

The Age.

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It is much to be regretted that the late Mr. Robert Towns, the well known Sydney merchant, should ever have been induced to bring over South Sea Islanders to work on his newly formed sugar plantations in Queensland. That was the origin in these seas of what is now known as the "labor traffic," which spread with alarming rapidity at first, and was attended, in some of its earlier stages, with so many difficulties, dangers and atrocities as to make it a counterpart of the old slave trade. What Mr. Towns had chiefly in view in bringing over the first batch of these islanders to Queensland was the working of his plantations at a profit by the introduction of cheap labor, and cheapness has ever since been urged as a plea for a continuance of the very objectionable traffic. But it soon became evident to that gentleman, and to others having plantations in Queensland, that some restrictions must be placed on this traffic in the interests of humanity, and an act was passed by the Colonial Legislature for that purpose which at once met with the approval of her Majesty's Home Government. So far was it, however, from meeting with the general approval of the colonists, that large sections of the community have always been opposed to it; and this habitually leads to much strife and dissension in the colony whenever the scarcity of colored labor is more than ordinarily great.

Such a season of scarcity is the present, and the planters hardly know in what direction to look for what they stand so much in need of. Never before was the supply of colored labor so inadequate to their wants as it now is, and they have been brought at length to acknowledge that they can no longer look to the New Hebrides for such supplies as they were formerly in the habit of getting from those islands. Mr. Paton, senior missionary of the Free Church Missionary Society for the New Hebrides, settled that point for them in a letter addressed to the different churches of Australia in February, last, in which he shows that "more than one-third of the population of those islands has been swept away within the last twenty years," and that the aversion to the trade there is every year becoming greater and greater. Not only so, but a deputation from the same society, consisting of Dr. Smith, Mr. Inglis, one of their returned missionaries, and some others, waited on Earl Granville and the Earl of Derby, at the Colonial Office in February last, and presented a memorial praying that her Majesty's Home Government would take immediate steps "for permanently establishing British protection and British justice in the islands," at the close of which it was urged, "that if this was not done the islands would soon be entirely depopulated." Of this the Queensland planters have as full a knowledge as the best informed anywhere on the subject, and no wonder, under the circumstances, that they should be more than a little discouraged at the prospects before them.

But what have the planters done, or what are they now doing, to avert what appears to be inevitable in Queensland—a permanent dearth of colored labor? Our latest intelligence on this point is that they are turning their attention from the New Hebrides and the Solomon group of islands—whence they have hitherto obtained their chief supply—to New Britain and New Guinea, under the hope of getting relief from that quarter. Mr. Lawes, senior missionary of the London Missionary Society in these seas, was the first to give us any intimation of this, which he did in a letter dated Port Moresby, New Guinea, 2nd February, 1883, from which we gather what follows. When on a visit to Cooktown about three months before that date, Mr. Lawes informs us that he was frequently asked by the planters, or their friends, whether men could not be got in New Guinea to work in North Queensland, and that his uniform reply to his interrogators was—"Yes, if you are prepared to take them by force or deceit, not otherwise." Nobody thought much of this at the time of the appearance of Mr. Lawes's letter, but it is now quite clear that a scheme was being devised, with or without the sanction of the Queensland Government, for getting colored labor from New Guinea, and that that scheme exists

then have been pretty well matured. For late in March a vessel was despatched from Queensland, by a well known mercantile firm, to New Britain and New Guinea, under the command of an experienced captain, with five stock and other things on board, to be used as presents to the natives, and the planters are now looking eagerly for her return with a cargo of colored laborers, whom they are prepared to buy at any price as soon as landed.

Whether this is or is not the best way of solving the labor problem is an open question. Our opinion is that it is not, for even supposing a good supply of labor to be obtained at New Britain or New Guinea in the first attempt—which is not, however, at all probable—the trade will fall off there as it has done at the New Hebrides and at the Solomon groups of islands, and any relief the planters get by this new departure will be temporary only. There is a better way open to the Queensland planters for procuring a good supply of colored labor, if they will only adopt it, and that is to enter into an arrangement with the Indian Government—as the Mauritius Government did, when in similar difficulties—for as many coolies as may be required. But whilst professedly anxious to solve the labor problem in this way, the Queensland Government, who have long been in correspondence with the Indian Government on the subject, have inserted a clause in the regulations submitted to that Government for approval to this effect—"That any Indian coolie remaining in Queensland after the expiry of his five years' agreement shall be liable to imprisonment, until he consents to return to India, or re-indentures himself to some planter." Such a clause as this was never dreamt of by the framers of the Mauritius Immigration regulations; and, with the Act passed in 1854 for the regulation of immigration from India before them, the Indian Government could not accept any such clause as the one proposed by the Queensland Government, if they even otherwise would.

Here the great difficulty, then, with regard to colored labor in Queensland comes in, but it does not appear to us to be insurmountable. Let the Queensland Government abandon the idea of inserting in their immigration regulations such a preposterous clause as the one now proposed, which would enable the Queensland authorities to treat any Indian coolies they found there as criminals, if they did not march off at once on the expiration of their agreement, and the planters may have as much colored labor as they wish. What has done so much good for Mauritius should do as much good for Queensland. The Queensland planters have had a good innings in their game for cheap labor, but they must not expect this to last for ever. Indian coolie labor may cost them a little more than the colored labor obtained from the South Sea Islands, but they must make up their minds to this, and be prepared to pay it.