical Guide*, and I soon became sufficiently expert in serving out ointments for sores, preparing mixtures for colds, or lotions for mouth ailments, as to be trusted by the captain and the Government agent, who are jointly in charge of the medicines. The mixing of powdered ipecacuanha, purgatic, and sweet spirits of nitre, with prescribed proportions of sugar and water, formed our regulation cough remedy, and its preparation was of frequent occurrence. The hoarding up of empty bottles and matchboxes, for mixtures, lotions, and ointments became, too, a daily duty. And so my time for the first days at sea was chiefly occupied. Not till later did I lend a hand at the ropes, the windlass, and the wheel. The first time I was ordered aloft was when we were in the vicinity of Wreck Reef, a stumbling-block in these waters, said to be strewn with the dismembered skeletons of unlucky ships. I had to go to the topmast and scan the horizon for breakers. The vessel was under the steadying influence of a stiff breeze, but she plunged and rolled in a very distracting fashion. I managed, however, to obey orders and searched the horizon for an hour, but saw no reef or indication thereof. That same day the Helena was struck by a heavy storm of wind and rain—one of those surprise squalls which whip the masts out of belated ships. We, however, were prepared, and weathered the blast without sustaining any more injury than a split sail or two. The returns betrayed some alarm. At the approach of the storm they sought shelter in the hold, and when it was at its worst they surged up for the deck with symptoms of panic in their faces, but were held in check at the hatch by one of the Polynesian crew, who pacified them with assurances that there was really no danger. Fine weather and fair winds ensued, and we arrived at the Solomons on the tenth day from the Burnett Heads.

The history of the "returns" from coast to coast was one of satisfactory routine. They had sea-sickness, but it was beneficial in its effects. The bronchitis patient was cured by *mal de mer*, and saved his cough mixture for future use. The one with the sore mouth had his system cleansed by the same malady, and never required his alum lotion. Oleseema, the consumptive, however, was fading visibly. His faith in the white man's medicine was considerable, and the cough mixture ordered for him seemed to give him relief. The only "nourishing" food he would look at was biscuits and tea, with which he was amply supplied. He had a brother on board, but for a long time this relative was not much in evidence. Oleseema had been allotted an upper berth near the fore hatch, as quiet and sweet a part of the hold as could have been chosen for him. There, with a couple of blankets, he spent the days and the nights. Occasionally he crawled on deck to sun himself and gaze wistfully at the horizon. "Me sick long time," he would say. "Me sick six months along Bundaberg; altogether me too much sick. By-and-by me die." As for the three sores and those healthy returns, they were not only contented, but beaming with happiness. Well-fed, and treated with kindness, and with the full freedom of the deck, they never gave any trouble or annoyance, and were always ready to lend a hand when their services might be acceptable in the working of the ship. Their daily rations were not unlimited, but that would have been a cumberously superfluous proceeding, for they were so liberally supplied with food that not a single "return" complained of being stinted. Indeed, at their own request, issues of bread and biscuit were frequently postponed till, to them, more convenient seasons.

As to the ship's company, a few words indicative of their characters, so far as they were disclosed during our short voyage, should be now *apropos*, as all were to be more or less associated with the transactions and events making up the history of the voyage. First was Captain Doig, a Scot by birth, who might be mistaken for a Dane by the fairness of his complexion. Although short of stature, he was every inch a sailor. Active work on deck was more to his liking than what idle seclusion his cabin offered. The voyage had already shown that in his seamanship he combined skill with prudence, and even lively in disposition, he was genially bluff in his denunciations of imaginary Jonahs or of venial offences, and severity itself in serious reproof. Towards his island passengers he was consistently kind, and to favourites jovial without undue familiarity. To every islander on board Mr. Ussher was "Government" in name and reality. They spoke of him and addressed him as "Guvment," and seemed to think any other name for him unnecessary. Mr. Ussher's official importance was also fully recognised by the captain and crew. As for himself, the chief thing he had to bear in mind was that he represented the Government of Queensland, which had made him the custodian of no ordinary powers. He had to see personally that the very stringent rules passed to control the labour traffic were carried out to the letter. If these rules were infringed he could stop recruiting and order the ship back to Queensland. For the proper filling of such a post special qualities of a high standard are essential. To the appointment of unsuitable or unworthy men as Government agents much of the abuses which disgraced the traffic in former years was directly attributable. How Mr. Ussher would acquit himself remained to be seen, but already I could credit him with a methodical precision of character highly desirable in official work. The mate, Mr. Moody, had not been to the islands before, but had been engaged in them for several years about Bundaberg, and was as well acquainted with the ways and wants of our passengers as with the ship's ropes. Next came the recruiter and boatswain, Mr. Mulhern, a square-built young man who had been for years employed as a recruiter on Fijian vessels, and who consequently possessed a very intimate knowledge of the South Sea islands and their inhabitants. The cook, myself, six white seamen, and six kanakas (designated the boat's crew) completed the ship's company. The A.B.'s included a former recruiter named Tom Gash, who was selected to steer the Government agent's boat. Thus officered and manned, we were now about to enter the field of our work.