

THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

IN MISSIONARY PRECINCTS.

LARGE ACCESSION OF RECRUITS.

No. X.

The vessel found at the trader's station on Florida was the Sydney-owned brigantine *Borough-belle* (Captain Williams), trading for copra, and from her an ample supply of meat was obtained. We lay off a village called Honavo, and the sound of church bells came from the palm-fringed shore, reminding us that we were now in missionary waters. Once the most savage of the Solomon Islands, Florida is now a stronghold of the Anglican mission. Its erstwhile wild and bloodthirsty natives are now tame, docile, and learned in the Scriptures. Although the ink with which the Sandfly massacre was recorded is not yet faded, the murderous instincts of the Ngela natives have been so thoroughly eradicated that white men can now come and go unharmed, and peace with contentment reigns from shore to shore. The contentment is sometimes thought too pronounced by skippers and recruiters in the labour traffic. Bishop Selwyn has proclaimed that the traffic, properly conducted, has his cordial approval. He has declared that it can be made a benefit alike to the islands and to Queensland. Traders, therefore, esteem him very level-headed and sensible, but when recruits are not forthcoming in the mission-field they are apt to say that the Bishop's native deputies are exercising an undue restraining influence over their flocks. Even if native teachers do detain boys by persuasion they have as much right to do that as the recruiter has to induce boys to enlist.

Our boats resumed operations on the Friday by visiting various places in and near Port Curtis, but were unsuccessful. Most of the villages visited were half deserted. Some were regular "sleepy hollows," where slumbering stay-at-homes had to be "coo-ee'd" into wakefulness. Most of the men and women were working afield, and numbers were away at Savo and Guadalcanar buying pigs. Inquiries were made of us for friends and relatives, who, though overdue, had not yet been returned from Queensland. It was hoped we had brought some of them back, and our negative answer was very obviously disappointing. We explained that a large number of boys, on learning that the labour traffic was to cease, and that they would probably have no chance of recruiting again for Queensland, re-engaged for another term without leaving the plantations, and it was more than probable that the friends asked for were amongst that number. The explanation was intelligently received, but it was not satisfactory to at least one chief, for he straightway ordered that none of his boys should recruit until the absent ones were returned or accepted for his satisfaction. In this matter there was no trace of missionary interference. At the end of one long pull up a canal-like creek, and under an avenue of high mangroves, whose overspreading branches were fringed with bright coloured fungi and maiden-hair ferns, the boats arrived at a sequestered canoe shed framed with bamboo and covered with coconut leaves. It was a solitude, undisturbed by even the hum of insects; but when we broke the silence by the report of a gun a voice hailed us cheerily from a hill, which the trees hid from our view. "Hallo, hallo! Fire him gun again! Fire plenty! Boy he come!" were the spasmodic utterances of the approaching stranger as he hurried down the steep declivity, and came into view along side almost breathless, but smiling. He told us he had been to Queensland himself, years ago, and liked it very well, although he had lost the toes of one foot in a sugar mill. There were, he said, some eligible boys about, but whether they would recruit or not was a question he could throw no light on. They were at present busy planting yams, but a few more shots might attract them to the boats. Taking the reiterated hint, the recruiter gave his crew orders to blaze away, and eventually half a dozen boys made their appearance, loaded with coconuts, as if they had only come to trade. Half an hour's talk, in which the recruiting terms were elaborated and discussed, a pile of intended presents being displayed on the stern sheet of the recruiter's boat, ended in one full-grown lad betraying symptoms of a desire to come to Queensland. He said almost nothing, but lingered in the neighbourhood of the boats in a serious frame of mind, and it was explained by one of his mates that he was bent on recruiting. When, however, he seemed almost fully persuaded in his own mind to join us, an elder brother, bearded, and in the prime of manhood, entered his veto, thinking, despite assurances of the existence of Kanaka mission schools in Queensland, that the youth might not be safe in a moral and spiritual sense beyond the reach of home influences and the shelter of his own protecting wing. After this there was nothing more to say, and the boats returned once more to the ship without any addition to our passengers. That night, as on other nights as well, the shore was illuminated with waving torches. The industrious villagers, after their day's work in the fields, were drawing supplies of provisions from the bountiful sea. Their lights attracted shoals of reef-haunting fish, which they were deftly spearing, transfixing with arrows, or entangling in nets.

On Saturday the *Helena* shifted to a place called Baranango, a few miles further south. We had reason to expect some recruits here, but were disappointed. A neatly-dressed native, in an elaborate canoe, who had haunted the *Helena* at her previous anchorage, had said that he and other boys would join us at Baranango. He had been to Queensland before, and meant to recruit again, but did not care to go without his own chums. We looked in vain for him at the appointed place, and learned that his plans had been upset by his chief. No one else offered, so on Sunday we moved on, and came to anchor off Mandoliana Islet. This was the scene of the Sandfly massacre. The islet was, as then, a mere fishing station, with a single humpy for sheltering the people who frequented it from the main island. It was densely timbered with cane and gigantic trees, on the horizontal branch of one of which a number of the captured murderers expiated their crime. But the times were changed. Where the assassin lurked we roamed in safety, shooting pigeons, and where the ill-fated Lieutenant Bower and his crew were slain whilst bathing we swam about without danger from bloodthirsty natives. The boats visited various villages on the coast, and at the first picked up a native in European clothes, named Sandy, to act as an interpreter. This was at a village called Coomba, which straggled along the beach under palm trees. The houses were of the light match-box work common to the islands—bamboo and leaves, with cane lashings—but they were much neater and cleaner than those of Malaita, and many of them were set off with gardens of tropical shrubs and plants, invariably including a rich variety of crotons. The largest building in the village was one erected and used for the purposes of a church and school. Its low walls were surmounted by a very lofty roof of cane and leaves, 2ft. in thickness, and projecting into deep eaves, and each gable end was neatly perforated with a crossiform window. The floor was covered with coconut matting and was seated for the accommodation of about 300 people. There was a raised-in altar and a reading-desk covered with the Union Jack. The native teacher, calm and courteous in demeanour, took a

quiet pleasure in submitting his register of school attendances for inspection. The entries in the book were extremely well written, and showed a daily attendance of about 30 scholars. The grounds around the school-house or church were tidy, and ornamented with plots of crotons and mounds of helmet shells. Men and boys met the white visitors with frank good nature, but the women, although becomingly attired, shrank modestly from view. Half-a-score of girls, followed by an elderly male attendant, arrived from work afield with large baskets of produce balanced on their heads. They came along a pathway by the beach in single file, as erect as amazons, their arms and bright-coloured skirts swinging time to their footsteps. When they observed the boats they turned abruptly into an inner track, as if to shun the strangers, and reached their homes by a devious way. Florida women are never allowed by their people to recruit.

After a long palaver with the male population the boats left without meeting with any success. Sandy, the interpreter, stated that there were a number of boys amongst them who wished to recruit, but had been debarred by their relatives or chief. Three of these boys, however, had indicated to him that they would seek an opportunity of eluding their tribe, and would endeavour to join at a point about two miles distant from the village. At the place referred to the boats found the three lads waiting, and took them off to the vessel on approval. Mr. Usher, the Government agent, was clear in his own mind as to the propriety of accepting one of them and as to the necessity of rejecting the others on the ground of immaturity. But the boats would have to return to pay for the eligible one, and the others would be taken back at the same time, after giving the captain an opportunity of seeing the lads for his own satisfaction. Under this arrangement, too, there was less risk of losing the big lad, who might have held back had his mates been openly rejected on shore. The plan succeeded entirely. The captain put the tape round the chests of the smaller boys, and himself pronounced them undersized. The biggest one was very acceptable, and he enlisted by himself without demur, and later in the day he was joined by another mate from his own village. The rejected boys were given tobacco and pipes as a solatium, and were encouragingly patted on their heads and told that if they ate plenty of "ki-ki" they would soon be big and strong enough for the Queensland plantations. When they were related one was caught in paternal arms, and received a belting for his unsuccessfulness "bolt," but the other escaped chastisement—at least, for the time being. A third Florida recruit was obtained on the following day from another village, named Boolow, within rowing distance of our Mandoliana anchorage. This was still slow work, but we had been told at the copra station that whilst we were not likely to get many recruits on the west side of Florida a good haul might be expected on the east side, as many boys were known to be on the "move" there. Another change of scene was the order of the day on Wednesday (October 25), so "tripping the keel," as the skipper would say, we beat down the coast against a south-east wind, and arrived in the evening at Mbol, a village at the eastern entrance of the most southerly of three navigable channels that intersect Florida. Here Fortune's wheel was to turn very decidedly in our favour, notwithstanding statements of opponents of the labour traffic that the boys of missionary islands never recruit a second time for Queensland plantations.

The three new chum Florida boys proved but the first swallows of a season, that commenced in earnest at Mbol, and brought a flight of recruits that included as many old chums as new. The initiative in the exploit of Mbol was taken by a youth named Doe-Kioh, new to the business, who was picked up by our boats, which were signalled for the purpose. This was on the first day after our arrival. Next day no fewer than nine were enrolled. Early in the morning a red flag was seen fluttering on the beach—the Florida signal for the recruiter. The boats found a crowd waiting around a former labourer named Com-bie, who had worked at Mackay, Brisbane, Bundaberg, and Fiji, and who was resolved on returning to Queensland, and a youth named Barry, who wished to go with him. Both were accepted, and Com-bie, alive to the value of ready cash on his arrival in Queensland, stipulated that the payment given to his friends should leave half-a-sovereign for himself at Bundaberg. This was duly arranged, and the prospect of more recruits was unusually bright. Just at this juncture Mr. Mulhern, the recruiter, discovered that a stay-at-home native, who, although not a missionary, held some post in connection with the mission school, and exercised no little local influence, was spreading a report that the boys on the *Helena* were half-starved. This individual had the temerity to venture on board with bland smiles, and thus gave the recruiter an opportunity of taking him to task for his libellous and damaging statements. The man admitted the impeachment, and said he had merely repeated what some Malaita boys had told him. Asked to point out his informants, he professed inability to distinguish between one Malaita boy and another. He was then confronted with the Guadalcanar recruits and those from his own island and village, by all of whom the libel was emphatically contradicted. As for the Malaita boys, they were all so sleek and fat that they made the lie evident by their personal appearance alone. The recruiter gave the maligner a stern and scathing rebuke, and in return received a humble apology and a promise not only never to offend again, but one to aid in the recruiting. The latter undertaking was fulfilled zealously. The erstwhile defamer became, if not exactly a proselytiser for the recruiter, always a valuable go-between, and if he were roughly scolded for his error he was liberally rewarded for his subsequent services.

Two more new hands were engaged during a shower of rain, and were settled for under unusual circumstances. At other places the recruiting transactions had been conducted, as a rule, at the boats on the beach, and in a few instances on board ship. At Malaita it would have been considered extremely dangerous and foolhardy to go beyond the beach for the purpose of making payments. Here, however, at the timely invitation of the natives when rain began to fall, the recruiter and Government agent, with their men carrying the trade box, adjourned to a hospitable spot in a coconut grove so that the business might be conducted under shelter and with comfort. The natives were exulting, but when the bargain was concluded the recruiter felt as secure with his heavy box in their midst and his new boys still at large as if he and his responsibilities were already on board ship. As a matter of fact, when he returned to the boats he found that the two youths had preceded him of their own accord, and had taken their seats on the thwarts. Later in the day five old hands followed. Four of them had worked in Queensland before, viz., Say-ganner at Bundaberg, Mul-tarra at Townsville, Cook-co and Coney at Mackay. These were on this their second engagement entered at a yearly salary of £10. The fifth, Gar-vey, had served his apprenticeship at Samoa, and he was put down at £9 a year. All five wished the presents allowed for them divided into two parts, £1 worth of trade and £1 in cash. They had been frequenting the ship on the previous day, interviewing our previous recruits and taking notes of the vessel and its management under the guise of vendors of shells. Theirs was, therefore, no rash step, but the deliberate procedure of experienced men, who had precedence to look before leaping.

On Saturday morning (October 29) the boats were once more attracted to the beach by the fluttering of a piece of red calico. When they arrived at the spot it was vacant, but sitting on a fallen tree some distance off was a young man playing with a toddling boy. He paid little or no heed to the boats, and the recruiter was driven at first to the conclusion that he had been hoaxed. While Mr. Mulhern and the Government agent were waiting and wondering what should be done next, the young man with the child sauntered up with pronounced sang-froid and coolly offered two helmet

shells for sale. Told that boys and not shells were wanted, he held the child out in his arms as if ready to dispose of him. All this was his peculiar way of coming to the real point. He it was, after all, who had called the boats, and he was resolved on joining the Mbol contingent. Some of his friends coming on the scene, he handed over the child to their charge, and, leaving the recruiter to pay for him, entered the covering boat. Finally, on the same day, we got as an additional recruit a boy named Ligo, who had previously worked on the Burdekin. The *Helena* was then got under weigh, and a course set towards the Sandfly Pass. With a light wind we sailed slowly along a very charming piece of coast scenery—hills and dales, forests and grassed lands dotted sparsely with cane huts, coconut trees lining the shore, shading and concealing from view more than one populous village. The weather favouring, the boats left the ship to continue her course, and ran into a village called Coolacambor, where two boys volunteered out of a crowd. The proper relatives to receive payment for them were not present, but they were prepared to join the ship at once; so it was arranged that as the ship was to anchor at Vava, round a neighbouring point, the boats would return and settle with their friends. Other boys present said they fully intended to recruit, but not until next day, when they would follow the vessel to Vava. "To-day," said one, "heart belongs me look to Coolacambor. To-morrow heart belongs me look to Queensland." In other words, these young men were not prepared to leave without saying good-bye to their friends at home. When the boys regained the ship she was turning into a large bay, which, were it not extensively reefed back, would be very commodious.

Next (Sunday) morning the voice of song rose from the hold, not, as usual, in barbaric "sing-sing," but in Christian hymns and chants. The Florida boys had joined of their own accord in holding service according to the forms of the Anglican Church, which some of their number were competent to conduct. In the forenoon the captain, Government agent, and others landed for a quiet stroll along the beach. Following footprints in the sand they arrived at the house of the local chief, Masseah, by name. Other houses were scattered around, forming the village of Vava. The footprints continued on a broader track onwards to a neat little bamboo church, around which the population, decently and cleanly dressed, were gathered, waiting for the hour of prayer. This was a pleasant surprise, for we had been informed on the ship that church service had taken place early in the morning, and that it would not be repeated until late in the afternoon. The chief, Masseah, came out from his people to meet us. He was a well-conditioned old man, dressed in a faded, but recently washed, cotton suit. His face was but scantily furnished with whiskers, and he had a mild and thoughtful cast of features. Never having acquired any English he was unable to address us intelligibly, but when spoken to he gave us a smiling welcome. In Mr. Usher he recognised an old friend, and he gratefully accepted a cigarette from the captain, with an invitation to visit the *Helena*. Followed by the chief we wandered towards the church, and old time recruits introduced the captain and the Government agent to the missionaries or teachers, who were natives of the island. There was much hand-shaking, but little said. Indeed, there was no time for conversation, for as we neared the church the bell began to toll, and the people streamed into the building. Mr. Usher asked if there would be any objection to the party attending the service, and by way of answer one of the missionaries, who rejoices in the name of Silas Jordan, conducted the visitors past a couple of two-story houses built on piles, and occupied as the teachers' residences, over a stile into a neatly laid out and well-tended garden, in the middle of which stood the place of worship, and up the aisle through a crowded congregation to a front seat. The congregation were kneeling on a floor of white soft sand. The interior was lighted with glass windows in the gable walls. The chancel was raised and carpeted with plaited palm leaves. The altar was draped with red calico, on which a white cross was pinned, and a simple rickety bench answered as a reading desk. The windows and the roof over the chancel were tastefully embellished with mosses and ferns; two fresh bouquets in glass bottles were placed on the altar, and a perfume of incense faintly pervaded the building. Everything was very decorous, orderly and complete. The morning service, with the litany and commandments left out, was engaged in, and was conducted very smoothly and tunelessly, and with evident reverence and sincerity. The whole congregation joined harmoniously in the singing, and intoned the responses with united voice. They sang like a trained choir, heartily, feelingly, and with faultless time, chanting the psalms of David on this distant "end of the earth" in the Coral Sea, and voicing hymns which, though rendered in an unknown tongue, are as familiar to all Christendom as the constellations of the zodiac are to both hemispheres. After church teachers and people gathered about the visitors on the beach. The teachers presented the captain with some newly-laid eggs, and the captain returned the compliment with handfuls of tobacco and pipes, and there was also much friendly intercourse between the Government agent and the natives.