

THE KANAKA LABOUR TRAFFIC.

OUR REPRESENTATIVE ON A RECRUITING SCHOONER.

DEATH OF A "RETURN."

A LARGE NUMBER OF RECRUITS OBTAINED.

No. VI.

At daylight on Tuesday, August 23, the Helena was under sail, bound for the most savage parts of Malaya. She had still a large number of returns to land between Port Adam and the northern end of the island, and her water tanks required replenishing. For the purpose of watering we turned into Deep Bay, and anchored off an indentation on the eastern shore called Taka Taka, within view of the sheen of a waterfall. By the time our sails were furled many natives came off to us, from the concealment of the bush, in a fleet of canoes. They looked superlatively wild, were absolutely destitute of clothing, and their ornaments were few and shabby. Numbers of them wore cane belts, designed for supporting the stomach when that important organ cannot be supplied with food. Duller in colour, they were also dirtier in their habits than their southern neighbours. Their skin was not a glossy sienna-brown, but sooty, and the only one who shone was a wrinkled old man with a black-lead kind of polish, who, as he sat beside our gunwale, grinning over the scene, with the juice of betelnut exuding from his mouth in red and yellow smears, would have passed in popular esteem for an ideal Satanic Majesty. There were bows and arrows of a very lethal character in all the canoes. The arrows were four feet long, of cane and hardwood, with barbed points. The barbs were splinters of human bone, so fixed that they would adhere to the arrow in its flight, but drop off and remain in a wound. There were half a dozen arrows to every bow, and the point of one shaft in every shaft was carefully wrapped in a leaf. The protected point marked a poisoned arrow—poisoned by having been dipped in human putrefaction, or in deadly juice obtained from plant or fish. The natives were not allowed to bring their arms on board, and although they had liberty to move about the deck at pleasure, they were kept under surveillance.

We were in Deep Bay for four days. The watering occupied the best part of one; taking two boys to their home another. Those returns were landed at a place called Quoi, near a village named Waibora, in the Maramasik estuary. This involved a row of eight miles against a head wind and heavy sea. It took four hours to reach Quoi. When recruited four years ago the returns were boys in a literal sense. They were now able-bodied men, and decently clad. A few savage friends in a nude state met them, and received them coolly. The first concern of the stay-at-home was the lugging of the boxes brought from Queensland to the beach, where a tall woman with children at her knees stood guard over them during the time the boats lingered. Our late passengers stood by the boats talking to the recruiter and Government agent, oblivious to the fact that the new pants they had donned were submerged in the salt water. They said they would gladly return to Queensland at once, but as they had been told their chief was short of warriors at present they would have to stay and bide their time.

Thursday morning proved eventful. Light airs were blowing from the land, offering an opportunity of putting to sea. At 6 a.m. the windlass was clanking merrily and sail was set. There were dark clouds in the southern sky, but nothing in their appearance to excite alarm. I would like to describe in detail what followed, but space will not permit. Suffice it to say that the vessel, while being towed to sea, was overtaken by a whirlwind, that she ran into and cut into halves one of the boats, and that she raged off, leaving the recruiter and his crew to struggle for life in the spume. The men were picked up by the second boat, and the wreckage of No. 1 boat was only recovered to be deliberately abandoned. The trade box, with its stock of hardware and soft goods, went to the bottom. A new trade box was improvised out of a chest, a return sold to the ship for half a sovereign's worth of tobacco, and it was arranged that the recruiter should now have the Government agent's boat and the Government agent the captain's gig. We were seriously crippled in the matter of boats, but had reason to be thankful that the safety of the vessel was secured, and that there had been no fatality or personal injury.

The natives revisited us and reported that one of their largest canoes had been reduced to splinters by the storm. An inviting smoke on shore was responded to. There was a large gathering of natives, and they had with them four boys who were willing and ready to recruit. Yet, as it turned out, the Helena or any other Queensland vessel could not have one of them. In the number and value of his presents the recruiter was prepared to be a Santa Claus, but his box did not contain the particular toys the tribe had set their hearts on. Calico was not appreciated, ornaments were rejected, and outlery they were not in want of. In lieu of every recruit they required a rifle. No guns, no boys. We had no guns to give, and we got no recruits. The tribe will have their Sniders all the same, but the boys will go to Samoa or to French plantations.

Poor Oleseemar, the consumptive return, was now within a dozen miles of his home. He had wasted steadily from day to day in spite of nourishing food and medicine. At Maron Sound he crawled to the poop for an airing, and asked for some tea. He was always supplied with whatever he fancied in the way of food, and tea with biscuit was what he liked best. On this occasion he could only swallow a mouthful. Then he looked up with his large liquid eyes, and asked fretfully, "What for ship he stop?" It will be remembered that we were delayed in Maron Sound for three days. "What for ship he stop?" he repeated. "By and by me die." Still we hoped to land him at his home alive. After endeavouring three times to leave Deep Bay, and after anchoring, for the third time, in Deep Bay his brother came aft. "Oleseemar want no more ki-ki," he said; and, continuing, "Very good, suppose you give him grog now. He soon finish." The captain and the Government agent went at once to the hold, and found that the sick youth would indeed require no more food. He was still alive, but there were unmistakable signs that death was only a question of hours. No one knew this better than Oleseemar himself. "Me sick long long time," he whispered. "Too long altogether. Close up now, me die." Spirits and water were administered, and he spent a comparatively easy night, but at noon next day, when the Helena was at sea once more and about to steer for his "passage," he died. The Government agent satisfied himself that the spark of life had really fled, and the body, tied up in deceased blankets by his brother, and weighted with a bag full of sand, was then dropped overboard *sans cérémonie*. Mr. Usher took charge of the dead man's box, and gave it to the surviving brother when he landed.

The landing of returns was now resumed and continued with vigour. Four were taken ashore at Malo, two at Manina Quoi, one at Akanval, three at Urrumburg, and three at Sinerango. The only unusual circumstance in this work was at Manina Quoi. Three returns were listed for that place, and they left the ship together. Sam had told us that fighting was going on in and around his district, and this news was confirmed when the boats reached the shore. They were met by a large and excited crowd, who talked much about the war. Two of the returns landed without fear, for they found themselves amongst their friends. The third, however, hailed from the other side of the bay, and would not venture to leave the boat, so, to secure his safety, the boats

crossed to his passage—an extra pull of three miles. At Urrumburg a chief, without saying a word, lifted a new felt hat from the head of a return before the landing took place, and stuck it on his own head. We were not present to see what this chief did with the boxes later on. All this time the Helena coasted slowly onwarik without attempting to recruit. At Sinerango several islanders who had been to Queensland said they would recruit again if the ship called there on her return trip. Sinerango, as before mentioned, was the scene of the "Young Dick" massacre; ahead of us was Lelli Island, low-lying, and shaped like a horseshoe, where the Janet Stewart murders took place; and it was also in this neighbourhood that the Borealis was surprised. Captain Doig therefore ordered his men to be extra watchful against attack whilst in these quarters. At this time, too, owing to two of the white sailors being laid under by fever, I had a night-watch added to my duties. It was decided that Urs should be our next anchorage. Urs is the first island of consequence in a twelve-mile bight that has no name yet. Lelli Island, lying in the centre of this bight, had been uninhabited ever since the Janet Stewart massacre, immediately after which the natives sought safety from expected punishment by removing to the smaller islands in the bight or to the main land. Urs may or may not have been one of their places of refuge, but, judging from the multitude of people who came to meet us in canoes, its present population is out of proportion to its diminutive size. It is nearly circular in form and about the size of a cricket-ground. It could be seen through the trees that the village itself was still swarming, and this despite the fact that already a hundred men and boys were making themselves at home on our deck or paddling alongside. The place and the people had a bad reputation, and some of our visitors looked savage enough for anything. How many chiefs boarded us would be hard to say. At least five men claimed to be "masters" of local villages. Two of them might have been engaged for exhibition in civilised countries with a certainty that they would prove a very lucrative "draw." Old Guria, from Quoi, took precedence of all. His attire consisted of a leather belt, from which a key dangled, and an old felt hat. He was a very large man, and had obtained rings of extraneous size to fit his brawny arms. A shaggy beard on his chin only served to elongate a cadaverous face, and his mouth was like a steel-trap. His eyes wandered everywhere with lusty greed, and he proved a prince of fawning cadgers. He reckons himself a big chief, and really is one, and has a very sanguinary reputation. The other most conspicuous savage was Matarow, chief of Urs. He was hairy, and resembled an overgrown orang-outang; a dirty soft felt hat was drawn over his bleared eyes, and his nose was ringed with a large white hoop that hung as low as his chin. He followed Guria about like a henchman, and copied him in all he did, especially in the begging. These unsavoury two forced their way into the cabin, and would not quit until ordered off in a stern and uncompromising manner. The whole mob were driven in a friendly way from the ship at sundown, and a couple of the returns were engaged to help the white men in keeping watch over night.

The Helena lay for a full week at Urs, where she landed six returns and obtained thirteen recruits. One of the returns landed had become so fond of the Helena that after he had parted with his box he begged leave to stay on board as far as Quoi, our next place of call. Permission was granted, and this youth was during the week of great assistance in the working of the boats at a time when sickness was rather prevalent in the fore part of the ship. Our first recruit at Urs was named Beer Beer, a light-hearted youth, with larrikinism lurking in his eye. At his bush village he had been guilty of some youthful villainy at the expense of an elderly widow, and he was in consequence compelled by his chief to take her into wife. It was evidently an unusual case, for, as far as I could learn, it is not often that a male islander has to enter the married state under compulsion. He has, as a rule, to pay a good price for a wife, and it is the woman who has the smallest voice in the matter. The price Beer Beer had to pay was the freedom of bachelorhood, and he considered his elderly spouse dear at that figure. At all events service in Queensland was preferable, and he enlisted. The next recruit was an old hand, who had worked on the Herbert River. This man was specific about the terms of his engagement. He knew he was worth more than a new chum, so before he allowed the negotiations between his friends and the recruiter to proceed he made inquiries as to the rate of wages he would receive. "Nine pounds a year," said Mr. Mulhern. Green hands are all enlisted at the legal rate of £5 a year, so in this case an advance of £3 was offered. The islander looked still undecided until he got a second question answered. "How much you pay along six months?" he asked. "Four fellow pounds and ten fellow shillings," was the recruiter's answer, and recruit No. 5 thereupon stepped into the boat. In explanation of the question as to the amount that would be paid every six months, it may be mentioned that the wages of labourers on Queensland plantations are made by law payable half-yearly. Nos. 4 and 5 were got on one day and No. 6 on the following day in a colourless manner. On the second of the new month three bush boys joined our ranks, and their friends went home rejoicing over their presents. Two of the three were from the same village, and when being formally enlisted by the Government agent in the cabin were particular about understanding the statements made to them through an interpreter. They had no difficulty in grasping the fact that they were wanted to work on a sugar plantation, and the amount of their wages (the minimum £5 per annum) seemed to be a very secondary consideration. The length of time they would have to serve was, however, a question of importance. The interpreter told them twice that it would be three years, but they would not be satisfied with his explanation, so each held up three fingers and looked at the Government agent for a sign. Mr. Usher nodded, and they were satisfied. No. 10 was another old Herbert River boy. He signalled for the boats on his own account entirely. He had toiled once for the benefit of lazy relatives, but was not "soft" enough to do so again. He therefore forbade the recruiter to give any trade away for him, and demanded thirty shillings as pocket-money for himself. Mr. Mulhern paid him in gold. As on 5-my, as the recruit was named, put the coin into his dilly-bag, and sprang lightly into the boat. "Good-bye, altogether!" he sang out to the disappointed natives left on the beach, and as they made no response he expressed disgust at their want of manners in very unparliamentary language. After he had been entered on the Government agent's list at £9 a year he handed the 50s. to the captain for safe-keeping until he should arrive in Queensland, and this deposit was also registered on the Government agent's list. Carvo, an old Mackay boy, came next, and along with him a new hand named E-do-yr.

Sunday (September 4) now intervened. On that day persistent signalling for the boats was kept up by the natives on shore. Canoes were sent from the ship to explain that the day was one on which no recruiting could be done. They returned and reported that there were three bush boys anxious to enlist, and that their friends were present to give their approving consent. Our messengers had found it difficult to explain that Queensland labour vessels now kept Sundays; all the same as missionary, but the bush folk said they would camp and wait till next day. It rained the rest of the day and all night, and the three boys spoken of were never heard of by us again. When we went to look for them on the Monday morning, however, another tribe answered our signal shot, and their leading spokesman, a big-boned, fierce-looking fellow, who carried a Snider, said there was one boy amongst them "ready" for Queensland. This man and another present had been in Queensland, and could make themselves easily understood in broken English. The Snider, and numerous bows and arrows having been stacked against a tree, the whole company came close to the

boats, and helped the recruiter to arrange an acceptable bundle of trade. The process was tedious but not difficult. Tobacco and cutlery were most in request, and the swag grew to a tidy size. Then the boy, whose name was O-wee, was invited on board. He was a tallish, light-coloured youth, with a fuzzy head. He came to the water's edge, and halted. Then ensued an animated discussion between him and his friends, after which the youth withdrew behind some fallen timber, and one by one his friends followed suit until only two or three remained on the beach. These latter when asked what all this meant answered "He fright!" and smiled cynically as if they considered him a booby. Ten minutes elapsed, during which the recruiter remained inactive; then he proceeded to restore the trade to his box, but an uplifted hand at the dead timber signified that he should not yet leave. The argument between the intended recruit and his friends had been resumed. There was no noise nor bluster, only the hum of voices in quiet talk, and eventually O-wee handed some of his armlets to a chum or brother, walked boldly down the beach and passed over the recruiter's boat into the Government agent's one. The bundle of trade was distributed directly it was lifted, and with the exception of three of their number the tribe set out for their bush village. The three who remained had asked permission to visit the ship, and they were taken along in the boats. They included the old hands already specially mentioned, and when they were questioned they explained the difficulty which arose in the act of recruiting O-wee. It appeared that O-wee and another boy had made up their minds to go to Queensland together, but his mate balked at the last moment, and O-wee was afraid to go by himself amongst strangers to a foreign country. When assured, however, by the "old hands" that the white men "no kill black man," and that he would find plenty Malaya men to chum with in Queensland, his fears vanished, and he enlisted.

The boats were summoned to the beach again in the afternoon. It was a day of rain, but between showers and business smoke had been detected, and was answered. About a dozen natives who had been crouching under bushes for shelter from the rain came forward to meet us as the boats grated on the beach. The negotiations had to be conducted at intervals between showers. There were two young men suffering from the Australian mania, or, at least, ready to emigrate. Each had a young woman clinging to his arm, as if unwilling to part with them. When a shower came on they squatted in pairs, with a mat spread over their heads as an umbrella. The weather in this instance hastened business, and one after the other the boys took their places in the boats as the trade was handed over. The "Marys," notwithstanding their seeming demonstrations of affection at the beginning of the proceedings, soon became engrossed in the distribution of the trade, and in the end their grief disappeared in their appreciation of presents. At all events there was no display of wounded feelings as the boats left for the ship. Recruit No. 16 (the 12th at Urs) broke cover on the recruiter when ashore with a party cutting firewood. He looked young and half starved, and was coated with dirt. Mr. Mulhern was dubious, but said the lad if he liked could go off in a canoe to the ship, and if he were accepted by the Government agent the matter of paying his friends could be arranged afterwards. Shortly afterwards the boy presented himself on board ship, and when examined was seen to be of age and healthy. All he required was ship and water and plenty of ki-ki. He was asked to return to the shore, and told that the boats would fetch him off in the usual way after settling with his friends. He did not approve of this proposal, and at his own entreaties, in dumb show, he was allowed to remain by the ship's jam-pots whilst the recruiter and the Government agent were away satisfying his friends. One other boy offered at Urs, but was refused on account of his youth.

The native who acted as interpreter for us here was not very bright or energetic. From a recruiter's point of view he was not of much value. He was unable to demonstrate or persuade, and entirely lacking in seal. But luck went with him in the boats, and he had to be paid, as the best ear, according to results; so, in addition to board and lodging on board ship, he received 300 sticks of tobacco, 40 clay pipes, a pocket-knife, 3 Jew's-harps, a looking-glass, a sheath knife, a head necklet, 3 leather pouches, 12 yards of calico, a dozen fishing-hooks, a briar pipe, 3 large knives, 2 axes, 6 rings, and 3 dozen of matches.