RABARDY

a novel

&

THE SOUTH-PACIFIC SHORT STORIES

OF LOUIS BECKE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Thesis submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy

at The University of East Anglia,

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February, 2017

Word Count: 95,221

ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a novel, *Rabardy*, and an extended critical analysis of the South-Pacific short stories of Louis Becke.

Rabardy is based on events which took place around 1882, in what is now the Bismarck Archipelago, Papua New Guinea, a place I know personally. The story follows the activities of white traders and a missionary, who negotiate and sometimes violently conflict with the indigenous Melanesians, and who become embroiled in the dissolution of a disastrous French Catholic settler colony. My protagonist is a French sea captain in his late fifties, a man admired for his competence by traders yet considered a monster by the colonists he serves, who believe he is cynically imprisoning them. Rabardy's ultimate disillusionment with the wider Western colonial project is suggested by the final documentary section – his journal, which redirects the story towards its hidden subject: the Melanesian people.

In both elements of this thesis, one problem is addressed in different ways: how to narrate colonialism. With stories from Sebald's *The Emigrants* and Louis Becke as a model, the novel incorporates different voices and documents to build up a fragmentary image of a complex picture. My frame narrator is based on Louis Becke, who sat beside the dying sea captain.

My critical essay reappraises Becke and his stories – long out of print – which I encountered during my research. Through close readings and a re-examination of his biography, I reject certain myths and uncover a more aesthetically and ideologically complex engagement with the anxieties of empire than Becke's current reputation permits. I show how Becke uses polyphony to dramatise and ventriloquise voices from either side of the colonial conflict, nesting different mindsets, types of narration and consciousness in a way which demonstrates the proto-modernist impressionism which is usually associated with Conrad and Ford.

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‘In time, perhaps, your country will think about its colonial crimes… Everybody has to empty their own latrine.’

Günter Grass: A life in writing. *Guardian* Books

‘The fundamental purpose of both romance and utopias is to remake the world in the image of desire.’

Patrick Parrinder: *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*

RABARDY

a novel

CHAPTER ONE

Rabardy was here again last night. He called *Beck! Beck!*– like a finger tapping the iron bed frame. I sat up, every muscle alert, but the door remained bolted, the room empty. I did not light the lamp, for fear I might knock it off the stand when my fatigue returned. Instead I lay back down, resolved to keep him out of my mind, remembering where I was, thinking only certain thoughts. I pulled the sheets and blankets close in the coolness, and soon felt warm as a tropical evening. The shush of my breath seemed far off, and the motion of my chest was a wave which reared back from a strand, sucking and gathering, heaving upwards till it swooshed in its collapse, like the tide fizzing out among damp grains of an equatorial shore. *Fool*, said the wave. *Half-dead old fool*.

I could hear the surf closing in on every side, felt it reverberate beneath my heels. I perceived I stood between the twisted trunks of palm trees, on a spit beside a lagoon where a crowd had gathered, like the ones who used to come to my readings in London or Paris or here in Sydney. The gentlemen wore bowler hats, and the ladies wore gloves while all sat upright in semi-circles of chairs half-sunk in the sand, waiting. A man in a tailcoat told them about my book and I heard them applaud while I hunted round the lectern and in the pockets of my pyjamas. My feet scuffed clouds of tiny flies from a ridge of dead fronds and husks, of the tiny bleached skeletons of crabs which a storm had spat back onto the strand, but I couldn't find the book. The back of my neck grew hot in the afternoon sunlight, as I realised I hadn't written the story yet, and I should have to make it up on the spot. The audience, which had already started to murmur, now began to screech and flap, walking in circles with their heads thrown back, beaks wide. I

had to stop them flying away and my throat burned with the strain, but no words came, only a voice which rumbled in the air like the sound of breakers on a reef – *Beck! Beck!* I saw a green chaise-longue beside an ebony table, a pile of papers bound with cord, younger hands – mine – receiving them. A face I had not seen in half a lifetime: its grizzled sideboards; the jellied blood vessels of Rabardy's sixty-odd years and sun-cracked sailor's skin; eyes which turned to stare straight back at me, dense as wolframite. And I heard the voice again, speaking clearly beside me as he did in that room where we sat – speaking as if in thirty years he had not stopped but had kept flowing on another plane, gathering his vitriol behind some dam wall out in the ether and now the dam had broken, filling my ears till they overflowed. *What do you think you are doing? You think you know, but you are nothing.* Outside, insects whirred. He said I deserved to fail; spoke cuttingly of my elderly parents and children, of things he could not have known because they had not happened yet. Not pausing for breath, he raged until a blow sounded, then another, and he was gone. Yet they weren't blows at all, only a knocking on the wall. I woke in the dark, skin smarting where the rumpled sheets had stuck. My throat hurt and I felt shaky from all the shouting and denials. Yet the hotel was still, not a living soul about, not even rats chittering in the alley below, only the rapping of my pulse which kept on and on, so that I lay exhausted till long after dawn, till the kitchen workers had arrived and the maids had started their rounds.

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These last weeks since I came here I've become almost a stranger to myself. It was in order to be by myself that I returned to this city, to escape from people and duties which seemed intolerable to me, all of which clamoured daily for more than I could give.

I love my family more than I can bear, yet when we are together I find I must be cruel and spiteful, till even I begin to wonder who this man may be they are looking at

with consternation and mistrust. I've been unwell, it's true, and so might with reason set down these changes as mere symptoms of my affliction. I've seen often how good men can transform into vicious ones under the influence of pain, fatigue or incapacitation. I have myself been many men in the course of my life though always with vigour and spirit. Where that yen for life is now, I can't say. It troubles me to think that a man's nature might be no more than a set of responses to physiological circumstance. I hoped by taking myself away from the strain of a situation I could no longer endure that I should give my constitution the opportunity, like my conduct, to right itself. Or, failing that, I should leave my loved ones in peace and finish a few matters long neglected.

But morning after morning instead of writing I read the papers and reread until the decision of some French politician or the construction works of the German navy appear to me overwhelming and unstoppable. As if the wheels and pistons which drive our daily course, generating the advance of civilised nations, now exercised the minds of the very men they served. And when my own mind cuts loose, the past, which was ever my friend and storehouse of tales, returns to me for hours at a time in a manner I barely recognise.

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I am the same age he was now, and what would Rabardy think to see me here? My entire wealth accommodated in seven drawers, a thin wardrobe, and a desk wedged under the window as an afterthought. This room on the ground floor, which was never designed for guests, I occupy courtesy of Mr Kinsela, proprietor of the *Paradise Hotel*, who generously discounts the cost: "I always enjoyed your books, Mr B," he says. I don't ask why he uses the past tense. And I can't complain that my counterpane smells of must, that the window never gets direct sunlight but leaks when it rains, that damp wicks up from the rug on the floor and curls the corners of my papers. That today, for instance, the chambermaids took less than two minutes to wipe the walls, empty my pot

and fill the basin. Then it was over. As she opened the door I asked the pretty one about her pearl earrings and she said yes, I had told her before *several* times how I used to dive for pearls in German New Guinea. “They’re only common ordinary things,” she added.

The girls look at one another as though I were a foolish old man who had designs on someone younger than his daughters. Daughters who don’t even visit, a fact which cannot have escaped notice. The maids used to ask about my girls, but not any more. Perhaps Mr Kinsela has told them not to waste time on me, because they know they won’t get a tip. I probably smell of neglect, like an old dog.

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Can it have been only a week ago, that Rabardy’s likeness dropped onto my desk? I was putting away a letter in my book of scraps at the time: my latest adventure tale, sent six months earlier and returned with apologies – “smaller demand nowadays”, written in smudged ink – and below it a scribbled postscript suggesting autobiography, “a small print run to tidy up ends”, it said, and with no hint of irony, “a chance to tell the truth”. It was then that the yellowed cutting slipped out. I must have taken it from one of the newspapers back in ’82 when the scandal broke. He wore his captain’s hat, in which I don’t believe I ever saw him once, and his pose was etched so formally that he looked as if he’d been stuffed for the purposes of science. It took a minute for the leaden lines to bring to mind the man, for our acquaintance from start to finish was measured in days, and while I contemplated the work of the jobbing illustrator certain phrases in the text drew my glance: “humanity of the savages”; “right of every colonist to take possession”; “abandoned without means”.

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I am waiting as I write for eleven chimes to tinkle in the department store around the corner on King Street so that I can open my second bottle of the day – which will be

brandy on this occasion, as the whiskey is almost out. I will drink it in silence like a monk because it's the only way to make myself comfortable. A few minutes ago I got up and walked around the bed, listening at the walls for interesting conversations in other people's rooms, and in the corridor, but I was soon tired and had to sit down again. I picked up a copy of *The Sydney Morning Herald* which some thoughtful person pushed under my door. 'German navy doubles,' says the headline.

The chatter of war is a madness, a queer ecstatic game about which I have nothing to say. I deal in what's done and gone, the same two decades of my life which I have revisited, ransacked and raked over until whatever it once was has lost all clarity and makes little sense even to me any more. What it was really like in those days, as against what people imagine, won't stand too many questions. All I know is that few had the strength or luck to stick it for long up in the northern fringes of Oceania. That each of us hoped – believed – we would prove ourselves to be the exceptions. That Rabardy had more of what it took to distinguish himself than I, though it didn't help him in the end.

Well, such times are over and their romance has no place in the modern world. The appetite has dulled. The last frontier is under enclosure and subject to the rule of authorities, and not one spot on the face of the earth, is left free for the discovery. A few misfit tales remain in my head where their strangeness seeps out, confounding me with questions. Like Rabardy's, which I think of more and more and which for the good of everyone must, I once agreed, be forgotten. These are the stories which keep me company, long after I have told the rest out. Events have stirred him up from the cold soup where memories sink. My livelihood consists of scooping in that murk, fishing out morsels of what might make a story. I turned him over once or twice, but could never get a grip. Yet lately I find I'm certain what he would say about a headline or a conversation taking place in the corridor. I know the talk I overheard yesterday outside room 12 regarding war in Europe would not surprise him, that he would say he always

told us it was coming, though I can't remember him doing so, and none of us could have imagined such a prospect at the time. Well, Rabardy thought terribly of us all in the end: colonials and missionaries alike. Of course by then he had worked himself into the strangest state. And I must confess, from the outset, that I hardly knew the man, not beyond a short exchange, a glance at his papers which I still have in my possession, and a couple of conflicting accounts told to me by others, for reasons of their own.

What was it really killed him? Was it sickness, or murder? And what does that make me, for my silence? Or were the others right all along – the Quinns, the missionary, the French doctor – that his death was an unremarkable event and a lucky one at that, for everyone?

Nothing I did could change the facts, only what they meant. Perhaps in the end that madman was right about us. In spite of our differences and self-determination we were only ever, in practice, cogs in some great clumsy engine which drove its plough to the edges of the world and gazed back, amazed at the furrows of destruction.

CHAPTER TWO

Wherever I find myself in the world – and I've travelled much of it – my thoughts are almost always in another place. When I sailed trade in the Pacific islands or ran an outlet on an atoll I passed the slower hours listening to sea birds or native tales, watching breakers foam on a reef and dreaming of home. And yet, no sooner did my cases hit my parents' floor than my mind would split apart again and busy itself hunting the distant ocean, snagged by recollections, churning over schemes. When the year 1882 came round I found myself standing at the back of Thrips's shipping agency on Australia Wharf, looking at a handbill pinned to a board. I had finally decided some weeks before that it was over for me with the south seas. In ten years of trying I had given the place my all and my all is more or less what it had taken. It is one thing to dice with shipwrecks and pirates at eighteen when you believe yourself invincible and your life lies open like an adventure book, but it's quite another when you close on the bar of thirty. The tide slackens and begins to retreat, and one by one calamities and misfortunes are exposed in their true form – as cutting edges of that natural process which chips every man off the planet to smooth it for his successors.

It must have been a week or so after the new year, for I remember a distinct change had come over my sister's house when the season of eating and drinking came to a close. I'd imposed on her hospitality and my brother-in-law's for nigh on two months and was determined to keep myself out of their way in order to avoid being a troublesome guest. I'd come in to make a routine inquiry about a letter I was expecting, and had positioned myself ready to pass the morning in a corner of the agency building. The office consisted of a square panelled room into which the doors opened directly, where people came and went and Thrips sat in state, performing clerical duties.

"WANTED:" read the notice, "strong young man for new trade business on East New Britain shore. Must be practical. Financial know-how and good ear for native speech a boon, and MORAL FIBRE a necessity." The paper had twisted up on itself like a dead fly. Smiling inwardly about the MORAL FIBRE, I pinioned two corners with my fingers to decipher the last yellowing line: "£150 a year, plus commission. Hernsheim & Co., Pacific Enterprise."

I'd first seen the advertisement many weeks earlier, before the sea air got to work on it, for that three-figure sum had a certain force on the eye, and I could have recreated, blindfold, the curlicues scratched in thin ink. Having worked half my life among the islands of Oceania I was both amused and dispirited by the talk of strength and practicality. It was as good as saying that in order to get a cucumber to grow you needed sunlight and water. And I had heard enough about New Britain to know to avoid the place. Indeed, had the notice named any other region of that vast continent of water I might have been flattered to consider the position myself, for I was everything there described, except that at a few years shy of thirty it would no longer have been strictly accurate to call me young.

Behind Thrips's desk the swing door moaned open, and in on flat feet trod a young lad who might have been myself a dozen years before. His legs seemed joined at the hip to a stack of ledgers, above which only his hair and eyes showed. He waited unnoticed behind his boss, stepped forward, swung the pile with a wince and let it fall onto the desk. The thump sent a sheet of paper sailing off the desk in a curve to the floor.

"No!" shouted Thrips. He raised a forearm sharply as if moved to strike something, screwed up his face against a dust cloud and froze, repressing a cough. The boy turned to stone.

"If you do that again," said Thrips, "I'll put you on the next boat to some God-forsaken island where you can gather coconuts."

Thrips raised his eyes in my direction, looking for fellowship in disapproval, without any detectable consideration that my career to date might have consisted largely of what he had just threatened. Behind his back his young apprentice's mask of anxiety melted in a distant gaze.

“And we'll see what your father thinks of that.”

As far as I could tell, Thrips had been an agent for as long as the town existed. His office buildings, once on the waterfront, had settled and sunk, and appeared to have retreated like a broken wave behind the seaward advance of quays on stilts, wharves and store-houses which had crowded in front over the years, staking their claim of superior vigour and size. His place seemed less a shipping agency – dispatching goods and services across a world exploding with new trade links – than a strange museum, presided over by one grey custodian who never detached himself from his throne. In the course of the morning while I perused every newspaper cutting he had dismissed three young men looking for work and an elderly couple whose packing case of valuables had been missing for two months. These last he advised to give up all sentimentality about their possessions, as there was, he said, no hope of recovery.

I was reading a story at the time about four fishermen whose boat drifted fifty miles across the ocean in a current and who survived for ten days on five ship’s biscuits and two tins of pilchards. Another article boasted about the great successes of missionaries among the savages of the Pacific, and a third announced that a French colony had recently been established on New Ireland, next-door to New Britain. A Marquis had founded the project independently, and was said to have raised a fortune. One of the colony's ships was in Sydney on the day the story was written, and the Baron in command spoke of a new dawn and of friendly relations between our nations. On either side of these cuttings the wall panels had shrunk open and the gaps between were filled

with a grey matter which I identified as old cobweb clogged with lumps: the dried-up victims of predatory insects, and their discarded husks.

“I’ve received a great deal of interest in that post you're considering,” said Thrips, without leaving his upholstered chair. His pitch rose and hovered over the last words as if to help them convince. I looked round to find us alone. His gaze was locked on columns of figures in a large leather volume in front of him on the desk. Nothing about his posture suggested he had looked up from it that day.

“You know why I'm here, Mr Thrips,” I said at last. “I’ve come about that letter I'm expecting from Henderson and Macfarlane. The one Mr Macfarlane promised weeks ago.”

He looked at me for an instant and shouted, “Mail!”

I could hear stumbling in the back room.

The boy shuffled through with an envelope. He held it between his employer's face and the ledger. Without glancing at the hand Thrips swatted it aside. The boy placed it on the desk out of Thrips's way but within his sight should he look up.

“Ah,” said Thrips, doing just that. He took the paper, opened it neatly with a knife that lay beside his ledger, unfolded the contents and read.

“Is that everything?” he asked his apprentice.

The boy nodded.

“I’m afraid there's been no letter this morning, Mr Beck,” said Thrips, seemingly pleased.

“I don't understand,” I said. I walked to the door and looked out on summer haze gleaming off a block of sea at the end of the alley, and thinking again, turned back. “Why would Mr Macfarlane leave me waiting and waiting like this?”

Thrips looked up sharply on the word *why.*

“I’m sure you'll find another job, a strong young lad like you.”

It is a fact I have never stood above five feet six, in my shoes. To anyone who has not lived life at this altitude I can barely express what a constant vexation it can be. Until my complexion puckered and my hair thinned I suffered more or less daily from an underestimation of my age.

“I was one of their longest-standing employees.” I strode towards him in an attempt to impress my presence more substantially. The boards squeaked like tiny souls in torment. “I made them a good profit. I nearly drowned in the course of my duties. Mr Macfarlane was kind enough to insist I should go home and recover and that he'd call on my services again soon.”

The angle of Thrips's neck and shoulders declared it was no concern of his what people such as I had arranged with others.

“Perhaps he has had cause to change his mind,” he said.

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Ordinarily, I would have had an answer for such a provoking remark, but I had been kept awake by the sound of my sister and brother-in-law arguing into the night, knocking my name about between them.

The bell on Thrips’s door rang and a man of forty walked up to the agent's desk and spoke very quietly, addressing his collar.

“I’m looking for work as a bookkeeper.”

“Do you have any references?” said Thrips.

“I can get them.”

“And your experience?”

“Twenty years at the Sydney coaling merchants.”

Thrips seemed dissatisfied. “Why don’t you work for them still?”

The man's hat buckled in his grip. “They closed this morning.”

“Bankrupt?” said Thrips. He looked at the man with a new degree of coldness bordering on disgust.

“Yes,” said the unhappy fellow.

“I see,” said Thrips.

“There are businesses going bankrupt everywhere these last months,” said the man.

Thrips observed the man's polished shoes, his restless hands and features. “I already have a bookkeeper,” he said. “I don't need another.”

“I’ve a wife and four children to feed,” said the man.

“Well, there's a job,” he answered, pointing at the notice in my corner.

I stood aside while the fellow approached and read about the New Britain position. He put his hat on again and turned to leave.

“Does that job not meet your requirements?” said Thrips.

“I have a wife,” said the man again, “and children.”

“I see,” said Thrips, satisfied of something.

And then, as an afterthought, when the bell tinkled once more: “You might use the opportunity to have *more* wives and children.” The man gripped the open door and stared back at Thrips with a look of utter confusion. “I believe it is what you fellows do,” chuckled the armchair emperor, “in those parts of the world.”

I wanted to drag Thrips from his seat and press his face into the roadstead until the bubbles stopped, for thinking his dull existence so far above those of a class of men on whom his livelihood depended. I could do nothing about the letter. I needed to be, as soon as it was physically possible, a thousand miles away from the lot of them.

“*I’ll* take the job,” I said.

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The cutter made good progress in a south wind, faster than any steamer. We tracked the coast, keeping a mile off shore with the edge of a continent in view on our port side. The land unscrolled in changing greens as the sun rose and sank, and every few hours the voice of Captain Cox boomed out puncturing the peace like a breaching whale: “Bring it down! No! Not that one! The other one. Cloth in your ears and cloth in between!”

Our ship was bound on a circuit of south-Pacific islands dropping off and collecting at ports along our way. “We sail as the fly buzzes, not as the crow flies,” said Cox over his charts, tracing with a fat finger the lines his first mate had plotted, and rubbing his white-whiskered chins. At Brisbane we loaded a tower of crates which took up the remainder of the hold so that the last few had to be lashed to the deck under everyone’s feet until the first mate, appalled at the danger to efficient running of his ship, looked at the paperwork and noticed that more than half the cargo loaded was in fact bound for Sydney to which they would not be returning for another month. He set the crew to unloading the mistake while his superior officer drew up a deck chair beside mine and poured us both a whiskey with trembling hands. Two blacks came on board in Queensland and crouched quietly together on the vacated part of the deck.

“They were working on the plantations here,” someone said. “They’re going home.”

Before our ship had even exited the roadstead at Brisbane, the captain retired his hat and jacket to his cabin along with his gloves. We sailed east till the land vanished, divided from us now by that vast underwater battlement of coral and ravenous sharks, and when we changed course again our way lay north and north only. Behind us every night the southern cross dropped closer to the horizon.

And while the heat increased the temperature at the captain’s table cooled. The more Cox seized on me as an audience and a drinking partner the sooner the first mate made his excuses and left the table. “It’s a striking place, and no mistake,” said Captain Cox,

apparently oblivious. “I’ve been there many times these past few years. And it’s changing. You’re well to catch it while you can, for till a decade ago it was empty of all but a few hermits and pirates. Now it’s filling up, quick as you like. You know Ferguson? Is it the Quinns you’re to be working for?”

I corrected him on both counts.

“Prussians!” he said. “Godeffroy’s, is it?”

“Hernsheim.”

“Hernsheim. Saxons, Prussians. They’re all German now, of course. A lot of them about. Very busy.”

At about eleven in the morning he would emerge from his hammock, and step out on deck. The mate who had been on watch all night was still on watch and stared expressionlessly from the helm as he waited for his captain to approach and resume command. Cox sniffed the air where he stood, tucking in his shirt, and acknowledging with a nod and a few good mornings the presence of sailors in the right places. Finally, he looked for me.

The mate who had been standing behind him for a minute, stepped forward and said,

“Your command, sir.”

“Good!”

The commentary spooled along between times, whenever the captain saw me.“You said Hernsheim, didn’t you?” he said, passing me in the gangway. “I believe your man is his manager, Blohm. I don’t know him too well. I expect Ferguson told me about him. Can’t remember what he said.”

Afterwards, crossing his legs and opening another bottle from a case in the hold labelled for ‘Suva’: “Might as well drink ’em. It’s what they’re for.” In the mornings he swayed awkwardly over the previous night’s bottle, pouring water in and around it,

before slapping the cork back in. Evening after evening, Cox lunged for my forearm, and lowered his voice. “Now listen here. My friend Ferguson’ll look after you, I’ll make sure of it. He’s been there longer than anyone. Well over a decade, round these islands somewhere. He’s the finest trader and the finest sea captain. He knows every tribe and chief along every coast. Made a tidy pile trading with ‘em too. They do like to trade. Last time I was here he showed me a tonne of the most beautiful black-edged pearl shell, of a quality you don’t see any more. He got it off a reef belonging to a chief in Northern New Ireland, who said he could have the shells for free if the chief could have the fish inside them for a feast he was laying on. I should think Ferguson made a pretty penny, but he’s like that, you know. He spots an opportunity and strikes a deal before most people would even….” The eyes rolled and the head flopped. Cox’s hand became a dead weight on my forearm which I tried to lift and replace on the table.

“Wait! Have another. Look: you mustn’t worry about the cannibals. Ferguson says they aren’t anything like their reputation, but listen – ” . He tapped my shoulder emphatically, and then again, interspersing the words in rhythm with the finger. “You’re *not* – to *tell* – *anyone* else – or they’ll *all* come – *flooding* – *in*.” Reassured of his audience, he took another glug. “It’s their fearsome name which keeps out the blood-suckers. Ferguson doesn’t even approve of missions, you know. He says converting the blacks can only end badly, and ruin one of the last great places. Rather him than me! I’ll stop to raise a glass or three with my friend and pick up a few of his stories and I’ll be off out of here to the Micronesians and Polynesian islands, thank you very much. I prefer my natives friendly.”

Ten days into the journey when there was still no sign of the captain at noon his first mate sent the junior officers down to his cabin to haul Cox out. They dragged him stumbling on deck by his upper arms, naked to the waist, and poured a bucket of

seawater over his prostrate kneeling form and then another till he electrified, spitting and gasping.

Afterwards he did not emerge for days, and it was the mate whose taciturn company I sought. I stood near him as he sat up beside the wheel, slim and dark, and after the awkwardness had gone and I felt that my presence was both acceptable and unremarkable I watched the horizon and contemplated the charts. The first mate had told me Cox should have retired after their last tour, but there was some sort of problem.

My destination lay in St George's Channel, where the Pacific Ocean squeezes between two islands barely twenty miles apart. The lands and seas were christened in the arbitrary way of names in that part of the world, which sometimes becomes an affair of such proliferation that every tribe and nation uses a different term for one plot of ground until no one knows which place exactly anyone else is talking about. In those days St George's Channel lay between New Ireland and New Britain just as its namesake still divides their originals ten thousand miles away, for on both occasions in the two centuries before my time it was an Englishman – though it could as easily have been a Spaniard, Dutch or Frenchman had any of them taken a different turn – who sailed through a bay, found it to be a strait and so earned the right to christen new-born countries which he had brought into the world simply by passing alongside them. In the arbitrary way of names, so far these ones had stuck. Square in the gap between the two sits the sandy archipelago of the Duke of York islands, a group which consists of no more than a cluster of wooded atolls in spite of its grand name. Here it was that for seven years the Wesleyans had been living and spreading the word in the first days of 1882 when I travelled to New Britain for work, and it was here that I hoped to keep busy and amass respectable funds, together with some solid purpose or lasting progress which I hoped the work would bring me, neither of which I had ever quite found in fifteen years of living the south-seas life. The fact was, work had faltered and what I'd

earned had gone. And looking back there was no denying I'd kept moving for most of my three decades, dropped anchor at many hundred scattered atolls and not once caught the glitter of yellow metal in shingle.

You have to know what you are about if you are to navigate St George's Channel. Anyone who has tried will tell you the current presents a challenge. Not only will the water pressing through the narrows drive any log southwards at a quick march, but when a strong south-easterly blows, the undertow will reverse itself and push the log at the same rate northwards again whence it came, until without warning the wind drops and the drift resumes its normal course, all to the consternation of navigators. Work against the flow and you'll be lucky to get anywhere; run with it and you'll need great care not to overshoot your target. Leaning over the port rail as the sloop approached the southernmost point of New Ireland and slowed as it met the current coming the other way, I wondered again why I was making the journey at all, for I had always imagined Melanesia to be a treacherous landscape of black earth and volcanoes. And as we travelled from one zone of the Pacific into another the shadows sank, daylight sharpened and jagged grey mountains slid up along either horizon where they hung, it seemed, like an open jaw.

"See that green hill over there?" said the mate, breaking his silence and pointing to a feature of New Ireland on our starboard side. "It's really an islet. As we come past you'll notice there's a narrow entrance beyond, to an anchorage so snug you won't see it at all. That's been on the charts a hundred years, marked as a shelter to sit out a storm. Well now, imagine you were to start a new life. Add your wife and children to the picture, with your old ma and pa to make up the numbers, how would you like to settle yourselves there?"

The land behind raked up steeply, and on either side as far as I could see rock rose out of the sea in tree-covered slopes, without any flat ground. It looked a pretty enough

spot, I told him, but I couldn't feel the draw. "No view," I said. "Secure, perhaps, but a little… locked in. Cut off."

"Two years ago we spied a ship sailing due south from New Ireland in the early morning and, seeing she was bound for Australia, stopped her. We had urgent letters for the company back home and one for Cox's wife and we thought to make an exchange. The other crew didn't at first appear to understand our signals, then indicated they were in a hurry, but we persisted. They turned out to be French, which was our first surprise, as the ship wasn't flying a French flag, nor did it look like a prison ship heading for New Caledonia. Two gentlemen came to the rail and were introduced by one of the crew as a baron and a count. I've no experience of titled folks but these two looked our heads all the while we were talking to them and I'm not a small man, as you see. There was great reluctance about the letters, even though they admitted their ship was on course directly for Sydney so it wasn't as though we were putting them out. They refused our invitation to come no board for a drink, saying they were in a hurry to fetch supplies for a couple of dozen men they'd left on New Ireland. Captain Cox asked right out if it they were prospecting for gold, knowing the old rumours hereabouts, though of course they wouldn't have admitted to gold even if it was gold. No, they said. It was building works – roads and the like, for a new colony. 'Colony?' said Cox. 'What colony?' Well, you've already seen for yourself what a strange, isolated area it is, especially for something so grand. There've been a few white folks who stopped off over the years. Twenty years ago there were one or two among the blacks who people said absconded from a whaling ship, and earlier still escaped convicts hereabouts, reckoning on a better life, but you'll not find a trace of any now. 'New France', said the Frenchman. Cox laughed and said he was sure people were calling it Canada nowadays and the gentlemen were about six thousand miles off course. At that bit of ribbing they looked past us even further, features puckered as if they'd got a whiff of the plague. So we gave them our letters,

and I offered to repay the favour by stopping in on the workers in a few days to see if they were alright. ‘Don’t on any account do such a thing,’ said the gaunt one with the moustaches. ‘They are rough types, and will certainly attempt to rush the ship.’

“It must have been a year later this time. We were heading south – and the strangest-looking vessel approached, steaming from Australia on full sail. A screw schooner made of iron, a good thirty years old. Whoever thought iron would be any good on salt water should have seen the state of it. The crew signalled to us, and when we drew alongside it was clear straight away that in spite of the dilapidated state of the paintwork and the rust patches the captain was a proper seaman. I know at a glance when a ship is well run and the crew are concentrating on their tasks. The captain of this iron vessel was also a Frenchman. He asked where we had sailed from, and when we said we had come down through St George’s Channel from the New Guinea coast he jumped at the news. ‘Did you see a schooner? a three-master, about 1000 tonnes?’ Captain Cox and I had taken the past two watches and noticed nothing larger than native pirogues and a small inshore steamer. He turned away, and was on the point of giving the command to go when Captain Cox said: ‘I’m surprised they didn’t impound your vessel in one of the ports you came through.’ Cox had hit a sore point, in that way he has, because apparently the port authorities had done exactly what he said, even though the captain begged them not to. One wonders what state the ship was in before they repaired it. Cox is a great admirer of the port authorities. He says they may be sticklers but you can’t go letting people sail off in death-traps no matter how desperately they plead. The French captain took off his cap and wiped his head in a very despondent manner. The past weeks had been terrible, he started to tell us, and though he would love a drink and had a great deal more to recount to us which we would scarcely believe, there was not a moment to spare. He needed to get his cargo of supplies to New Ireland where three hundred men, women and children were expecting him. Thanks to the repairs at

Maryborough, he said, it would be extraordinary luck if he were to find anyone still waiting where he had left them. He thought they might have gone in the schooner, you see. It sounded a weighty mission for one man, and even though he was clearly exhausted he seemed determined to push on. He had far more sail out than I would have considered safe, and from the groaning sound the screw made as he set off again I'd say he was driving that engine as hard as it could go."

"Are there still people there now?"

"That's a question. It always looks so quiet, and we've heard next to nothing since. I never heard again about the man on the iron ship. I don't remember his name, though I'd know his vessel anywhere."

"Hup! Look at that, Beck," said a voice behind me. Captain Cox had roused himself and stood dressed in his jacket without shoes or socks. He was pointing out to sea, and I thought at first he must be delirious, but I followed his finger and there was a vessel in the offing. "It looks as though you'll be leaving us sooner than expected. See the German flag?"

Cox stood on the poop, and waved with rhythmical authority, his jacket flopping open on each out-swing. The sloop gradually deviated from its racing course. Dipping, sails flapping loudly, she drew alongside.

"Yes!" said the broad face leaning out from the upper rail with severe features, cheeks red and brown hair blown flat on one side by the breeze. "What do you want?"

"Blohm! It *is* you. I have your man here. This is Beck. He's been sent up from Thrips's to fill that position you were advertising for."

"Aha. Patience is rewarded. I was thinking Mr Thrips puts my advertisement in the rubbish," said the man in a strong German accent. "Good day, Captain Cox. I did not expect you here again."

The captain told me to run and get my case and kit bag, but Blohm put up a hand to stop us.

“What is your name?”

I told him.

“Beck, I cannot take you with me today. I attend a pressing matter. Cox, will you leave him at Mioko? I’ll return a few days afterwards to collect. All is good. Tonight the Quinns celebrate. You take my place. I have made the excuse.”

Cox looked more cheered than he had in weeks.

“Whatever can be taking you away from a party at Mioko, old fellow? Must be a matter of life or death.” And at the sight of Blohm’s unchanging expression: “Nothing too terrible, I hope?”

“Terrible, yes. The matter is death,” said Blohm.

Cox’s features tensed. “Who is it? Not anyone we know?”

“A man who trades for our company since one year. Do you know Captain Ferguson?”

“I do, very well. I count him as a friend. Was Ferguson involved?’

“He is dead,” said Blohm. “I travel to the place.” He called to his sailors who began tightening the painters. Within moments the sails were filling once more.

Blohm leapt back up the ladder to his wheel house, turned at the top as if Cox had asked him a question and shouted. “It was at Buka Island. Certain blacks tied him to his mast with ropes and cut off his head – ” he mimed an axe swing, for clarity. “At the neck.”

Cox gripped the plank as if bracing himself for a big wave. We watched Blohm’s boat shoot off eastwards at high speed. Now and then a white plume flared along her bow as she cut through the steepening waves, and in a few minutes she was gone.

Our prow swung round towards a double stripe of white beneath dense green, and I heard the name Duke of Yorks repeated down the rail. I began to reflect on my own state of affairs and how it was only ever a matter of time before certain forces blew out of nowhere and made a ruin of everything. The two black passengers stood up to point at an islet, talking loudly at one of the sailors. Following their fingers I saw a little cove open up out of the flat line of coast, and when it swung round to reveal for an instant a clearing and the sanctuary, as I envisaged, of some safe little anchorage, a kind of emptiness stared back in the midst of which stood a blackened wreckage. Too square for a native hut, it stood isolated on sand and scrub, until a line of trees closed it again from view, and once more the woods and sand banks stretched out ever closer along the way of our journey.

"Natives set fire to it in the night," said the sailor on his way back past me. "A German was inside." Then he smirked, watching my response. "He got away," he said. "Black fellas left him his dinghy."

We wove our way into the harbour through a maze of channels and islands, Cox twitching about the time and tides, the sun stood half way between its zenith and the western horizon, an angle at which the light appeared to dissolve the sea's surface in patches, so that we could see below clearly to navigate, like looking through a dirty window at the underwater landscape: pale blue madrepores, head- or knuckle-shaped, fan- or dish-like, enormous rocks, any of which might punch a hole in an unsuspecting keel. The sloop sped up past the point of a long spit of sand, cut through a chain of miniature islets and brought us into a broad roadstead, sails quivering in the slackening breeze.

"You're a brave man, choosing a life here," said Cox, leaning beside me on the rail. "I've nothing but admiration for the lot of you. Quinn'll cheer us up. He's a fine fellow, and she – well, Emma's a fine fellow too. Creole, you know. Part Samoan, part

American. Not strictly married, but good as. Couldn't be better people to have on your side."

Amid the chaos of arrival, the shouting and shoving, the running and flinging of ropes, the opening of cargo holds, I saw the figure of a man in white calling out instructions to a team of labourers. He wore a panama and a suit, even though it was the middle of the day. Around him crates were unloaded at a pace and with a focus I hadn't often seen in the tropics. Surrounded by wilderness, the bay bristled with the masts of dozens of sailing dinghies moored together in rows, and a tender sculled across the glittering flatness to a schooner at anchor in the deep water. All along one curvaceous shore wide roofs basked in sunlight and among these in the shade of a verandah moved the figure of a woman. Two darker women stood on chairs either side of her, lifting a long garland of leaves and flowers between them. White and pink blossoms dangled from every corner.

Quinn turned and waved, his mouth a straight line. Beyond and as it seemed above, the peaks of New Britain carved their profiles out of a vacant sky and a wisp of pale smoke drew a question mark over the bare cone of Matupi.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pacific Ocean is scattered with atolls like the one where Donal Quinn had his trading station. Mioko sits at the southern tip of the Duke of York Islands and in those days the Wesleyan mission of Port Hunter occupied the northernmost bay of the group. Less than six square miles all in all of low-lying land, the Duke of York Islands are collisions of limestone and sand which look as if some earthquake or typhoon could sweep them away, just as another such event must once have heaped them there. Sometimes, traversing what the map declares to be empty ocean you'll come across a blister of land with green shoots, where new life is taking speedy advantage in the wake of whatever catastrophe burped it up. Saplings sprout in the shallows where tree seeds were washed or left by sea birds flapping down to break their journey. Picture such a place thickened with vegetation in after years and you will have in mind the island home of the Quinns. The house stood in the nook of a spit that pointed south to a chain of islands, fringing a bay. Elegant pillars adorned a verandah which ran three-quarters of the way round the house, ringed by palms, lawns and flower gardens. Breezes aired the groves agreeably, shaking the flag on its white pole. Beyond the trees, shipping passed north or south through St. George's Channel, and from windows facing east and west the Quinns could watch the sun rise behind the mountains of New Ireland and see it set behind the volcanoes of New Britain.

Cox returned from his discussion with Quinn, dull-eyed and sunken behind his white moustaches, saying: "It's a terrible thing". News of Ferguson's death had come too late, he reported, for any arrangements to be changed. Guests invited long ago were on their way by now, and the invitation was officially extended to us. However you looked at the matter, he reasoned, today was still Emma's birthday, and Ferguson would be the last to begrudge his friends a celebration. It would, he supposed, give us a chance to toast the

poor murdered Scot. Instructions from the Quinns were that no one was to disembark until evening. Cox pressed his lips together and nodded slowly. “It’ll give us all a bit of time, one way or another,” he said, and stepped below, looking like a man with a fly wedged in his throat.

On land, unloading work had ceased, the warehouse had shut up and a dozen or so Samoan boys walked briskly round the shore towards the house where they stood in a crowd listening to someone in the shade of the wide roof. The roof was new and thatched in Samoan style – probably by the same men. Soon they moved away in groups. Two set to excavating a fire pit not far from the house. They dug an inspection hole and filled it again, releasing a whiff of roasting meat which drifted past me on the deck. Two large Polynesian ladies with baskets emerged from the trees behind the house, settled on the lawn beside the verandah steps and began threading large white flowers into *leis*, just as Polynesian women used to before a kava drinking on an island where I once lived, and was very happy for a while. The curved path running from the jetty to the house was flanked with shoulder-high wooden posts. Three men – Samoans again – pressed rags into the apertures on top of each, and poured oil over, as daylight began its rush for the horizon. The underwater lamps of the roadstead went out and all the dying powers of the sun concentrated on the water surface, until it shone in the calm like polished steel. A reflected world, trees, buildings, boats and clouds seemed to merge with the one above, as if chemically fixed to a photographic plate.

By the time I came back on deck after changing my jacket and trousers four or five new boats had collected in the roadstead. Steam and sail, brigs and cutters and one white launch with paddle wheels which could only have been a mission boat. In the Pacific if a boat is white, it’s a mission boat. The entire fleet – from Catholic to Wesleyan – is daubed the colour of bones. What designates purity to us strikes an

unsettling chord in Oceania, where the shade means death. When white men in white robes approached from beyond the horizon in white ships they were always going to catch the ear of prudent chiefs, for all the peoples of the ocean continent in their kaleidoscopic variety share a common obligation to their beloved dead, who like especially to tyrannise the living with inscrutable powers. No reward will come to fruition till the whims of the departed are gratified. Should some disaster unfold, spirits of the dead will generally be found at its root, working their vexed magic.

Cox reappeared, shaven, with glowing cheeks and a whiff of brandy. From inside the house a piano began to play our cue to approach. The torches were fired, lighting the way from jetty to dinner, while he and I, his first mate and our small party of officers climbed down into the dinghy. The little boat wobbled and jerked as we settled ourselves on the benches, and the blackness above and around gave an impression we were buoyed up on ink. Nearby, oars splashed and squeaked in rowlocks and feet thumped as other guests stepped out onto the shore. Below these sounds rumbled another, somewhere behind our sloop. It slowly rose, began to clank like nails in a tin and then emerged as steam engine. Most of the other guests had already passed on from the stone jetty where we stood, their dinghies having been secured there in a flotilla on the sheltered side, when the new ship rolled into position behind ours. She seemed large, an ocean-going affair, but painted some pale colour which couldn't be clearly identified in the darkness, except that in her new neighbour's stern light the paintwork appeared patchy. The pace at which she came in set the other boats bobbing, and pushed out a volley of long wavelets which doused the end of the jetty and made the dinghies shuffle and bump. We had to grab the oars and row backwards to stop ourselves pitching into the roadstead.

Out in the darkness a voice said, "It's Rabardy."

Someone else replied. "Dear God! Not him."

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I don't suppose there can have been anything like as many people present as the scale of preparations suggested. No more than thirty white men and women lived in that part of the world, nor did many more drop anchor there, but in my mind's eye I picture large numbers walking the path to the house in the glow of the torches, like stragglers in a procession of lordly savages from an ancient world, and I fell into a reverie imagining that at any moment Odysseus would sit up from behind a tree trunk where he'd been sleeping, to tell us of the last two thousand years of his adventures and how he had come to find himself, like us, washed up on the shore of Mioko.

At the bottom of the steps the two large ladies, now with hibiscus in their hair, held out with an air of listless routine a garland of frangipani to each of us in turn and, inviting us to bow, draped it round our necks. The fresh aura from these dying efflorescences breathed their perfume into our spirits. Guest-friendship is common enough among lonely whites dotted about the world but I rarely saw such elegance in all my time in the Pacific, even in richer places longer established. Walking up beside Cox, I could see his features flush. He paused at the top, hands on hips, and swung his fragrant belly left and right in appreciation of the view. Trees and sandy banks embraced the wide, dark roadstead. Through the garden the path glowed and reflected shimmering spots across black water. At the jetty behind us two men in a dinghy could just be seen reaching up to pass their mooring rope into the hand of a Samoan. We weren't quite last. Something made me look once more at the water and now I saw smaller silhouettes dotted between the shapes of boats at anchor – canoes floating just off shore, dark as the shadows of trees, not Samoans but blacks, resting and watching, paddles on laps.

In the bright doorway, Quinn looked smaller than he had from the sea, no taller than I am, in fact, but as light and sharp in his movements as a man much younger than his pewter temples. His moustaches, trimmed and waxed, were the colour of wet sand, like

his hair. He smiled when Cox introduced us, as if I were a person he'd long hoped to meet, and shook my hand like a bell.

Long tables, arrayed in linens and flowers filled a salon where piano music played. People stood around, and a group of older men in a corner leaned back in their chairs with an air of weary disdain. Green fronds of *bilas* fronds hung from the walls like fingers of multitudes of hands, suspended with brightly-coloured blossoms which made the room look and smell like a forest.

The piano music ceased. The player stood up, closed the lid and turned around. I recognised the woman I'd seen in the distance as she glided past in floor-length red and black silk with a small bustle – Mrs Quinn, Australian-educated, with gloves to her elbows and hair piled up above her ears with pearl and tortoiseshell. Cox stopped her with a hand. "Happy birthday, Emma," he said, blinking at her dark eyes and shapely mouth.

"Thank you," she said. "You are kind."

The two latecomers emerged in the doorway, one with an easy air and a foreign dress uniform that caught the eye. His companion stood behind in a drab civilian suit with arms folded. Quinn let out a bright bark and cut straight across the room from the drinks cabinet. Politely introducing himself to the second he proceeded, before he had quite finished doing so, to laugh and administer sundry shoulder slaps to the first. Quinn's friend was dark-haired, taller than Quinn or me, with a fine topiary of facial hair. His eyes, though small, sucked in the room as his host welcomed him, and I could feel their gaze pass over like a cool current. Emma did not appear to notice her last guests arriving but returned to supervision of the boys in a kitchen full of clanging sounds, steam and the scent of spices.

A hubbub began to build, so that it was an effort to follow the voice I was meant to be listening to above all the others being raised.

“Poor Ferguson,” someone said to Cox behind me. “It’s terrible.”

Quinn led his latest arrivals towards us. “Rabardy,” he said to the one with the foreign uniform. “Meet Beck. He’s has just arrived here to work for Blohm, and has been operating in the Navigator islands for some years. I’m thinking of taking him on myself – unless you have reconsidered my offer?”

“Nothing to be done,” came Cox’s voice behind me.

“Good evening, Beck,” said Rabardy. The French accent explained his uniform. “I am no longer – ”

But Quinn was in train: “Rabardy has been living in New Ireland for nearly two years, which is a record for any white-skinned man. He’s a Robinson Crusoe, or is it – Napoleon?”

Rabardy’s solemn companion withdrew himself and began circling the room.

“You like a challenge, Beck?” Rabardy said. “You have to be capable to survive here.”

Quinn snorted, as if it were one of the funniest remarks he’d ever heard. “If you want to be handsome and well-regarded, look elsewhere for your inspiration, but if you wish to make a good fist of it in these parts you could do worse than listen to my French friend here, *Capitaine* Rabardy. Or – oh dear, sir, forgive me! It’s *Governor* Rabardy of the Kingdom of Oceania, isn’t it?”

“It is not.” Rabardy’s moustaches twitched.

“Ah!” said Quinn, as though an entire history had crossed over in the air. “That’s most intriguing. Now, in which respect am I wrong? Let me see.” He examined Rabardy’s expression. “Did you leave of your own accord or did they throw you out, you old rascal?”

Rabardy checked for his companion who was edging his way out of the door to the verandah. "*I* cut the rope," he said.

"Did you now?" Quinn's eyes narrowed to a glitter.

Behind him Emma wove through the crowd towards her husband. She slipped her hand over Quinn's arm, while he spoke on. "Now, Beck, this man you see before you is – apart from me, of course – the ablest trader in the whole archipelago. He's come to work for me, lucky fellow. And there's no better position for a hundred miles around. You may protest, Rabardy, but that's so."

A change came over Rabardy's expression that was hard to determine. Quinn walked away through the crowd with Emma, calling for drinks. Rabardy and I looked at one another, and at his companion in the civvy suit, who had returned to hover at an awkward distance. Rabardy didn't attempt to introduce him, but as I reached out a hand to do the honours myself the chatter subsided and the crowd turned to face Quinn standing at the other end of the room.

"Honoured guests. We called you here today to celebrate Emma's birthday, but a few hours ago with great shock we heard of the murder yesterday of our dear friend, Alexander Ferguson. In all the time I have lived here, half the news I received came directly from Captain Ferguson himself. The whistle of *The Pacific* entering our harbour, followed by his friendly greeting are so much a feature of our lives that I struggle to imagine they could ever be otherwise. No one knew these waters like he, or better understood what this place can be, for good or ill. Ferguson came to these islands before anyone in this room. A brave pioneer, a brilliant captain, and a canny trader. We've all sought his advice at one time or another, tips about currents, reefs, earthquakes, or activities of the natives. Ferguson helped to make the New Britannia archipelago a more civilised place, where trade can flourish. Our livelihood and survival depend on our continuing to work together toward this cause. The Buka tribe will get

their comeuppance, one way or another. All this has only made us more determined. Gentlemen, lift your glasses, please. I give you our great friend, Captain Alexander Ferguson, and my beautiful wife, Emma Quinn."

The response was echoed and clinked. Guests began pulling off their garlands. Emma gestured to the boys to collect the heaps of white blossom which lay about on dressers and the table.

"Now let's eat!" said Quinn, interjecting into the chatter that had resumed after the toast. "We've a lot of food."

Two young black men arrived from the kitchen, barefoot in lap-laps and cotton shirts, wafting scents from carved wooden platters which they bore at nose height towards the table. My appetite woke like a bear from hibernation. We took our seats around a vision of tinned salmon among cucumber rounds, rice dishes full of nuts; prawns and pumpkins in coconut milk. Foods from Europe lay side by side with local vegetables where no known force of nature would ordinarily cause them to meet.

"Gentlemen," said a tall man at ordinary volume. He stood behind Quinn at the head of the table, the tone of his voice promised a wholesome treat. "Gentlemen," he said again, smiling at the faces which now looked back at him. "Shall we pray?"

The missionary squeezed his eyes shut, lifted his hands then dropped them to rest on Quinn's shoulders. Quinn tensed , looking down at his place setting. "Lord, we lift before you our brother Alexander Ferguson, your servant, the secrets of whose heart are known to you only. We pray that he has gone now to sit at your right hand where he will be safe from harm forever, basking in the radiance of your glory. Teach us not to waver in our faith, Lord, but always to pursue Your will with our whole hearts, knowing Your merciful grace will provide for our weakness." There was a long pause. "And thank you for this splendid food you have provided for us."

A wavering hum from an American, broke into a punching "Aye-men!".

“You’re a doctor!” exclaimed Cox from the other side of the table, to his neighbour – the quiet fellow who had come in with Rabardy. Within a minute Cox’s sleeve was unbuttoned and rolled almost to the shoulder; his fist and forearm began to fold and extend repeatedly in a slow gesture, rhythmically punctuated by his other hand pointing at the wrist with an emphatic jab. The doctor ate with weighty eyelids, turning once or twice to watch with no flicker of comprehension.

The only other woman in the room sat beside me, cutting her vegetables into minuscule pieces and pausing with each forkful before she put it in her mouth. When I tried to engage her in conversation she squinted, furrowing her pale forehead. Emma broke in from the farthest end of the table. “It is so good to see you out again, Miriam,” she said. They launched into a discussion about health while I looked around at the sailors and local traders, and the missionary, who I had no doubt was my neighbour’s husband. The room was a babel of accents – German, Dutch, Australian, American, a couple of Frenchmen or Belgians, a Swede, at least one voice sounded Russian – and all of them quietened as Quinn spoke.

“…upset the Buka tribe last year when he went to collect his copra and gave them only half what he’d agreed.”

“Are you saying it was Ferguson’s fault?” said Quinn’s opposite neighbour. “We don’t even know what happened.”

“It’s a fact,” said Quinn. “Blohm told me, and Ferguson mentioned it to me himself a few months back. This time the tribe put on a big show of welcome and showered him with gifts. How he didn’t suspect, I can’t guess.”

“If you’re frightened of wolves,” muttered the Russian voice from somewhere down the table, “don’t go to the woods.”

“It’s calculating, vengeful,” said a man beyond Quinn to another beside him.

“In ten years, Ferguson never made a mistake like that,” the other agreed.

“He started working for the Germans,” said Quinn. “This is what they do – drive prices down to undercut the rest of us. They build a corporation, whip up a tribal war, then bring in their navy and order out traders who’ve been there years”

“Too many people are in copra now. How will the blacks ever understand commodities markets? They think we cut the prices out of spite.”

“They pull their own inflation tricks. Look what’s happened in two years to the value of a yard of red cotton.”

“The cachet’s gone. Every chief and his cousins are in carmine now.”

“I blame the missionaries, giving stuff away for nothing.”

“Shaw’s lot didn’t murder Ferguson.”

“Miriam?” The fellow with the grey beard stood up, dropped his napkin beside his plate and walked round the table. He must have been six foot four – quite an asset, to impress a congregation. “Are you unwell?” The woman beside me was bowed over her plate, pressing her fingers into her eye sockets. He bent over, a hand on her back, and whispered.

“Believe me, Beck,” said Quinn, “They’re trying to take over this whole region. They could cut Australia off from the rest of the world. Britain needs to stop sitting on her hands and declare.”

“I thought the Germans were your friends.” The American was smirking.

“Your lot are no better, Dawson. And besides, what difference does that make?”

“Beck is to work for the Germans over at Matupi.”

“Of course you are, Beck,” said Quinn, “and I meant no offence. Blohm is an excellent fellow. A capital eater of sausages, and an exacting paymaster. You’ll learn a great deal under him, building the German Empire. And when you’ve had enough of his

rules and meanness you can come back here. If Rabardy isn't living up to expectations you can have his job instead."

Emma had walked around the table and was standing beside the missionary and his wife. "Of course," she was saying. She gave a meaning look at Quinn to silence him, and began to walk with them to the door. "I hope you'll be better soon."

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A solid-looking black man approached with a tray covered in tiny bananas round a huge papaya. Rabardy's whole demeanour seemed to change as he turned in his chair and spoke to the fellow in a language I didn't know. The man walked in and placed the tray on the table. Rabardy was still talking to him as he unloaded the fruits. He gave Rabardy a long answer and when he'd finished Rabardy said something which made the houseboy laugh, and then laugh again as he reconsidered it. The houseboy asked if we wanted anything else and Rabardy thanked and dismissed him. The man was swinging the tray as he left, shaking his head and repeating a phrase to himself, giggling breathily through his lips.

Quinn bit into a piece of papaya and wiped his chin. "This is the best place in the Pacific for fruits and vegetables. Everything is twice as big, twice as sweet as you'll find anywhere else. I'll show you round tomorrow. We're doing extraordinary work here, Mr Beck. We're bigger than anything Blohm has, though I expect he'll be trying to outdo us soon."

Just to look about the room in a reflective moment, to take in its polished wooden floorboards, mahogany dressers and ornate side tables, to stare into the three large engravings on the wall of island life in Emma's homeland, to drop down satisfied onto the velvet chaise longue and upholstered armchairs, and listen to the upright piano which a young pastor from the mission came to tune – this was the closest I'd been to bliss in a long while. And on every surface, between the conches and coral fans, oil

lamps glowed over the tables and showed up coloured patterns on the big Ottoman carpet. Ivory pools interlocked on the painted-board ceiling, so that the whole enclosed world seemed to shimmer like Christmas, while outside was silent and dark under pin-point stars, for even the sea lay still, like some huge wet Cerberus who had stretched himself along the ground beside his master's house and fallen fast asleep.

Dawson caught my eye. "So, Beck, do you think it a good or a bad idea to bring civilisation to the savages?"

I didn't like what I perceived to be a trap. "It depends what you mean by civilisation," I said, "or savages."

"I hear there are some French and Italian savages on the other side of the channel who could do with civilising," said Dawson.

Rabardy, to whom the remark was clearly directed, said, "At least the black kind know how to look after themselves."

Rabardy's companion looked unamused. Dawson tried a new approach. "Are you interested in anthropology, doctor?"

"Before the sickness of my patients preoccupied me, I found it interesting to question our local king and his subjects. They had, as far as I could tell, no conception of a supreme deity. We tried to explain the idea but they had no idea what we could mean.'

"They have enough to worry about," said Rabardy, "from the spirits of their ancestors. They don't need a more powerful version."

Dawson spun sharply round to face him directly. "You find some communion, perhaps, in the beliefs of men who are but lately descended from monkeys?"

“You assume,” said Rabardy, “because you have no knowledge or understanding of their culture that it must be worthless. Yet when they treat you in the same way – as little more than a source of ironmongery – you condemn them.”

“Are you suggesting I’m no different from a tribe of marauding savages who overwhelm a ship, murder the crew and eat them, just to steal equipment they don’t even know how to use?”

“Which, out of their tribes and ours, has invaded the other’s territory and is attacking their beliefs and way of life?”

“You crazy Frenchman! How is teaching them about mercy, forgiveness and the peaceful pursuit of trade worse than witchcraft, perpetual wars and cannibalism? Thanks to the work of men like Shaw, there are tribes on speaking terms who used to murder one another at every opportunity. Now they are brothers instead. Would you prefer to see it the other way around again?”

“They have lived like this for hundreds of years.”

“So did our ancestors once, no doubt, about whom we now know nothing at all. Yet Shaw and myself are recording the lives and works of these cannibals for posterity.”

“Does this make it acceptable to continue taking them away to work on sugar plantations in Queensland?”

“Believe me, buddy, it isn’t people like me or Shaw who run the labour trade. That’s going on all by itself, and if anyone is likely to stop it happening, that would be me or Shaw, so don’t come over like that with me.”

Quinn stood up. “Let’s have some music. Emma! I hope you’re going to play for us on your birthday. Do you like music, Beck? Can you sing? No. Me neither. Like a whale! Have you heard a whale sing? Exactly.”

A few of the guests retired, thanking their hosts. Mrs Quinn got up from her chair, sat at her piano and played a waltz loudly for half an hour, while Quinn took a circuit of the room, bottle in hand, to where his guests stood or sat, smoking and talking in groups. As he held up the whiskey all but a few shook their heads and several made their moves to go. He shook a few hands and then sat himself down at the head of the empty table again with his bottle, helping himself and calling out goodbyes with a wave. By the time the room was down to ten and the piano music had softened to melancholy prettiness he was declaring as absolute fact that the Germans were planning a manoeuvre, and that it was entirely the missionary's fault. If Shaw hadn't killed those natives and then gone and confessed to the authorities, this place would be safely British by now. It was the press's fault, the navy's fault, the fault of all those city folk, sitting judging – parasites, every one.

The music stopped with a long chord. Emma stood up and quietly closed the lid. I coaxed Cox to his feet too, slung one of his arms across my shoulders and held him upright with a brotherly embrace. He swayed while he worked his eyes open and focused them. "Isn't this glorious?" he smiled at last. "Look at all of us here!" He pointed round the room to a few empty seats and said, "You and me, Beck." He spotted our host. "And Quinn. All here. What a place! What a crew!"

Out in the darkness, goodbyes and thank yous said and done, we progressed to the jetty without a thought of how we would get back to the ship. Overhead, the great wheel of stars seemed visibly to turn. Though like as not it was probably the whiskey turning my head. A short way away, through the trees a fire was burning in total stillness, out of which a black man stood up wordlessly and came to meet us. He knew which dinghy, helped to lower Cox onto a bench, and handed me the oars. I said good night as he pushed us off, and thanked him. He nodded his head upwards and went back to his fire,

which I could now see was ringed by figures, their mahogany skins reflecting the light from the flames.

From the deck, in the starlight I could see the charcoal outlines of hills circling the horizon. The jagged ridges of New Ireland stretched limitless in either direction, sinking out of sight only with the curvature of the earth. I squinted south as far as I could see, wondering if any small angle or dip might mark the entrance to the cove at Port Breton or if it was too far away. I tried to imagine, as I put out the lamp a few minutes later, hundreds of white people living out there among the blacks. I thought of America, a place I had never been, and whether it had seemed to the first settlers there a promised land or a place of fear. So much had changed in two centuries. Five years ago no whites lived here. How will it be, I asked myself as I fell asleep, in five years' time?

CHAPTER FOUR

I followed Quinn along the shore path which offered a fine perspective of Mioko bay, curled in the embrace of the sea. Under a canopy of palms and casuarinas, woven houses on stilts extended out of sight, and in the shade along the shore dark figures bent over their works, carving a pirogue and mending a net. An old lady submerged herself in the shallows, watching over quick, glossy children in the deeper water. I've rarely seen a place so well able to support a large population and I said so to Quinn.

"It's the mango and pawpaw trees," he answered. His tone was strangely flat as we dropped a few boxes into the dinghy. He scanned the roadstead as if expecting to see something. Sometimes in the height of the season, he told me, such a huge flock of Pacific-island pigeons drops in that you can hardly see the leaves, let alone the fruit. The boys get out their bows and arrows and slings.

In the bow sat a young black with a feather in his hair, dully holding the rope. The wind was up, so rather than tack into it we sailed round three sides of our destination, Utuan. The islet bristled with woodland to the sea's edge. The black fellow seemed to wake up as we came around the third side. He giggled, pointing up into the trees and said something loud and wordy to Quinn. Quinn nodded.

"You spoke with Rabardy last evening," he said, still gazing out to sea with such a distracted air I had to look around to confirm it was me he was talking to. "What did you make of him?"

I tried to read Quinn's mood. "His English is very good."

"He's got some Malay too, one or two of the Chinese languages, German, a smattering of Arabic, and two or three local tongues that hardly anyone speaks except the missionaries. He negotiates trade in person with all the tribes." He pushed the tiller hard round and ducked under the boom as we went about. The grey coast of New

Britain spun away and the limestone lump of Utuan stood up before our bow, her dense trees rooted in the rock as if their fingers had prised it open. “You’ll hear things about Rabardy,” he said. “About me too, perhaps. Not that either one of us much cares what people say. People generally take against him, on first impression. The first time I laid eyes on him, I thought he was a pirate. And Shaw’s the only churchman alive who genuinely feels goodwill towards his fellow men, but he’s no fondness for Rabardy. Blohm told me once Rabardy was untrustworthy. When I asked him to explain, he said Rabardy will do anything for his own gain. That’s rich, coming from Blohm, and besides, it’s what I like about Rabardy.” Quinn pointed up the beach as he spoke. Jumping out into the water, he snatched the rope from his man’s hand; we pulled the dinghy up to a tree trunk and moored her with a double knot. “If you can’t look after yourself,” he added, walking back, “what use are you to anyone?”

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We stood in a hollow between two large trees.

“By the end of the year we’ll have planted up to here.”

Quinn pulled the creepers apart to reveal the extent of the boundary. Somewhere within the weft of vegetation claws scuttled over dry leaves. The canopy glowed faintly, where points of light reflected off a sea which was largely invisible beyond tree trunks and curtains of creeper. From where we stood, in either direction, a narrow trodden line wound away among the trees. A hunters’ pathway that hadn’t been used in a while.

“The first part was easy,” he explained. “That drainage ditch was there already. All we had to do was dig out some taro that had run to seed. They’re always tending their gardens, these people, he said. But they keep the forest for hunting. They have sacred ideas about trees and animals. Taboos and the like.”

Little ash piles smouldered across an area the size of a tennis court while Quinn's arm movements described one closer to twice that, and the unfocused look in his eyes suggested a vision extending several cricket pitches in every direction.

"In seven years every one of my trees will be producing 30 or 40 coconuts a season," he said. A few more acres and we'll be able to stop buying from the locals altogether."

We hopped back down onto the strand and splashing knee-deep towed the dinghy over marly shallows, scrambled round a thicket on a point and so arrived in another inlet. From there a wide track led to a rough, burnt-out clearing where coconut husks sprouted thick green stems, each nestled in a little heap of soil, dotted ten feet or so apart in a grid. A group of bamboo huts stood beyond, half-eclipsed by pale grasses. Shelters for workmen, I thought.

Quinn called out, "Dalten!" And we both stood still to listen. Waves flopped into tree roots on the weather side.

He tutted.

"So much for him watching the place. We could have been anyone. Could have destroyed half of this by now," he said.

He led the way round and along the rows checking the young plants. A second face of the main building hove into view. What had seemed shabbily intact from the side showed itself from the front to have been stoved in. The roof had folded together and dropped down into the gap.

Quinn stood looking quietly at the building for a few moments and then returned to his examination of the ground in the clearing.

"This is where Kleinschmidt grew his botanical samples," he said, indicating what was now uniform plantation all round us.

"What were they?" I asked.

“Impossible to say.” He kicked aside a stick that had dropped onto one of the young plants. “So many had been trampled by the time we got here. His notes were gone too. Two days of fire-dances did for the lot.”

“Is he a scientist?”

“He was until they killed him. That’s where they did it – right where you are standing.”

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“We knew when we arrived that we had come to the wildest place on earth,” Quinn went on, waving away a vortex of sand-flies that had found us out in the shade. He had decided to wait and catch his native guard in the act of sneaking back, so we sat out of sight and watched the roadstead. We leaned against a horizontal palm trunk that snaked sideways before its upward surge began. “So we were surprised to find a dinner guest living minutes away across the water. Emma and I survived by walling ourselves in behind a palisade of sharpened posts and walking around with guns in our belts. My girl learnt to carry a bull-whip. She finds it discourages pilferers and molesters. We never thought we’d miss the gossip and back-biting of Apia, but droning insects and the hiss of wind and breakers can turn a person peculiar in a few weeks. Kleinschmidt was very clever, the closest thing to a kind person you’ll find hereabouts. He didn’t speak often but when he did it was generally worth listening to. He said he liked not having a scratch of civilisation in sight. Once I dropped in and caught him staring at a leaf, not even drawing it. I stood for an age waiting for him to notice and finally had to tap him on the shoulder. He was working to some plan for a series of books he meant to write, a volume on plants, one on beetles, lizards or birds and up towards some study of the people. He became quite animated sometimes about their remarkable qualities. You’d think, to hear him talk, that by merely drawing their shields and describing their

ceremonies he could turn Mioko people into the ancient Egyptians. But of course they got to him before he could do it."

Quinn rose and walked quietly round the tree to squint left and right.

"What do you mean?" I said.

He sat down again.

"It happened less than a year back, though it seems longer. A tribe of several dozen men women and children who were distant relatives of our friend chief Topulu drew up their canoes on the beach one afternoon and marched straight across the island with their clubs and arrows, trampling Kleinschmidt's botanical samples. We'd had trouble with this group. Even Topulu and Tolitoro, the local big chiefs, were at the end of their tethers about the way this breakaway branch were making themselves difficult. There had been a couple of near scrapes with other white folks, and this lot were looking for an excuse to prove themselves over both the whites and the other chiefs. As far as Kleinschmidt was concerned he owned the island because he had bought it and had a document marked with Topulu's 'x', which meant no one else had a right to be there. Kleinschmidt was furious about what they did to months of his work. He was a wiry fellow and fierce when cross, I don't doubt it. He accosted them demanding reparations and their immediate departure. They stood their ground, even the little tots; the women were surliest of all, I heard. Kleinschmidt's studies were everything to him, and he wouldn't have held back. He jabbed at them with his trowel in his fist while they stood and stared, until one of the men, casually like whistling a tune, swung his big stone axe to and fro, picking up pace, and with a slight twist cracked it on Kleinschmidt's head. Kleinschmidt pitched over like a tree. His boy watched the whole grisly affair from behind a bush. Emma still half believes the murder was an accident, that the tribe were afraid and confused. But they had already tried to kill three whites before. It was only ever a matter of time and once it was done there was no going back. When they looked

down at their work and saw a white man dead as a fish with blood pouring from every hole in his head, it whipped them into a frenzy like sharks. They take the whites to be spirits with special powers, and seeing one despatched so easily sparked a volley of crazy notions. They lit a big fire and beat the *garamut*. It rang out for three days, in darkness and daylight, pausing only for a few minutes at a time when the drummers changed. You can't imagine what it's like to live with that sound. You hear it in your bones, your heart thumping and not a thought of sleep, and all the while you know it's broadcasting some precise message to every black for miles around but you don't know what the message is. It's something of a magic trick, a kind of telegraph, and we have nothing to compete with it. Not until Kleinschmidt's boy paddled to us in secret with the news did we know for sure the threat we faced. He translated the message phrase by phrase: they had killed a white man, they were saying, and now they were going to kill all the other whites in the islands and sack the trading stations. They were inviting others to join them. There was no doubting where they meant to begin.

"Not only were we all in a dire situation, but every black man within a canoe's journey knew it. I sent out messengers in the dinghies. Shaw and the mission people were told, and the few men trading in isolation along the nearest coasts were all summoned. We talked into the night but what could we do? There are thousands of them, all armed, inclined to warfare as a hobby and partial to rounding off the action with a bit of cannibalism. They would have killed us all. And when I think about Emma, about the Shaws, even about Blohm and the other Germans – however much we disagree over a drink – we look after one another. It doesn't bear thinking about. Had the British authorities been here, I wonder what they would have done. Certainly not whatever they expect of us. Captain Henderson drops in once every three months to drink our whisky and swap news. It's meant to be friendly and reassuring. But if he thought one of us had killed a black man we'd be strung up on the spot. Meanwhile, the

blacks murder one another and us with barely a thought. What use are three-monthly visits to us? If we'd left it to Her Majesty's representatives we'd all have been long dead. This is my home. Emma and her children are here. Everything I own and have worked for these past five years. I kept seeing in my mind the station burning, the warehouse ransacked, everyone butchered to pieces and worse.

"At the same time we were calling the whites here to the station we sent out a clear message to our black friends, the chiefs, that as far as we were concerned anyone who was not for us was against us. Tolitoro pledged to fight alongside, with his warriors. Topulu said he would put a *tabu* on the rebels, so that any *one-talk* of his who even looked at one of them would be *tabu* also. Other whites came as soon as they heard. We sat up around my table in the darkness, drinking coffee and whiskey and listening to those drums speak. Everyone was ready to give their all, they said, if it would help to turn the tide, but we were so few and not even rifles will make up for such a difference in numbers. We had no way of telling, either, whether our black allies would prove true. Chiefs who live miles apart on different islands turn out to be brothers or have alliances with one another that you would never expect. Someone said, if only we had a cannon, and that's when I remembered Rabardy. Blohm said it was no use. He'd spotted The *Génil* heading south five months earlier at full speed, and had heard for a fact soon after that the colony was deserted, but someone else at the table swore he'd seen exactly the same rusty ship with that mechanical rifle on the back a mere three weeks before, turning in to the harbour there. I've never waited so long for anything than the eight hours it took for Blohm to steam to the colony in New Ireland and back, with no certainty he would even find the ship.

"It wasn't only the question of whether Blohm would find him that troubled me. I had been cool and unhelpful to him when we met. It occurred to me he might not want to come to our rescue at all. So it was all the more of a relief when he came. He came

without a moment's hesitation, and his quick thinking and decisive actions were… well, without them none of us would be here.

"What a lucky thing it was, that he was there when we needed him. No military experience, only a plain man's good sense and a will to get the job done. He sat massaging his moustaches over a double brandy while the six of us talked – drums still ringing across the bay. Then when people finally stopped interrupting one another, that's when he started up. In ten minutes he went back over what they'd said, spelling out the issues one by one; he said what he thought should be done, where, when and by whom.

He seemed to understand what the tribe would be thinking and how at every step they would react. Before dawn Tolitoro's braves arranged themselves along the shore here and sent off a few arrows while we fired our rifles into the bushes, and together we drove the savages across the island into their pirogues, and out into the channel where, around the point, Rabardy's ship was waiting. From start to finish he saved our lives inside ten minutes.

"Afterwards, after the long thunder-rattle of the gun, the quiet was overwhelming. The relief was so sudden and extreme I was more agitated than ever before. I had to make sure that every ounce of danger was past, and only once I'd gone and checked and checked again, and was sure everyone who might have remained or become a problem in the future was gone could I rest calm. Visions of what might have happened to us shook my waking thoughts in the weeks that followed, though we'd never been in such a strong position. It was clear who was in charge, and what we could do when provoked. Overnight the blacks became more honest and respectful. No nonsense about ancestral rights was raised when we took over the island."

"You certainly seem to have been very lucky," I said. "It doesn't bear thinking about, how differently things might have turned out."

"No, indeed."

“If this battle you won here decided the war, why was Ferguson killed?”

“That was a business matter, and not to be conflated,” said Quinn. “Strange as it may sound, the death of Ferguson only drives home the importance of keeping ahold of ourselves, and how much we need men like Rabardy, the crazy old frog. We survive because we look after one another. We compete but we’re all together. Loyalty is a necessity.”

He looked at his watch for a long while, and at the roadstead again.

“When I see that damned kanaka,” he said, “I’ll hang him up.” And then, “Let’s go. We could be here all day.”

We pushed the dinghy back into the water and climbed in.

“This plantation is Emma’s idea,” said Quinn. “It seems a waste of time and money to me. It’s hard enough to find land, the planting is back-breaking work, and it’s near-enough impossible to keep watch all the time. We’re sailors, Beck, you and I: we buy and go, or come and sell; we change with the wind; we don’t tie ourselves down.”

“Are you suggesting,” I said, “that working on land for Blohm will not be the best idea?”

The black boy with the feather in his hair came running out from a thicket with theatrical hurry, chewing betel nut. He took the rope from his master and held on with intense focus. We untied the sails.

“I have a schooner on order from Sydney,” said Quinn. “She’ll be here in a few weeks. Can I tempt you back to shipboard life? Whatever Blohm is paying, I’ll match.”

“I made a promise, and I don’t like to let people down,” I said, hearing my father in every phrase, and wondering what consequences I might be dicing with by saying no to an offer I greatly preferred. “Why is he pointing at that tree again?” I said.

“He’s boasting. Kleinschmidt’s killer ran away and climbed to the top of that tree; this fellow’s brother saw him and shot him dead.”

“What island were the attackers from?”

“They were Mioko people.”

“Which? The murderers or your allies?”

“They were all Mioko people.”

“Why would they kill their own?”

Quinn turned to his oarsman and asked him a few questions. The answer was cheerfully given, with some chatter and that upwards nod of the head. The man hawked a dark cloud of betel-nut into the water and smiled with red-stained teeth. Quinn shrugged and turned back to me.

“He says they disagreed.”

CHAPTER FIVE

It was almost mid-day when we left the roadstead in Blohm's steamer. Blohm whistled at the wheel, and between the thumps of his steam engine the tune came in broken snatches. Repeated over and over, the puzzle resolved itself as the opening of Beethoven's Fifth, slightly flat. In a fierce blue sky the sun cooked the water turquoise on every side. The tide dozed on the white sand, so clear it was impossible to see where the two met.

Ahead of us, the *Génil* still rode at anchor, bow towards us. We watched a couple of Chinese sailors and a Malay, stripped to the waist, throw something heavy over the side and pull it back up on a rope. With each bump a swoosh of water tipped out of the bucket and a few large flakes of paint dropped into the roadstead where they floated. The crewmen were bent over, scrubbing in the heat as we drew past.

"Why do they not go home? It is a nonsense," said Blohm. His mouth, at rest, formed a lipless half-smile.

I asked what he meant.

He waved his pipe, which had gone out in the wind. "To propose a colony on the opposite area of the world, when one cannot so much as stop a ship from – " he reached for the words " – to break apart."

We passed a dinghy crossing the bay from the iron ship towards Quinn's jetty and I recognised the upright figure of the doctor. I nodded but his arms remained folded. He looked away. As we moved into the deepest part of the bay beside his ship an awning lifted above her poop and flapped down again, revealing for only a moment Captain Rabardy slumped in a hammock, his bare feet hanging over the side. I recalled what Quinn had said about Blohm's dislike for the man, but could detect no expression on my

new employer's face: for or against. I wondered if he'd even noticed the captain. There was no sign of the doctor. I supposed him to be inside.

As we swung round Utuan I squinted into the trees for the clearing, looking to see if Quinn's guard had returned. I thought I could see a black man wandering slowly about in the shade, abstractly hitting tree trunks with a stick. Around the shores of the bay on all the islets, the local tribe of blacks stopped their work in the shade to stare at us. Two children dived into the blue water, one emerging with a large sea cucumber which she placed in a canoe. The canoe shook as a boy in a miniature pirogue crashed into it, watching with delight as the other children tried to hit him. Someone shouted from the bank.

"You are looking for the place where my countryman was killed, yes? Quinn has told you this story?"

I admitted he had.

"A sad tale. Kleinschmidt was a very knowledgeable man. He should have been more careful."

Blohm blasted the ship's whistle and raised his hand in salute. A crowd of small naked children shrieked and galloped along the beach, waving.

"With this plantation," he added, "Quinn will do well."

Turning away from the white sands of Mioko we steam out in open water towards the lumpy peaks and ridges of that grown-up neighbour country. A solitary brown bird with a forked tail was making the same journey, seemingly oblivious of our presence, dipping and speeding across the waves. The grey mass of New Britain turn a sharper deeper green. The vast bay of the old caldera opened its mouth and as we turned towards this opening the engine clattered, thumped twice and died. A shout went up from Blohm's boys, local fellows mostly. One held up a can of water like the host, while

another leant right out over the bow, anchor in hand, rope unravelling in loops around his feet.

Blohm *scheiss*-ed and *dummkopf*-ed, grabbed a spanner that was the length of his forearm and, wielding it like a war hammer, ducked below. Wavelets slapped the boat and we drifted. In the womb of the steamer voices rumbled and hammered, tools tinkled and clanged. We passed a charcoal-coloured rectangle of beach where a stream oozed copper-brown liquid into the green bay, spinning a beige underwater cloud that dispersed within yards. A crocodile, sunning himself at this meeting point of waters, lurched round as we drew close, pushed off into the water and sounded.

The engine barked three times and resumed its uneven jangling. A cluster of huts came into view and was gone. We passed inlet after inlet, each indistinguishable from the last, pressed in by a ridge of steep earth heaped behind, and cloaked in a formless collision of bush and tree. From out of this dark tangle climbed pale creepers, reaching up and along with leaves like giant hands that dropped to the ground when there was no more bush to climb and vagabonded to and fro towards the sea across the black-sand strip.

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The afternoon was half over by the time we dropped anchor in another bay, steeper and darker than the rest. I was delivered to my little hut. Weatherboards on a frame with a corrugated iron roof, it looked as though it had been put up a few months earlier. It smelled of creosote. One man was handed a bush knife with which he swiped clear the vanguard of the vegetation that had been tamed once and was surging back. Two sailors unloaded my bags and a few supplies.

“Only four boxes this day,” said Blohm. I climbed the ladder behind him, leaning back to keep a good distance from his boots. At least my accommodation was on stilts, a luxury for anyone who has spent the night being eaten by sandflies.

“This is a new place so we try and see, yes?” He stood in the bare room into which the door opened, looking round as if he had momentarily forgotten where he was. He wagged his finger and mouthed at at the few pieces of furniture and equipment.

“You like a grate and chimney? I bring you next time.”

“But how will I light a fire?” I said.

“How?” he frowned as if I were dull-witted. “Outside!”

While I unpacked he indicated the furniture – two chairs and a deal table of approximately equal size, which he wobbled to demonstrate their sturdiness, a small chest of drawers of which he seemed particularly proud – demonstrating their function by opening the drawers in turn – and beyond a curtain the trestle-bed in a space barely as big. A few bowls and plates and two pans were laid out in a line on a folded pallet. Blohm produced a piece of paper with ‘inventory’ written at the top and asked me to sign. The only element with which the place was equipped with any generosity was shelving. Shelves stretched round every wall, five rows high on huge brackets, and so deep as to leave little free space to walk around in the middle of the room. He pulled me gently away from my own belongings to the boxes of supplies.

“These you now unpack. Put on the shelves.” He looked from the shelves to the boxes and back again. “Space them out,” he said, looking through the door where he could see the last of his sailors waiting in the dinghy for him. He spun round at looked at me inquisitively, like a father examining his daughter’s unwanted suitor. “Do you have questions?” he asked.

I wondered where to put the copra as it came in. Blohm pointed out, round and under the floor, suggesting the space between the stilts. As he did so he whistled to his steamer and beckoned. “You buy 12 hundredweight of shelled copra per month. Payment to you after one month, but all this – ” he showed an open palm to the chair, table and boxes, “– deductible. Dispose of them how you like.

“Next new moon I come back. The village,” he waved, “lies that way. You make friends with the chief; he does not harm you.” A crew member thumped up the steps and handed him a Jäger rifle and a Colt revolver which he passed straight on into either hand. “Necessary for other chiefs and villages. They do harm you. Ammunition to find in with rice bags and tapioca.

“You need me, go this way.” He indicated along the coast, and wiggled a finger to suggest the rounding of a headland on the facing shore. “Flat island under rocky volcano. One hour to paddle. One!” He held up a finger as if that part needed clarification. I thought, shortly afterwards, that it looked about that far, as the stern of Blohm’s boat steadily shrank and then turned out of sight with its dinghy in tow. A trail of little grey clouds rose above the bushes on that same headland for another few minutes as the colours of sky and smoke converged.

I cooked my supper outside when the sun had sunk. A musty smell of rotting leaves and salt breathed out of the black soil where the trees and bushes seemed to caress the dampness and drink up all light. In the vivid hiss and snap of my wood-smoke fire, with shadows all around I was a single point of life on a rotting planet. I wondered if my black neighbours and customers would come and see me, assuming they were friendly, as Blohm had suggested, but they left me alone to the biting insects and a concert of deep churring in the canopy overhead. I felt a low ache for home, which turned into a strange tang when it occurred to me I couldn’t even say where home was.

In the morning I awoke to sounds of low voices and footsteps moving quietly around. Outside, three blacks were stroking the canoe Blohm had left for my use, lifting it to test the weight. When they noticed me watching from my door, they nodded vaguely and continued with what they were doing. I fetched tobacco from my store and held it out towards them. They strolled over to take it and passed it round, smiling now and exchanging remarks with one another. I introduced myself. Fortunately my name is

easy to say in any language, though they said it with such a short ‘e’, it became, “Bick.” After they had told me theirs, they indicated a basket of split coconuts beneath my shack. In the afternoon clouds gathered in the bay and thickened. At about three, when I was walking along the coast to try to get my bearings, the light ebbed and I smelled rain. The drops were thick and heavy, and though it was only a ten-minute walk to my shack I was wet through and had to change, hanging up my clothes to dry without a fire.

I pulled out my old copy of *Robinson Crusoe* but after the first page put it away again, and wrote up notes for the past week in my journal till the bad light began to affect my eyes. In the morning I woke wanting to write a letter full of incident and feeling to someone who would be delighted to read it, but it only made me think of my mother, and with her gone I couldn’t see the point. Instead I hammered a rice label onto a tree and shot at it. Afterwards I smoked and cleaned the guns.

I was already getting tired of tinned beef and rice on the second evening, when my neighbours came past fishing off the dark grey beach with a long net. They started on the point where the inlet made a kind of bight into the sand, waded in waist-deep from that corner and walked round to the far side in a slow circle, so that the net enclosed a semi-circle of water thirty yards wide. It was high tide, and the only sounds in the flat water were ripples and tiny splashes on the very rim of the strand itself where the fish had nuzzled in to find food. The moon rose and phosphorescence glittered in the water as I ambled down to the shore to get a nearer view. When the net closed, the shoal seemed to sense it and fish began to fire off around the little inlet, but they could not get past the barrier. One jumped over and caught the light as it escaped, like the flash of a blade. The rest swam round and round in a diminishing pot of boiling water, till their fins and gills caught in the fibres. I clapped as the men lifted the net, and the women picked out the fish with hands and sorted them into two baskets. The women laughed. The men looked at me curiously.

On the third day an older man arrived. He stood in the middle of my little space between the house and the canoe with arms folded, naked except for a piece of twine around his waist and something similar round his upper arm. He stared up at my new home and scant belongings, a long piece of straw through his nose. I called out a greeting from the top of the ladder and raised my hand. He seemed to have a great deal else to think about before he found the time to turn his gaze at me and hold it – again for some while. He waved his hand around in a circle that took in earth and trees, the top of the slope behind me and the water behind him, and then pointed to himself. I fetched a large pouch of tobacco and a string of red-glass beads, bowed and offered them.

The chief took me by a circuitous route up from the bay. His entourage of five warriors kept pace behind. The climb lifted my spirits a little as did the prospect of hunting. There's no better way to win over new people in a new place, and I have to this day many friends from far-flung islands who remember 'Bick' as a friend and brother still. But I couldn't shake off the stories I'd heard about New Britain – too many from too many sources to be dismissed. As we climbed the winding path, sometimes I was looking down on my fellows, sometimes gazing on a level with their ankles. They wore quivers of arrows, obsidian knives and slings tied to their arms and legs, while they clutched handfuls of spears, great stone clubs and axes. All the baskets and bags of provisions were carried by two women at the rear, also naked, and bent double beyond their apparent years with the weight. We passed trees from which pigeons scattered without anyone stopping to lift a weapon. For a hunting trip, this made no sense. As I looked round trying to comprehend their intention, I slipped on a bend where the path crumbled. The men stood and watched me scrambling back up onto the track with my rifle and pack. I waved them in front but they shook their heads as one and waited for me to go first, falling in quickly behind with their weapons at the ready. I braced myself for a blade in my back or the crack of a club on my skull. There was nothing I could do

to defend myself against either, though I kept half turning to let them know I was watching, whilst at the same time I didn't want to fall again and expose myself to attack. My back felt hot and sharp and made me writhe inwardly as if a blade were already entering my flesh. I lost all sense of where we were going, so that when we stopped near the top of the hill where the slope was still steep and a pawpaw tree was dropping its fruit, it struck me that even if I were to run away, I could never find my way back to safety, but would be forced to wander through woods bristling with warriors like these and their enemies to all of whom I was a piece of meat, no more, one component of a single meal. I looked around for pigeons, or any other creature which might justify our armoury. The ground was scattered with pawpaws which had fallen and smashed, and needle-like wasps hovered around these, guarding and chewing the oozing flesh. The chief summoned a woman who handed me a basket. He pointed at the ground, with a sweeping motion. There was nothing to do but crouch before him. He watched while I filled my basket with ripe fruits from the ground and then the tree. I stood up and no one moved. The other warriors were looking around at the hillsides. The chief's chin was raised and his eyes narrowed in an expression which suggested that a favour had been given. I thanked him and presented a couple of yards of red cotton I'd brought in my pack for the purpose. His great arched nostrils flexed as he unfolded the treasure over one arm and stroked it. He unravelled and wrapped it around his waist, then spreading his legs apart in a sturdy stance he threw his arms out violently towards the tree. I tried to make sense of the movement but too many noises were going on around us. A gurning noise, deep and low and grinding. Leaves and branches clattered and soughed. All the trees were jerking back and forth, bouncing, as if a vicious storm had descended in a pale sky. Everything was shaking, but the wrong way up: the bottoms of trees and bushes were wagging the tops. On another slope thirty yards away, a stand of saplings set off on a downhill slide in a scree of earth. Below where I stood I could see the top of

a warrior's head who stood on the section of path below. Brightly coloured feathers had been jammed into his tightly curled hair. My legs wobbled beneath me and I felt myself lurching towards him. I tried to stand upright flinging my hands and feet wide but instead I flew against the chief, pressing him back against the tree with my forearm. His eyes widened in a sneer of fury. Gripping the tree with one hand he shoved me violently away where I fell onto the ground. If he communicated anything, I couldn't understand it. I was on all fours, trying to keep ahold of safe ground. But the ground was not safe. The very safe thing itself was convulsing. Nothing was safe. And then without seeming to slow or stop, I saw that all was quiet and still. It had seemed to take many minutes but perhaps in the end it took only one. We waited and listened, not drawing a breath, while every bird and insect, every tree did the same. Then we stood up, brushed off the dirt, picked up what had been dropped. As we walked back towards the sea the sky dimmed and it began to rain.

I was very cold that day, returning with the basket of pawpaws. I put it on the table, picked one out and took a bite, though I wasn't hungry. It was soft like a woolly paste and very sweet. My stomach turned. I threw my wet clothes on the floor and struggled into my last fresh set without troubling about fastenings. Too tired to sit outside or make a fire, I rolled myself under a blanket, and the hours passed in which I did not know if I were asleep or awake but I could not get warm. I heard feet and movement, a bump, clanking. My head seemed clamped in an iron band and I could hardly budge. It took a supreme effort to stand up, find a hat and more socks, put on a coat and boots and look out. Darkness covered the bay and my little strip of territory. By a dim starlight off sea I could see the two blocks of wood in silhouette, onto which I had stowed my upturned canoe,. They were empty and my copra weighing scales were missing. I couldn't think, didn't care, and returning to bed pulled a tarpaulin over myself. It took an hour to get warm enough to be comfortable. Later I heard the local men returning. When I tried to

move to see, hot sweat trickled down my neck and dripped off my ribs onto the damp pallet. My heart whooshed in my ears. I had to throw off the tarpaulin in order to breathe. When I opened my eyes I saw that I had only dreamed of opening them before. Inhuman faces, elongated with spirals for eyes and big tongues, stared at me, moving round into my field of vision wherever I turned my head. They murmured strange noises and after a while I could understand the words. They were saying, kill the white man now. His head is a coconut. Split the coconut.

Everything was shaking again and crashing. Cans rolled off the shelves and boxes slid to the edges, slid off and burst open on the floor. I could smell coffee beans and jerky beef. I covered my head for fear of what might strike it. Once more the shaking went on, as if the men outside were gathered round the four walls and hitting and shaking them in turn, coming to get me and my trade goods.

I could hear my own voice shouting, though it was daytime now, and I wanted it to stop, to let me sleep. I realised then that it was a different voice, coming from a strange bearded face, and what was keeping me from my slumber was a hand shaking me by the shoulder.

***

I was helped to a sitting position and found a cup of brandy in my hands. Someone sat on the chair beside my bed. The heat of the alcohol in my throat woke me up. There were tins on the floor and a few split bags of coffee beans and rice.

“You’ve got the New Britain fever,” said Shaw. “We’re on our way to Nodup. I wanted to check how things were looking in the bay after the earthquake. I saw signs of life and thought I’d have a dekko, but you were all locked up in the middle of the morning. How much does your head hurt?”

I described the pains.

His squint relaxed. “It’s not the worst kind.”

“I don’t know how it happened. They stole my canoe, and now I’m stranded.” Images appeared in my mind – a dream, I thought, and then a recollection. A strange window of time in the middle of my fever when I felt well for a few hours. “I went to the village to ask for it back in my best pidgin, and everyone stared but didn’t seem to understand what I was saying. I walked up to the biggest hut and shouted at the headman. He turned angry and called his big men. I had to walk away. They took the scales too. How can I buy copra without scales? What are *they* going to do with a set of scales? I’m so glad you came.”

“They like anything made of iron. Don’t leave anything out: it’s too tempting.”

“I thought he was my friend. Blohm said the villagers were keen to have a trading store.”

“It wasn’t necessarily the chief who robbed you. He may not know anything about it.”

The spilled coffee beans smelled good. I became aware of my own sweatiness, lying in a dirty tangle.

“I’ve been here a fortnight and all I’ve done is lose money, get sick and fear for my life.’

“Well, you look like you’re on the mend. It’s simple enough to get your canoe back. Go to the headman’s hut and steal something of his. Make sure someone sees you.”

I felt too weak to do anything. “I’m not going to do that, reverend. It would be suicide.”

“Not at all. It’s quite straightforward. He’ll come and ask you to give back what you took. Then you tell him someone has stolen your canoe and scales and that you’ll return his possessions when yours are returned to you. Leave the rest to him.”

“Will he even understand?”

"You'd be surprised."

His assistants swept the floor for me and re-stacked the fallen cans and packets. They looked at him and he gave the short smile of someone who rations their favours.

"A piece of advice," he said, turning back to me from the doorway where he looked like a thin giant against the light. "The current here can be stronger than you'd think. A canoe won't be much use if the tow is in the wrong direction. You need a dinghy. Quinn'll sell you one, if you can save up the money. He doesn't sell anything cheap."

I thanked him and his footsteps tapped away down the steps.

The steam engine was clattering as I threw my small bag together and locked the door in the way Blohm had instructed me.

The launch had turned around and was gathering speed along the beach in a smoky haze when I waved her to stop.

"May I come with you?" I said. "For the fresh air."

***

My home of the past fortnight fronted a huge bay named Blanche Bay after *HMS Blanche*, which dropped anchor there only a few years before I did. One shore of this bay contained an opening into another smaller one, named after the same ship's captain who was still sailing around in some part of the empire. Simpson Harbour formed an almost perfect circle with steep sides. As we puttered in Shaw explained the harbour was the caldera of a volcano from ancient times, and that the other craters pitting the sides with mounds and hollows were lesser volcanoes which had also erupted centuries before. The land plunged fifty metres down below the sea, and out of its deepest core in the centre of the harbour rose two strange pillars of rock – one round, and high as a church, one broken and half as tall. We puffed around them in our launch and then made for a green hill on the near shore.

“Here,” said Shaw. “Jump onto that lump and then step across the gully. Don’t be fooled by the undergrowth. There’s a hole down there that’ll swallow you up. I want to go over to the middle and see what the quake did.

He told me there had been landslides all along the coast. “Five years ago when I arrived this island didn’t exist. Where you stand was water. Then two years later *that* blew up.” He gestured at a barren peak among the lower hills on the far side of the bay. Scorched tree trunks surrounded its lower half.

And so he told me the story of the volcanoes of New Britain, how after a week of quakes and big waves the local people left the area and the volcano they call Kaije sent up a spout of red rocks as big as houses and a column of smoke in which lightning flashed. Acres of pumice drifted southeastwards out of the bay, and natives said the bottom of the sea had jumped up. Shaw forced his boat through after a week, to find every living thing buried under a fine grey soil. And a new island. Locals saw a line of flame cross beneath the waters of the harbour which they said was the thrashing tail of the great dragon who lives below the harbour. Then lava came steaming up from a boiling sea. When Shaw arrived he stepped on what he thought was rock, and the surface cracked like eggshell over a heat which blistered his feet in his boots. All around the two-mile-wide island where only reef had existed before, floated thousands of dead fish, and turtles which were so well cooked that when the villagers collected them their shells dropped off.

“If I were Blohm I’d think carefully about setting up in the shadow of Kaije.” Shaw nodded towards my employer’s station across the bay, a compound with palisades enclosing several roofs. It could not have lain closer to the foot of the volcano. “Emma Quinn has plans to move this way too. Their harbour isn’t deep enough for her ambitions. She has her eye on this part of New Britain for establishing plantations. Quinn won’t do it, though. He’s an adventurer; a blackbirder, and if the scheme doesn’t

work fast enough he'll be up to his old tricks again. He and Blohm are vying to get the biggest outfit together for the least possible outlay. Quinn has been imagining that in Rabardy he has a secret weapon, and can make a fortune. If I were Quinn I'd be as circumspect about that Frenchman as I'd be about that volcano."

Kaije stood up across the bay, not the tallest of peaks but the most dry and impervious – an open maw atop sheer graphite screes, while around the bay everything which was not water was green vibrancy which the water reflected back.

"Everything heals and grows at a tremendous rate," said Shaw. "Bounty after pandemonium. Luxuriance to smother the destruction. But Kaije is only napping."

I stood and looked at her in silence for a while until Shaw interrupted my thoughts.

"One, you know, is really much like the other, but where would you like me to take you – Blohm's place or Quinn's?"

***

Quinn's felt different as we approached it again from the western side, having stopped for my gear on the way. I pride myself on not being one to give up, being the one who works out a solution to a problem everyone else balks at, but I had got myself into such a state that nothing would persuade me to go back, not even Shaw. I had become fixated with Quinn's as a happier and kinder place. Entering the roadstead, however, the quay buildings stood subdued, empty. The ships that had been there for the party were all gone. Only Quinn's dinghy fleet remained, roped together, fidgeting on the wash made by our approach.

Shaw was lying down on the bench, all six foot four of him, with his head on the crook of his elbow and his eyes firmly closed, but every so often he moved and his features tightened. When he heard the engine slowing he pulled his knees into his chest and took several deep breaths. It didn't take long to tie up at the jetty, what with Shaw's paddle steamer having such a shallow draft: the advantages of a launch for coastal

navigation are undeniable. I watched Quinn's house boy and Emma's house mary stride out of the house with a basket and begin hanging wet sheets from a line at the far end of the garden between two ficus trees. A smartly-dressed little boy ran out from the house, grabbed a sheet and pulled on it, squealing with pleasure. Shaw pulled himself upright and walked along the shore towards the office at the back of the house, while his boys helped me unload my belongings. My bags were rooted out from under the benches of the mission launch and placed on the jetty. Shaw's Samoans waited for their shepherd's return, watching the light that scattered in sharp points off the surface of the water. The house mary came down to the water with another basket and started washing shirts. She pushed and pulled, twisted and pummelled them, rolled each into a ball on the grass and went on to the next. The last was swinging from the line when I heard raised voices echoing round the corner.

I followed the sounds to the warehouse and tried the door. Inside, a lone black who I didn't know was sweeping the floor. He pushed the broom in methodical strokes towards a central pile. A cloud of dust made an aura around him. Boxes stood in piles on one side of the floor, as though someone had got half way through the process of reordering them.

I said, "Master, he go where?"

The man waved an arm up and over. "He go long up, long French."

"To the colony?"

"Place Rabardy," he said, as Shaw appeared behind me, coming back down the path.

Shaw's face coloured like a tropical rain shower – still and darkening, then bright and clear.

***

“I’ve explained everything,” said Shaw. “Emma will take you on, for now. She says there’s always work here, as long as you aren’t fussy about what kind. Most of their boys are away with Quinn.”

I thanked him.

Emma Quinn sat in her office, writing figures in the ledger and making corrections. She let me wait in the doorway for several minutes, and I was on the point of leaving again when, without looking up, she spoke.

“He went to the French colony in New Ireland with all eighteen of the boys. On a rescue mission.”

She dipped the pen in the ink-well and resumed her work.

I wondered if there was anything in particular that needed to be done.

She suggested that the warehouse would be, “a good place to start” and blotted the page. “The warehouse, the plantation, the books…” she said. “There is no end of jobs to be done.”

“I do bookkeeping,” I said. “I was a supercargo for many years. Quinn mentioned that he had a new schooner on order and that there might be a position for me. But I’ll happily turn my hand to anything.”

She opened a second book which she seemed to be cross-referring with the first.

“When did he say this new schooner was expected?”

I admitted to not remembering specifics.

“There’s no way of knowing”, she said as I moved to go, “how much more time and expense will be frittered away before this absurd affair is finally over.” She looked at me and smiled. Her eyes were darkest chocolate. “Would you like some coffee?” She rang a hand bell. “Really Shaw ought to be glad that the place is evacuating. I think as far as he’s concerned it couldn’t be wiped from the map fast enough.” The house boy appeared

in a doorway. “Coffee, Apoi,” she said. And then, turning back to me, she gestured for me to sit down. “I understand things didn’t go so well with your posting.”

“I wouldn’t have left so quickly,” I said, “if I hadn’t got sick, but the place wasn’t right. The natives didn’t seem too friendly.”

“They were like suspicious, and perhaps curious,” she said.

Apoi came back in with the coffee and began to pour it solemnly. He placed the cups and spoons in line with intense focus and stirred the pot methodically before pouring. He seemed to feel Emma watching him.

“Apoi, what do you know of – ” she turned to me. “What was the name of your village?”

“Ralum.”

“Ralum?” he said, turning his eyes back in his head as if he’d locate the place somewhere just inside his brow bone. His skin was almost ebony black. “Ah, Ralum!” There was a bit of chatter, as the two agreed they were talking about the same place. He flexed his eyebrows and puckered his lips. “Him no good. No good!”

“He comes from Buka”, said Emma. “Everyone here is a Tolai, and therefore ‘no good’. They would say the same of him. Buka people are the blackest of the Melanesian islanders. When a Tolai burns the food he says it’s ‘buka too much’. I prefer to recruit my servants from as far away as possible. The further away home is, the less likely they are to run back to their villages.”

We drank. “How fortunate that Shaw was passing,” said Emma. “He has an uncanny way of knowing. It’s not the first time he has come to the rescue.”

“You knew him in Samoa, I suppose?”

“Shaw came here two years before we did. We had a few difficulties and he was kind to us. This place was considered certain death back then. He has made it much safer

than it used to be. As far as Shaw is concerned if he is doing God's work he has nothing to be afraid of. He's the nearest we have to an authority here. Tribesmen to traders to British naval captains like to know him and visit whenever they pass through."

"It's a considerable achievement for one man."

"He would not claim the credit. I went to a convent school, Mr Beck. I know what the godly can be like. Shaw is different."

I said I had noticed he seemed to be in pain.

"It's elephantiasis. It comes back more and more frequently, and worse. If I were him I'd leave my mission to younger folk and go home. If he knew half of what Mrs Shaw goes through… but she puts on a brave face. You know we buried his daughter here? She was only a baby."

"I hope I didn't inconvenience him," I said. I wanted to ask about the cannibals, but I sensed she was busy and had said all she wished to say.

"You must forgive him for leaving so suddenly. He is agitated because Quinn has gone to the colony. Really Shaw ought to be glad the place is evacuating."

"Forgive my asking but is this the French colony? Rabardy's colony?"

"Rabardy? Yes. You look pale, Mr Beck. Apoi will take you to your quarters. I'm afraid we can't put you up in the house at the moment. I'll ask Kanai to bring you drinks and blankets. Malaria mines everyone round here, but there is a particular kind which gets into the brain and can be fatal. I am sorry not to be able to give you more attention, but I have paperwork to do. The timing of this crisis has not been our friend."

CHAPTER SIX

I spread out my possessions in the room next door to where the Samoan boys usually slept. Beyond a curtain their pallets stood stacked in one corner where geckos hunted black flies on the ceiling. Every few days a regular customer came to the warehouse and made his choices–all single men who sailed up in one of Quinn's dinghies, sunburnt faces doughy for lack of smiling exercise. A loud square fellow overflowed with stored-up chat. A tall gaunt man stood scratching and muttering about trouble with worms eating his hull, and how Quinn's tinned salmon had made him ill. I wrote down their purchases in the book, with notes in a small hand—"credit six months, interest twenty per cent".

I was shutting up the warehouse one evening when a whistle blasted. I turned to see Rabardy's old iron schooner nosing in from the channel. She sat low, jingling as if the stoker had shaken a bag of nails into her pipes, coughing out bales of wood smoke which hung in a gilded trail, while she turned to avoid the madrepores. At that, a wooden hulk twice her size swung out behind. The Chinese junk lurched as if to overtake, then strike her broadsides. Both ships were crowded with people, more than I ever saw in such a spot. For though Quinn had already begun to fill a stack in his warehouse with goods to please the idle tourists of the future, yet the station still dealt only with other working concerns. From a hundred yards these passengers looked unkempt and reclined in heaps all over the working areas of the ships where sailors needed to pass. Only the crew moved, shouting as the engine faltered, so that when it cut we could hear their voices sharp and close over the water. The helmsman strode out from the wheelhouse and his blond moustache caught the afternoon sun. Quinn. Sailors —one, two, three of them— plunged into the water with knives in their teeth. All eyes squinted downwards.

I did not distinguish the music till a cluster of notes trilled across the roadstead from the salon windows of Quinn's bungalow. Emma was at her piano, playing *The Marksman*. Amidst a crescendo of shouting the brown polished trunks of the divers surfaced, raising coils of something like a vanquished sea snake above their heads—the tow rope, disentangled from a propellor. From the jetty we watched and waited and Emma's piano harmonies leached out till they seemed to fill the bay—tinkling through a veil from another world, lifting and rolling, till the mangroves and sandbanks seemed to be bright meadows where sheep grazed, and pine forest rose and dipped, and the land sheered up to the clouds in a wall of peaks.

I caught sight of Rabardy, on his deck chair on the poop, but hunched over this time, wrapped in blankets, staring at the floor.

***

That night the Samoan boys filled the space beyond my curtain with their breaths and chat. Quinn stayed out of sight all the next morning into the afternoon when I decided to investigate the tinned salmon. I found three shelves of his warehouse stacked front-to-back with the flesh of the king of fish: a small fortune's investment. The first rank looked sound enough, beyond a covering of dust; the row behind had discoloured in the flannel-like air. Rust had eaten at the hindmost tins and a caramel liquid seeped out. We began doling the consignment into a stack, to lob them into the depths of the harbour, when we heard the splash of paddles and clunk of rowlocks. A bump resounded against the jetty; foot-stepping on the boards, and the rowing noises moved off again. Through the warehouse door, propped ajar, I could hear the falling intonations of men walking away. By the time I stepped outside they had gone on around the corner where the path led off towards the house, and the dinghy was sculling back towards the iron ship.

I chased after the new arrivals.

“What do you want?” I called.

The three smiled vaguely. Two wore ragged pyjamas, the older one had the trousers only, with a waistcoat over.

“Mr Quinn?” I asked.

Vagueness hatched into enthusiasm.

“In his house,” I said.

“We go there?” The half-suited man spoke with a strong accent and pointed at the bungalow.

“No,” I said.

They halted. One wafted a hand. “We walk.”

I wondered if Quinn had authorised this. My six Samoans gave no indication. When I turned back, the newcomers had already set off. Now a child was exclaiming nearby, a woman coaxing. Each new party rambled with increasing freedom round the site. I thought of the young seedlings in the coconut plantation, and Emma’s potager of taro and banana plants. I wondered if the chandlery had been left open, though thieving blacks had long since taught us to keep it barred. A Samoan stepped backwards into the rusty stack. It crashed to the floor and set the cans off on a roll across the space and underneath the shelves. We scattered to retrieve them but the noise seemed to have sent out a signal, and the doorway darkened. Visitors entered, their clothing torn, their hair filthy. A group of young men and women, dark-haired and olive skinned, arms behind their backs, stood looking at us sideways to avoid our eyes, as if they had just woken from long sleep to find themselves in an unknown country and stumbled across a circus which they hoped to watch for free. One of the women held a bony baby to her chest which turned to face me with solemn eyes in a head like a misshapen rugby ball. A tall man of about forty in an old suit marched straight past the timid group, picked up a

biscuit barrel and turned it over. Two elegant women in faded dresses followed his lead, sniffing the wrapped cakes of soap. An old couple prised the lid off a crate and yanked out handfuls of candles, bickering as they did so. I asked them to stop, but as the noises of chatter increased in that echoing space they didn't seem to hear me. The old couple looked at me severely and resumed their activities. Three men approached, wafting stale sweat. They gesticulated with some of our bottles, addressing us in Italian. Then broad daylight opened over us all, and in the wide doorway stood Quinn. The place stilled. Items found their shelves and boxes again; packaging was replaced. By the time he spoke, ordering everyone back to the ship, the foreigners were already filing out. A young man with a ragged beard passed Quinn, proffering a box of matches, to query how much, but Quinn snatched the box without looking at him, and sent him off with a sideways nod. The dinghy laboured to and fro across the roadstead and in no time the harbour was quiet once more.

Quinn looked at the pile of tins.

"I'd like to speak with you," he said.

***

The door to Quinn's private store stood ajar. Dense racks crowded the walls. Light from an oil lamp reflected off a barricade of jars overhead, where pale fish floated; fat-bellied frogs reached up with legs bent to spring; white-eyed snakes lay coiled and distended in their wan baths.

"Hold these," said Quinn.

His lips moved silently as he passed me arrows which lay scattered over the bench in front of him. When they were bunched in my hands, points downward, he looked relieved, dropped the lot into a bark quiver and removed them to an upper shelf.

"I came to find you, Beck, a fortnight ago. We could have done with your help, but you'd already gone."

“Blohm collected me early.”

“Are you finished with that job?”

I didn’t want to sound like I’d given up. “It wasn’t a good place.”

“It can’t have been as bad as where I was.”

I asked if he meant the colony.

“This carving must have taken weeks, ” he said, examining a shield. “The pearls in the eyes show it belonged to a king.”

Quinn lifted the bowed rectangle onto a nail, straightened and brushed it with his fingers like a talisman. A row of black cones stood above, as wide as a man’s head and as long as his arm, with feather dressings on top–half plain, half illustrated. At the bottom of each, a white-painted crescent turned upwards beneath a pair of circles, rings within rings, centred with a red dot. It was a child’s image of a face, a clown smile—yet the eye points seemed to drill into mine.

“*Duk-duks*,” said Quinn, “come out on a full moon. Everything but the wearer’s legs is hidden under a ball of leaves topped by one of these. They come in canoes to dance and dispense justice. Women and children have to hide or be killed on the spot.” He stared as if at a vision of what he had just described.

“Yes,” he went on, in a new tone, as if only just hearing my question. “I did mean the colony, though it’s a bit of a stretch to give that title to three half-collapsed buildings made of green planks. When no one came out I thought we were too late. The doctor did too. Then a dinghy came and people hobbled out. It was sad to see them, dying in that dump.”

“Perhaps you saved their lives.”

“Do you know how much it is costing to feed them for a day? Twice as much as for the rest of us who work here.”

He went quiet, turning the quiver round this way and that.

“When you go solo”, he said after a while, “I want you to bring me everything that strikes you—native jewellery, the nests and feathers of unusual birds. I pay well.” He waved around him at the clubs and tappa robes before continuing. “Kleinschmidt collected most of this. One day they’ll thank him for saving all this from destruction. I think you could learn a lot from that man, Beck. He’s one of the few people in the whole of the south Pacific it’s worth knowing.”

“I thought he was dead,” I said.

“Not Kleinschmidt, no—Rabardy. He’s crook at the moment, but when he comes round from the fever he’ll want to talk. When he’s got an audience he goes off on his stories and few people are better to pass the time. I think he’ll like you.”

“What do you want me to do?” I said.

“Whatever he asks,” said Quinn. We left the store room and, lifting his ring of keys off the nail, Quinn whistled to the Samoan men. “Bring those cans to the jetty,” he told them. “We’ll take them to the iron ship.” They nodded. “And don’t forget to mark it in the book.”

The wind had gathered, as it often did in the afternoon. It harried the trees and vexed the water round Quinn’s dinghy, spinning us half way to the iron ship before I could get up any rhythm with the oars.

“If that man had money and a family behind him he’d have been an admiral by now,” he said, reaching for the stern ladder as the dinghy bumped. “He’s stood all this alone, for nearly two years.” As I tied up the dinghy, Quinn frowned to himself. I found him waiting for me at the top of the ladder. “Shaw has his reasons for thinking what he thinks,” he said, “but he can’t blame others for his own mistakes.”

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A whiff of Sydney drifted up from the hatch. I checked my pockets for valuables, as if I'd turned into a street by the docks. The gangway was lined with people and bags, heaps of folded clothing. A group of scrawny children knelt on the floor around some knuckle bones. We passed a young couple sitting in an embrace, the woman gazing off as if bored. For a crowded space it was oddly quiet. It set me thinking about my mother who was only a child when she left England with her parents and my father who wasn't much older. What sort of life did they think they were coming to?

Two men led Quinn aside towards the salon. I took a circuit of the passageways. Even in the thoroughfares hammocks hung looped over hooks. A few sagged with sleeping forms. Bundles and cases teetered in heaps past which it was scarcely possible to squeeze. Quinn spoke to someone beyond the salon door. "You'll go when everything's ready and not before".

A man in black came down the ladder with a small portmanteau. An elderly woman thanked him with a 'Monsieur docteur'. He stepped over the threshold into the captain's cabin and Quinn followed, signalling me to join them.

The place smelled of mould and feet. The door thumped against something. I edged in and saw a black girl crouched staring at the invaders. I squeezed beside her with my back to the exit, and a view of little more than Quinn's khaki jacket. Rabardy's thick heels and hairy toes filled the thoroughfare between bunk and chair while he sat up on tousled sheets in pyjamas. The doctor rolled up Rabardy's sleeve and took his pulse while the patient stared dully at the ceiling and let his forearm flop.

"The fever is mild," the medic told Quinn, then to Rabardy he said in French: "You have taken the medicine?"

Rabardy's face gleamed. The porthole was so opaque I could not determine which view of Mioko Bay he would have enjoyed had he wiped away the streaks of condensation which sprouted black blotches round the frame. The doctor held onto a

small bottle on the washstand as if reluctant to let go. “You take this night and morning,” he said. “*Every* night and morning.”

He clipped the case buckles shut and got up. Quinn followed him out, pulling the door shut behind. When the latch dropped the girl sprang up and snatched the bottle. She carried her curves awkwardly. Yanking a pillow out from a cubby hole she shoved the bottle behind with a lot of clinks and stuffed the pillow over her stash. Rabardy sank like an axed tree trunk and pulled his legs into a ball beneath the sheets. She turned to glare at me, opened a little wooden trunk and pulled out a string of glass beads which she held up to the light from the port hole, winding them about her arms and neck.

“…which is nothing”, the doctor was saying to Quinn in the passageway as I closed the door behind me, “beside the acute cases I have amongst my other patients. The captain is in no danger.”

“Rabardy has the strongest constitution of any man I know,” said Quinn. “He’s never had a breath of fever.”

“He appears to suffer, yes,” said the doctor. “And yet, for this state in which you see him I find no medical cause. What sickens is his mind.”

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Aniseed filled the cabin as we stepped back in. A lozenge of blue mottled soap sat cracked and dry beside a pipe in a dish on the washstand.

“Hullo, old fellow,” said Quinn. “We’ve come to see you. You remember Beck?”

Rabardy lay stiff under a blanket. The black girl was curled at his feet on the end of the bunk, gazing into a space some way short of the corner of the ceiling, head pillowed on wrists. A lap-lap stretched over her hips and thighs, and her teak breasts hung down into the crook of her elbow.

Record books balanced in a neat stack on the desk. A pack of papers lay fanned beside them, ribbons draping down on either side. Rabardy's chair still stood back at an angle where he had last risen out of it. The lid was off the ink pot and a pen lay uncapped in a runnel.

"You must be feeling a little better, I think, after all that sea air yesterday. I've been telling Mr Beck about you, old chap. He's all for what a grand thing it would be if you were to come and stay with me a day or two, just to get you back on your feet."

While Quinn talked on I followed Rabardy's doleful gaze. He seemed to be staring intently at a mirror propped behind the washstand. There was little to admire about his yellowed skin and pink eyes.

"Look, old fellow, you need to take proper care of yourself."

Rabardy sighed and rolled to face the wall. An odour of old seafood emanated from somewhere.

"It's no use fretting about the colony," said Quinn. "You did everything you could. Don't stay here and mope. Come with your friends, Rabardy."

"Stop the noise!" said Rabardy, sitting up with sudden ferocity and, turning on the girl, he grabbed her chin.

She snatched his hand away and levered herself up on one arm with exaggerated slowness, flashing the whites of her eyes as she rolled them. Her jaw rotated and a wet noise clicked in her throat.

"Give!" he said, bolt upright now and holding a palm to her mouth.

"Her fingers slid between her lips and her eyes narrowed. As the hand rose to strike she drew out a glistening orange fragment and dropped it lightly into Rabardy's palm. He stood and tossed the sticky thing into the basin where it made a loud ting and shattered. He poured water over his hand, wiped and looked back.

The girl's back was bent, arms covering her head. Eyes watched from beneath dark fingers as he dragged out a jar of orange twists from the locker beneath his bunk, poured them into the waste-box and emptied an ash tray on top, admiring the mix. Her face pressed itself in the sheets as he slumped back onto the bed.

"Rabardy?" said Quinn again.

"How can I stay? You know I cannot stay. If I go, you know what will happen."

"You're not to blame, old friend." Quinn waited for a reply that was met only with silence. He looked at me intently. "Come on, Beck," he whispered. "Say something!"

"I'm keen to hear about your adventures, Mr Rabardy," I said quickly. "I hear you've some tales to tell."

The look Rabardy gave me was so cursory I couldn't distinguish its intent. He lifted the blanket once more, covered himself and said, "They are telling lies about me."

"Then don't go," said Quinn. "It couldn't be simpler."

Rabardy's bulk thumped and creaked finding a comfortable position, and when all was quiet again the girl crept up the narrow bunk towards him.

"Capi?" she said.

The captain's arm came out from under the blanket and pinioned her close, stroking sepia skin with cracked fingertips.

***

"He's delirious," said Quinn, leaning against the door frame rubbing his knuckles across his lip. A look of determination flushed his face and he stood upright. "How about a whiskey?" he said.

I hurried down the gangway, trying to keep up with the dusty back.

At the top of the ladder he stopped and turned, looking past me to the passengers further back along the deck. “They are killing him,” he said. “And it’s as if he wants them to do it.”

***

As I rowed Quinn seemed distracted by the sky, which bellied like a sail. He groped round his jacket for the pocket in which he’d put his keys.

“Makes a good light show, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Sunsets in the New Britannia Archipelago are the finest in the tropics,” Quinn replied, as if taking credit for the phenomenon. “Kleinschmidt said it’s the hot damp air that creates these colours.”

“These are the evenings I think about. When I’m back home.”

He turned to look at me, as if what I’d told him demanded a considered response.

“The last thing Rabardy should do is leave. If he goes to Australia with the colonists, and then to France, they’ll make mincemeat of him. It’s a pointless gesture. Half the men you’ll meet hereabouts have prison sentences or creditors waiting for them at home. Kleinschmidt was a bankrupt. Who can say that Blohm and Shaw never clashed with the law? Or you or I? This place is our second chance. Rabardy should stay. He’s behaving like an old native who sits down and in a week is dead. I’m stumped. I’ve offered him as much as I can afford. So I fetched you—a fair-minded chap with enough experience of how choppy the world gets that you won’t judge another whose oars have slipped out of their rowlocks.”

“I’m delighted to be of help,” I said, “if it’s within my power. I spoke to Rabardy before. I’m racking my brains to recall who he reminds me of. So, is it company he needs? Is that what you’re saying?”

Quinn looked across the bay towards a stand of scrubby trees. “If the Rabardy I know could have met that semblance of himself you saw this morning … he wouldn’t have given him the time of day,” said Quinn. He paused. Then frowned. “His parents died when he was a baby, you know. In one of those revolutions the French are so partial to.”

“What’s happened, Mr Quinn?” I said. “You told me how Rabardy rescued a desperate situation when Kleinschmidt was killed. Has the colony evacuated for good? And why does Shaw hate him as you and Emma say? I feel quite in the dark, and don’t see how I can help unless I know.”

Our route, which followed the arc of the bay, lay now mostly in shadow, and the last rags of clouds caught fire as the sun fell inside the western headland. Boats hung on a veil of light, the double line of dinghies beyond the jetty, the two bigger ships out in the deeper water.

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“I want him looked after. We owe him that at least,” said Quinn. Supper was over and Emma had retired. “If you really want to know about Rabardy and why he is the way he is now, I can tell you, but with four expeditions, and Shaw and Boero, it’s a long story.”

“There’s nowhere else I have to be.”

“Well, then. Two years ago we heard of a party of white men who had come to establish a French colony in the south-west of New Ireland.” The flames of Quinn’s dining-table candles ducked in a breeze that seeped from between the shutters. I covered my whiskey glass as Quinn lifted the bottle. He nudged my hand aside.

The Quinns and their friends around north-east New Britain and the Duke of York islands neither saw nor heard from these men, although passing crews brought news from time to time of the Frenchmen who had occupied a small bay, a well-known anchorage in bad weather. A year later a trader handed Shaw a note written to

him by these same colonists. Their leaders had left them stranded. They were sick and starving, and Shaw was their last remaining hope.

The Shaw who opened this letter was a sadder and more cautious man than the one Quinn and his friends used to know in Samoa. The gentle giant who started his mission in great hope, trusting God, had lost four pastors to cannibals on the New Britain coast, and in order to prevent further loss of life had given the nod to a concerted show of force which resulted in the burning of many houses and the deaths of nine black people. Although he had been tried and exonerated in criminal and church courts alike, yet in Australia when he went home to raise funds he would hear the accusation follow him round wherever he went. It is a lesson, said Quinn, if one were needed, not to speak of what goes on here to people and in places where they will not understand. Well, Shaw had just returned from such a trip to Australia and New Zealand, only to find two of his children dead of fever. It was a pitiful time for him … and for Mrs Shaw. But the Reverend and Mrs Shaw looked at the note and heard the call. Ferguson had a ship big enough for the task and off he and Shaw went. Shaw landed in New Ireland, to find this ragtag bunch of stick-thin whites in torn overalls, their legs oozing with ulcers. He took one look at the conditions they were living in—most of the supplies used-up, the rest putrefying in the damp tins and boxes —and agreed to evacuate. Before the ship was even half-way to the mission station a man died. He crumpled, Shaw told me, melted before his eyes. Eight more proved beyond help. Yet Shaw's people, thousands of miles from civilisation with nothing much more than faith, cooked and nursed, and eventually hauled fifteen poor Catholics from the brink.

After a month, almost all Shaw's mission supplies for the coming year were used up; some of the men slipped off to take up jobs nearby, while the rest lay about expecting to be fed. Not one converted to the Wesleyan faith, nor did any lift a finger to assist in the work of the mission or pay back what had been done for him. Ferguson was furious. He

took the last few back to their colony and told them they were well enough now to look after themselves.

This was only the first expedition of four, though no one in the New Britannia Archipelago had any way of knowing it. A few months later, a steam whistle interrupted Sunday morning service, and Shaw followed his congregation out of church to find a strange iron ship moored in the roadstead. The skipper landed and introduced himself as Captain Rabardy, 'commander of the second expedition to the colony of the Marquis de Rays'. Before Shaw could begin to consider his response the Captain drew tall and said, 'Well, who are you, sir? And what is your business in New France?'

Rabardy could have had no idea, of course, about Shaw's noble works or all the years he'd been in the islands. The Marquis would never have told him, even if he knew. But that would cut no ice with Shaw, who imagines his reputation – or so Quinn averred – to be greater even than it is. Shaw walked the fellow up the hill and said, 'I don't know whose map you are working from but there's no land round here known by that name except a small bay in New Ireland, where it only figures among a few white men who arrived recently. However–' and the preacher timed these last words for the moment they stepped in front of a coral-stone monument, to which he pointed– 'you will find nine of those men right here.'

A few weeks later, the iron ship dropped anchor in Mioko, and Quinn had his chance to meet this Rabardy of whom he had heard unflattering remarks from Shaw. He invited Rabardy ashore, – though the crew of the iron ship had already declared they had no wish to buy anything, not even a candle – whereupon Rabardy peered round to take in the warehouses, Quinn's bungalow, the garden. He had a way … of answering questions with questions. Before long he knew all about Quinn's little business, about Emma and him and what they'd done in their two years here. And all this without his telling Quinn even one piece of news about the colony, which Quinn knew Rabardy had now seen

with his own eyes. Rabardy quizzed Quinn about the other whites in the islands, how long each had been there and what he knew of their plans. As night fell they retired to the salon. Rabardy left his glass untouched while Quinn refilled his own twice. Then Rabardy sipped in an exaggerated way, as though he were pretending to enjoy it. He asked again about the land, where there were the most or the fewest people. “Finally, my patience wore thin,” said Quinn. “I told him flat – that this wasn’t the plains of America: space was tight, plus the natives weren’t friendly at all. He didn’t ask any more questions after that.”

The next morning Rabardy went to say goodbye and thank Quinn for his hospitality – as if they’d had a delightful evening together. He said he was expecting the third expedition any day. Would Quinn be so good as to direct them on to the colony, he asked? Quinn said he would but the thought didn’t cheer him greatly: ship-loads arriving thick and fast. Hordes of people spreading out all over the landscape, pushing others out of the way just so they could accommodate their own.

After that day he heard nothing of Rabardy for months. The new warehouse arrived. He and his men had to get the frame and walls up quickly – they did not fit together as indicated – then move all of Quinn and Emma’s supplies out of the smaller buildings and take stock. While this was going on they couldn’t afford to lose a trading opportunity with any comers. Frankly, they needed to be in two places at once. Emma had struck bargains with some of the tribes round the northern point of New Ireland. They collected so much copra it was a problem to know where to store the stuff. Meanwhile Emma was peeved with their home and told her Samoans to weave them a traditional bungalow. It was a job to get both constructions up before the rainy season. In between, boats kept going and coming, mostly bringing copra, though many bought supplies … so word reached Mioko from the mission station, or from the Germans to

the west. And news of the arrival of hundreds more Spaniards and Italians with their families in New Ireland.

Quinn knew nothing about what Rabardy had been up to before the third expedition came, nor did he have any idea how long the settlers stayed or what Rabardy did when they left again. They did not meet again until after Kleinschmidt's murder. When the battle was done, the morning was warming up over a flat-calm sea, and while Quinn's friends and allies gathered on the beach to discuss how things had panned out, the iron ship stayed riding at anchor in the same spot. On her deck, a peculiar young lad Quinn hadn't seen before was grasping the mizzen-mast in a desperate embrace. Rabardy sat a few feet away beside the cannon on his stern rail, smoking and staring at the wreckage in the water as the sharks came in.

"It is…" said I "…it must have been strange. Such an end of the matter, and no way of telling..."

"I know. I know. A whole tribe," said Quinn. "But it was they who declared war on us, unprovoked. At least with the whole lot gone there'd be no worries about messy reprisals. Besides, Tolitoro, the very same chief who orchestrated the murders of Shaw's Samoan pastors three years before, fought alongside us as our ally. He spoke with great admiration about Rabardy, in a way one never hears a black man of his standing do." Tolitoro talked and talked, chopping his hands in the air, about the pincer-movement Rabardy devised to drive the tribe out onto the water in their pirogues. But what most captured his imagination seemed to be the sheer ferocity of the barrage: the mechanical gun whirring in a storm of pops, barely pausing as Rabardy loaded and reloaded, until the only movement on the sea was that of bullets pitting the surface.

Tolitoro sent Rabardy a gift the next afternoon to show his appreciation in the traditional way, when Quinn too was on the deck of the *Génil*. Two braves presented the item delicately folded in banana leaves, cooked and still warm. Quinn didn't like to

warn his friend for fear of causing offence. Rabardy peeled back the foliage, and an aroma of fresh pork came off, at which the odd young man, who had also been sitting on deck nearby, crawled away and curled himself up in a hatchway. At the sight of blackened skin Rabardy stepped away as if bitten, while Tolitoro's men watched unsmiling. Then all of a sudden Rabrady rushed at them, seized his present and threw it overboard, where the bundle unravelled as it hit the water and for two days leaves and thigh drifted about on the surface in a little slick of fat.

Rabardy had little sense of what he'd achieved and Quinn had to tell him again and again how grateful everyone was . Reputation is everything here, he said. It's all the chiefs care about too. With the admiration of Tolitoro, who owns lands in New Ireland and the Duke of Yorks as well as several parts of New Britain, Rabardy would have the respect of all the blacks. Everyone would be safer for it. In fact, Tolitoro had taken umbrage at Rabardy's treatment of his present. He declared the captain was badly brought up and swore never to speak to him again. This made no odds, so Quinn didn't mention it. As it was, the whole situation seemed too entirely new to Rabardy. I put his mood down to modesty but there was more to it than that. Such an extraordinary amount had befallen him over such a short space of time in the Pacific that he was still coming to terms with it all. He was in a state of shock.

"I don't suppose," said I, "that what had happened was quite normal for a ship's captain used to trading in French waters, if that was his experience."

"You're right, and that all came out over the next few days," said Quinn. "The days we spent together we grew to know one another so well I believe I could answer almost any question about him, or predict what he might say in any situation you could name. Certain experiences tie people together in ways that can't be undone."

Gradually Quinn learned how Rabardy came to be involved in the colony. Rabardy had been desperate. He was in his late fifties and his name had been besmirched by a

scandal which he did not explain to Quinn but which Quinn could tell was not of Rabardy's making. Unable to find work as a result of this injustice, Rabardy resolved to drink up his final francs and finish the problem for good by stepping off the quay into the darkest corner of Brest harbour. But in the bar a stranger in a velvet cravat bought him wine, kept him talking and in a midnight euphoria congratulated him on his new appointment. Next morning, instead of being heaved dripping from the murk with a boat-hook, Rabardy stood in the garret of a rickety terrace beside an aristocrat, watching his signature dry on a contract which would guarantee him a place in history.

Somehow the project had raised enough funds to run a small nation, or such was the rumour, fanned by a coterie of admirers and administrators, and perfumed with tales of a castle bought in Spain for the colony's orphans. Rabardy said he felt sorry for the Marquis: it always seemed as though the man's ideas had overtaken him. He could conjure with conviction the possibilities of the vast world beyond Europe, which he said lay ready to be grasped by anyone with courage and a sense of adventure. They spent a few afternoons together over the months while Rabardy was waiting for his ship to arrive, looking at charts and volumes of ships' logs by Duperrey, Freycinet, D'Urville and the like, all of whom had anchored at one time or another in the bay chosen for the colony, and written about it with rapture, indifference or disgust. D'Entrecasteaux had stopped in, too, when he was looking for the lost expedition of Lapérouse. Rabardy and the Marquis his employer became convinced the poor French Count must have spent his last night in Port Breton before he vanished, which merely enhanced the feeling that God and history pointed to that spot.

When Rabardy's command arrived she looked much worse than her twenty-five years. One glance at her should have taught him to reconsider. Soon after, the Marquis went missing. Then a secret order came to cancel purchases and follow him in the night. The colonial outfit shifted from Brittany to Belgium, and from there to Barcelona.

Supplies were left behind in ports and it was difficult to keep track. Sometimes, moreover, the Marquis's agents boarded and removed sections of cargo in order to refill the hold with ammunition or machine parts for a mill, or refinery. Once, Rabardy went to complain, only to find the Marquis in a furious gloom among his maps and schedules because the preceding visitor had proved a cathedral with flying buttresses was practically impossible. Men loitered in the *Génil*'s gangways in braided uniforms, cinched at the waist. A famous Italian had been commissioned, apparently, to create the regimentals. The misshapen volunteers strode about the streets in this glamorous apparel and flirted with Barcelona girls. When the order came to leave many of them simply disappeared. Rabardy himself had come to feel so mistrustful of the pretenders who surrounded the Marquis that by the time he left he really couldn't have said why he was going at all. Looking back, he thought perhaps it must have been bloody-mindedness, a refusal to join the promise-breakers. However, once he was signed up to the project and people knew about the fact – well, that was that.

As soon as they sailed, the officers and men on board began to argue, which continued throughout the months-long odyssey south and east round three continents. At coaling stops they slipped away. At Aden in the Red Sea the British harbour-master took fright at their guns, and flashed alarm along the telegraph wires about a ship of communards, seeking to foment revolution across the world. Six weeks later when the *Génil* limped into Singapore with a metre of water in her hold, Rabardy's first mate absconded in a dinghy with three other officers, half the weaponry and all the money.

"You or I might have turned for home at that point," said Quinn. "It would have been the only wise course of action, but Rabardy never entertained the idea. Mostly, he told me, he was relieved to see the troublemakers gone. The prospect of this little chick of a nation scrabbling to its feet hovered often before his mind's eye, along with a gang of men toiling for a year to build it from nothing. He was determined not to let them

down.” By the time the Génil passed out of the heads at Singapore Rabardy was the only man left on board who had begun the journey in Europe.

So when Shaw showed him the coral tomb, described the hovels and informed him he’d find the last dozen stragglers camping in New Ireland, this was only the latest in a series of blows to which Rabardy was accustomed. To be told by arrogant British that his future comrades were mere burdens simply increased his gallic resolve. Rabardy blamed himself for not getting there sooner. By the time he arrived at the colony he felt the sense of duty which springs from being competent. When he saw the short stretch of road, vegetable patch and those collapsing huts, one can only guess at his feelings. Every last piece of useful equipment was already promised to another captain who sailed in the following day and evacuated them.

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If I may be permitted to stop short Quinn’s account for a brief digression, I must point out that in the years since I was obliged by my health and a young family to leave the islands I have often met with men whose confidence in their own abilities and conviction of the idiocy of all others was unshakable, but until a man has faced the mortal decisions, the extremities of pain and devastation which the Pacific islands afford in their uglier moments he can have no idea what he would do or how resourceful he may be. Granted, there are those who arrive and do nothing but sit feeding their own desires in some fat easy spot like bullfrogs, who choose never to meet anything that will test them, but there is between those of us who do differently, who engage with work and play in equal measure, an understanding. There is that which when you have seen it will teach you never to judge, and the moments of which one can look back with pride are not those which would make sense to other men.

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Having watched the last man leave from a project that wasn't worth two sticks on the ground, Rabardy returned to his ship and circumnavigated the island to examine the rest of the terrain. The first time Quinn met him was at the end of this journey of discovery. It had been, he said later, the most exhilarating time of his life. With nothing else to do and weeks to go before the next ship was due, he coasted round New Ireland. Very little flat land was to be found, yet villages occurred at regular intervals, divided by steep slopes and impassable crags, or under dense forest. He moored up many times and spoke to the people in an approximation of their tongues. He has a trick of copying sound patterns, you see, like a mynah bird. For a while he lived his boyhood dream of exploration. But not a single spot rose to view that was both fertile and unclaimed.

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"Well, I knew places of course. Not on New Ireland but in New Britain to our west. These were for him to find for himself, not to be given away so that hundreds of foreigners could take possession and lord it over us – as was their plan. Charity is a dupe's game.

So, when the third expedition arrived Rabardy welcomed to Port Breton hundreds of young Italians who were crestfallen to see not a single of their promised cottages standing. But they rolled up their peasant sleeves and set to work anyway, for as long as this was possible. They constructed a watering hole, stone revetments and a jetty. Many were already weak from the journey; fevers came and stocks ran low. No crops had even been planted although the Marquis's schedule said that wheat – which does not grow in the tropics – should by then have been ready to harvest. Rabardy kept up his hunt and made friends with the local blacks who were, as always, happy to trade their produce for the white men's rare treasures. When sickness stopped progress and the colonists began to starve, Rabardy set his cap for Sydney, loaded up with supplies and turned around in unprecedented time. At Maryborough the *Génil* was impounded for repairs, without

regard for the urgency of the situation or Rabardy's pleas for compassion. By the time he steamed into Port Breton harbour blowing his whistle he found neither the governor nor the governor's ship, nor any white man, woman or child, though new crosses in the cemetery told half of the story.

"It must have set him thinking but he was caught, for in Sydney Rabardy had communicated by wire with the Marquis to arrange funds for his purchases, and the Marquis told him of a fourth expedition, already under steam from Barcelona. He had seen the project fail twice in the chosen spot, and seen enough of our wider region to know there were better places, like here in Mioko or at Port Hunter, where Shaw manages satisfactorily. Everything seemed to Rabardy to hinge on the necessity of finding a more suitable location—the alternative explanation being too tough to stomach—so off he set again around the islands, trading as he went, and that is how, a few weeks before I met him for the second time, he stumbled upon Boero, the strange young man whom he kept beside him like a pet.

"He had sailed east as far as the Solomons, buying trepang and masks. In Bougainville he found land that was flat and fertile but patterned with gardens. The same at Buka … and it was here that, drawing closer to investigate, he happened to notice a white-skinned figure among the canoes which crowded round the ship. Intrigued to see an albino he showed an interest in meeting the man. The Buka chief called the pirogue over, took hold of the passenger's arm and indicated he was for sale. Rabardy saw that the wretch was European and offered one iron axe then two; the chief nodded and pushed the pirogue towards the *Génil*. After a smack on the ear woke him from his stupor, the lad climbed up the ladder, naked and piebald with patches of peeling skin. He began fondling the cleats and ropes. When they dressed and fed him the sailors noticed certain French words catch the mute's ear. They tried more languages

until a phrase in Italian finally sent him weeping to the bow, where he liked to lie all day long, watching the foam curl.

Boero – for that was his name – liked to keep his saviour Rabardy in view. He slept at night in the gangway near the captain's cabin door. Rabardy fed, covered and teased his 'little Italian imbecile'; he seemed always to know where Boero was and what he might need. I think all these experiences left a mark on Rabardy, for good or ill but none more than stumbling upon Boero, witnessing what a man may be reduced to, and the haunting thought of what the poor fellow had endured. I believe it took some time to learn the details. Boero could barely recount a line before folding into a ball.

He had been on that first expedition. A peasant lad from the north of Italy. When the mission failed and they began to starve Boero and the few friends he had still alive purloined a dinghy, and with a few handfuls of ship's biscuit pushed out to sea. They were hill boys. They knew nothing of navigation. The current pulled them so rapidly eastwards that by dawn they had lost sight of land and were carried for days across a broad stretch of sea with no more water than could fill a baler when rain fell on their unprotected backs. At last the tide slid them onto a beach where, overwhelmed with relief that their ordeal was at an end, they drank from a small stream, gorged themselves on fruits and fell asleep on the sand. When they awoke a crowd of blacks surrounded them. For a week the boys were well-fed prisoners, not guessing why till first one and then another was dragged from his hut to be tortured, murdered, cooked and feasted upon. Finally Boero found himself alone. As he lived in horror of his coming end and an agony of loneliness, his very anguish seemed to make him a curiosity. His gaolers no longer fed him as before, but bid him weep in exchange for fruit. Then, God knows how, something chanced to make him laugh, and for a while they ordered him to do that too. Reaching for any means to preserve himself, he danced his Tuscan folk dances and sang good Catholic hymns. Once he was offered human

flesh and recoiled. After that they gave him nothing else, only fingers and toes which hunger finally compelled him to consume. By the time Rabardy rescued him Boero thought he had been trapped in Buka for three years. But the most it could have been was three months.

I heard voices passing outside, quietly spoken Samoans wandering about chattering at night, as they do sometimes, and thought about poor Boero. To be eaten was the nightmare horror of fairy stories, something every child knew was impossible and therefore the fear was a thrill. I couldn't imagine how it must have been for the poor young man. There are things I have done and seen which I cannot forget, much as I would like to. What chance did he have of that? What of Rabardy?

"Do you think," I said, "that Rabardy was affected by what he heard?"

"It was little more than a fortnight after they had brought Boero back to Port Breton that Blohm went to ask Rabardy for his help at Mioko. Perhaps that explains the ferocity with which he dispatched our war-mongering neighbours. Yet he did not show any distress. There wasn't time. There rarely is. The point of my story is that that was Rabardy's moment, as I have told you, after Utuan. He earned himself the gratitude of every man and woman in these islands. I offered him a job. I have no doubt Blohm will have done the same. Had Rabardy accepted either he would have made himself a lot of money by now. I thought he was playing a game of sorts, trying to talk up my proposal. Perhaps it was a good thing he didn't accept, because I started making offers beyond my means while he seemed strangely unmoved. We talked long and swapped stories during the week he was our guest, until he grew morose for such long spells that Emma asked me to get him to go away. Finally he stood up and announced that more colonists were due in New Ireland any day, who would be expecting him to welcome them.

I pointed out how unlikely this was, said that they would hardly stay long anyway, that if he left them to their own devices he wouldn't be the first to do so. He was one of

us now and he didn't owe them anything. It was clear as day to everyone else the whole scheme was a kind of hole to which people were drawn like sheep to a well, only to plunge in headlong. Boero knew it, sitting cross-legged by the stern rail, staring through the balusters. Had Rabardy somehow got it in his head that he could make the Marquis's plan succeed? Because no one, not even he, could be as capable as that.

"Four weeks passed before we heard the *Génil* rumbling round the spit one afternoon and Rabardy's voice in the office next door ordering a load of coal and a length of our stoutest tow rope. I came out and pressed him to stop for a drink. 'What did you get this time?' I asked, as we strode over the lawn. 'Workers? Militia? Not families again?' He nodded to the second and put up his palms wearily to the third.

Only days before – on the basis that not even Frenchmen could be gluttons for so much punishment – Emma and I had wagered there'd be no more settlers. Yet a new ship bobbed in Port Breton, carrying three hundred souls and a new governor. The Marquis was not among them.

Rabardy explained the rope, that he had been tasked with rescuing a vessel adrift somewhere in St George's Channel. The ship was one of two which made up the fourth expedition. With a poor mast and no engine she had been on tow by the other ship when their rope became detached. Emma, who has a nose for the right question, speculated that the governor must have had severe words for his captain when the accident happened. 'No indeed,' said Rabardy. 'The captain and governor are one man.'

"Now this was news. If the Marquis was now promoting ordinary sailors, this might raise Rabardy's expectations for his loyalty being rewarded. But it was really no hope at all, because the master of the *New Brittany*, a Captain Henry who had never seen New France, was there first, promoted to governor over the head of Rabardy who knew the area, could speak the languages, had seen the mistakes and held his station for a year—who in short *was* the colony.

“The more we turned the situation over the more questions it begged: how does a rope become detached, or the captain of a leading vessel fail to notice that his haul is no longer connected? When the *New Brittany* surged forward, released from a great weight, why didn’t Henry go about at once and collect his charge, rather than deserting them to drift about on one of the strongest currents in the Pacific?

Rabardy gave his dry smile at this. Henry, it seems, had not sufficient fuel to go back, only to get to Port Breton—a place where the one thing you know you will never find is coal. For the time of year he came the wrong way round New Ireland. Any Admiralty chart would have told him so. And he came without enough fuel anyway. If coal supplies were as low as Henry claimed, then neither ship would have reached the colony without severing the rope. It was no accident. Henry had made a problem and passed it to Rabardy in double measure, and Rabardy must now hunt between Mioko and China to find his tow and haul her hundred tons using a considerably smaller vessel.

It made me angry, on his behalf. I’d told him there was no future in a settler colony. Holding the fort through all those evacuations, obeying orders, what did he hope to achieve? For whom? If he really thought the Marquis would reward his service, he had his answer now, signed and sealed. Those French fops don’t know how to pick a leader any more than they know how to manage their funds, run a business or survive in the tropics. Only a ship of fools would get a man like Rabardy on board and do nothing with him.

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“I heard his engine at dawn. I looked out and the anchorage was empty. When after a week Rabardy hadn’t reappeared I couldn't have said whether he had gone down like a brave chevalier or was moored up in some quiet bay to smoke with his new friends. There are days in that channel when in spite of every effort you make, a vessel will go backwards instead of forwards. It’s easier to sit and wait for conditions to switch round.

A fortnight later, the *Génil* steamed in without a tow. ‘I’ve been at the mission station,’ Rabardy said, when I caught up with him on the jetty. ‘I couldn’t stand the singing any longer.’

“He’d hunted for two days after leaving us, scanning the islets that dot the stream to our north-west. If the colonists were lucky he knew their ship would stick on a sandbank, if unlucky a reef, and they’d have no defence against anything above a choppy swell. As night dropped the second evening, he spotted a large shadow the shape of a barge under some trees against a lee shore, the final islet in the cluster beyond which lay hundreds of miles of open ocean. He towed them to Port Hunter by snaking around the lee side and coming in from the west. ‘They’ll have to make you governor now,’ said Emma.

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“After six weeks the current turned and Rabardy left to reunite the two halves of the colony. In between times he steamed up and down the coast and across to other islands and showed up here with the finest copra or half a hundredweight of black-edged pearl shell, although he wouldn’t tell me where he got it from. When I asked about the colony he said they were responsible for themselves. A few weeks ago he came through with a nice set of ornamental shields for which I paid him well in credit. He had the little girl with him by then, and several black guards who gave the ship a very serious air. I asked how things were with the new governor and he said that the new governor had gone away to Manila and not come back, that *he* was the new governor. We toasted his promotion. I asked if he’d found his land. ‘I’m looking,’ he said.

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“The man-of-war came through not long afterwards. Our friend Captain de Haughton, who keeps a governmental eye on affairs in the South Pacific, had just pulled anchor in English Cove where the situation looked as grim as ever. Rabardy was away

somewhere with the militia, and there was no sign of the *New Brittany* which should have returned from Manila a fortnight before. The navy lads felt so concerned for those French families, they handed over some of their own rations. De Haughton thought the most that place could ever become was a coaling station. Four or five could probably rub along there, but a hundred or more? The very idea was hare-brained, he said.

"Things continued gloomy, for after Christmas Rabardy came himself to fetch supplies from here. The fever had hit the colony hard and they were losing at least one of their number – from babies to fit young men – every week. Boero had died, which was sad, but a mercy. It seemed an awful unfairness to poor Rabardy: he'd finally got to a place he'd been working towards for so long – all his life, in a way – just when things had turned at the top and were gathering pace downhill. There wasn't anything he could do and what's more, he'd seen it all before.

On New Year's day the *New Brittany* arrived. The ship everyone had given up as lost had returned from the Philippines and was now come to fetch Rabardy. Before I could pull out our bill for their supplies which were already loaded ready to go Captain Henry held up his hand and said he was sorry, but there was no more money left.

"And that was it," said Quinn, "until the day you arrived. Rabardy brought the doctor with him who wanted to speak to Shaw, but Shaw left our party before he could get a chance, so the doctor borrowed one of my dinghies and a pilot to take him to the mission station. He set off at dawn, before you did. The rest of the day, the squeal of Rabardy's men scraping at rust was excruciating from every point of the harbour. He seemed quite cheerful when I stopped by the *Génil* but I noticed how grey and thin he was getting. Later he came to the warehouse and bought more ammunition for his rifle and pistols, and some glass-bead necklaces for the little girl. That's when he finally came clean about his plans. He'd spotted a place on New Britain where there was land which the locals had a *tabu* against, which meant he'd be able to buy a few acres

cheaply for himself and Tani. To that end, and in order to get himself set up in trade goods for the first season, he asked if I would please give him his money in cloth and tobacco and all the usual trade items. ‘So,’ I said, ‘at last you’ve seen reason and shaken off that damned colony.’

‘The colony is over,’ he said. ‘The *Génil* is mine, and I am never going back.’ When I passed later he was sitting out on deck smoking his pipe and translating Little Red Riding Hood to the girl. I called up and invited him to come over later for supper to celebrate.

“Emma was furious. She had taken against Rabardy again. I suppose it was because of the girl being so young, though you’d hamper yourself severely as an employer if you made too much of a stand there. The natives take lovers among themselves as young as they can. The sun was already sinking when we argued about it, and I could see through the salon window the doctor returning from the mission in my dinghy. Soon after, Rabardy sent a message that he was unwell and would not be coming to supper anyway. I went to call on him the next day and that’s when we agreed the arrangements about my assisting with the evacuation.

‘They are going to make me take them to Australia on the *Génil*,’ he said. ‘She isn’t fit for the journey, and I can’t go back. I won’t make it. I’m sick.’ It was true. And it struck me that the one thing about Rabardy was that he had never been sick. Everyone else had their spells, got mined by a spot of fever now and then, but Rabardy never seemed to waver. And since then he has been in the state you see now.

“I took some of the boys and a stout rope and went over to New Ireland in the *Génil* to evacuate the colony. It was sickening, absurd to see what an idiotic project it was. There was so much stuff we were nearly a fortnight just loading it all. Some we left behind. A great system of gears for some incomprehensible machine is still lying over

there in the grass turning to rust. And if the natives on the neighbouring island haven't already eaten them, there's still a pack of dogs too.

"I've never seen so many sick people together. Really, it made me uncomfortable to move among them. But they were quiet at least. My concentration was so directed at the delicate operation of dragging the second ship out of the mud and manoeuvring both vessels out of the small bay that I did not hear anything else until we were pulling out. By then the dogs who had tried to swim out after us had returned to the strand and were barking loudly. We saw the natives from the island running among the buildings we had just left behind. They brought out into the open a few useless objects that had been discarded. Then we heard a striking sound and a louder tearing, and a piece of wall came down, followed by the roof. Rabardy watched inscrutably. He was great friends for some time with the chief of that tribe. No one even looked at Rabardy while he sat on deck, stroking the tassels on his blanket, the young black girl at his feet."

"As we headed out through the channel the hunted look left my passengers, who sat or lay or leaned about the deck gazing across the water like day-trippers enjoying their first view of land from the sea. But the fresh air seemed to make Rabardy worse, not better. He has been, since the moment the evacuation command was given, in the grip of a fever. The heart has gone out of him.

"They look like unfortunates, Beck, and they may make you feel pity, but they hounded him, constantly accusing him of being on the point of abandoning them. If they are victims, that was their choice. It's their nature to do nothing but talk. Talk is vicious, and in their talking they concocted the most vengeful plan. Rabardy wants his ship. It's his by the law of the sea, because he hasn't been paid in such a long time. But it is also the only means of escape for the colonists. Shaw has threatened to report him to the commodore of the British fleet which patrols the south Pacific if he doesn't evacuate the colonists. Rabardy knows that if he gets to Australia the ship will be sold to pay the

colony's creditors, and he won't see a penny. And when they point the finger of blame at him, it will be even worse.

"I've tried to persuade him that he can come back. That he need only deliver his charges to Sydney and return here to live out the rest of his days should he choose. But he says it is not possible, that the British are waiting for him there, that they they will have it all now. He jabbers like a native, saying they've pointed the bone at him. He talks about being eaten—by whom, it isn't clear. By the British, the natives, his own colonists—I cannot tell.

"He guarded that colony unswervingly, went back to it out of duty time and time again when he knew he could have stayed with me. He looked constantly for new lands for them. He is now the means of their escape. Yet they hate him more profoundly than anyone, even the Marquis.

"If it's true the meek inherit the earth then they must do it by wheedling and conniving, spreading lies about the strong, who are the only ones who ever do anything or take responsibility. Give me an honest robber any day over someone who believes they do no harm. You know, in New Britain, if something is stolen from a house it isn't the thief who is held culpable. The wife gets the blame, on the basis she should have been guarding the home and keeping its contents safe. There's an attitude these colonists could have done with. No one but they themselves gave away their wealth to an overblown swindler. Dreams are nothing to admire. Ever wondered why utopias are always such a long way away? Because the dreamer knows his only chance of a better life is to get as far as possible from his own squalor. He wishes he had more money and land and a nicer family and a more interesting life and is convinced the next man has exactly all of that. It takes a certain sort of idiot to blame others for the dustheap of a life you've chosen. Well, some of us get up and go and make our own lives where we can, but that's not—it's absolutely not the same as what these people in all seriousness

thought they could do. You have to do what you can with what you find, use every opportunity,

If these people knew anything they should have seen what they had: someone adaptable, practical, capable of anything they could reasonably ask of him. No one in that ridiculous colony held out for even half the time he has stuck it. He's worked for years to give their wonderland its best chance and how did they reward him? That squashed wretch you now see — that is their only legacy. A solid man transformed into a shadow."

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In the dimness beyond the open door, a small movement gave away the presence of Apoi who must have been standing there a while.

"Master," he said, when at last he saw Quinn looking at him, "Mr Shaw."

Quinn looked at his watch and back at Apoi, astonished. Apoi was holding out a letter.

"Him come before. Him go longtime."

It was close to midnight and the moon had set when I walked back along the shore. Stepping into the shadow around our little barrack-room to mount the steps I almost tripped over my Samoan dormitory mates in the darkness, crouching silently in a circle under the stars.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke to find Donal Quinn standing over my sleeping mat in twilight.

"Beck!" said his silhouette. "Get up!"

Beyond my curtain, the Samoan boys lay sprawled across their pallets as if a giant had hurled them to their deaths. Their breathing caught in the calm that pervaded everything. I pulled on my trousers and shirt, aching from a restless night, and thudded along the corridor after his footsteps to the gloom at the outer door. On the threshold I concluded he must be mad or I still in the throes of feverish hallucinations, to drag me up so early. But there he was: a Quinn-shaped blur crossing the colourless lawn towards the jetty. I trotted down the steps. In the half-light, the iron schooner and the second vessel, the pontoon, were still moored fifty yards apart in the bay, quiet as the hour suggested. By the time I caught up he was sitting in the rowing boat, staring out. I hopped onto the bench and slid the oars into the water.

"Not a splash!" he said.

Below us stretched a landscape of ridges and valleys, as if someone had removed the glassy surface overnight. The paddles dipped and shoals of blue fish scattered under their drops, were sucked down among the pumice rocks and exploded outwards again. Over my shoulder when I turned to navigate, the sketched-out ships developed details. The decks were a mess of bundles. Face-shaped blobs blanched the dim portholes.

Waving me towards the stern ladder, Quinn gestured for quiet. I held on while he climbed upwards past the ship's name – *Génil*, Brest – and disappeared on deck. The metal rung warmed in my fist, and the sun rose rapidly, as it does beside the line, till dancing beams penetrated my eyelids. Hoops of gold frolicked up the sides of the iron screw, brightening the pitted paintwork which had come away in patches like diseased skin.

Up above, a hooded figure under a blanket shuffled ahead of Quinn. Quinn's hand was on the man's shoulder, steering him. At the top of the ladder the man shied back. Quinn leaned across to ease something from his clutch – a box – and a slender shadow squeezed between the two of them and pushed in front. The girl. She grabbed the rails and shinnied downwards in her grass skirt, under a cloud of hair, toes gripping as nimbly as fingers. Her long bead necklaces clacked against the rungs while Quinn and Rabardy descended in silence.

The captain settled on the stern bench, his knees almost touching mine. His were wrapped in a lap-lap of the kind mission boys wear. Red cotton stretched tight between his calves, hairy feet and ankles sticking out below. Beside him sat the girl. Her conker-coloured breasts had only lately ripened from a child's flatness. She was young enough to have been his granddaughter, had their skin colours made a closer match. The air had warmed, but he pulled the blanket tight round his shoulders, embracing the wooden chest on his lap. Glimpses of a white belly, squashed against the sides of the box, showed through the chink in the blanket when the girl fidgeted. Pressing her cheek against his, she rubbed the back of his neck with brown-and-pink fingers, gaze fixed dully at the bilge-water washing up and down below the boards. He narrowed his eyes, soaking up the gesture like an old dog. A dog of sixty, and not a healthy one, for beneath the grey moustache and sideburns his face gleamed yellow, and he was shivering. I hoped the doctor was right about it being only the fever.

As I pushed off, a noise distracted me, a kind of lazy rain. The iron hull was sweating condensation and all along the walkways above, piles of cloth stirred and shifted upright, with human heads. As we drifted towards the bow, gazes held us. They swivelled as we turned alongside, and followed as we passed back beneath the stern.

I began to scull anxiously, like some thief or abductor. The oars felt waterlogged. They thumped as if the surface of the swell were sealed, shafts jamming in the

rowlocks; the blades spattering my passengers. And while I wrestled to regain control under Quinn's glare, a whisper dropped down from overhead, strongly accented.

"Sallow," it said.

I lifted the oars, straining to listen. At the place the whisper came from, two men leaned together.

"Ne-torrent-ça-l'eau."

My sailors' French couldn't make it out. I resumed rowing.

Over the squeaking of rowlocks the message came again. From the same direction as before – but vocalised distinctly this time: "*Nous t'aurons, salaud*!"

Bastard! We're going to get you.

Our passenger sat rigid, a blank look in his eyes.

Quinn reached out a hand beneath my arm to his companion. He closed his palm over the man's fingers, and leaning forward spoke to him with his face so close to my ear I could hear him swallow.

"Pay them no mind," he said.

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Apoi, the black manservant was opening the shutters when we arrived in the salon. A flood of sunlight dazzled a glass on the table, blazed in a pair of empty bottles on the sideboard, and picked out several candles that had melted into hard grey blobs around the room. Apoi bent down beside an upholstered mahogany settle to gather up a last glass from the floor. The green cushions still carried an imprint where someone had been lying down. He took and fluffed them one by one with ceremonial precision.

"Rabardy, this house is your home," said Quinn as Rabardy sank onto the settle, disarranging it again.

I wasn't offered a seat and I didn't take one. A moment later Quinn was gone. Dust lifted and poured between patches of light.

"Look here, Beck, do you mind?" said his voice again, behind me now. "Emma and I have something we've been needing to sort out and it can't wait. You two'll be alright here for half an hour or so, won't you?"

I swung round to see him poised with his hand on the back of a chair.

"We haven't time to join you both," he said. His clothes looked slept-in. "Do you mind?" He beckoned me over. "Don't worry about the warehouse today," he said loudly, and then added low with percussive lip movements: "Keep him here. Yes?"

Emma Quinn stood clutching a portfolio under one arm, long black hair swept up above her narrow features and coffee skin. She told the houseboy to fetch a cloth and basin, and added from the doorway, tightening her sarong. "The doctor has left some medicine. He says the captain is not in any danger."

Captain Rabardy lay with his shirt open and his legs apart as though he had been blown backwards. His thin grey hair was windswept and flattened on one side. The little girl crouched on the floor beside him, watching as one would a newly-lit flame.

"I see," I said.

After they'd gone, the girl dipped a cloth into a bowl of water and dabbed it across the captain's face. Trickles thudded onto the velvet upholstery which dripped in turn a few minutes afterwards onto the floor. She kissed his eyes and forehead noisily and he murmured. I stepped to the window to watch the harbour come to life. When I looked around again the girl had moved across the room and was touching the pedals of the piano, pressing and releasing, stroking the metal with her long toes. I went into the kitchen to find something to eat. The houseboy was preparing a tray.

"Master na misses?" I asked.

“Him kai-kai long office,” said the houseboy, jabbing his head sideways in that direction. In the fresh light he looked smaller than I did; the grey showed up in his hair, as did the strangely youthful muscles on his chest and arms. I asked him to bring more kai-kai in a minute for me and the other master. He nodded and walked outside towards the office on pink soles, gazing at the tray in his hands.

Around his departing shape as the door swung shut the monastic silence ruptured for another morning with distant footsteps and voices on the quay or round the bay, sounds you’d strain to hear individually, each of which infinitesimally pushed back the curtain-spell. The banging of tins, the shaking out of cloths, the splashes of slops poured into the roadstead, ratchety bird-calls. And from below, rising above these, from somewhere out of sight came a low flat noise with an insistent beat. Returning to the salon window I could see the white launch. Figures moved about on board, silhouetted against the glittering roadstead. A man sitting on the bench like a statue got slowly up, unfolding till his head vanished into the awning. He bent down to call from underneath to Quinn’s Samoans on the jetty.

“She’s all I have now,” said Rabardy. I turned round to see he was still lying down and that other than the girl we were alone. I followed his gaze to the corner of the room where she was kneeling on a stool at the piano. She lifted the lid and peered inside.

“My Tani,” he said, softly.

Hearing her name, Tani glanced over at her master with a slight frown and returned to her study. Her arm thrust into the belly of the polished behemoth and her head followed after it until she was invisible above the shoulders.

“She watches out for me,” he said. “A twig breaks and she’s awake, like a dog ready to spring.”

A twang was overlaid by a thud. Tani erupted from the piano and retreated, to curl up behind the stool, rubbing her head. Rabardy’s features were veiled in distraction. Voices

outside drew me to the window where I saw Shaw half way up the lawn speaking with Apoi. Apoi pointed him to the office. Shaw's face was tight and dark looking. He walked with distinct purpose.

"I don't know how Quinn imagines I'd escape, or why," said Rabardy, "with no ship, and no money." Rabardy's cheeks, which were yellow only a few minutes before, had flushed pink. "You can work and work," he went on, "be the brilliant one, the person everyone depends on, but no one wants you to have that fortune. Turn your back a moment only and they will have it from you."

"So, Mr Rabardy," I said. I was beginning to wonder how long I might have to stay, although I didn't want to leave the poor fellow in such a gloom. "Have you ruled out entirely your plan to stay and establish yourself in these islands?"

"It was – until a fortnight past – my only wish."

"It should be easy enough," I said, hoping a little brightness would do the trick, "with a man like Quinn as your friend."

"You think highly of Quinn," said Rabardy.

"I think well of anyone who deserves it," I said." He really seems to have made a great deal of himself, in short time."

"He operates according to certain principles," said Rabardy.

"Well, I haven't been in Mioko long, but what he's done with this place in only a few years I wouldn't have thought possible, let alone without a budget from a government or a big company."

Rabardy shrugged. "Quinn has a simple plan. All the others fool around, doing and undoing, going nowhere. Disasters wash about in their wake, but they notice only to blame someone else. Most people most of the time are a waste of their wages. But Quinn is another species. Companies and colonial offices would be nothing without a

lot of Quinns, and so many Rabardys besides. If one could climb up among the stars and see a clear view down into men's souls there we'd all be, dotted about the surface of the world: the sun never setting on an army of Rabardy-Quinns, each hooked up to his own treadmill. Every one furrowing his groove for as long as he continues to be useful and the harness holds, and he never notices there's anything better to be got than the same old nuts and hay. It is over for me, but Quinn has freed himself and is his own master."

I wanted to tell him that I knew the whole story, that it wasn't his fault that the colony failed, but something held me back: a suspicion that I might not know half the truth, a sense that these were private matters and I didn't like to intrude.

"What are you going to do with your fortune when you have it?" said Rabardy.

His question took me aback. He was testing me. "I've long been ready for my fortune," I said. "Although I'm not so sure it's ready for me. Now and then I catch a glimpse of something on the horizon which I am sure must be my fortune approaching, but then it goes sharp about and steams off again."

"I could have done anything, anything I wanted, but they have taken it all away –" he said, " – my job, my ship, any hope of a future – and if that weren't enough they must tear apart what's left and throw it to the dogs." He turned raw eyes at me, his gaze holding mine for a moment before it slid off in a faraway look of anger, sank to his palms and combusted in a twinge of pain as if he'd found the fingers gone.

The cheeks shone and shoulders shook. I offered my handkerchief. He took it in silence.

"I'm sorry not to be of more help," I said.

I felt for him deeply. There is nothing to compete with the loneliness of failure out in the islands. One cannot be more isolated or more easily forgotten. And the difference between success and devastation may be no more than a small decision made in the moment. There's so little time for reflection – and then so much.

Rabardy drew in a long suck of air, which seemed to alter his mood by degrees.

"You're a good fellow," he said finally. "You seem trustworthy. You can tell me whatever Quinn has asked you to say."

I sat on a carved chair angled sympathetically towards his settle. "Oh no, it's nothing. He merely said you are leaving soon. I'm sorry to hear it." The cushion fell to the floor. "I've left Oceania too," I went on " – more than once, though I always seem to end up back here again, soon enough." He heaved himself up slowly on all fours. I offered him the cushion but he pushed it away. "I know what it can be like – truly." A voice outside caught my attention so I crossed to the window. Shaw was hurrying back to his launch across the grass while his Samoans started the engine. It couldn't have been a social call. I wondered what it was. From down the corridor came the sound of the outer door into the kitchen swinging open and shut.

Somewhere in the kitchen a woman was talking quickly and quietly. A man's lower tones answered, inaudible at first, but the phrases came louder and clearer, and for a while only his voice could be heard. "…No one would buy it….Blohm? …never sell to that man…. depend on that schooner… months of collections scheduled… would owe more than we save."

The words became indistinct again, until she said with force and clarity: "…Will never ask my father for money…"

"Believe me, Emma… if the alternative…"

I felt a blast of heat from my chest. I had told Emma about the job Quinn offered me on his new schooner. And she had asked me what schooner I was talking about. I had caused an argument, if not the problem itself. I had made a situation worse. And there wasn't a job, beyond the one I was doing.

Rabardy was sitting up and staring into the air beyond me.

“There is something you could do,” he said. He coughed and beckoned to Tani, who heaved the mahogany case off the floor and placed it beside him. Rabardy grabbed at his neck, fumbling, face red as if he was choking. Tani’s features were blank as his hand pulled away from his collar, a string hooked over the thumb. He withdrew the length from beneath his shirt until a key dangled, which he inserted, squinting, into the small lock.

“I want you to take this.” He opened the lid. The case was full to the brim with notebooks and old letters. He spoke crossly to Tani. “Everything is shaken up!” She smiled uncomprehendingly from beside his ankles. He began to rummage, taking out sheafs of papers and placing them around himself on the settle.

“The letter is of the most importance. Place it, I beg you, into the correct hands, and not – the incorrect.”

Tani took and passed the letter to me across the remaining space. In looped writing, the address read: “To the Governor of the British Pacific Territories, by hand of the Commander of Her Majesty’s Fleet.” It was sealed.

There was a clattering in the kitchen and Quinn’s voice said, “*Any* circumstances,” before lowering again. Rabardy’s brow ruffled and he returned to his precious case. “… can dissuade him from this ridiculous,” Emma was saying, “… afford a scandal…”

“The letter will make everything right, for everyone.” He looked at Tani. “You understand, Mr Brook?”

A crashing sound as of cups on a tray startled him. Rabardy began to replace the papers in the case, one stack at a time. He focused intently on the task, while his hands moved slowly and unsteadily. He stared at the largest pile, then passed that across to me too.

“The rest are in my cabin. Tani knows where is the key. If anything should happen,” he said, “you will publish immediately.”

Louder sounds from the kitchen indicated that the door had opened.

"…even see that he has any other option…" came Quinn's voice, lowering sharply at the end of the phrase. As his footsteps and Emma's approached along the wooden hallway, the letter and the small stack of papers felt hot on my lap. I quickly stowed them under my chair, behind my feet.

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Quinn carried a small drinks tray, with a pewter cup on it. "The doctor tells me you have not been taking your medicine. How do you expect to recover without medicine?" Rabardy glanced at the cup and snorted. "You need your strength," said Quinn as Emma walked in behind him. There was something in their mood I couldn't quite determine, but they seemed different, colder, after their argument, or after the visit from Shaw.

Rabardy turned to Tani and spoke in her language. She looked at him softly and stood up. He patted his lap. For an instant she seemed to consider her options, then lowered as if onto a precarious branch. Before she was quite seated he wrapped an arm round her neck and buried his face in her hair. She acquiesced, head tilted away from the noisy breaths, arms flopped at her sides.

His voice said, "If you and the doctor like his medicine, why don't you take it?"

Quinn's eyes met Emma's: hardness in hers, impatience in his. He caught my gaze too and mouthed a question. I shrugged and looked back at Rabardy. The Quinns went to sit, and as they did I turned my feet slowly outwards, so as to obscure their view of the space beneath my chair.

"My old friend," said Quinn, "I have been unable to change your mind and after discussing it with Emma I feel I must respect your opinion. Your ideas about living here with Tani and whatever it was about representing the blacks, those things were never going to work. You're determined to go, and we're ready to give you our blessing. However, you said something yesterday that concerns me. I understand you're feeling

cornered and naturally you're taking it hard. But you need to focus on the fight in front of you. It's no good telling tales. No one will care to hear. Especially not when you're under suspicion. All you'll succeed in doing is to cut off the friends you still have."

"You aren't saying anything, Rabardy," said Emma.

Tani fidgeted and climbed off him to go to the window again. Rabardy seemed to stare at a spot somewhere between himself and the floor. His clothes were crumpled and sweaty as if he had sat up from several days' fever wearing them, his face red and damp.

"I want my money," said Rabardy.

"Of course. It's yours. You can have it in trade goods now, or wait. I can't lay my hands on bank-notes as quickly as that, as you know. Remember you asked me to hold it for a rainy day? A person might think Port Breton would have been rainy enough for you."

"Yesterday you wanted me to stay," said Rabardy. "You said you had a job for me, a place I could live with Tani."

"You know I would do anything I could for you." Quinn leaned forward, elbows on knees. "I hope you would never question that. But it's out of my hands."

"I cannot stay now," said Rabardy.

"Don't make this harder,' said Quinn. He turned aside, mouth resting in the cup of his fingers.

Rabardy's eyebrows reared.

"Donal is trying to tell you it's become too complicated," said Emma. "We would have to sacrifice everything we have. And then, how could we help you?"

"I understand," said Rabardy. He sat up straight and lifted his gaze solemnly to the corner of the ceiling where a gecko was hunting flies. "I must be the sacrifice," he said. "Well then, keep the money. It's no use to me. Keep it for Tani."

Emma glared at Quinn. “That’s unfair,” he said.

“Excepting my little Tani, every man or woman alive wishes me dead.” He picked up the pewter cup and turned it around in his hands. Looking inside he seemed to address the liquid therein, as if it showed him like a fortune-teller’s crystal ball those of whom he spoke. “I serve them. I guide them. I trade with, I fight for, I protect them; spend my strength and wit for their behalf, and now nothing. They scrape the meat from my bones and throw me on the fire.”

“You’ve been through the mill, old fellow,” said Quinn. “But you’re not going to change the facts by going on like this.”

Rabardy replaced the cup on the tray.

“I don’t need to change the facts. They speak for themselves.”

“What do you mean?” said Emma.

Rabardy’s silence was inscrutable.

“He’s talking about the colony. No one I know would have put up with what you’ve put up with, or managed to pull off the tricks you’ve conjured to keep that colony going. God knows you deserved better. We owe you, too, Rabardy. You know how much.” Rabardy who had been examining the backs of his hands, began to pick at what appeared to be a sore on his knuckle. “But I can’t help you, my friend,” Quinn went on. “You’re going to have to go with them; you’ve been saying so yourself for days. The point is, even if you do, what’s the worst that can happen? If they have their way you’ll be hauled up to give an account of your conduct. Well, if they try that, be ready and when it’s your turn to speak, throw it all back at them. You’ve got plenty to accuse them with. Besides, we’ll stand by you.” He looked across at Emma, whose expression was cold. “You know what I think?” He said, grabbing Rabardy’s knee and giving it a shake. “I don’t think it’ll even be necessary. They won’t have a hearing. No court in Australia will give a damn about your colony and its affairs, not enough to shoulder the cost of a

trial. Your accusers would have to get you back to France, and that'll be next to impossible. I'm certain the most it'll be is trial by newspaper, somewhere on page two and then the whole thing will blow over."

Quinn turned to Emma who was sitting very tall and still except for a finger which tapped the arm rest. He carried on. "You defend yourself; we help you. When it's blown over and that Marquis fellow is in prison where he should be, you can get another job. A chap like you, anyone would want you. You may even decide to come back to us here, and you'd be very welcome. But you know what, chum? What you mustn't do is try for any more than that."

I began to wonder if my presence was a manoeuvre in some game which no one was about to explain.

"You think the Marquis will go to jail, and I'll be set free?" said Rabardy.

"Of course," said Quinn.

"They will let a Marquis go to jail while I go free?"

"He has a point," said Emma.

"Alright," said Quinn. "You have a point."

"You insult the captain's intelligence," said Emma. "He wants the truth. We know these people. They take the credit when someone else's efforts somehow make their ridiculous ideas work. But with a foul-up like this? The Marquis will withdraw himself as much as possible and, seeing as he's been nine thousand miles away all this time, that won't be difficult. His cronies will say he trusted Rabardy and Rabardy failed him. If I were to make a bet, I'd wager they'll still be claiming this colony was a great idea in five years' time, and that if not for Rabardy it would have worked out fine. I wouldn't put it past them to send more expeditions."

“Very well. I won’t lie to you, Rabardy. The corner you’re in couldn’t get much tighter. And worse is yet to come, old friend.”

“What will it be? A court?”

“There’s a good chance. With so many dead, and all that investment money up in smoke, someone will have to pay.”

“I’ve nowhere to go,” said Rabardy. “I feel sick. I ache as if had been running up a mountainside for days – running all this time towards a safe place, and the place is gone. It never existed. Some vengeful insect has got into my head and eats me. I fought for three years, only for this!’ He stretched out for the cup of medicine with crabby fingers. His eyes tipped back up into gaunt sockets like marbles on a desk. Tani watched him coolly for a moment and handed him the cup. He flopped back onto the settle, his breathing scratchy.

“We need to get him out of here,” said Emma but Quinn wasn’t listening.

“The gall rises in my throat when I think what you’ve been through,” he said. “You’ve given years to a project which didn’t deserve it. No one else did half as much. You judge yourself because you were ordered to stop the evacuations. But if you hadn’t evacuated these people they would have died in that sink-hole. How would that have looked in Europe? So, there’s been another evacuation and he will blame you because you were here and he was not. That’s the way it goes with the rich and powerful. Why do you think it was he never came.”

“They said he would surprise us one day.”

“He took you for a ride, Rabardy. You’re expendable.”

Rabardy started coughing. He was saying something like “tear”, but it was difficult to hear at first.

“He wants water,” I said. I needed to get out of the room, if only for a minute. “I’ll fetch our guest some water.”

***

“There’s a pitcher in the kitchen”, said Emma. “If it’s empty you’ll find water in the well outside. There’s a spring round the back near the pool. Apoi will show you.”

The kitchen door wouldn’t open more than an inch, so I closed it and tried again. It swung easily this time, as if something had been obstructing it the first. Apoi stood a few paces away with his back to me, wiping the front of the range. I said hello and he turned in a slightly exaggerated way and looked surprised to see me. I spotted the pitcher beyond him and reached for the handle. It was empty.

“Water?” I said and then, remembering the pidgin for it, “Warra?”

He nodded, took up two more empty pitchers from a shelf and beckoned me to follow with the one I was holding. I followed automatically. It was just beginning to rain again. Apoi wrapped his arms around himself as if it were snowing and trotted ahead of me along a path flanked by rows of kitchen plants and through a brightly-coloured hedge. His stride was as long as could be accommodated by thighs wrapped tight in a lap-lap. He bent down beside a brick tank several feet across and maybe fifteen feet long. Emma’s swimming pool. A runnel trickled clear water into it from a spring a few feet away. Apoi dipped the pitcher he was carrying into the trickle and let it fill.

“Masta Labbady,” he said. “Him die?”

“No no,” I said. “Rabardy is sick. He’s just very sick.”

Apoi looked at me with narrow eyes. “Me look him,” he said. “Him *die*,” he added, with emphasis. The note rose in his pitcher as water reached the top. He swapped it for

the second one and gestured for me to put my empty vessel down beside the first. “Him no die finish,” he said at last, and I realised we were talking at cross purposes.

“Him no die *finish,”* I said. “Him *die*. That’s all.”

Apoi’s expression agreed.

Stepping back across the dim hallway and through a door, I thought, for a moment I had the wrong room. The blinds were down and a candle had been lit.

“Where did you go?” said Quinn, with an edge in his voice.

“There wasn’t any water. I went to help Apoi fetch some.”

“He’s a houseboy. He doesn’t need help.” Quinn pointed at the settle.

Rabardy was lying with his knees drawn up, hunched and motionless in a posture that reminded me of a rat we poisoned once. His mouth was cracked open and leaking a little from the corner, in a face like wood pulp. Tani knelt behind, her cheek resting on the soft curve of the chair back, watching her own fingers vigorously working at a loose upholstery button. A sound cut across the silence, like wind soughing round the house.

“What happened?” I said, putting down the cup.

“He had a fit,” said Quinn.

“Is he still alive?” I went to him, and bent down. “Rabardy?” His hand was clammy but not cold. The thumb twitched.

Emma and Quinn stayed in their chairs. Everything felt very solemn, as though someone were about to get down and pray. But no one did. Quinn, elbows on knees, gazed down at his own clasped hands. Emma sat upright and watched the room.

Rabardy’s eyes flickered open, showing the whites, then rolled back round until the black re-emerged.

“Brock!” he said. I felt Quinn’s eyes on me. “Thank you for – thank you,” said Rabardy.

“I’ve done nothing,” I said.

Quinn spoke up. “This is probably it, captain.” The soughing wavered mournfully, dipped for a long time, then just when it seemed to have gone completely it resurfaced, accompanied by sticky clacks. “If you’ve anything to say, Rabardy, now would be a good time.”

“Tani!” he said.

Her head popped up, aghast, and watched his hand lift shakily then drop again.

“We’ll look after her,” said Emma. “You needn’t concern yourself.”

Emma turned a palm to the girl, who stood, walked round to her and took it. Her free hand knotted itself in her beads as she looked back first at Rabardy and then quizzically round at all our faces. I thought of what Shaw had told me: that they don’t like sickness. That death by any other means than violent injury they put down to sorcery, to evil spirits.

Rabardy gazed in my direction now, and when the hand lifted again I took it. I looked to Quinn. He shrugged and shook his head. “I tried – and failed,” said Rabardy, gasping between the words, and with a look of amazement as though he were trying to remember what he was supposed to be saying, in the face of the incomprehensible words he heard himself actually saying. “Not one competent man to… to my authority… to shoot the ruffians who…”

Quinn shifted in his chair. He stood up and walked to the cupboard and I could hear the clinking of glasses, a cork being extracted and the sound of pouring.

“It’s ten-thirty,” said Emma.

“What of it?”

“Perhaps Beck would like a glass.”

“Would you like a glass, Beck?”

“No, thank you.” I was kneeling on the floor between Rabardy and my chair. It occurred to me that I had not said any prayers, and the thought made me uncomfortable, as though by my posture I were mocking. When I shifted, my shoes bumped something underneath the chair, and I remembered Rabardy’s papers. I reached round and felt for the pile. It was still there. I groped for the letter on top. It was not. I felt a surge of heat. I looked at Rabardy. His eyes were half closed.

“Should we pray?” I asked, at last.

Emma and Quinn looked at one another. She spoke. “If you wish.”

“I should think that’s the last thing he wants,” said Quinn. “Would you like a prayer, old man?”

“People do, at times like this,” I said. There was a pungent smell. I wondered about getting up, so as to be out of range of his breath, or whatever it was that gave off the odour. The settle thumped and jumped an inch as Rabardy’s leg gave a horse-kick. The motion jettisoned him forwards and would have sent him rolling off the settle had I not caught him. His weight winded me, and required all my strength to heave him back, where he flopped into the valley of the upholstery once more, his face like sunken cake mix. His chest dropped inwards, with a noise like a wave draining back down the shingle.

***

Quinn and Emma came and went, moving softly so as not to disturb the dead, and I hardly heard them. It seemed as though weeks had passed, although it can’t have been as much as an hour before the doctor stood in the dim salon among us. He placed his bag on the ebony table, firing scrutinising glances about the area as he did so, as if to check that nothing his equipment touched might be infectious. He stood above Rabardy, rolling up his shirt sleeves. From behind one of the closed blinds, a shaft of light had sliced into the darkness and swung through a steady trajectory across the floor. It met

the settle, bending and lengthening to cut across Rabardy's feet and to bisect the new arrival as he stood surveying the corpse. Beside the dust-free velvet upholstery and among the polished lamps and chests the doctor's clothing showed smudges, small rips and thinning frays which I had not noticed before.

"Please will you open the blinds?" he said. "I cannot examine my patient in darkness."

Rabardy's eyes and mouth were still half open. A fly took off from somewhere nearby and turned a big loop through the air, buzzing flatly.

"We need to keep him cool," said Quinn.

"One blind for the time being, then," said Emma. She drew it up and the pair of them stood a step away and watched as the doctor yanked first one eyelid open then the other, and pushed down on the chin to squint into Rabardy's mouth.

The Quinns began to talk quietly about what sounded like business: which instructions had been sent to the warehouse and who, if anyone, was going to Utuan today.

The doctor stirred a forearm through his bag and pulled out a small mirror. Once more he raised Rabardy's eyelids, and wedged wide his mouth, catching the light with the mirror so he could see better. He pressed a finger under Rabardy's ear and against his wrist, rummaged again and found a listening tube which he held to Rabardy's chest before he spoke to me.

"Will you help me turn him?"

The corpse was heavy and the fingers cold. I put my hands under his armpits which remained warm and damp. As I hefted his upper body into my embrace, I tried not to look at the eyes. Their faint glimmer made me wonder what sights they saw before their light died. As his head flopped against my shoulder and the doctor's screwed-up face

rested against Rabardy's spine I recalled his superior knowledge of languages and battle tactics, of which Quinn had spoken, and considered how they were now decaying under that unkempt scrag of grey hair. He had come all this way, lived out his half-century and more, and here both ended. His grasp of the world was defunct. It made no difference to me, of course, if I was honest, that he wouldn't see another sunset or sunrise. It was merely that his journey had touched mine. He had travelled from France and I from Australia and somehow we connected, like cables in a spider web. His course had run out alongside mine and now I would resume my progress, one way or another.

"I cannot be sure," said the doctor finally, standing tall and putting his tools away again with an air of speed and precision.

"What do you mean?" said Quinn.

"The only way to be certain he is dead is to wait until rigor mortis has set in."

"Of course he's dead," said Quinn. "Anyone can see that. We don't need a doctor to tell us."

"If he is, I will have to carry out an autopsy."

"Why?"

"To determine cause."

"Do you think he's pretending? That he's waiting for you to leave so I can whisk him away to some sanctuary and keep him safe from you lot? He's been ill for over a fortnight. You yourself told me twenty times of the seriousness of the fever your patients endured in the colony. What of the babies taken ill in an afternoon who were dead by dawn?"

"Captain Rabardy is no child."

"Only yesterday you informed me he was beset by troubles of the spirit, that his own state of mind was making him ill. I don't know what you intend to prove, or what

possible difference it could make. Decay is rapid here in the tropics and we treat our dead accordingly. We don't leave them lying around to become bloated and rot, or cut them up in pieces to feed maggots. The funeral will take place this afternoon."

***

I was sent to fetch the teacher, a Fijian pastor who lived at the far extremity of the woods, and from there I returned to Rabardy's ship with instructions to the colonists and a list of items which I must bring back to the house. At three everything was ready: the priest, a bier, candles and three dinghies which had been fitted out and moored beside the house ready to transport the convoy. It was as dignified a funeral on a beach as I saw in the South Pacific, and this one had been conjured by Quinn in less than five hours. He knew his resources – mango or man, mattock or machine. The instant an idea hatched in his mind the message would go to every quarter of his domain and retrieve whatever was needed. In a place where years wash like sand off a spit, not a moment was wasted.

By three in the afternoon a small catafalque stood on four stout bamboos in the middle of the sandy space between Farrell's house and the sea. Soon a boat drew up: five colonial officers, arriving from the *Génil* uniformed and armed. I never saw such finery, even among British, French or German navies on parade. They stepped onto the jetty in polished boots and marched along the path in formation to stand around the open coffin in which the ex-governor of Port Breton lay, in full dress uniform, hands crossed over his sabre, features placid and dignified. Above us, the sky's deep blue had softened and the day's heat mellowed. Lowering sunlight pressed its warm touch to every face and form like a sympathetic friend. The vegetation buzzed with stirring insects. On his richly decorated bier, surrounded by Europeans and naked kanakas, and Fijian pastors chanting psalms in their sonorous language for the departed, Rabardy seemed no less than some great explorer, fallen at the height of his career. The dinghies were all ready to transport the convoy, the native curates finished their chants, and the

coffin was lifted. When one of them went to close it in an afterthought it hovered for a moment near the doctor who, seizing the moment, lifted the captain's hand and easily bent it. As the casket swung away he reached out for the jaw, pushing other mourners aside. I could see he had difficulty opening it; the joint was set solid. At last he had his symptom of death. A quarter of an hour later we were travelling towards the northern point of Mioko where the cemetery is located. Towards five o' clock a few black crosses emerging out of high grass told us we had arrived. We disembarked. Quinn and Tani. She had been dressed modestly in a lap-lap and a Mary robe which covered and disguised her shape from collar bone to ankle.

The names inscribed on the crosses were European: Kleinschmidt's, the naturalist whose murder Rabardy had avenged; Ferguson who had been killed the day before I arrived, and two steps away a captain whose body had recently been thrown ashore by a storm. Between these tragic graves was dug that of the ex-governor of Port Breton. Tani knelt down beside the open pit and sobbed, as if every shovelful of earth on that coffin lid were piling its weight on her chest. When the protestant curates had addressed the last *mata mata hai maté maté* (mors mortuus est) to the Catholic leader of New France the mourners went silently away. I thought about all four men, and how it is the destiny of so many who run suffocated from the civilised world never to return to it. Many families, deprived of their wild and frustrated sons must never know if they have passed from life to death, or how. This man was the last hope of these people, who longed to return to the world they had left. The sailor who lay interred beside Rabardy was the only other sea captain on the island. They bore their sufferings mutely, waiting for someone to step in and conjure the magic they were themselves unable to produce, which would carry them over 800 leagues to Australia, or 4,500 to home.

As the sun plunged and the sky burned embers at its passing, I rowed one of Quinn's dinghies to transport the mourners back to the main jetty. Few trips were needed, and as

I returned for my second load of passengers I noticed why. Most of the colonists were still on board the ships. On my second trip I noticed the doctor sitting beside me, hands on his lap, staring through the graveyard – so it seemed – to a place beyond it. I thought of how he had reached for the hand of Rabardy one last time and touched his face before the lid closed and the soil rained down. A loud singing broke into our thoughts and a flotilla of local black men passed in their dugouts, with pipes and tambourines. They were Tolitoro's men, got up with brightly-colours feathers in their hair, daubed with red ochre and striped with chalk.

Quinn called them over to the jetty and spoke to Tolitoro, who looked displeased at the interruption to his *duk-duk* festivities. Listening to the white trader Tolitoro's nostrils flared, his mouth puckered, and he let loose a loud rush of vituperation. I remembered then that Tolitoro had fought with pride alongside Rabardy at the Battle of Utuan, and considered Rabardy's treatment of his thank-you gift a grave insult. Clearly, he had refused to attend the captain's funeral.

By the time we were waiting beneath the ladder of the *Génil* I realised who else had been missing. Not one of the colonists in attendance were officers of any other than the military, and even then there were no more than two. Not one sailor had been among them, nor were there more than a handful of civilians though all the colonists had rallied and were moving around on the two ships, where several more uniforms could be seen. And I realised that in all their dreams of returning to France they must have taken one thing for granted – that they would have a captain to take them there. And what despair they must endure to find, when they were so close to safety, their captain gone.

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"Doctor – " I said. He turned to face me, and for a moment seemed to know neither who I was nor where he sat. Then he gathered himself upright and looked sharp.

“Mr Beck,” he said. “How may I be of assistance?” He smiled tightly, eyes diminished by their cavernous sockets.

“It was only that I wished to tell you how sorry I am,” I said.

He looked confused.

“Sorry you have lost a fine man,” I added, anxious not to trespass beyond sympathetic gesture into aggravating his pain. “If there is any way in which I can help – whatever it might be – you have only to ask.” He looked at me, expressionless, and the sentiment condensed in the air between us. I summoned my forces, reminding myself to say what I meant. “I have heard with great interest”, I went on, “of what Captain Rabardy achieved for the colony, in the teeth of adversity, and of how bravely he defended you. Looking after so many people who could not look after themselves must have been a tremendous service to you all. And now your burden must be carried alone. You have lost your protector – and your guide homeward.”

The doctor’s whole brow ruffled into furrows that converged at the top of his nose. His eyes made bright points that seemed to examine mine for some obstruction he was about to remove.

“If you are really of this opinion, Mr Beck,” he said, “then you can have no idea at all.”

We drifted on. I wondered what to say. As I opened my mouth with a platitude half formed on my lips the doctor lunged off his bench right at me and at the same time my head and neck received a violent jolt. I spun round, fists at the ready to return the blow which had come without warning from behind, only to see that our dinghy had bumped against the jetty. I seized the rope, leapt out, pulled tight and waved to my passengers to disembark. Their steps clomped away down the boards as I secured the dinghy to the mooring posts, except for a pair of feet in scuffed brown shoes which waited neatly together beside me.

“I must tell you, Mr Beck,” said the doctor when I looked up, “that to assist these people in their anguish has been my privilege. Were I asked to perform the whole work again, I promise you I should do it.” He stood very straight in his jacket and waistcoat, and I could see that even in the cool of the night shade that had settled across the roadstead, his face was streaked with moisture.

“Of course, doctor,” I said. “I did not mean to suggest that…”

“As for that man of whom you speak,” he went on, “I tell you without exaggeration: he was a cold-blooded murderer who would have eaten every one of us alive if he could, and if I tested his pulse it was because I wanted to make sure he was gone. Everyone you see here and everyone they left dead beneath the sand in Port Breton would have been happier if that twisted satan had never been born, never lived and never came to this hell-hole.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

All night long I drifted into sleep, only to wake myself with a jerk, anxious to check the portfolio. I untied the ribbons and leafed through the journal, tipping it upside down in case the letter fell out. Perhaps Quinn had taken it, but what could I have said? I hadn't meant to make a promise to a dying man, but there it was – and now the fellow was quite dead. After everything Quinn had said about Rabardy, his great reliability and fortitude, I felt dismal and vexed with myself. I began to sink into resignation about my failings, and I thought about the doctor – what he said of Rabardy, and his strange behaviour towards Quinn.

At about five-thirty I gave up the struggle to rest, got dressed and came outside, only to find Emma and Quinn were up before me and in their office with the blinds closed. I went looking for a coffee and found Apoi who shooed me out of the kitchen and passed on their orders that they must not be disturbed. If ever a moment were to occur in which I could carry out the second part of my promise and fetch the rest of Rabardy's papers, this was it. Perhaps to do so much might atone for my failure with the letter – and who knew? Having once gathered everything together I may just as well be able to think of some simple clever remark I could casually make to Quinn, which would result in his handing me back the letter without a thought. It wasn't impossible. On the other hand, I reflected, perhaps if I couldn't think of anything to say and if he didn't give the letter back as such, I had no reason to suppose he wouldn't send it to its destination with all the other missives he despatched week by week. And that was of some comfort. What would I have done, after all, that was any different?

I stood in the hallway, sipping and ruminating on these things, when a voice behind me with a French accent asked for Quinn.

“Ah, doctor!” I said, spinning about to see him hover at the door, “the Quinns are in their office. You won’t see them now for a few hours.”

“Please tell them I wish to speak with them,” he said. And he turned to walk back across the lawn to his dinghy.

“Doctor! May I come with you?”” I said.

He looked quizzical.

I explained. “I have some business on board the *Génil*, regarding a promise I made to Monsieur Rabardy.”

The doctor kept his silence a few moments. “My place is aboard the *Marquis de Rays*” – he indicated the heavy wooden pontoon which the *Génil* had towed behind her when she came into Mioko harbour, and which was now moored fifty yards away. “It has been our hospital for some months. I will be happy to deliver you to the *Génil*, however, if that is what you wish.”

“It is only,” I said, stepping into the dinghy behind him and picking up the oars, “that Rabardy wanted me to collect some papers of his.”

The doctor gave this a moment’s thought. “Mr Quinn has but to ask me or one of the other colonial officers if he wishes to concern himself with M. Rabardy’s affairs. It is the responsibility of M. Chambaud, the notary, to inventory the chattels of the dead.”

“Mr Quinn does not know I am here,” I said.

“I see,” said the doctor.

“It seemed easier to carry out Rabardy’s request without troubling him. Mr Quinn has many other concerns which call for his attention.”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “One does not make success in business by sitting on one’s hands.”

“No.”

“But he likes to keep things–how do you say?–under wraps?”

“You too are a very busy man,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Yesterday you said something about Mr Rabardy, and about the colony.”

“You would like me to explain?”

“He gave me his papers to keep safe; he asked me to fetch more of them and see to it that they get into the right hands. I would like to understand.”

“Are you quite sure you wish to know?” he said. And then when he could see that I did: “I have to check on a few of my patients. Then – if you have time – I will tell you.’

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It was a short crossing from one ship to the other. I carried the doctor’s portmanteau down the ladder for him, and handed it back after he took his place in the stern. He left oarsman’s bench empty for me, from which I took it that I was once more to row. Half-way there we passed a second dinghy making the same journey in reverse, with three young women on board and an old man. The doctor hailed them and they pulled alongside, gripping our gunwales for the duration of a short exchange.

“We have moved our cases to the pontoon,” said one of the girls, speaking in simple enough French that I could understand. “My father is coming back to the *Génil*. We wish to be together.”

“His colour has returned,” said the doctor. “A bit of company will benefit him. Won’t it, Claude?” he said to the old fellow, who smiled vaguely at the doctor’s ear, revealing his gums and only three teeth.

“Some of the others will be coming over later too,” said the girl again. “Chicon said as long as we could make room on the *Génil*, it would be acceptable.”

“No one wants to stay in a place of sickness longer than he must,” agreed the doctor.

The girls smiled and rowed on, with a few loud clanks and scrapes of slipping oars. The doctor went into himself for a while.

An odour told me even before the shadow of that hulking wooden block fell over us, that we were drawing closer to the pontoon. The *Marquis de Rays* was a Chinese junk, a three-masted sailing vessel of some capacity which had been dismasted. Her decks stepped upwards at her bow and stern where the hull curved steeply upwards like a pair of sultan's slippers, so that the best way to board was over the side amidships where a rope ladder awaited us. Half way up, the doctor turned back to me.

"You must wonder why we came to be in Port Breton in the first place – " he said " – why so many self-respecting Frenchmen, Spaniards and Italians would leave our native lands behind and go to a – a hole." He shrugged and took the medicine bag I was handing him, as if it were I who had raised the question. "Quinn made a point of saying," he went on, on the deck, "when he came to evacuate us, that a person has no business transferring his affairs to a place where he lacks the resources to look after himself."

From the waist we entered through what looked like a wooden shack built under the after-deck, and descended into the main body of the ship. Inside, the Marquis de Rays was divided into compartments in traditional style. We passed through a room stacked high with cases. A young woman knelt in front of one, arranging piles of neatly folded clothing around herself like a barricade, before putting them all carefully back and sitting on the lid of the case to press it together and lock.

"You have enough jackets there to last several years, Mademoiselle Pitoy," said the doctor, in his native tongue.

"My father's clothes," she replied. "He was particular about his cloth, and his tailor, and he didn't want to run out, so far from home."

There was a great stack of cases. So many, I wondered if they could possibly be the possessions exclusively of these forty or so who had been retrieved from New Ireland. It took me a few moments, standing back to examine the height and depth of the structure, to see that I was in an open space, many times larger than at first it appeared, divided by a wall of boxes, neatly secured.

An occasional more concentrated whiff of the same mildewy smell which had caught my nostrils in the dinghy stuck in the throat like tar. The portholes had all been propped open, however, letting in long draughts of salty air. Along the inner walls where these draughts passed, wave-shaped tide marks showed where the wood was beginning to dry and where it was still damp. Between the rough beams, tiny rapid movements caught my eye, of polished beetles seething among heaps of gnawed wood meal. It did not seem to me a salubrious place to keep patients. Of these I could see but three now, a young man and two women, on pallet beds spread out in a line along the boards, under blankets. The young man's bare feet stuck out. A fat insect landed on his big toe, buzzed its wings once and stopped. The foot retreated with sudden force under the blanket. Its owner moaned and turned over.

The doctor passed along, speaking to each patient in turn. Their conversations were conducted rapidly in French, in tones that sounded both cheerful and precise. He looked into their eyes and ears, checked their temperatures and examined the supplies left in bottles which stood beside them on the floor.

"Who is looking after these people today?" he said to the young woman.

She told him a young man's name and indicated that the fellow was expected soon.

"M. Quinn told us," she added, "that it would be better for the sick to leave this ship as soon as possible."

"M. Quinn is fond of telling us what to do."

The doctor led me up to the wheelhouse where he invited me to sit on a bench while he took out a pipe cleaner from one of what seemed a great number of waistcoat pockets and proceeded to ram it up and down inside the tube. It was a more pleasant spot to sit where, but for the shade provided by the small roof, we occupied the midpoint of Mioko harbour and her islands, with this little world as panorama above a glittering sea. The Quinns' house nestled half way down the point, where a band of trees protected it from the worst salt spray.

"For Quinn everything lies ahead. We too were like this once. We moved to a new place, to create a life for ourselves. Yet he did not grow up as we did, in the ruins of a nation wrecked by wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions. In such a place, you can work all your life and still not be able to feed your family or be sure of their futures. The father of that young woman in the hold left property consisting of land rights he bought in New Ireland, the building materials he ordered for his country seat, and seeds and young plants for the tropical agriculture concern he planned; all of these items are spoiled or left behind, like Pitoy himself who lies under the sand at Port Breton. Three years ago he was a wealthy man, the epitome of what any ordinary man may aspire to by means of intelligence and hard work. He took an interest in the lectures and publications of the Marquis de Rays, and was so persuaded by this man's vision that he sold the business he had built up over two decades on the Moselle – fourteen barges trading up and downriver from Nancy. He bought with the proceeds a pearl of great price, the reward for all his striving – a future in this colony of peace and simple labour, planting and harvesting, where everyone feared God and those who had succeeded in life would be accorded in society the status they deserved. It is with good reason that we French have a reputation as *casaniers*. Nothing will induce us to leave our homes or our beautiful homeland. A man like Pitoy does not give up everything for nothing, especially not when he has a wife, children, nieces and nephews who depend on him."

He stuffed the bowl of his pipe with cheap American twist tobacco, of the kind we used to trade for native produce. Across the harbour a black boy waded silently out of the water towards a wood stack, creeping low along the strand. Under the trees, a man bent over with his legs astride, bobbing and bashing away at a strip of soil with some tool, while the other hand gripped his lap-lap closed from beneath. Strange to see how quickly a man who has been naked all his life may develop modesty. We watched, mesmerised, for a minute or two. The boy stood upright and hurled a rock at the wood stack, ran after and returned, dangling a small sea-bird by its wing. His friends shrieked with delight at his kill. The doctor reached into another waistcoat pocket and pulled out an antiquated tinderbox. He looked at it and put it away again, resting the pipe unlit on a large dial beside the wheel.

"You have not known war, have you, M. Beck?"

I told him I had witnessed many skirmishes among tribal peoples, sometimes drawn-out bloody conflicts, but of the civilised variety with uniforms and battle formations, none.

"In France we have seen plenty of what you call the civilised kind," said the doctor. "Ten years ago we lost a war with our neighbour, a war we ourselves proposed, in a gesture intended by our emperor to demonstrate the superior strength of France. It was his third such attempt, two campaigns having failed in Mexico and Italy. Our losses at Metz and Sedan crippled us, our emperor was taken prisoner and our capital city laid to siege. Prussian soldiers patrolled our streets, demanding enormous reparations for the pains to which we had put them.

"To an outsider like yourself, I imagine that we and our colonial scheme might appear, under the circumstances in which you find us, almost laughable. I know what Quinn thinks," said the doctor. "I have watched the scorn in his features. A successful man considers unsuccessful men to be less than him. Quinn has a heart, a small one,

enough to bring him over to Port Breton to help us evacuate, but it is soon used up. He and Reverend Shaw judge us harshly."

I drew breath for a defence, but the doctor swatted the air between us.

"You do not need to say anything. I know they are your friends, and perhaps I am too heavy-hearted myself to be fair on them. Though I cannot believe one of my countrymen would ever be so cold.

"However, you asked me to speak of Rabardy, to explain my remarks, and this is not possible unless you can perceive where we came from and why to this place. Every French family on board this ship was crippled to some degree by events of our past decade. The last war and the events that followed brought about the near-total destruction of our nation, once the greatest in Europe, and even this humiliation has been but the latest in a century of self-destruction, as if the only national employment we could sustain with any resolve were to turn upon ourselves and tear one another apart without remission, all-too readily, without external provocation. While our nation was reducing herself to penury and anguish money-grabbing men sailed out into the world and seized it for their own enrichment."

It is strange how, in these days, an event which breaks out in one small corner of the world may have consequences in another, even when the two are so far apart as France and the New Britannia Archipelago. It is as if the world were shrinking, and at the same time the changes were gathering pace so furiously that neither rich nor poor can manage the effects. Many years have passed since this conversation I now recall to you but I have not forgotten the force of the doctor's feelings even if I have spent time researching and recording the details once, when I thought that I might write a story about it. I knew nothing before of the Paris Commune, about which the doctor proceeded to tell me. And the vision of fifty thousand prisoners, and twenty thousand slaughtered in the streets by their own countrymen shocks me still. On both sides, he

said, while we sat on deck in the shade and watched the boat to-ing and fro-ing, were friends, cousins, uncles, nieces of the people we saw before us on the two ships.

"You had reasons to leave. I see that;" I said, "but it seems a very long way to travel on trust."

And so he told me.

After the killing and destruction, dull, weak, ambitious men vied to rule the nothing that remained. Bourbons argued against Orleanists, government against church. Little wonder that a Frenchman might look fondly back upon an age when France ruled Europe, proud in chivalry, blessed and united under a Catholic God.

"If you can conceive as much, perhaps now you will begin to see what an olive branch, a lamp in the darkness the Marquis appeared to these people to be – so different from anyone we had encountered in the longest time," said the doctor, hammering his pipe against the freeboard to loosen the ash.

Charles du Breil de Rays sprang from an ancient family whose all was ripped away in the revolution. Unlike so many others in the years that followed, his father returned from exile to his burned-out ruin of a castle, ransacked of its treasures, built a modern house and settled down on his shrunken estate among those who had but lately tried to destroy all evidence that his bloodline ever existed. Here his son grew up. The young Charles must have known about the former greatness of his family yet instead of looking back he looked east and west and south. He idled his childhood hours at the harbour in Lorient watching vessels come and go into the Atlantic Ocean, and dreamt of following them to their destinations thousands of leagues across the world. At fourteen years of age he caught a gipsy trespassing on the family estate who read his palm and prophesied he would one day be king of a great nation. She knew of his family, and the power of flattery, but her charlatan's insight surely discerned something in his face at that early age, an idea of himself. Her prescience acquitted her of that day's

misdemeanour, but over the boy it exercised a lasting influence. The vision she conjured left him in a conundrum, for no foreseeable course existed by which he might attain the throne of France. He must either dismiss or reconfigure, ask himself whether some undecided region over the sea was his future domain. Of course, in the nineteenth century her promise was not so fanciful as once it might have seemed, yet even so, year by year the wide world with its seemingly limitless possibilities was dwindling as European nations snatched territories. The young man kept his hopes up and his mind open. He worked on a cattle ranch in America; he started a peanut business in Senegal.

A few years ago in a library in Paris I found a copy of the speech which the Marquis gave to a hall in Marseilles when he returned from the wilderness and made his entrance. It was marked up as one of a print run of 500, and had been carefully catalogued and filed away. In front of a crowded room the man who by the time I read his words had been dead many years voiced the pain many felt at the humiliation of their beloved nation. When one looked back at the grandeur of centuries past, so the Marquis said, to Charlemagne and the birth of the Holy Roman Empire, to when the Pope took up his throne in Avignon, and Paris was the cradle of western civilisation, one fact stood out: in those days France walked always hand-in-hand as two – a nation and her Church, each sustaining the other.

It is a cruel irony that those whose hopes have most been crushed will throw themselves the more desperately into new aspirations.

“When everything you have is taken away,” the doctor said, “what do you do with your strength and hours, what do you say to your children? My people were disillusioned by every value to which they had so loyally clung. How can it be that when a man tries to do right, he should receive anything but his just deserts? The new land which the Marquis proposed was to be founded on a promise: no more upheaval, no more destruction, and on the assurance that by doing right one would succeed. Be

loyal to God and this new France, and God will bless your endeavours as he did in the past. Work hard. Be free. Exploit the modern science of the operation of capital."

The Marquis directed his invitations first at investors, to whom he guaranteed ten-fold profits in only a few years, but this could hardly be sustained without men one day going there to live and work, and so he offered the ordinary people of France the peace and simple prosperity they longed for. They had only to embrace a prospect as daunting as it was invigorating, and look with conviction beyond the shores of their native land. The Marquis's agents also enlisted northern Italians and Spanish peasants in great numbers. The privations of these people's lives were such that anything seemed better than lifelong servitude at the hands of lords who kept them close to starvation. They had no rights, knew no freedoms; their only solace was the love of God and their families, but they had resilience and willingness to work hard doing their duty to both. The words of the Marquis spoke to everything they held dear, and gave them hope.

It was fortunate for the Marquis that at the time he sought to launch his colonial project the French government had entered into a quarrel, quite separately, with the church, about education and who should be permitted to mould the intellects of the young. The Jesuits who had instructed France's children for centuries have been exiled. The outrage felt by generations who had the Jesuits to thank for all they knew may be easily imagined. By the time the *New Brittany* left Spain to go to Port Breton a new support was rising for the Marquis in direct response to this situation, even though at the same time a handful of men from the first expedition returned to France from New Ireland and the papers were full of their claims that the colony was a chimera, a swindle.

"Sitting here in this harbour which is as God made it, and surrounded by ocean, rock, sand and forest," the doctor admitted, "it seems indeed that we were foolish to go ahead and trust our lives and futures to the promises of a persuasive man. And yet, by the time we volunteered ourselves to come here the colony had become a serious and complex

institution with every appearance of solidity. A printing press had long been in operation, disseminating the Marquis's ideas in a regular publication. There was even a book, filled with lavish illustrations, from which honest people understandably inferred that many months had been spent studying our future home and its occupants. An anthem had been composed."

He stopped abruptly. A baby screamed on its mother's shoulder, as she walked towards us over the deck, gently bouncing the emaciated creature. He put the little one on his lap and at the next yell took a good look into the wide open mouth. "This is much better," he said. "Keep on with the treatment for a few more days." He lifted the baby up and swung him gently, singing, "New France! New France! New France!"

So many investors embraced the idea of New France that they grouped together to form companies which sold shares on the open market. A society of farmers met to discuss crop rotations and planting plans. A mining company bought quantities of industrial equipment and despatched them on board ships that should have contained rice, salt-beef and axes. They at least were efficient in their aims, which sprang from rumours of copper and gold awaiting exploitation in the hills of Southern New Ireland. Well, those people will see no return on their investment; their money is rusting away on a beach, leaching metals into a landscape that hitherto had none. Nor will they benefit who bought and sent the workings for a mill, which was intended to harness the power of the river to drive machinery. People chose hope and faith, over cynicism and suspicion. There are men and women on board the *Génil* today who still believe the Marquis is coming, to rescue us from his corrupt officers and restore his kingdom.

"I met the man myself only once, to complete a contract of employment. He seemed dignified, polite if a little distracted, and said nothing of consequence that I can recall, though I have sometimes tried to do so. He was increasingly preoccupied, it was said, with meetings and what he called affairs of state. I believe there were many arguments

about what form the new nation should adopt and how it was to be paid for, though there must have been a wealth of money for a time, because the Marquis bought – for future orphans of the colony, he said – a castle in Carmenso, where he took up residence when things became warm with the authorities in France. As much as the Marquis made himself popular by speaking for traditionally-minded folk he made himself in equal measure a pariah with the government he disparaged, who were from the outset doubtful of his intentions. It was at about the time he adopted the title of King Charles I of Oceania that he found it prudent to repair to the sanctuary of his Spanish castle, in a country wholly more sympathetic to his purposes. By the time we, the fourth expedition, set sail from Barcelona he was seldom to be seen in person partaking in the day-to-day administrative planning of the colony.

"Truly, doctor, this Marquis you speak of is a strange man. I cannot distinguish how much he intended at the outset to enrich himself at others' expense and how much it came about by accident. I came to ask you about Rabardy, and I have already spoken to Quinn, who knew him well. I was shocked by what you said of him yesterday. Nothing of what you have yet said dissuades me from my opinion of him, that Rabardy was as much taken in as any of you by the same Marquis, and suffered great injustice at his hands. I am gripped, even so. Please tell me more."

"I will come to Rabardy, I promise, but I must get to him through our journey. You will see why. I may tell you I have been keeping notes about every detail, for when I return to Paris which I intend to do as soon as I am able, I aim to publish a book which will finally expose the Marquis and bring to an end all further talk of his schemes."

"Please go on," I said. "I have a little longer before I must return to the warehouse."

"We waited months at Barcelona. When we crossed the Mediterranean at last and sailed through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, our skipper, Captain Henry who had brought his wife with him, began to argue with the highest-ranking colonial officials on

board, in particular the notary Chambaud. We moored in Aden, a desert settlement of unbearable heat, with two low hills which proved to be, on closer inspection, enormous piles of bones. In Ceylon the heat was no less denaturing but in the manner of a steamer rather than a bread oven, lush with dark vegetation. While we took on fresh fruit, vegetables and water, Captain Henry returned from the telegraph machine at the harbour offices with news from the Marquis. The third expedition, which had left six months before us on board *The India*, had deserted the colony and removed as one to New Caledonia. We should find the place empty and must start our new lives there alone. Whilst denunciations of our Marquis and his scheme were news to no one, criticisms had been until now easy to dismiss as the envy of timid stay-at-homes. We had told ourselves that the reason why the first expedition evacuated was because their passengers were only ever temporary workers and restless young men, but we knew the third expedition was composed, like ours, of families. Over three hundred people sailed on board that vessel, of every age, and both sexes. Although their party consisted of peasants from northern Italy and Spain, all had travelled to New Ireland without imagining that either they or their children or their children's children would ever need to return. Those without money to invest had indentured themselves and their children for ten years' labour on behalf of the colony, in exchange for a little cottage each. When the stragglers of the first expedition returned to France, the Marquis blamed the men, calling them layabouts, parasites and traitors. We could not in honesty dismiss the evacuation of *The India* with such an imputation. They would not have undertaken the journey lightly, and like us they would have severed the ties they left behind.

"With the evacuation the colony was left without a governor. It was small consolation that the Marquis did not select his closest ally, Chambaud, as his replacement, for Chambaud antagonised even the most level-headed and accommodating of us in something like the way a spider will, merely by crouching on

its web. Instead – perhaps in order to retain him – the Marquis gave command to Henry. The mood changed on board the *Nouvelle Bretagne*. Henry took stock of the supplies, went over all the colonial arrangements, and began a campaign which lasted from Ceylon to Singapore: to persuade every single one of us to leave the ship and return home.

"It is easy enough to see now, looking back, that Henry was right. There's not a man, woman or child who wouldn't have done better to get off that ship in Singapore and go home, even if to do so meant losing every last rag of money and dignity. Even in penury they could all have counted themselves more fortunate than they do now. There is nothing like watching loved ones die to clarify a person's perspective. But the higher one climbs to moral heights, in public view, the harder it is to climb down. Instead a rumour began to spread that Henry was engaged in a plot, to deprive the colonists of their places in paradise—that he wanted the land and opportunities for himself.

"We left Singapore a month later with rice and coffee beans, biscuit and bully beef, a gang of Chinese carpenters, another of Malay fishermen, a building in sections that could be erected on its own frame in a few hours and, at the end of a stout tow rope, a Chinese pontoon to accommodate it all. Henry had abandoned resistance and applied himself to the task of sustaining the little colony at our journey's end. We were for the first time united in purpose and in the happy privacy of our expectations. Crates of Pitoy's tiny date palms and banana plants stood out on the decks of both ships in all but the worst weather, provoking sailors to curse the obstruction in indecipherable tongues. Our militia men in their beautiful uniforms, dreaming of life as soldier-farmers and of battles against marauding savages, likewise protested their right to drill on deck unimpeded, between cages which scratched and flapped regardless, clucked and quacked, as Pitoy's flock steamed to its dynastic future on his estate. Young Lorenzo checked the temperature of his wines and beers in the hold, bought from the cheapest

wholesaler in Singapore, and expounded on the finer details of the hospitality he would offer to ladies and gentlemen when his establishment, which already had the personal blessing of the Marquis, became as prestigious as The Raffles Hotel. On board the Nouvelle Bretagne we watched our wake rise, fall and divide around the bow of the second vessel. And little children waved at their fellow passengers across the water.

"In bad weather, we crowded into the salon, where a judge named Tilmont polished his rifles and talked of hunting and of the magnificent domain to which he was bound with his sons and daughter, with its woods sloping east and west astride a little river. Never to be outdone, Pitoy gathered his children who knew so well what he was going to say that they would call out and correct him if he missed a detail: "Our house will be here, on this little promontory, facing east towards the morning sun. Our garden will rise in terraced levels, with flowers here, and orchard on every side, and precious sweet fruits all year round for my dear little Emilie." Emilie would squeal and jump off his lap, for it was the cue for a tickling, and Pitoy would return to his volume on the principles of tropical agriculture, allowing the children before he put the precious document away, a few minutes alone with the map for their dolls to explore and adventure over it.

"Our approach to the colony brought us east through the Celebes where we stopped for wood and water and bought more fruits. East and then south they steamed into St George's Channel at last, New Ireland to our larboard, her rocky spine two thousand feet above the sea. As the volcanoes of New Britain emerged on the horizon the sea appeared to change character. High waves jolted as wind argued with flow, creating a current that pushed us back northwards as fast as our propeller could drive the two ships south. The screw made noises like a cow giving birth and the view on either side froze with many miles yet to go, until a sailor jumped down from the mast, walked smartly to the stern, leaned out and flashed a knife. Two of his fellows pulled him back but he

grinned a toothless smile, for he had severed a strand of the tow. We watched helplessly as one by one the others gave way. And there was the *Marquis de Rays*, two hundred yards behind us, floating free.

"The cry went up to turn back. Henry asked how much coal we had and, on being told there was enough to get the *New Brittany* to her destination but no more, remembered: 'Captain Rabardy of the *Génil* will be waiting for us. He can retrieve the pontoon while we unload. Our friends won't be alone for long.' He was thinking, of course, that it was better to get one ship to safety than risk losing both. We gesticulated to the crew on the bow of our sister ship, who were already tiny figures beckoning and staring back. We watched one another till they had shrunk from sight.

"Four hours later when the cry went up that our destination was near, we felt only anxiety for what we might find. The arguments en route, news of the colony's desertion, the great expenditure in Singapore, such things taxed the spirits. Now, with half our party and supplies adrift on the seas, no certainty we should ever see either again, and not enough coal to travel beyond this point, there was, on the faces of those who did not wear a mask for the sake of their children, a look that switched between curiosity and foreboding. After many months – for some people, indeed, more than a year of preparation – we would finally step onto the ground of the place which had been the talk of France, the land towards which all our work and passion had been directed. We would see the real place, beyond the speculation, and we hoped it would be alright, for we had nowhere else to go.

"From the sea, the coast is an unbroken expanse of dark green, with shapes of lighter or deeper tone testifying to the limestone forms beneath. At its base the waves lash the rock itself and the salt spray rubs it smooth and licks out holes and tunnels. Here and there an inlet or cove embraces a narrow beach of white sand but over all the trees lean out, sending their roots into holes and opening their canopies out over every square

metre available. The engine slowed beside a grassy slope where an open reach of water made the slope into an island. This was Lambom. As Henry turned the *New Brittany* into the bay the crew were sent to every rail, pushing passengers aside so that they could squint down into the water for reefs and submerged rocks. We edged on gingerly. A promontory seemed to lurch forwards and then slide back to retreat behind. To our right all pasture, to our left a beach, cut off by a vertical rock face. Crew members on the larboard bow threw up their arms and shouted. Henry cut the engine and an anchor was thrown quickly from either end of the ship. The harbour of our future capital was too narrow to enter safely.

"Of this detail the colonists seemed oblivious. They gazed ahead, twisting and shoving to try to catch a glimpse of the colony. Some looked backwards to the beach, now behind us, with its little gathering of black crosses, twenty or more. Half-filling the roadstead before us a pale ship waited. The *Génil* was here, at least. Henry gave three long blasts on the ship's whistle to announce our presence. There were no movements on the other ship. Beside her English Cove extended left and Irish to the right like an outstretched thumb and forefinger, so that it was impossible to see to the limit of either from where we sat. Wherever we looked we saw trees. A wall of impenetrable vegetation. Virgin forest. There was not a street or a warehouse to be seen, not a cathedral in sight.

"You may perhaps think, Mr Beck, that my people were foolish to imagine it could be any other way. Now that the facts are known, this is clear. But you must permit them the pain of discovery and disillusionment. There are men who would sell a lie to anyone foolish enough to part with their money or hard work. But no such man was among my companions on board that ship.

"A commotion to our right broke the spell. A pirogue. Six naked braves, dark as mahogany, were paddling towards us in perfect synchronicity from the offshore island, a

seventh man sitting arms folded in their midst. I had until that point never seen a vessel powered by men move at such a terrific pace, cutting through the water. If we feared being trapped before, it was nothing compared to this moment, when we looked with new terror at the motionless ship at the far end of the roadstead. We could not have travelled through any of the ports we visited for such a length of time without hearing stories. No sooner had we answered the usual questions about our destination than out they would trot. The people were cannibals to a man, said the folk wisdom. Ships along these coasts were often overwhelmed by armed blacks who swarmed over the sides, killed all on board and ransacked every movable item of use or value, to leave the ship a ghost, tilting at anchor where months later it would be discovered by some other vessel looking for wood and water.

"Beyond the pirogue on the inward-facing shore could be glimpsed a group of huts, a dozen or more, the native village. If this was our new home, it was clearly already someone else's, and the neighbours might not be as friendly as the publicity suggested. Once again, Henry's leadership was tested. He remained calm, ordering the people to stand back. Before they could do so, the pirogue drew up alongside our stern ladder and the sound of naked feet could be heard, clambering at pace up the rungs. One set of feet. At least it was only one. A black face appeared at the top where a small crowd had been gathered to get a good view on our arrival. They cleared aside as if at the sight of the pestilence itself, and looked anxiously to Henry who nodded approval. The man wore a string belt, a few bands on his upper arm, and nothing else. He looked from one side to the other and strode confidently down to the main deck where the largest crowd awaited. Henry stepped forward and bowed. The black tilted his head and drew from the string belt behind him a piece of paper. He held it aloft for the crowd to see, and presented it to Henry with a broad sweep of the wrist. Henry read silently. He nodded at the man and waved two of his crew to the salon.

“Henry said he was pleased to make Maragano’s acquaintance. Maragano smiled and waited, arms folded again. Children began to whisper.

“The men brought a case of the captain’s finest cigars which Henry opened to offer one. Maragano grabbed both sides of the box, snapped down the lid, stuffed the lot under one arm and hurried off the way he had come. Moments later his pirogue was powering back towards Lambom.

“Henry read out the letter of introduction for everyone to hear, ‘I am Maragano, King of Lambom and everywhere else. I take whatever I’m given without giving anything in return. I really am a penny-pinching Papuan. It is signed,’ he went on, “Gustave Rabardy.”

“Someone shouted from the bow and we turned to look. A white man in a dinghy was rowing towards us from the pale ship. Even from a distance we could see he was wearing the peaked hat of a captain, and as he drew closer we saw the glimmer of braided epaulettes on an officer’s jacket. When he looked round to steer we caught clear sight of his grey moustaches. He was clipped and shaved. He wore gloves. Captain Rabardy, of the second expedition. We had probably all seen his image printed alongside many others in the journal, but had given it little importance hitherto. We knew that his iron schooner, the *Génil*, had sailed a year after the first expedition. He was sent to bring equipment and militiamen to the colony. When the first expedition evacuated, he did not. The third had come and gone, but he had not. Captain Rabardy was still here. He had survived and held the fort for eighteen months, and he looked perfectly civilised, fit and in good health. It took him several minutes to row out to us. Half way across the bay he paused to tug his sleeves out from the cuffs and swipe at something on the back of his neck. We were not alone. We had a pilot.

“I will always remember his greeting, in every detail of the pale light on his uniform and the sounds in that moment when the whole crowd waited, water lapping around his

dinghy, the scent of coal dust from our engines mixing with the damp air of the place. Did he know how he held our pasts, presents, futures, our very souls in his hands? He had made the same journey, encountered the same troubles on his way, witnessed the same crushing view at the end of it all, kept the faith. Captain Rabardy shipped his oars, wiped a finger under his nose, raised himself upright off the bench and observed the hundreds of faces hovering. He chewed something and spat it out into the water.

"Wretches!" he shouted. "What on earth have you come here for?"

"I know," I said, "that Rabardy's welcome must have been a great shock to you all, but he had watched the first evacuation and witnessed the collapse and removal of the third. It seems to me understandable he would have reservations when he saw you. You brought women and children and old people. Would he not consider these a burden?"

"Had Rabardy not also passed through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean? Did he not know the trials we faced? No. Rabardy was not what you think, M. Beck. He steered us past every submerged rock and madrepore, speaking loudly about the colony to which we had come. 'You'll find fresh water in the watering hole which the Italians built – before fever and hunger got to them,' he said. 'There are two wooden buildings. Both leak,' he said. 'Over there is the only level ground. There's very little soil – and it rains all the time.' He loved every minute of the theatre, as he sowed his despair into the already stricken hearts of the new arrivals.

"Myself, I was glad to get rid of him. And get rid of him we did, but not before he had pitilessly watched the colonists wandering about the hillsides with their maps. Pitoy, for example, with his family in tow, suddenly shouted Rabardy's name. He was a big man, who looked more like a blacksmith than a businessman," said the doctor, "and everyone thought he was going to strike Rabardy. 'Monsieur,' Pitoy said, shaking as he did so, 'Where is my land?' Rabardy began to speak, but Pitoy roared over him. His wife and children seized his arms. He tore himself out of their grasp and sobbed against a tree, hitting the bole with his fists and head.

"This gave Henry his cue to accost Rabardy too, about items of equipment which had never been unloaded from Rabardy's ship. 'You knew we were coming, yet you've done

nothing to render these buildings habitable,' he said. Rabardy floundered, jabbered that he had had barely enough men to maintain his own ship."

"So, he sent Rabardy to find the *Marquis de Rays*?"

"Yes, he did. And for a while we were happy.

The Doctor seemed determined to blame Rabardy for the piteous state of the colony, though I had heard nothing conclusive. My question was an attempt to suggest that Rabardy's might have been the only cool head amidst the general ineptitude and despair. But the Doctor continued, speaking of the cheerful busyness which settled over the colony in Rabardy's absence. A week gave way to two, then four. At last, the trader Blohm stopped by from the Duke of York Islands where he said he had seen both ships waiting for the current to turn. Rain was falling in torrents when they returned – the Doctor continued as if Rabardy might also have been responsible for the rain.

Rabardy – the Doctor recalled with care – was in the front row for the mass of thanksgiving offered the following morning over the fleet, with a strange young man beside him who fidgeted through the hymns like a child. When Abbé Denis lifted the host towards a blue sky for the sacrament, the cannon fired three blasts. Its echo resounding around the rocky harbour seemed to announce a long-awaited turn-up in our fortunes. Thanks to Rabardy, however, this soon proved to be just another illusion. Within a day of his return we all knew about how the leaders of the first expedition had deserted their men and left them to the mercy of a black village and some Wesleyan missionaries. And we had heard of Boero's story. Rabardy liked to call Boero out on display when he told it, and the discomfort on the young man's face was undeniable. Boero's piteous fate made the colonists look with new eyes at the blacks beside whom we lived. His life, which consisted now of lying under the steps, stroking wood-grain and coiling ropes, was hardly worth the word, yet only the caprices of fate separated his

state from ours. The certainties my colleagues once enjoyed of their places in the world diminished with each new revelation. And Rabardy had no need to tell us any of it.

Such had the mood altered that when Henry left for Manila, a number even suspected Henry's motives. Funds from the Marquis were waiting at a bank there, he said, our supplies would not last more than three months and the return journey might take half that time. He promised to return, gave Rabardy firm instructions not to move the colony until he returned, and agreed with him and the militia that a programme of conquests should be considered, if they found anywhere where the land was suitable. Our hearts sank to watch him leave. He had earned our trust; but for many, a spectre had been raised: perhaps we had been brought out here in order to be abandoned.

As our new governor, Rabardy gave a short speech about how we were all to face the future together. He told us we need have no fear for our safety because he was known all across Melanesia as a ferocious warrior chief, and no one would dare to hurt us as long as he was here.

On the third day, as Rabardy made his visit to the grande maison to discuss projects, it was pointed out to him that no one knew who owned the land they were working, and that it was galling to break one's back merely to enrich some stranger. Duly Rabardy set off along the shore towards Chambaud's house to ask the notary to apportion the land. Some shook their heads but others maintained if Rabardy could persuade Chambaud to stop following secret directives from the Marquis, we might finally be able to help ourselves. The evening shadow dropped over the roadstead. Under heavy clouds the only light glowed in Chambaud's house. When at last footsteps sounded along the path and Rabardy's dinghy splashed back to his ship, Pitoy said, 'I know now how this will go.'

And so the farcical displays began and every morning for a week Rabardy made the same journey to Chambaud's cottage, returning in the afternoon. He did not speak to us

– nor we to him. Finally, a grand ceremony was held on board the *Génil* to which we were all invited as witnesses. Our governor addressed us. The notary Chambaud waited behind a desk, papers and ink before him. A roll of red cotton, packets of tobacco and clay pipes lay on a table guarded by two militiamen. Maragano made his entrance, a string around his waist and a straw through his nose, braves on either side. Rabardy spoke to him with the solemnity of a marriage rite.

'Maragano, king of Lambom, who was your grandfather? Are you his rightful heir? Is it true that your grandfather was king of this whole island?' And then he spoke again in Maragano's own tongue. Finally he turned back to his audience and announced, 'Maragano will now sign over the territory of New Ireland to the rule and ownership of King Charles I of Oceania.' This with such a showman's flourish that the crowd applauded, in spite of themselves. Maragano scratched his cross on the document and turned to the soldiers, who nodded. He and his braves snatched the treasures, and within a minute they were back on Lambom.

We could not understand it: if the Marquis did not own this land, what was it that all those people had bought with their life savings? Rabardy told us it was to tie up a legal issue, so that Chambaud could divide and register the land. From dawn to dusk, however, we saw no Chambaud. Once in a while, Mme Chambaud or her maid would step along the shore with young master to collect water or buy from the native pirogues which pulled up in the main curve of the bay to sell fruits and cabbages, a turtle or a large snake.

And then the *Génil* started her engine and Rabardy steamed away. Pitoy became agitated about what we were going to do, now that both captains had abandoned us to the mercy of savages. Can't you see? he was saying. This is the Marquis's plan. They have sold us land which does not exist and sent us here to die. They have our money. Dead men tell no tales.

Two days later when Rabardy returned, Pitoy marched out to accost him. He came back saying Rabardy had been looking for a new site for the colony and that he had offered to take Pitoy inland, upriver, to reassure him. 'I believe I will find my land after all,' Pitoy had said. A few accompanied Rabardy on these excursions. They steamed many miles, but found nothing of any worth.

The morning they left for Buka, the priest was called out to bless the *Génil*. When he had sprinkled and made the sign of the cross over their bowed heads, Rabardy strode out from the wheelhouse, in full uniform. He gave a short speech declaring that the colony was coming to fruition. The intention had always been to expand. Now we had the capability to do so. A verse of the colonial hymn played on a bugle while flags were raised. Personally, I don't know what he thought he was achieving. Rabardy could not move the colony, without Henry's say-so and I believe – so the Doctor insisted – Rabardy was steaming around at the colony's expense, trading in goods for his own profit.

The Doctor paused momentarily. Perhaps he had noticed some discomfiture on my part. As if to underline the veracity of his account he continued more colourfully – the colours of New France dangled listlessly. The engine coughed out a cloud and the *Génil* chuntered forwards and back in tight turns – literary flourishes that only suggested to me a story that had been well recited. But I resolved to keep my council. I begged him to continue and through the rest of his story I remained silent.

We waved through vapour at the brave men on board, said the Doctor, the *Génil* attained the channel, her bunting flapped and the ship growled out of sight. The sergeant who had been left behind to guard us, sat cleaning his rifle for a long time. This whole incident was the second grand plan of Rabardy's. Do you see?

We passed the days as best we could, waking late for a coffee without bread, getting up to fetch firewood or hunt for a pigeon, or to catch some fish. Rationing had begun,

and our thoughts turned often to food. For some of the morning a few of the men went through the routine of discussing cultivation but little was achieved – the conditions in which we had been left by Rabardy were just so awful – and as the heat increased through the afternoon we slept and waited for evening.

It was in the middle of such an afternoon that somehow, above the whirr of insects and bird chatter we could hear – or feel – a low creeping, a swish of vegetation, and perhaps the crack of a twig. None but the very sick slept deeply in Port Breton. Someone outside the grande maison hissed and at once men leapt up, instinctively seizing whatever weapon came to hand and headed for the door. The footsteps seemed to canter now on every side, closing in. Perceiving we should be under attack as soon as we opened the door, some left by a flap at the back of the building and the rest waited, then threw open the door and burst outside. Something whistled. A stone thumped to the ground. As our sight adjusted to the bright daylight we saw a circle of blacks creeping towards us from the shore. They bore stone clubs. The sergeant took his rifle and fired one shot into the air. The blacks startled and ran into the bushes, though not before some had looped back to the little stand of bushes where our washing was hanging to dry. They snatched armfuls of clothing and escaped out of sight.

Our relief at the departure of these strangers gave way to fear and anxiety. To them we were prey. Would they not try again? And with each new attempt learn our weaknesses? The attack had come in daylight. Could parents ever again allow their children to stray? Could the young be permitted to continue speaking to Maragano's people with the easy friendship they had always felt before?

It is one thing to pity from afar savages who are ignorant of the benefits of civilisation and the forgiveness of Christ, but when these savages bear down intent to turn you into their next meal, kindness and sympathy vanish. We were thankful to our

sergeant – and for once to Rabardy – who at least had the foresight to leave us with one protector.

When Maragano pulled up his pirogue in the shallows the following morning he did not seem surprised to hear of events the day before. ‘Men-busch,’ he said, indicating the interior of the island. ‘No good.’

Later the sergeant asked if any of us had seen Maragano yesterday or his people. Every day at least one canoe floated in the harbour somewhere. Others would cross from shore to shore, visiting their satellite gardens. They occupied the roadstead to such an extent that other tribes never came to sell us their wares. On the day of the attack, however, Maragano’s people were not seen.

Locked as we were in this damp cove a thousand miles from civilisation, predated upon by savages, anywhere was beginning to look preferable to the vision we had declared and fought for, and on which we had spent ourselves. Rabardy had told us, again and again, that there was no more agreeable spot on the island which had not already been occupied and cultivated. People were beginning to say that Rabardy liked black savages more than his own kind. I believe those people were correct.

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One day a British naval vessel glided into the cove. Maragano and the captain shook hands as if they had met before and Maragano’s men offered them fruit for sale of a much finer quality than than anything he had shown us for a while. The captain asked after our progress, observing that the *Marquis de Rays* did not look fit for lengthy navigation. We explained that more ships were expected back any day. The captain said it was common knowledge the difficulties we had been having and shortly before they left he made a gift of several boxes of their own supplies. The British sailors waved as they pulled up anchor.

When the next afternoon the *Génil* rounded the point our whole colony came down to the shore to greet the her. Our sergeant stepped forward to greet his captain when the dinghy shuttled to the shore.

'Is all well?' asked the captain.

'As well as can be expected. What of you and the men?'

'Unharmed.'

There was a whistling and shouting from the ship and when we looked we saw a number of blacks being led out, their hands tied. Rabardy instructed them to kneel in a line. Ten were young men, the last an immature girl.

'Who are these?' asked the sergeant.

'Slaves,' came the answer. 'Rabardy bought them.'

News of the attack momentarily distracted attention from this strange cargo. Rabardy was furious: he too was certain that Maragano must have been somehow complicit. But then Rabardy was asked directly about the blacks by one of our senior landowners, a very religious man. He explained, casually, that we needed labour for cultivation and building work, that Henry had said as much when he left and here were men who knew how to build, and what would grow in this climate. As for the money, he went on, every scrap of the trade goods he had handed over was his own, earned by his own hard work, and if men such as Tilmont wanted assistance he could buy a man for F500.

Well, two died that morning – an old man and a one year-old baby who was so undernourished she looked six months at most. The *Marquis de Rays* was soon so full that I instructed new patients to stay in their quarters and extended my visits to the shore. This was when I heard about Maragano. He had come to visit Rabardy but was sent away, then he came back with a pig and two chickens. Rabardy accepted the apology and everything was the same between them once more. Between Rabardy and

us, however, it was not. Stooping so low as to enslave the blacks was something none of us had bargained on. And then, as if piqued by what he saw as our ingratitude, far from sending them to work on shore, Rabardy equipped his native troupe with bows, clubs and arrows, dressed them in showy materials and gave them sailors' rations. They stood guard, two at a time, flanking the gangway. They were prohibited from having any contact with the colonists.

Rabardy did not set foot on land again after he returned from Buka. He wished to maintain order nevertheless and demanded to know who the ringleaders were, those contributing to the increasing unrest. The priest, whom Rabardy suspected of drinking the communion wine with his friends, was deemed to be principal agitator. He was the first to be arrested. It happened after dark. There was a chase and a scuffle and in due course Abbé Denys was on the deck of the *Génil*, hands tied behind his back. Nothing more serious took place than a fierce discussion, during which the abbé accused Rabardy of following orders that no one should ever leave. After lengthy discussions he was returned to the Grande Maison. He added to our troubles, that priest, but he was brave, and no one could really blame him for wanting to get away from that hell.

Next there was Louis, – a Malagasy creole whom Henry transferred to the *Génil* when he left for Manila. He greeted me from the galley doorway whenever I came on board. 'He's in one of his moods today, sir' he would say of Rabardy, giving a little whistle and a shrug. But one morning after Rabardy's return with the slaves, when whispers were passing around about his conduct, there was no greeting and when I made my way down to the salon but Louis was not there either. I asked Rabardy where Louis was. He said that Louis had many jobs and was not always in the same place. Finally, on the third day I spoke to the crew who said that Louis was in the hold, in irons. I asked Rabardy if this was true and he answered that Louis was a miserable cook who was stealing food and consequently was in irons. 'Go and see him yourself if you

like.' I found Louis in the dark, arms chained behind his back. His thumbs and hands were bruised and swollen. After three days in this restricted position he had become visibly ill. Louis sobbed and thanked me as I led him away to the hospital ship. 'I'll get him back,' said Rabardy, standing behind us in the doorway. 'And when I do I'll knock him cold like a dog.'

Misdemeanours had become so commonplace Rabardy determined that an iron hand was needed to crush them. Together with Chambaud and some of the others he set up a council of war. The subject of their first interest was the carpenter Lauriel who generally had not been known to let a day pass without committing some misdeed of greater or lesser significance. After his five-day trial he too was thrown in the hold, where he developed a lung complaint of which he later died.

There were ninety-five on land in the last days of November. Of this, sixty-five were sick, and of the sick thirty-five were confined to bed. It seemed to the thirty who continued to enjoy a measure of health that something must be done and a number of them approached Rabardy to discuss the problem. Henry had ordered that the location was to remain unchanged until he personally returned, but by this time only a few stalwarts still cared for the Marquis's vision. Most simply wished to get away any way they could and find a place where they could work, and get on with the business of a normal life. Mioko was talked of and Matupi, where a strong young man could make fair money for his labours. They wanted Rabardy to transport a few of the company, since he knew the places and people. As if he had intuited their very thoughts, Blohm, the German trader from Matupi, sailed into English Cove one afternoon. The priest and two other young men were on the shore waiting with their bags packed before the ship could even moor. On land Blohm was surrounded by colonists. After a few minutes, Chambaud appeared. He pushed forward until he found himself face to face with Blohm, whereupon he proffered a letter which he said to the audience was written on

instruction from Rabardy. Blohm opened and read the letter where he stood, and his neck and shoulders stiffened. He frowned as he folded and stuffed the letter back into the envelope, rammed it into his pocket and gestured for a clear path. He could not take anyone away with him that day, he said, although he promised to return.

A few weeks later the *Freya* entered the channel once more. At once the *Génil*, which had not moved from her anchorage in some time, signalled with flags and she turned about. From this moment we knew that the commander of the *Génil*, our governor, was keeping us prisoner.

Rabardy himself sat out on the poop of his ship where – when the sun was at its highest – you could see his silhouette reclined on a deck chair. Even if you didn't see his eyes looking at you, you could feel them whatever you were doing – stopping to chat, going for a piss in the trees, working the garden patch – which fewer and fewer still did. Watchmen stood fore and aft. After nightfall they would call out to any pirogue asking the passenger to identify themselves and ordering them to pass wide.

Maragano's men became regular fixtures in certain positions – one spent long hours carving wood on a point from where he had clear sight to the end of both coves, another was always moving about the hillside behind us, a third occupied the northernmost point of Lambom island, which commended a panoramic view of all sea traffic. Maragano visited Rabardy every afternoon and stayed for at least an hour. Every other day he left with a tierce of tobacco or a string of glass beads.

I felt the sequestration harder than most, for even before the great outbreak of the fevers I was never included among the colonists who accompanied Rabardy from time to time on his explorations of the neighbouring coasts. For the hour or two of leisure that was available to me during the day I took it upon myself to buy a native pirogue, simply with the purpose of exploring for myself. On the very day I negotiated the purchase I was called on board the *Génil*. Maragano watched me pass. I had barely

stepped into Rabardy's presence than he began to shout at me, demanding to know by what right I had bought a canoe without informing him. Before giving me any chance to speak he made multiple accusations, that I intended to escape, to take colonists with me, that my plan was to deliver lying letters to the English pastors at Port Hunter, and finally he accused me outright of being a traitor.

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In his better moments Rabardy was concerned about the way things were developing. It was typical perhaps of his enthusiasm for record-keeping that he asked me to present to him an official report on the health situation. Three days before Christmas the situation had become extremely grave. The number of sick had grown out of all proportion. No age was immune to the various strange symptoms. Fevers might present as mucous or bilious at first, as cerebral or with the appearance of typhoid. Some continued as they had begun; others transformed entirely, or developed sudden pernicious phenomena. In the early days I attributed the illnesses to seasonal fever. But by late December there could no longer be any doubt how serious it was.

I explained to Captain Rabardy that what a healthy man requires to sustain him is simply inadequate to nourish the sick. The hospital's entire provision consisted of forty-three tins of vegetables, and if I were to give one to each of my thirty-five patients I would find myself with only seven left for the following day. As for bouillon, the most fundamental therapy for those who cannot eat, my limited provisions boasted a single tin. I do not know if he was moved by what I said, but two days later he announced the measure to which all political regimes resort in the hope of ameliorating their difficulties: he organised a plebiscite. His question was: 'Should the *Génil* go to Australia to fetch help and supplies?' The answer was unanimous. Every slip carried the same reply: 'Yes, if the *Génil* will take away with her everyone who wishes to leave.'

In another two days it was decided that our governor would go instead to Mioko or Matupi, to ask for supplies from the English or Germans. On the 28th December the *Génil* got up steam. But the colonists felt that Rabardy would not be returning, and that as soon as he was out in St George's Channel he would steer a course for Australia. For two days afterwards the anxiety continued, and indeed it increased, if that were possible, with the news that we had only enough lard for one more day. By the evening of the 31st December the colony seemed like a dead thing. New Year's eve arrived without a sound in the harbour, and beside the pallets on which lay the sick, bottles of medicine dispensed that morning stood untouched. They no longer had the will to prolong their miserable existences.

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And yet, New Year gifts were not far away.

At daybreak, a noise woke me. I got up and hurried to the bridge. All was silence, then the feeble sound of a steam whistle reached us. It was Leotard who started up the cry, waving his handkerchief. The *New Brittany*! Twenty minutes that husky whistle announced that it was indeed she who approached. When her bowsprit emerged behind the western point of the harbour even the sick, draped in their bedclothes like ghosts, were roused to cheer. Some clapped. Others simply wept with joy. Yet from that ship, welcomed with so many bravos, not a single cry issued, no hand waved in welcome. She sat high in the water, her plimsoll line dry. Only the volunteer Passoni cried out from the deck: 'Everything's damned to hell!'

'Word of honour can be a costly thing, my friend.' Henry said to me, when I climbed aboard. 'In order to keep mine I had to steal this ship and the supplies I bring. Punishment will not be far behind. But I have done my duty.'

Mrs Henry disembarked to tend the sick. I explained that Rabardy had gone to fetch us supplies. Henry hastily unloaded the provisions, pulled up the anchor again and left to find him.

Two days later, both ships re-entered the harbour at Port Breton and we learned at last the curious drama which had unrolled in Manila, and how our governor had been obliged to turn pirate to rescue us.

Once at Manilla Henry had wired the Marquis for funds. The Marquis replied that these would be forthcoming, and instructed Henry to go ahead with all necessary purchases. But at one of the suppliers Henry saw an advertisement offering land for sale in the colony of New France at Port Breton. Outraged at the continuing deceit, he went straight to the offices of the newspaper and gave an interview informing the citizens of the Philippines the true situation in our colony, an interview which was published the next day. After that Henry completed the purchases and returned to the bank for the funds to make the payment. Of course the funds were not there. He wired the Marquis, more urgently this time, and receiving no reply did so again and again, emphasising the desperate needs of the colonists. Finally, Henry received had his reply, using the papal address: 'Why so many telegrams, *urbi et orbi*?' And soon afterwards things began to unravel. The next communication instructed him to return the supplies and sell the ship to pay the debts. When Henry refused an embargo was placed on the *New Brittany*. Henry protested but to no avail. Spanish carabineers were stationed on board and the smoke box was removed, rendering the ship immobile.

Henry was in the depths of despair when news came of an imminent typhoon. In the circumstances the authorities consented to the return of the smoke box with the proviso that Henry must promise not to attempt to escape from the harbour. The sky was already darkening when he rowed back to the harbour master to return the smoke box, saying that he could make no such promise. The harbour master relented and sent him back to

the *New Brittany*, this time without conditions. Henry waited until the storm was at its height. Under cover of night and a screeching wind, he and two trusted sailors cut the ropes and unhitched the anchor chain. Somehow they escaped, and when the carabineers awoke next morning they found themselves in open sea. Henry left them on another Spanish island colony on his way, though they had been keen to come all the way and help the poor colonists. The Marquis had chosen money and political alliances over the welfare of his colonists. Had Henry obeyed we would have known nothing, consigned by the man whose vision we followed to die in a tropical oubliette.

Alas, on the evening of the 12th of January a steamer without a flag appeared at the entrance to the north-west passage. I was on land at the time, beside Captain Henry who was personally directing the building works. All eyes turned at once towards the strange ship which entered without making a signal. After watching it carefully for a while through his lorgnette the captain suddenly cried out: “They’re heading straight for the corals; they’ll run aground.” He leapt into his dinghy and rowed towards them. As soon as he was in range we saw him make signs and the mysterious ship went about. He drew alongside the hull and we didn’t see him after that. At seven-thirty I was called to the *Génil* where Captain Rabardy informed me officially of the arrest of his superior officer by the *Legaspi*, a Spanish naval corvette.

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The next day, the break-up of that phantom colony began. The *New Brittany* was declared a spoil of war. Those officers who conspired in abducting the carabineers were transferred to the *Legaspi* to be taken to Manila for trial, with their leader. The sick, not just the Spaniards but all of them, demanded passage on board. The contracted workers, Arabs, Chinese, Italians, who had not been paid in six months saw in the *Legaspi* a means of reaching justice and asked to be taken too. Finally Rabardy’s crew moved as one onto the frigate, leaving Maragano’s friend alone with his cook. Then, prisoner

though he was, Henry threw out a parting order which was for ever to divide the former accomplices in crime and cause them to turn their fire on one another. He returned Rabardy to the status of captain of the *Génil* and promoted the land-registry man to the rank which he had long coveted, that of Governor of the colony.

Now only forty remained. Having heard from the Spanish officers that they would find no work at all in Manila, they turned their hopes instead towards the land of labour and success – Australia. The frigate commander left them three months' supplies and as a means of transport the *Génil*, disarmed and manned by a crew consisting of Captain Rabardy and his little cook, Alphante. At dawn on the 20th January, the *Legaspi* began to haul in her anchors and the *New Brittany*, echoed her manoeuvres.

Poor forty! We stood for a long time watching them draw away into the distance, taking away our best ship and our true leader away in chains. When ships, masts and the last cloud of smoke had vanished from sight behind the mountains, a gloomy silence reigned. The *Génil*, on which no living being made signs of movement, appeared beached at the entrance to the roadstead. For transporting us to Australia, she had a shot-riddled boiler, out-of-order pumps, a hold that was permanently full of water, not a single sailor, no engineer, not a gramme of coal. The only man who could get that machine moving was the same one who once told us: 'I have strict orders to keep the colony at Port Breton, whatever the cost in money or men.'

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The realisation did not take long to have a deleterious effect. The epidemic resumed its progress, and within days three quarters of these unfortunate souls were confined to their bunks. We needed to escape, immediately, urgently and completely. The Spanish commander knew this when he left us. But there was another who did not interpret the situation in this way. A man who for months had forbidden departure by anyone other than himself or Rabardy. The nomination of Chambaud by Captain Henry to the post of

governor of New Brittany might have been nothing more than a Parthian spear thrown at the Marquis, but Rabardy was the one who felt it.

For three days, Maragano had been cutting wood. Proposals were made to the volunteers to enrol as stokers. Sergeant Dufour, a former fitter, had been offered a job as engineer. We needed to be on our guard. We all suspected Rabardy. A secret departure of the *Génil* was even more to be feared on the basis that her captain, now without a crew, believed himself more than ever exposed to the vengeance of the colonists. His terrors had taken on a pathological form. The slightest noise in the night caused him to leap out of bed and take up arms; at table he compelled Geninet, the steward and the only white left on board, to taste all the dishes he served, and then later he insisted on cooking all the meals himself.

One evening, my nursing assistant had taken my rifle out of my cabin on the *Marquis de Rays* to clean it. A cartridge remained in the barrel so I fired – quite harmlessly – into the air. At once we heard a terrible racket on board the *Génil*, moored 200 metres away. The voice of the captain could be heard shouting 'Assassin! Assassination!' When I arrived on board for my morning visit he accused me of trying to kill him and said I should be tried before a council of war.' You see now what a chronic state of terror Mr Rabardy was in? I tell you he was haunted by the memory of his previous tyranny, by his impotence over his ex-prisoners, each springing into his thoughts ceaselessly, so he could neither sleep at night nor enjoy the pleasures of the table. He kept a firearm beside him at all times. The phantom of vengeances was as much deserved as it was imaginary.

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There were no longer any healthy people left among the 40. One night in the dilapidated section where Colnenne lived with his wife and little daughters we had a long conference. Colnenne, stretched out on a straw mattress, prey alternately to a violent fever and a terrifyingly cold clammy prostration, seemed unable to understand

anything we said. Two steps away, his two girls vomited streams of bile and Mme Colnenne wept in silence. However habituated I was to the spectacle of physical miseries, I felt myself violently moved. ‘Look!’ I said to the other witnesses of this scene. ‘This is what awaits us all if we don’t escape from this infected building, from this malarial soil. The neighbouring booth looks the same as this one: two women and two children shiver with fever. If I step across to the Italians, it is the same; and among the volunteers only one can still come and go. We must leave this place, monsieurs, it’s only a matter of time…’

A voice behind me cried out: ‘Yes. We must leave this place! The doctor is right! Let’s go! Let’s go!’ Poor unfortunate Colnenne, teetering on the edge of his grave, eyes haggard and hands outstretched towards the sea, showed us the direction of exodus. His voice, his gesture, the feverish luminosity of his gaze, everything about him had that strange air of inspiration which the dying sometimes have, when their flame of life throws out a final glow before extinguishing. We were so vividly struck by this cry from beyond the tomb we remained in silence for a long time.

The next day we returned to our governor and berated him until, led by the irrefutable logic of the facts, he accepted our proposition and agreed that Rabardy should transport the colonial deputation to Mioko.

But it was not so easy to put the deputation together, for since the fever had hit, there was no one else but me. How would the sick manage for two days without me? On the other hand, the same sick also ran the risk of succumbing before an evacuation took place. I wouldn’t need to be away for more than forty-eight hours, so I did my medical rounds, and left an order sheet containing the precise prescriptions for the student pharmacist. Chambaud gave me a letter of introduction to our neighbours – which I noted did not authorise me in any way to discuss an evacuation. Next day I boarded the *Génil* and gave Rabardy an order to conduct us to Mioko. The bridge of the *Génil* was

covered in hardwood chopped in Lambom over the past four days. It was enough to get us to Mioko. As we drew closer to Mr Quinn's house Rabardy stood tall and said without looking at me: 'He who laughs last, laughs longest. This is my ship. You may disembark, but we won't be returning.'

My plan had been stopped in its tracks. This was the evening of Emma Quinn's party, when you and I met – so the Doctor reminded me. Without saying anything to Mr Quinn, whom I knew was a friend of Rabardy's, I told him we would be grateful if he'd lend us a dinghy and four men for the following day.

The following dawn I stepped into a large sailing boat ready for immediate departure; I told the Fijian pilot whom Quinn had provided to set sail for Duke of York island and to take us the eight miles to Port Hunter. The sea was rough that day, but we reached the missionary and explained who we were.

He led us towards a monument where he had buried nine refugees from our colony, among whom the ravages of starvation had been so severe that nothing could have revived them. Thinking then of the people waiting for me at Port Breton, I described to Mr Shaw what state we had left them in. He had known nothing of our governor's arrest and the recent break-up of the fourth expedition.

'In which case,' he said, 'what are you waiting for? You must leave.'

'We have no crew,' I told him, 'no coal, and to cap it all, Captain Rabardy refuses to go back to Port Breton with our last ship.'

But then Shaw had what he described as a 'magic talisman' which would not fail to bring Mr Rabardy back to Port Breton. Half-an-hour later he gave me a letter, sealed and addressed to the captain of the *Génil*.

We took our leave and went back down to our dinghy which the kindly natives had filled with coconuts, bananas and ambarellas. The return journey was as easy and agreeable as the journey out had been punishing. The flat sea sparkled like a mirror

beneath a flickering fire. Our Fijians sang one of their chants. We felt almost happy, picturing how we held the means of getting the *Génil* back to our unfortunate companions.

It must have been about 9.30 when we arrived at the *Génil*. Rabardy was on watch as usual. I gave him the letter. He broke it open as if he didn't trust the contents. As he read, his features tensed with anger. The talisman was working. At the end, he exploded. We were damned, filthy traitors. He told me for at least the tenth time he would put me in the hold, then he shut himself in his cabin.

Shaw's method was quite simple. He told Rabardy straight that if he didn't return to Port Breton to carry out the evacuation of the people waiting there, then Shaw would denounce him to the commodore of the British navy which policed the South Pacific.

Now, we had to do business with Mr Quinn. He asked me in whose name I spoke; I answered that I spoke for the settlers. 'Do you have the authority of your governor?' I said that I had, though not to discuss an evacuation, and an evacuation was what I wished to talk to him about. 'Well,' he said, 'you can't stay long in that appalling situation. We have collected Mr de Rays's abandoned followers from time to time. If your supplies are exhausted we can't wait. Let's go while there's still time.'

I explained that our governor had declared his permanent opposition to any evacuation, and that it was no secret Rabardy had been given orders to prevent us returning to civilisation. This did not concern Quinn in the least. Even he was moved at least partly by humanity. By ten in the morning we were ready. Quivering with rage, Rabardy gave the order to weigh anchor and ten minutes later we passed Pigeon Island and steamed into St George's Channel.

Towards 4, we saw the ridges of Mount Verron. Port Breton lay within reach. Perhaps at that very instant funeral prayers were being conducted around a coffin. Would Mélix still be alive? And Colnenne? They would be waiting, knowing nothing

whatsoever of the planned flight of the *Génil*. I told myself if I had not taken my place on the council Rabardy would have put his plan into action, and would have been responsible for bringing death and despair perpetually, instead of the liberty and health which I brought now. This thought alone helped to sweeten the bitterness of my fears for the poor sufferers from whom I had had to desert for a short while in the interests of their survival.

In the evening I told the Governor about the generous manner in which we had interpreted our mission. Upon learning that Mr Quinn was on board the *Génil* with 18 Fijians and why they had come, Chambaud shouted out that we had exceeded our authorisation and that he was still opposed – these were his precise words – to any evacuation of the colony, partial or total.

'Even in the present situation,' I objected, 'when there are no more than two months' worth of supplies, when the Marquis has allowed his own ships to be embargoed, his captains arrested and his so-called colony to be dismembered?'

'Even in the present situation,' he said.

'Even now when thirty-five people out of forty are once more in their sick beds on land with the fever?'

'I repeat that I will never agree to ratify an evacuation.'

'So am I correct in assuming that you too have been given orders, as has Mr Rabardy, to sustain a lie and perpetuate a crime?'

'What is the good of evacuation?' He asked. 'I have already told you and once more I repeat that I am quite prepared to leave, on the *Génil*, to fetch more goods and supplies from Australia. I remonstrated that having failed to pay his debts in Manila, the Marquis would hardly be any more likely to pay them in Australia and that the *Génil* would be seized at the first English port where she stopped, and sent to the docks for repairs. How would you send us supplies then, I asked – by balloon?'

In despair I turned once again to Rabardy. I reminded him of the forty-seven who remained in good health when the *Legaspi* left, three-quarters were now infected by disease. Those dreams of the future which each person nurtured when they left home – cruelly dispelled by a brutal reality – had given way to a single obsessive desire, to get away. By its very fixity, I told him, this wish had assumed the characteristics of a disease. The population of Port Breton was sick with departure madness. Rabardy read my report and called for me. 'Well then,' He said. 'Let's go,' The word had been given at last.

Mr Quinn, who had been watching the canoe of the dead pass every morning under the bow of the *Génil* on its way to the sandy island which served as our cemetery, drove the departure process forward with praiseworthy ardour. On the 13th February everything was ready, the sick were settled on the two ships and the signal had finally been given to depart. It was Mr Quinn's stentorian voice which gave the orders on board the *Génil* and who served as her captain. Rabardy could do nothing. He watched that long line of dying people board his ship and seeing those whom he had long oppressed reduced to a state of abject misery, he threw himself on a chaise longue, pale, dumb, horrible to see. Finally the fever had taken hold of the man who for two months had so scrupulously evaded its attacks.

As for Chambaud, he was one of the first to embark with his luggage, and did not choose to put into practice the principle of fidelity which he had long preached. At heart this jealous guardian of the flag was nothing but a petit bourgeois, boarding the ship with his cat, four chickens and a parrot. What an ending for the viceroy of New France! When the *Génil*, towing the old pontoon, started towards the harbour mouth every gaze turned back towards the sombre hole which had been our residence for three months, our theatre of misery and tears. Some called out a farewell of curses, others contemplated in silence. One woman wept, her elbows resting on the gunwale: Mme

Colnenne, staring towards the black shadows which sheltered her husband's grave, from which she was now to be forever be separated by a vast ocean. On shore six dogs which we had abandoned because Mr Quinn refused to allow them on board, howled and threw themselves with leaps and bounds towards the departing ship. It was a piteous sight. As they did so, strangest of all, Maragano's scoundrels paddled out from behind the point. They ran up onto the shore of our territory, threw themselves on the grande maison, and began to tear it apart.

CHAPTER TEN

The morning seemed to have lulled itself into a semi-slumber. Outside the saloon where we sat, indistinct voices punctuated the calm, and an engine churned the water some distance away.

I felt I should speak after such an account, that there was something I ought to communicate, but my thoughts were spinning. “Well, you were lucky to get away from Port Breton,” I said, “when so many did not.” I didn’t much like the sound of these words so I tried more. “Yet your journey is far from over.”

The doctor seemed weary. “Quinn complains about the cost of keeping us all in Mioko, while he does nothing to send us to Australia.”

“I expect he has his work cut out finding you a captain.”

Outside from across the water a voice called loudly, hailing passengers on the deck of the *Génil*. I felt myself tense before I realised why. It was Blohm, my old employer. The doctor and I strained to listen as men on the foredeck gave muffled replies. These were soon drowned out by the chopping slosh of paddle wheels. The *Génil* rocked sickly on the wash. Footsteps thumped. A low whizz and jangle could be heard, of ropes pulling through rings. The starboard portholes darkened and filled with the blue paintwork of Blohm’s boat as it drew alongside. Thuds up amidships suggested people jumping between the vessels.

“Excuse me,” said the doctor. “I must go and see what this is all about.”

I didn’t want to meet with Blohm at that moment or any time soon, and remembering that I should probably be somewhere for Quinn, I left. The chatter around the *Génil* had climbed to a high pitch by the time I pulled away in the dinghy, from the port side. The young man who ferried me to the jetty in front of Quinn’s lawn seemed in a hurry to

unload me so he could scull smartly back. As we tied up, another dinghy, from the *Marquis de Rays*, was straining splashily over to the mother ship, sitting low and full to capacity with half a dozen men. I stood on the jetty and observed the excitement until I became aware that someone behind me was doing the same.

His features were flat, but the eyes gleamed darkly like the barrels of a side-by-side.

"So this is how things stand, is it?" said Quinn.

"What's going on, Beck?" said Emma, emerging from the house a few paces behind. "What's Blohm doing here?"

"I don't know," I said. "He arrived as I was leaving."

She looked at my face for a second or so after I had stopped speaking, but I avoided her eye.

Two or three young men pressed closely round Blohm, who laughed and waved them in through the bulkhead hatch towards the saloon, smacking some of them on the back. A handful more followed, and as he went in after, checking round to see if any more could be drawn in, white papers wafted in his hand. Contracts. I saw then why Quinn was staring so hard. These able men were spoils from a shipwreck. Whoever recruited them stood to double the size of his operation. Quinn had spent a fortnight of his own work and that of his men, not to mention a good amount of coal and supplies bringing them here. And now his rival sniffed them out under his nose. Quinn walked up and down a few times, one hand gripping an elbow, the other stroking his nose. He stopped and looked at me, and for a moment I thought I was going to catch it, for idling or colluding, I couldn't tell which, but his face sprang into a smile and he said, "Beck, fetch me my Buka boys!"

I set off around the back of the house and along the path to the hut in the trees where Quinn's guard lived. They were charged with patrolling, but mostly at night, and this being the middle of the day several were sleeping. At my call and the mention of Quinn

they were alert in moments. At the door they swept up their tomahawks and the iron bush knives with which Quinn had supplied them, and ran on light feet, shadows keeping low. Rabardy's little army had reinforced the one Quinn already had. It occurred to me he must have recruited them after Kleinschmidt's murder. Bukans had a reputation locally for their ferocity and were set apart for the extreme blackness of their skin – buka was their word for burnt food. This status guaranteed Quinn their loyalty over and against anyone in the archipelago who decided to get ideas. No one noticed the Bukans approach the unattended ship. A Pacific islander swims to wash or to hunt. Either way he does it unobtrusively. In water their skin made them as good as invisible, their curly hair absorbed the light. Only eyes and teeth showed as they glanced at one another or back towards Quinn and me on the jetty. They climbed the ladders barefoot, a knife between the teeth, ran silently along the decks, disappeared through hatches and finally re-emerged to take up station at the rails. At their signal, we paddled out to join them.

Half an hour later the absent passengers rowed back across the water from the *Génil*. They were only just clear of the other ship when they turned and noticed the blacks on the deck of the *Marquis de Rays*. They pressed on towards the ladders but Bukans barred their way at the top. A colonist who had made the ascent raged, uncomprehending. His friends in the dinghy shouted for the blacks to get out of his way. Then from their midst Quinn stepped forward.

"I'm taking possession of this ship," he said.

"Everything I own is on board," shouted one of the young men.

One of his fellows stood up, an old brown wiry fellow with no teeth, who couldn't have been anything but a sailor. "That ship belongs to the colony. If you don't get off at once I'll have at you with a grappling iron."

His friends pulled him down and pacified him, in the way men do with drunkards. They at least seemed to have some consciousness of what Quinn had done for them, and perhaps a little besides of their own treachery in signing with Blohm.

"You think it's yours, do you?" said Quinn. "Rabardy thought the *Génil* was his. If you still wish to go to Australia, come! Let's talk about it."

The men pulled once more towards the bottom of the ladder and Quinn shooed them away.

"Not here. Tell your compatriots we will discuss plans tomorrow, in my office."

As they rowed slowly away, looking back some of them in disbelief and resignation, others with vitriol in their eyes, Quinn turned to me, "Come on Beck. Let's put your supercargo skills to good use. I want an inventory of everything on board."

Not fifteen minutes later I had open a trunk full of ladies' slippers, all pink satin and unworn but hard as rock and coated in a blue-grey mottling. I brushed one to see if it would dust off. The powder smeared and stained. Outside I heard Blohm's paddle wheels once more, and the *Marquis de Rays* bobbed and chafed as she passed.

Blohm stopped his engine to shout to Quinn. "That ship looks useful," he said. 'Where did you get it?"

"Go and find another ally to ransack," said Quinn.

"You don't own this harbour," said Blohm, "or these people. They have been with you a fortnight. If you wanted to make them an offer, why did you not make them an offer?"

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It was not until a week later I trailed behind Quinn into the saloon of the *Génil*, carrying his small leather portfolio. It had taken all that time to inventory the strange cargo of the defunct colony. Some of what we found must once have been highly prized,

though its lack of utility drove down its value, like the ornately carved marble altar which Emma had already had delivered to their drawing room where she was putting it to use as a drinks cabinet. Some items were useful like the portfolio, some – like the three trunks full of second-hand hymn books – unaccountably took up space which would much more profitably have been occupied by axes. On the day of the negotiation Emma was nowhere to be seen, though her methods were all over the papers I carried. The doctor stood in front of the large stern window with his hands behind his back and his chin raised at its habitually quizzical angle, and Chambaud, pale and soft, filled a corner behind a table on the other side of the room. He nodded and smiled at Quinn who did not acknowledge the gesture. I remembered Chambaud's presence on the day of Rabardy's death, waiting for Monsieur Quinn outside the house as if he had an appointment.

Ever since I sat down with the doctor I felt as if my mind had been in a storm. I picked up the papers a few times and looked at the first few letters and the notes he had made. I hardly knew what to think about Rabardy, only to reflect what a strange man he was, if everyone was to be believed – and there was no reason to think anyone was lying. I itched to get hold of the other papers Rabardy had directed me to find in his cabin. Yet the room was locked. Her master had suggested Tani would help, but that proved fruitless. I'd seen her a few days after the funeral, playing outside the little school building beside the makeshift church, among the throng of Mrs Quinn's countrymen who had come from Samoa as servants and assistants. A tall girl was examining Tani's bead necklace. Tani reached up and stroked the other girl's long straight hair. When their teacher saw me at the gateway she came over. She told me Tani had cried a whole day for her capi and was sad all the next day. She called the girl and asked, "Your Capi, where is he?" Without looking at us Tani said, "Gone–" and returned to her play.

Quinn held up the two documents in the saloon for long enough to make the titles understood, and when his audience was primed he read aloud:

I, Donal Quinn, agree firstly to evacuate the colonists of the scheme known as New France from their settlement at Port Praslin (which I have already done and for which payment is due), secondly to feed and secure them at Mioko until they are ready for their journey (which I have done also and for which payment is also due) and thirdly to arrange for their transportation to Sydney on board the Génil, which ship is to remain the property of the colonists, to dispose of at their final destination as they see fit. I undertake to provide a captain and any necessaries for the journey to Sydney. In return I will keep the pontoon known as The Marquis de Rays, and all her cargo, in payment. I will provide the colonists with a cheque for £496.13, being the difference in value between what they have paid and what they owe. Once the colonists have left Mioko with all necessaries the arrangement between myself and them will be considered by both parties to be complete.

So there it was: after weeks of stalemate and inactivity, during which it seemed at times as if the colonists had, as far as Quinn was concerned, melted into the landscape, their departure was now, apparently, imminently realisable. Their ship was not to be replaced, in spite of everything that had been said against it. By a luck that falls naturally to people like Quinn who never need it because they have such a knack of converting unlucky situations to their advantage, we walked into his drawing room one evening to find the last piece of the puzzle waiting there: a face with white whiskers consuming whiskey, pink already and pinker at the sight of us both. Cox got up, chortled and poured out a long account of his adventures back to Mioko from the Witu islands where his ship had dropped him off. Not anyone else's decision, he insisted. Entirely his own. All getting too much. Really must get himself back to Australia and call all this a day. Reluctant to leave so many friends, but there it was.

“How is it you present this proposal,” said the doctor, “in legal terminologies at a meeting, as if we had the freedom to choose yes or no? You hang us above a barrel, Mr Quinn. Our choice is between to pay you exorbitantly and escape, or to remain and owe you yet more. Will you or will you not allow the colonists to board the *Marquis de Rays* and fetch what belongs to them?”

“Everything on board is itemised here,” said Quinn. He took our inventory from me by way of demonstration and tossed it onto the table, leant back and spoke to the top frame of the window while adjusting a cuff. “All the values have been taken into account. Any item you wish to extract can of course be discussed and its value deducted from the sums agreed.”

The doctor picked up the inventory. He took his glasses out of his pocket and screwed up his features. “Blasted things!” His eyes skimmed the first page and then half way down the second, he said, “I can’t make sense of this. You value individual pieces of old rope, then generalise the contents of a trunk as personal items, before assigning a paltry figure. I know these items are very precious, jewelleries or watches lovingly transported half way round the world. It was the last small comfort to those we have lost to believe their treasures would be returned to their loved ones. This is inhuman! Come, Chambaud! You know what was in the cases. You sealed them up. Speak to him! Tell him we won’t be treated like this.”

Chambaud woke as if he had felt a tug on a thread. He smiled at Quinn in a manner that declared the latter to be the most esteemed authority present. Bowing, he waited until everyone else had had the opportunity to speak and then he looked at Quinn, with mouth turned down and eyebrows raised. Quinn gave a lazy wave that licensed the notary to speak, while the look on his face pronounced the whole conversation a pernicious waste of his time.

“I’m sure M. Quinn has carried out procedures with commendable attention to detail,” said Chambaud. He picked up the inventory and looked down his pince-nez at two of the pages, nodding as his glance skimmed the document. “Yes, the system appears quite satisfactory. Hmmm…” He turned his attention to the contract and read it with twitching lips. “Everything seems quite above board.” He smiled. “I will of course give it further consideration, in private if I may, unless – ” he glanced at the door to Rabardy’s cabin, which had been locked since the moment Rabardy walked through it on the morning of his death. “I wonder, Monsieur Quinn, if you would be so good as to – you see, the inventory is not in its strictest sense complete, and due process cannot entirely be said to have been carried out as long as…”

“You wish to take into account the possessions of your late captain?” said Quinn.

“Yes!” said the doctor. His relief was palpable. “Thank you, Chambaud,” he added, with renewed vigour. “At last! We have asked this again and again, M. Quinn. You cannot in honesty calculate the value of the colonists’s possessions without including the wealth Rabardy amassed during the time he has been trading here. He boasted of buying and selling tortoiseshell and black-edged pearl and all manner of valuable materials. The contents of his wallet alone ought to count for half the personal cargos on board the pontoon. I’ve seen it. He showed it to me more than once, laying particular emphasis on how it was so fat it wouldn’t close properly.”

“If you would be so good as to return the key,” said Chambaud. “Monsieur?”

Quinn pulled the ring of iron sticks from his trouser pocket.

And so the keys were produced and the door opened. In spite of each man’s sense of urgency we paused in the doorway. At the stale smell, perhaps. The very air in that cabin seemed to have been waiting for us. The mould had grown incrementally in the window frames and dust lay in a perfectly even gauze on the bed and mirror and washstand. On the blue soap. A dried-out pen still rested diagonally across ink-spotted blotting paper as

if it had just been put there and would be picked up and reused in a minute. We looked at one another. Quinn opened a cupboard above the bunk and pulled out neatly folded trousers and shirts. Chambaud raised the coverlet where it hung down towards the floor, revealing a cubby hole which ran beneath the length of the bed. He stepped back and indicated to Quinn that it was locked.

Master of ceremonies now, Quinn selected the most likely-looking candidate. The cupboard doors slid back in their runnels. Quinn looked in to left and right and withdrew a pile of papers, tied together with string. Ledgers and log books followed. He reached an arm in and felt round the back and sides. He withdrew a box and opened it. Two spare bottles of ink and a box of nibs. He squinted once more into the darkness and this time, the arm came back empty. Quinn gathered together what he had found, into a stack which he could manage in an armful and walked back out into the saloon. Behind him, Chambaud continued checking, knocking the inner walls to test for hollowness, pressing to see if they would give way.

Quinn lit his pipe and rested his free hand on top of the pile on the table beside him. The doctor got up slowly from the cabin bunk where he had been sitting watching Chambaud. He walked back into the saloon, looking sideways at Quinn as he passed.

Chambaud came bustling out of the cabin on his toes with an air of efficiency.

“Monsieur,” he said, addressing Quinn as if the two of them were alone. “I must ask you…”

Quinn spoke over him. “This seems to be the lot,” he said, patting the pile. “I think it would be best, in view of the all that’s happened, that Rabardy’s papers be passed to the French Consul in Sydney.”

Chambaud stiffened, as if at a snake. “I insist you do no such thing!” he added, in a manner that seemed to take even him by surprise. “The consuls of France have nothing

whatsoever to do with our affairs. I must ask you in the strictest terms not to hand our private documents into the grasp of our enemies.'

"Please, Monsieur," said the doctor, "do not listen to him. Crimes have been committed against these people. This is the evidence. Please do exactly as you said a moment ago, I beg you!"

But the man who never spoke was unstoppable now. "Those papers are the legal property of New France. They belong to King Charles I of Oceania, whose crest they bear. If you refuse to hand those papers to me then I shall leave immediately and have no further involvement in the discussion about financial arrangements for the evacuation."

Quinn blew a long puff of pipe smoke and peered at the small official.

"May I speak?" I said, and then louder, "Quinn!" but he didn't seem to hear.

He looked at the doctor, who was leaning against the table with a disapproving frown, and at Chambaud who seemed to have inflated by a foot in height and whose eyes glimmered with conviction. Quinn's hands bracketed the stack, and slid it towards Chambaud. "It's yours," he said.

In less than a breath, Chambaud gathered up the pile, and carried it out at the far end of the saloon into the galley. We could hear the clonk of oven doors opening, and moments later the rush and flurry of papers catching fire.

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Six weeks after they had dropped anchor in Mioko harbour, the last colonists of New France in the south Pacific steamed out of the roadstead and turned south. At the helm was Cox, a man whose command I was pleased not to have to experience on another voyage. In a remarkable manoeuvre Quinn had succeeded in disposing of both nemeses by combining them and sending them away.

The waters peeled aside from the bow in a v which curled up to tickle a patch of repaired plating which I had examined myself on the inside and which was held together by little more than hope. No more than a few big waves in a high sea would be needed to smack away both rust and repair and leave fresh air in their place – where lumps of water would drag the vessel down till it became too heavy for its own steam or sail, and once the hole dipped to water level that would be it. Only Captain Cox would agree to skipper such a vessel. Only someone who knew nothing of ships or their skipper or who was truly desperate would stay on board that iron coffin.

Could Quinn have shown them more charity? Readers of fiction and the Bible would probably say he should have done as he would be done by, but Quinn might answer such a glib judgement by pointing out that he would never have signed up to a chimera in the first place. Give up your all for a fantasy and a fantasy is all you'll have left. Land, status, freedom and wealth: no one gives these things away except by first stealing them from someone else. Had the colonists achieved their impossible dreams it's unlikely their empire would have shown Quinn much mercy.

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Accounts reached the papers about six weeks later, although nothing came to my attention until months after that. When I walked into Thrips agency on Australia Wharf the following year I saw the article on the wall, cut from the Sydney Morning Herald, beside that older piece which was almost illegible now. Thrips recognised someone to whom the story was new and called to me from his chair, where weakness and infirmity kept him prisoner. Having fixed my attention he filled me in with further details which he had wrung directly from clients who, if they weren't exactly witnesses, purported to know witnesses and to have questioned them. "This, you see, is why French colonialism will never work," he said, missing the point that the French Government had been opposed to the project at every step of its progress.

After leaving Mioko the *Génil* coughed her way across the Coral Sea, kept afloat by the sinews of her Chinese engineer and, when his strength at the pump faltered, by passengers. Captain Cox considered the two large holes above the water line and gambled on the ship being able to make the journey provided heavy weather didn't intervene on the way. To be doubly sure, he made up his mind not only to abstain from alcohol of any kind but never to leave that bridge for more than a few minutes at any time, even to sleep. Heading over the Styx away from all sight of land was a trial of faith, after which no doubt the first sight of the Australian coast sent a wave of relief through the civilian passengers though it would have left an experienced sailor unmoved. That land might have been a hundred miles away for all the use it was to them. A reef like a giant's battlements defends hundreds of miles of that coast from the ocean. When at last the port of Townsville emerged to the west they started a course in that direction and snapped to a halt, the engine still turning. Eight miles from land the ship had snagged on a rock. Cox drove as hard as the engine would go, but the bow was wedged. They all willed a ship to puncture the horizon, but on every side sky met sea in an implacable arc. The Captain ordered out of the bow area every object – alive or inanimate – that had any weight whatsoever. Gathering all the passengers together then in the stern, he sent all forty to the starboard side and then made them rush on his command to port. The Génil creaked and tilted, one way then the other as if she were in a stormy sea, but the rock still held her. He gave the instruction again, while his engineer turned the engine over in full reverse gear. Twenty times they ran across the ship and on the twenty-first with a great grinding and a plunge the bow dislodged, the propellor bit and they moved freely again. Relieved but reluctant now even to look for a gap in the reef they continued southwards. It was another five days till they finally reached Maryborough, and weeks again till they saw Sydney.

Years later I met a young Italian living in America, who had grown up in my country and knew the Italians of the old colony as personal friends. He told me how the Marquis's men rushed up to Maryborough from Sydney, when the *Génil* docked. The colonists, many of whom still could not quite see the Marquis as anything other than a visionary with a great heart, imagined that his men were there to attend to their health and well-being, and to offer them support. Some hoped they might arrange passage home to Europe. But Baron Titeu de la Croix – missing governor of the first expedition – was not in town for well-wishing. His visits were to the law-courts and shipmasters' offices. The colonists knew nothing until Captain Cox received an order to evacuate the ship, so that it could be sold to recoup costs. Led by the doctor they refused, demanding fair treatment. It was a moment of triumph followed by a steady slide, as first funds from Quinn's cheque were used up, and then the French consulate rebuffed their appeals, reminding them how they had given up their citizens' rights when leaving Europe, and finally the ship was sold for what little it would fetch and all those families, cautiously welcomed by Australia, were scattered across that huge land. The people of what was briefly New France became citizens of what had once been New Holland which was now the colony of France's chiefest rival, and there they made the best they could of life on an unintended shore. Families drawn together by their sufferings were separated at the insistence of various employers. Some of the Italians consoled themselves by saving laboriously for the first years to buy small plots along the Daintree River where, hoping to realise a new dream, they planted vineyards. But that one proved just as short-lived, for in those years the phylloxera fly swept Europe and Australia and decimated the world's vines.

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Almost two years to the day after the final evacuation of the fourth expedition, and while I was working as a surveyor in Queensland an account of the trial in Paris of the

Marquis de Rays took up two columns on the second page of *The Queenslander*. I have the cutting still, in a book of scraps which has stayed with me ever since, having no value to any but myself, while all my other treasures, my rifles, fishing tackle and fine carvings made by my Oceanic friends have long since been sold to pay bills. It is always a strange experience to read in a paper any story of which one has some personal knowledge. “The new trial commenced on Tuesday, of the Marquis who lured so many unfortunate beings to New Ireland, which he had represented as an earthly paradise and where scores of them perished miserably. After prolonged imprisonment the Marquis looks as energetic as ever, and preserves that coolness and aplomb which have distinguished him throughout. He has been two years in prison, for he has taken advantage of every legal loophole in order to gain time, hoping that the public indignation would calm down before judgment was pronounced upon him.” An extract from a letter of sympathy is then quoted, to illustrate the support he continued to enjoy: “O Monsieur le Marquis! O sire! How these your executioners would be disappointed if the veil of the future could be lifted and they could see you sitting on a throne in Oceania. But if the wickedness of your enemies can only be assuaged by your death, we shall cry out immediately, ‘the king is dead, live the king, and your oldest son shall be proclaimed by us King of New France, under the title of Charles II.’ According to the summing-up before trial by the president of the court, the Marquis had sold 700,000 hectares of land for 5,000,000 francs, and used 1,800,000 himself, paying large cheques to young unmarried women whilst flaunting pure Christian sentiments as the married father of a family: “You led an existence of luxury and vice,” the president says “while your victims were dying at the other end of the world. When several of these unfortunates, to escape from brutal treatment on board ship, made an attempt to land at Aden, you sent instructions to place them in irons, adding” — and here the legal

gentleman reads from another letter – ‘If any of them attempt to move, shoot them. They may then tell their story to the French Republic.’

Dr Baudouin’s testimony, and his memoir-exposé of the enterprise which was published the year before, played a key part in proceedings. The case for the prosecution hinged on establishing that the land at Port Praslin was an inhospitable hole, where the colonists were kept prisoner by a cabal of the Marquis’s deputies, among them Chambaud and Rabardy. Chambaud was present to defend himself, and Rabardy, who was not, was reported to have laughed as he left the colonists – on orders from the Marquis perhaps – to their certain deaths. I read the transcript in Paris when, in pursuit of a few years of subsistence, I was living in France and hunting for a project. The Marquis made much play of his good intentions, and his lack of control over events that were taking place so many thousands of miles away. Both sides came to depend for the maximum effectiveness of their arguments on a certain portrayal of Rabardy. The man I met is unrecognisable from the one in the court record. Perhaps that is always how it goes when something so far away is judged by those who never leave home. It seems entirely reasonable to call a man by the deeds he does. This depends on our believing we know what any of us would do, given the same circumstances. If we wish to preserve our own good opinion of ourselves, the mirror image which helps us to get up and dress and greet our neighbour and settle down to work it is best to be glib about these things. The earth belongs to the meek, who react but do not act. They can never be the accused, only the victim. I, of course, kept my silence, and I keep his papers.

Do we deserve our fates, or do they happen to us?

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Last week my newspaper recorded the death of Emma Quinn, though she had long since ceased to be called by that name. We did not meet again after my time at Mioko and no further communication took place. If the Quinns were displeased with my

sudden departure they would have had no cause to remember me. They were not people who dwell on the past or waste resources where no clear benefit is to be gained. A year after I left Mioko, they moved to the very place where I spent my unhappiest week, the outpost which Blohm had by then relinquished. Their new home was called Gunantabu, which means forbidden place. It was a land sacred to burials, and deemed to be the home of malevolent spirits. Emma saw an opportunity in the superstition, and speculated that living harmlessly in such a spot would only cement her reputation. She also guessed correctly that the locals would accept a low offer for territory they could not use.

They started calling her Queen Emma at around the time I left. Her obituary last week recorded that she was staying in Italy with her fourth husband, a much younger man, and that the relationship was not without regular dalliances on her husband's side. The exact circumstances of her passing seem a little vague. They printed it alongside a couple of the photos which appeared regularly over the years in society pages round the world. She still struck an imposing figure when she solidified with age, wearing her grand clothing, jewellery and fine houses with dignity and entitlement. She died the wealthiest woman in the South Pacific.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A fortnight after the *Génil* departed a schooner came. She had been to Hernsheim's to deliver and collect cargo, and Blohm sent her on to Quinn's with a letter for me. After six weeks in Mioko the novelty of the place had rubbed away. I'd seen the island in all but the most freakish of weathers, in every dress and mood the climate tended to throw. I was habituated to the weird whistling noise a strong north-easter made by blasting through the casuarinas, and the heat of a still day when the wind retired to let the land bake, and the throb of insects put us all in a dream state. I knew the hardships and calm, the fear which breathed between every beat, ready to blow up. The way fingers rested lightly against the trigger.

"My dear brother," read the letter. "A couple of weeks after you left the clerk came over from your agent's offices. That letter you were expecting from Henderson and Macfarlane arrived. They had kept it for you a week or two although they said it came only a few hours after you went. I'm enclosing it here. It looks like the job you wanted – work as supercargo in the Carolines. I hope you don't mind that I opened to check. The agent said they can wait a few weeks if you are busy, but do come as soon as you are able. Of course if you are happy in your new position with H. Hernsheim then you won't be interested, but I thought I'd let you know. Our friends are still talking about your stories. Write soon and tell me your news. Your loving sister, Madge.'

The sky was yet grey when we pulled up anchor in Mioko: the islands and headlands just beginning to take shape in the gloom. Ahead of us rocky Utuan was a wooded shadow. I wondered if and when any of the local islanders might start moving back in there to plant or hunt as they had before. To our stern, around the harbour and stretching back through the clearing into the trees, thronged the huts of the Mioko people – many

hundreds, all of whom could live comfortably on what the land and sea had to offer, the vast extended family of Topulu, Quinn's ally.

Beneath us, the sand – granules of things long dead, and smashed till they were too small to break any more – was shifting with the tide as it did every day, building and drifting, piling up with debris in the wake of storms that spat out the seeds of new trees among the severed limbs and fingers of old ones. There had been a time when nothing was there at all, then the sand accumulated and one day Topulu's ancestors saw it was a better place to live than wherever they had come from.

We set our course southwards, tracked the north-east shore of New Britain island and crossed the channel to follow the New Ireland coast. My new captain, making the rounds, happened to mention that our route would take us past the southern tip of that island on the western side. He said he had heard about a colony which was starting up there.

'Let's go and look,' he said, when I told him what I knew.

As we dipped and glided, I gazed again at the sunlit peaks and forested slopes and it struck me that this view was no different from the one the first explorers would have looked on two centuries before. I wondered what fears preyed on them when stocks had shrunk to privation, sailors were mutinous, ships apt to break apart. Every mind's eye must have turned inward to feed on scenes not seen for years maybe, and which at best would not be seen for as long again. Was that why those Englishmen declared these lands their country's twin, even though they were on the opposite face of the world where winter was inconceivable and the naked inhabitants a strikingly dark shade of brown. My musings idled along, weighing how man will make a home wherever he finds himself, and how the local people would have gone on with their daily round of hunting pigeons and spearing fish, carving shields and pirogues and weaving houses, oblivious to their new identity. For a while the men and women would have

remembered the strange vessel to which they had sold their wares, with its considerable size and peculiar equipment of masts and sails, tackle-blocks and cannons, and the costumes of the men. Later generations must have connected the ship with the others which followed – whalers towing dead leviathans, whose hunters stopped to butcher and boil their quarry in vast cauldrons on the shore; heavy vessels transporting multitudes of ghost-coloured people linked together at the ankles, who were menaced with weapons by their fellow men, but who once in a while broke their links and hid in the forest until the ship that brought them had gone. Looking around me on the deck where a few sailors were also gathered along the rail to watch the waves rush past below, our own little journey, buzzing from coast to coast like a fly, seemed a small grain in the procession of comings and goings, of stuff and souls which had ploughed on through the centuries until my own, the ships gradually altering in shape and number, to navy vessels and paddle steamers, five-masted schooners and barques with iron hulls, and the convicts had given way to traders and settlers like myself and Quinn.

A few minutes later the ship turned hard to port and came around Lambom into English Cove.

The swell was strong and currents sucked us in on a certain path. A sailor who had been there before said that at a certain point on the tide the water rushed one way around the island, and at another it went the other way about. On either side, high rock walls and slopes, the rock half eaten away by the sea so that it resembled an ancient piece of driftwood or a vast black Swiss cheese. Out of the crevices trees grew, clinging on tenaciously in the wind, tossing their fronds. Somehow they sucked life from the unyielding rain-soaked land. Around a corner we hurtled and as a promontory retreated revealing a small cove of soft white sand we held our breaths at the sight: dozens and dozens of black wooden crosses, crowded over it.

I looked round but no dogs came running to the sound of the engine. A couple of canoes floated in the roadstead. Their occupants, staring into the water with cat-like intensity, paddles across their laps, glanced occasionally sideways at our approach. As we dropped anchor one paddled up.

“Français?” he said.

I shook my head, and signed that we were just visiting, that we wanted to walk around and then go.

“Français – ” he said, and indicated that they had gone away, vanished. He raised his eyebrows and nodded upwards suggesting it was all very strange.

I tried my Pidgin English on him, but the fellow did not seem to have it. He didn’t recognise the phrases of Mioko speech which I had picked up in my month there, or the Kuanua words which Blohm taught me for use on New Britain among the Tolais. So many peoples lived within a few miles of one another in isolated cultures and communities. He listened with polite intelligence, and as the attempt at conversation broke on the rocks of incomprehension he offered in perfectly clear signs to take us to the shore. We nodded our thanks. I stepped cautiously into the hollowed-out tree beside his feet, water four inches from the top edge on either side, so that when I looked down in order to keep the vessel steady my knees sat in a narrow gully between walls of water. The roughly-hewn casing that kept out the flood was no thicker than my finger. The fellow gestured to his fishing companion to transport our captain.

My pilot propelled us with perfect smoothness, the paddle dipping, lifting and swinging in one motion, born of strength and practice. I understood from him that he had made both canoe and paddle himself, and that it was quite expected every man should make his own. He took us, by accurate guesswork, to the place where the people he called the Français had made their home. Fifty yards of one shore were revetted in stone from which a wooden jetty projected. The green softwood looked ancient and

decrepit – though it could not have been more than eighteen months old. The planks were peeling away from the joists, and the posts resembled wonky teeth. With hand movements, the clear repetition of a few words and with his eyes and air he somehow managed to ask the question: are the French coming back again?

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Whenever I pack and move a collection of items follows me from one new home to another, still wrapped up after the last time. I know each at a glance and although they delay the drudgery it is one of the few pleasures of an upheaval that these treasures which have no other purpose divert me from the urgent business of living and reacquaint me for a few minutes with the past. I have a bundle of letters from my mother, bound in string; two spotted silhouettes of my grandparents; a dog-eared story I wrote when I was twelve, and a book of sketches which my mother started when she first arrived in Australia. It starts with pictures of gum trees and a lorikeet, a dry-hilled cape framing the first bungalow in which her family lived. The house is right in the middle of the page, which contravenes every rule about composition, but declares what the place meant to her. Two or three drawings of a young boy – one in profile, one looking at the viewer, another of the lad churning milk in a dairy – recall her little brother, my uncle, gored by a bull before he was twenty. All pictures cease by half way through the book, when she either grew too old to have the time, or the new continent became too familiar to merit recording. Rabardy's leather portfolio, too, has accompanied me round Australia and Europe, to France and Ireland. From time to time I've lost a few hours in the strange writings. Some are florid and well-turned out, like the journals of his arrival and explorations in the New Britannia Archipelago, which include a few maps and drawings in the same hand. The early letters have fluid curlicues but most are much scruffier: the handwriting changes size, leaning sometimes strongly forwards and then inclining the other way. The crossings out increase starkly as the

dates go by. This and the fact that most of them were letters from Rabardy to other people led me to assume his habit was to keep rough copies of his correspondence, but lately I've wondered if they mightn't be the originals after all, a whole array of letters that were never sent. One or two items are in English, but mostly they are in French, which a few years ago I spent some time attempting to translate. The result was so peculiar that I felt sure it must be my linguistic abilities which were at fault. I gave some of the papers to my wife, a more capable French-speaker, still planning to write a book about the captain, but whenever I tried it seemed to slip away from me. Sometimes he seemed heroic, a man whose tenacity and resourcefulness put him ahead of all the notable colonial adventurers in the South Pacific. At other times he seemed neither more nor less than a monster. My wife, who was intrigued to start with, declared she had other priorities on which she would prefer to concentrate her efforts. I wrote a sketch of a few hundred words and left it there. But I carry the portfolio yet. And still I wonder, had I been able to persuade someone to publish his journal straight away, as Rabardy wished, whether anything would have happened differently.

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Last year I took my wife to a department store on George Street to buy her a hat. We pushed the elevator call button and waited behind another group because our girls were excited about the ride and Sabina agreed it made no sense to visit David Jones yet take the stairs. I had been ill and was myself glad to avoid the strain. Although we should have preferred not to get into a tight space with anyone else, owing to their popularity the lifts were both full and slow in coming. When one came we squeezed in beside the crowd, who seemed particularly tall and big-boned. The vestibule wobbled as the doors clanged shut.

'Beck?' said the patriarch of the group. With him were a young man, three young women and a woman of about his age. I recognised the features of the younger man,

who resembled his grandfather closely, before I identified the man himself. “Good God, Shaw!” I said, regretting my choice of words instantly. He was deep into his seventies, his skin spotted and loose, hanging in voluptuous folds. We arranged to reconvene in the tea rooms on the top floor later, while each engaged in the purposes for which we had come.

By three the room was emptying and we found the Shaws at a table by the window.

“I’ve read with interest of your work, Shaw,” I said. “Rumour has it there are churches and colleges all over Melanesia with your name on them.”

His grandchildren turned to watch his response.

“The mission has been out of my hands a long while,” Shaw smiled, shaking his head. “But may I say how much we enjoy your work? Freddy here took a shine to your stories in *The Bulletin*, and was most impressed to hear we once knew the author.” Young Shaw blushed. “We have several of your volumes now, in a section on the shelf. I see you were in Samoa after Mioko.”

I hoped I had not said anything about missionaries which might cause offence.

He looked at Freddy, who shrugged. The women were discussing Shaw’s children. I was sorry to hear of the loss in childbirth of another Shaw daughter. The mood quietened. She had obviously been a favourite. And Shaw returned to more cheerful themes.

“I’m pleased you finally found a rewarding outlet for your talents,” he said, making the standard assumption about a writer’s remuneration. He asked after my current project, but because discussing a work in progress has a certain way of killing it I reached for a subject I had already shelved. “Rabardy!” he exclaimed, looking a little greyer. “There’s a name from the past.”

“He gave me a pile of his papers before he died,” I said. “He wanted me to publish them.”

Shaw fell silent. Our wives were deep in conversation, and his grandchildren, alert to the threat of a long conversation about the past, made an excuse of finding Freddy a cane before the day was out.

“There was a letter, too, which he urged me to send forthwith. Instead, I mislaid it.” I suppose priests and vicars must become quite used to the phenomenon whereby people like me, who long since ceased to go to church, need to unburden themselves with a confession. Shaw’s serious eyes watched my hands on the table. He seemed wary. “And by then he was dead,” I went on, unable to stop before it was all out, “and other concerns took precedence.” I felt strangely disappointed, at how I felt now I had finally given voice to my secret guilt, and at his response. I remonstrated with myself, wondering what else I could possibly have expected. Shock? Or reassurance?

“I left when you did, or not long after,” said Shaw, as if that would account for something. “Have you ever been back, Beck?”

I had not.

“My successors at the mission always kept me informed. Emma went to the mainland for two years, you know, while Quinn was still expecting his ship to come in. They had a business disagreement. He didn’t believe in spending seven years waiting for a plantation to produce when he could sell pearl shell and sea cucumber to China and trade in labour to Samoa. Things with the Germans happened very quickly, of course.”

I knew about that, but had never heard any news of how the change affected old friends in the archipelago. Shaw was quick to take up the cue. He told me Quinn was convinced the British would step in at the last hour, right until the warships arrived and he finally saw it was over. He tried to sell his station to the new masters but they already

had their trading centre, at Blohm's place in Matupi under the volcanoes where the harbour is deep and wide enough for an entire navy. Once the Kaiser's men took control and imposed their system, Quinn's trade network was next-to useless. So he took his debts and cleared out. He was already sick when he joined Emma on the mainland. She had been buying plantations and went on buying them, always taking trouble to register the land purchase with the US government, in addition to the German one: belt and braces. When she became too significant to ignore the Germans embraced her as an ally. Shaw speculated that because she was a woman, and a brown one at that, they did not think of her as a threat. When she moved down the coast away from the volcano to Kokopo they even followed, renamed the place Herbertshöhe and made it their capital.

"And what of Quinn?"

"You didn't hear? She brought him here to clinics in Sydney but the tuberculosis wouldn't budge. Afterwards Emma met an Italian sailor a few years younger than her who was killed by the natives in a scuffle. We hear good and bad news about the Protectorate, and about how the new company they set up treats the natives and other traders, but the whole thing was unfortunate for Quinn. Everything he had was staked on that trading station. Afterwards, I don't think he had the resources left to start again. It's the same for us all, sooner or later. Grand projects are a younger man's territory."

And he lit up as he told me about his churches, which he said had done well under German and British rule alike, in Fiji and Papua as well as Neu Pommern, which we used to call New Britain.

"I can't imagine," I said, "what the place is like now."

"You'd be amazed," he said. "I've been back to our old home, to see the children's graves and catch up with old friends. We're so touched, Miriam and I, at how people remember us. And the fruits of our work are there for anyone to see. All the old cannibals and warmongers are gone. There are roads and telephone wires. The tribes

and villages are no longer segregated. People wear clothes and move around freely, in a civil and neighbourly fashion. If ever one needed proof of God's blessing, a person need only go there to see it.

"Until recently my successors got along very well with the German administration. Now they're telling my Australian Methodists to hand the whole mission over to their German brothers eight thousand miles away. What with this news about the manufacture of armaments, it is very concerning. It seems, after all, that it would have been wiser for the British Empire to secure an unbroken strip of territory from south-east Asia to Australia, as Quinn believed they would. People in high command were campaigning to get the colony declared. They were about to sign on the dotted line in 1881 when a Frenchman began writing to accuse them of sponsoring the killing of the natives. He threatened to expose the British navy to the newspapers if they didn't pronounce the islands some sort of self-rule.

"I cannot tell what Rabardy hoped to achieve – for it was certainly he who wrote those threatening letters to the colonial office which put a spanner in the works. With so many colonies to administrate, they didn't need another, least of all one associated with violent incidents which would upset the folks at home. Rabardy's knock was enough to pitch the whole scheme off its feet. Before they could get it back up again the Germans steamed in, and it was too late.

"I expect you know I never liked Rabardy. I'm not proud of it. God asks us to love our neighbours; fortunately He never said we had to like one another. I've been blessed with God's forgiveness which I could never hope to earn on my own merits, and as a fellow sinner I wish the man's soul reconciliation with his heavenly father. That doesn't change the fact he was a fantasist, an egomaniac, and a suicide. You know he tried to blackmail Quinn? Quinn showed me the letter before he destroyed it. Rabardy was going to tell the navy that Quinn and I had set him up to carry out that massacre."

He caught sight of his family in the doorway, and got up to go. They said goodbye to Sabina and he shook my hand. “Do you still have the journal?” he said.

I did.

“Burn it,” he said.

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For a few weeks, I thought a lot about Rabardy. Relieved to know the letter I had lost was probably only one more among many. Relieved to find I was not so guilty after all, I found myself free to think about him again. I wondered if he had died from fever, as Quinn suggested or by his own hand, as Shaw believed. Or was the doctor right to insinuate that Quinn had disposed of him? Rabardy tried his patience, but would Quinn have murdered his old friend? The friend threatened to take apart everything Quinn had worked for. Perhaps Quinn stayed Rabardy’s hand – perhaps he forced it. Or did Rabardy give up the ghost when the last of a long line of schemes and visions he’d hoped for was extinguished?

In the end, Rabardy’s was just another unexpected death in a landscape which already had too many of those. And if war is coming, with mechanical guns and iron ships, and fighting from the Baltic to the Tasman Sea, there will be many to come which will be regretted more severely than this one.

TWELVE

Beside me at my desk is the journal Rabardy gave me shortly before he died. The entries are inconsistent and only a few are dated. Curiously, the account begins the day of his arrival at Liki Liki, 31st August 1880, for there is no mention, in this notebook at least, of his voyage or the loss of his crew or the trouble he had in locating the remnants of the first expedition.

Today I watched (he writes) as the colony's equipment was loaded onto a Sydney schooner, taken away as part of some evacuation contract. The last sixteen men and their lieutenant have left us the camp they set up in an insalubrious hollow, overlooked by native huts, miles away from Port Breton where the colony was meant to be situated. I could not have done more. I tried to cheer their spirits, by inviting on board the *Génil* all those who were able to walk. I showed them how well armed and sound she is, how well stocked with essentials; I gave them my most express assurance that the *India* would be with us in only a few days, bringing the third expedition. My efforts were in vain; I protested against the removal of the equipment, against everyone's departure, but to no avail. Why did they not follow their orders? Not one of those wretches had carried out the Marquis's clear instructions. Such ignorance and confusion! Such negligence!

Two days later, on the 2nd of September …

This place is poisoned by pestilential miasmas which rise up out of the marsh every evening and cover the roadstead; fetid odours waft over the ship and make the stuffy heat of one's lodgings seem preferable. From my porthole, *The Génil* seems afloat in clouds. In two days of exploring, three of my men have fallen sick. This pestilence seeping out of the marsh will carry fever into the lungs of anyone who will let it in. It is clear why the departed colonists were struck down. The natives would have disdained to live in such a place. As it is, their year's labour – the efforts of eighty-two men! –

consists of a few huts, a small plantation of bananas and a sweet potato patch – enough to sustain a family of eight, no more. As for roads and the buildings which the passengers of the *India* will be expecting, cottages for the workers and houses for the landowners – there are none.

Why didn't these wretches have the courage or the intelligence to find another way? It breaks my heart to think that they had no unity, no trust, no *honour* though all the while they possessed everything they needed to succeed; had they even been willing merely to follow the orders they had been given – which I know were the same that I myself was given – there is no doubt in my mind they would have redeemed the expedition, saved their lives and goods, and laid the foundation for great things.

Therefore, tomorrow I'll disembark the few useful men who remain, cut firewood for fuel and depart for Port Breton. There I'll construct the wooden buildings and make sure everything is more comfortable for those who follow. I can say no more except that I will do everything I can and that this disaster, will not cause me to doubt but instead strengthen my courage and resolve. The entire calamity was their own faults. I will not make the same mistakes.

Following this, there is a gap: two blank pages at the top of which Rabardy has written only the words 'Provisions' and 'Equipment', with no entries below. On the following page he has drawn a crude map of the island, after which he begins again, with no date this time, only the month – November.

I have circumnavigated this whole island. It is 200 miles from north to south and in places less than 10 miles wide, within which space a mountain range rises along most of its length. To east and west alike the mountains extend almost directly into the sea, with only a narrow foreshore in places and multitudinous valleys. Streams of all sizes foam and roar into the sea from these many deep gorges. As we passed them sailing up the

east coast these watercourses, though none of them are navigable, resembled broad causeways leading upcountry.

Two villages that lay on our route struck me as remarkable for their neatness and taste: quite unlike the pestilential hovels my fellow colonist had contrived to rot in. The natives seem to have collected from the bush a quantity of the brightest looking variegated shrubs to plant round their dwellings. I discovered that this was done as much for convenience as for ornament, as they use the bright leaves in their dances.

The houses were mostly made of bamboo, thatched with pandanus leaves. With the exception in both cases of those belonging to the chiefs, which were considerably larger buildings, they are not very high. The sleeping bunks seemed to be made of the sides of a canoe split off and laid on posts driven into the ground; over these were laid mats, made of green coconut leaves, which were pleasantly cool, but rather rough, as the thick stem had not been entirely removed. One of these mats was always brought out to us as visitors. Once we were seated a native came offering betel-nut, which we soon perceived we must chew in order to avoid giving offence.

We are the only white men here. The people of the south are completely different from those of the north. And the blacks in the middle of the island cannot understand the languages of those to the north or south. Inland, in the valleys and on the mountain slopes, dwells a population which is usually on a war footing with the shore dwellers. And yet they all gave me a warm welcome: they are eager for iron and tobacco and offer their produce in exchange: shells, tortoiseshell, taro, banana, coconut, copra and mother-of-pearl. Many brought me sugar canes – huge ones, very sugary and rich.

Their languages are very soft, their songs, like those of all primitive peoples, are chants; but I have listened to choirs of women and children which were very pleasant and had perfect rhythm. As for religion, I have little information as yet; when I have learned better who to speak with them I hope to learn the distinguishing features of their

beliefs. The ease of relations, the gentleness of the New Ireland islanders leads me to believe that it will be easy, in the not-too-distant future, to convert the majority of the women and children to our Roman Catholic faith.

I sailed back down the coast of New Ireland and returned to Irish Cove which I now consider the best harbour on the island. Therefore, I took possession of it in the name of Monsieur the Marquis de Rays, on the 14th September 1880 in the presence of the King of Lambom, from whom I have bought the properties he owns in the valley, and from Bellic, the king of Lamasa, who owns all the hunting rights in New Ireland.

My hopes are thus high for the nascent colony, because at every step I see something that could – if exploited with intelligence – provide a great source of riches. Sugar, cotton, trepang, coconut, shells, pearls, mother-of-pearl, without even counting the exotic hardwoods, whose wealth would daunt the most ambitious. Undoubtedly results would be difficult to achieve in the first years, but afterwards what else but success? Nothing is required but courage and perseverance. The third expedition will be here soon. If their governor is active and energetic we will do great things in a few years – God willing we should live so long.

***

There is no mention of the third expedition, of Rabardy's journey to Sydney for supplies, or of how he returned to find the colony deserted. Instead, only a series of entries indicating an increasing interest in the natives, one page dedicated to each subject, as it were, as if he meant to return and complete his notes. The only date that anchors in time the following pages is the word February.

The natives of New Ireland would put most Europeans to shame – *records Rabardy* – with their knowledge of natural history. I cannot find a beast, bird, fish, reptile or insect whose distinctive name they do not know, in addition to which they will tell you the class and species to which it belongs. When I ask a native the name of a caterpillar, he

says at once: "It is a caterpillar, changing to a moth, a tree-borer, a cocoon-spinner." Of a beetle, I'm told: "It is a beetle, larva eats offal, nymph buries in the earth." The information is spoken all together like a single name. Of a flying squirrel my friends will say: "It is a *Dirra-dirra*" – for this is the sound it makes – "it lives on fruit, springs from tree to tree at night and brings forth live young." Even the boys seem to know the name of the smallest insect; and if by chance I should ask about one of which they are in doubt, they turn to the nearest man, who supplies the information at once.

***

Girls and men go about the place as God made them and look better like this than in clothes given to them by whites. Nakedness does not indicate sexual lassitude nor does it induce a native to become aroused. Their brown skin is like a suit, or at any rate the naked native seems less uncovered than a naked white who presents a very awkward and angular picture without his shell; he feels the absence of a part of himself, does not know how to move and stimulates a feeling of repugnance in the observer. The opposite is the case with the native.

***

I have never seen people dance and sing as much as New Irelanders, or with such stamina and variety. Every event from births to funerals to marriages to the completion of a house or launching of a newly built canoe is an opportunity for a dance: the end of a harvest, the killing of a pig, the accomplishment of any community project … all call for dances. Men and women dance separately, though children may dance with either. A child who has barely learned to stand can be seen being taught by his mother or father. I have also discovered that the work of a choreographer, lyric writer or composer of a melody is never performed without their express permission and the exchange of *tabu* money which continues to be a source of revenue for a popular artist during his lifetime and after his death for his descendants.

When a new dance is invented, the choreographer gathers his acquaintances together and begins rehearsals which may last several hours a day for many months. Lines of dancers, decorated with patterns and adorned with jewellery, carry bunches of brightly coloured flowers or feathers. The dancers sing in unison, skipping forwards or back, standing, crouching, performing actions with the hands or feet, swinging arms and legs. In precision of movement, an experienced dance group from New Ireland could hold its own alongside any French ballet.

Erotic dances are performed at festivities to honour the dead. Wooden drums, boards and pieces of bamboo accompany, supported by a choir. The orchestra performs an overture, then out of the bushes at the sides masked dancers approach the dance area with slow steps before uniting as a troupe. Now the dancers circle in measured movements, sizing one another up. A single masked figure appears, causing excitement among the other dancers who draw close and rapidly retreat. The new arrival is a woman. The men seek in turn to make her receptive to their advances, while the beautiful mask is cold, turning her back on one, pushing another away. Finally, she acknowledges one as her lover. He leaps around her, and the rejected suitors withdraw. In the final scene, the two portray intimacy with earthy realism, not without initial reluctance from the female figure. Yet there is nothing obscene about the representation. Old and young, male and female, watch the actions serenely and shout their appreciation at the conclusion. Along with the grotesque and the comic, a certain decency is maintained in the large public gatherings, though sometimes – in fenced-off, densely veiled spaces impenetrable to the curious gaze of those who are forbidden from watching – other dances take place which recognise no limits at all.

***

I have been told by white traders that the presence of human skulls or jawbones hanging around a house indicates cannibalism. I have heard, moreover, of punitive raids

launched by Europeans on the basis of this conviction, yet I now know that these skeletal fragments are mementos of the dead, of beloved friends or relatives, no different from keeping a lock of hair as we do in Europe. The spirit of the departed person resorts to his or her skull when it returns from its journeyings. A year after death the family will disinter their dead and take the skull, scrape out the inside and cover the outside with gum and lime to represent the face of the departed. They fix a piece of wood across the back of the lower jawbone, which is held in the mouth of the person dancing in the *toberran* dances.

The spirits of the buried dead are invisible during the day; at night they appear to survivors in the form of fire sparks or little flames. The spirits of men pursue women; those of women creep up behind men. All flee instantly, for any contact brings sickness and death. The spirits of battle-dead or those who died by violent means appear at night, flying around, or alighting on certain trees. The spirits of unborn children whose mothers died in childbirth walk about during the day in the forms of men and women adorned with strong-smelling plants. They try to seduce the living, especially those who have had sexual intercourse with members of the same totem. They live in holes in rocks and in stones or take the form of a dead tree-stump in the forest. But at night they are black with bright shining eyes. The spirit *laulauvin* in hollow trees likes to hunt young children and kill them. Family members who want to make children hurry to their hut call out, '*Laulauvin* is coming!'

***

Secret societies and chiefs exercise the only rule of law in New Ireland. Both are supposed to possess exceptional powers of sorcery. These powers are real because the men themselves believe they possess the powers, and the people believe it too. The choice of chief is decided by this belief.

When epidemics strike – as they do from time to time – in the evenings old and young take burning palm leaves and sprigs and run wailing through the village and round it, to drive out the evil spirits that bring the sickness. As they move among the trees and round the enclosure waving their torches and yelling and gesticulating as loudly as possible, the scene offers one of those eerily beautiful pictures in which the archipelago is so rich. The landscape lying in deep darkness is suddenly lit by torches that dart along among the bushes.

For no-one here dies of a natural cause: they are all victims of sorcery. And although sorcerers are highly respected, if the dead person enjoyed superior status, the sorcerer will find himself chief suspect, an invidious position from which he must try to extricate himself as well as he can, by paying *tabu* to the relatives and followers of the dead man. If he succeeds in clearing himself, a few whiskers or head hairs, a piece of the ear or finger are next cut from the corpse. He mumbles a spell over these, summoning various spirits to punish the evildoer. This *kom* sorcery cannot fail, for the next time someone dies, it is as a result of the *kom*, proving that the second dead person brought about the death of the first through sorcery.

A charm must contain something of the one to be charmed – his hair, a piece of his clothing, his excrement, food scraps, saliva or footprints. These are used as a medium for the murmuring of a spell combined with blowing hand-held burnt lime into the air. Because of this, the native clears away everything he can. Hence the extraordinary neatness of the compound, where the earth floor is carefully swept each day to remove anything that might assist an evildoer with a spell. A native conceals or burns his shaved-off lock of hair, and carefully wipes the spat-out betel-nut saliva off the floor.

Thus the native lives a life plagued by all kinds of anxieties. He sees himself surrounded constantly by evil spirits and their influence. He trusts nobody, for who

knows whether his nearest neighbour or best friend is not trying to bewitch him with calamities? Everywhere he suspects treachery and deceit.

It is much easier for a European to win the trust of a native than for a native to trust a countryman from a different region. The many evil spirits and hurtful sorcery that surround the natives on all sides have no detectable influence on the European, therefore he is a white man from a land where there are other spirits and other charms, over which the local spirits and sorcerers have no power. To tell the natives that neither spirits nor sorcerers can harm then is preaching to deaf ears; the feeling is always, you have spoken well but we know better.

***

Morality here is right living. Certain actions are right because they have always been considered right; others are wrong because they have always been considered wrong. Public opinion constitutes the rule, and punishment for any breach is the shame felt when one falls foul of it. A good man is generous. Niggardliness is always wrong. A man of good conduct must make plenty of feasts; be loving to his friends; look after his children well, and be a good fighter. A bad man is a stingy man, who takes no interest in his children, is quarrelsome, who speaks evil of others or kills without cause. To kill as a reprisal is commendable. Retribution after death is certain. Thieves are punished in the other world by being beaten against a tree trunk, and dragged across the fibrous *rikarika* plant. The niggard's ears will be filled with excrement before he is thrown against the buttress roots of trees. Reverence to the aged is a virtue, and neglect of the elderly always condemned. Selfishness and cowardice are two of the principal offences against morals, whilst bravery, cruelty in war, persistence in revenge and endurance of pain are amongst the principal virtues.

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The next entry is dated, July 10th, months after the massacre, a week or so after Captain Henry's arrival. I believe Rabardy's activities over the following days and weeks coincided with the time Henry sent him to look for the stricken ship. Quinn said that Rabardy took his time and seemed in no kind of hurry to return, and that he went away for a long period with the intention – so Quinn suspected – of exploring the islands with some other purpose in mind than affairs of the colony.

The missionaries I have met (he writes) seem to take the view that all native traditions and customs have to be uprooted to make room for Christianity. To forbid without giving any replacement whatever has a deleterious effect. Instead of the earlier daily life interrupted by celebrations and joyful gatherings, slackness and indolence appear, lip-service, hypocrisy and all manner of vices perpetrated in secret.

From July 15th he continues in a series of diary entries. The route he took appears to go in an entirely new direction among unfamiliar peoples, south along the east New Britain coast:

For a dozen miles we saw no natives; though we found cooked turtle bones. Beyond Archway Point, natives appeared frequently along the shore, but when we attempted to land they adopted a hostile stance, making objectionable gestures to show their contempt. In one place we anchored in a small cove, and at once the local tribe came down to the beach in great numbers, and threw stones from their slings, whereupon we deemed it prudent to haul further off shore.

July 18th –

The river, though wide, was not navigable beyond the first few metres. The banks were overgrown with ferns, intermingled with sago and betel-nut palm. A creeper with a magnificent red wax-like flower hung down from a gum tree, and some of the lovely dracaenas lent their colours to enhance the scene. As the bay seemed a tranquil place, we dropped anchor for the night. We noticed several large hornbills flying about

amongst the trees, making that curious rushing noise with their wings like a railway train in motion, which inspires the native name *banga-banga*. We found cassowary tracks on the shore, and one evening saw a small wallaby come down to the beach to lick salt off the stones.

July 21st –

On landing, we found the natives shy at first. After we showed them strings of beads and red cloth they began to venture close; whereupon we bartered for small things they were wearing, such as armlets and necklets. The first man who received a few beads seemed so overcome by his immense wealth that he rushed along the beach yelling like a maniac, to show his friends the wonderful treasure he had got from the mysterious creatures who had come to visit. Others grew more eager and pressed round us, trying to barter everything they were wearing, even the rings out of their ears.

July 29th –

Wishing to purchase a pig, and finding not a single one of us had any language in common with these natives, I asked my fellows what would be the best way of making them understand. "Why don't you try grunting?" someone said, so I began to grunt vociferously. The effect was magical – some of them leapt back, holding their spears in readiness to throw; some ran away, covering their eyes with their hands, and all exhibited astonishment and alarm; so evident was it in fact that they expected me to turn into a pig, and so irresistibly comic was their alarm that my crew and I burst out laughing, which gradually reassured them, and those who had run away came back. Seeing us so heartily amused, and that I had not undergone any metamorphosis, they began to laugh too. I drew a pig on the sand with a stick and made motions of eating, whereupon my meaning suddenly seemed to strike them, for they all burst out laughing again, and nodding their heads, several natives ran off to fetch the pig we sought.

After this they were much more friendly, and took us off to a village close by. Seeing no women or children about, it struck me this must be a village they had conquered. My suspicion was confirmed by a large quantity of human bones lying about, all of them charred and blackened by fire. I picked up what looked like a shin-bone, and showed it to a native with an inquiring look, whereupon he snatched it, pointed to his own leg, put the bone in his mouth and mimed munching it all round, rubbing his stomach at the same time, and grinning as much as to say it was very good. Although there were so many bones about, I did not see any skulls, which led me to wonder if they had been taken away for trophies. The houses were beautifully made, and far superior to any I had seen before in New Ireland; they were semicircular, with the roof sloping right down to the ground at the back, and the front filled in by fine wicker-work around a small door. The inside of each house was decorated with figures burnt into the wood or stained with nut-juices. The village itself stood in a circle around an open space, planted with small trees and variegated plants. Nothing suggested there was anyone now living in the houses of this conquered village, and indeed if a man lives in the house of an enemy he has killed in battle, it is said he will be haunted by the dead man's spirit. I could only imagine that the natives who were now showing it to us must have surprised the village at night, catching all the inhabitants asleep. Their spears were the most dangerous I have seen in the islands. They fastened a cassowary's claw on the points with a kind of wax which, if the spear entered a body, would melt in the heat leaving the cassowary's claw embedded in the victim's flesh when the weapon was drawn out.

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At which point his journal more or less comes to an end. Pressed inside the folds of the following pages are two letters, or as I rather suspect, drafts of letters, as neither is signed, and only one is dated.

January 24th, 1882

Your ~~Majesty~~, lordship M. Marquis

~~By the time you receive this letter I will have done what I have to do. You will not hear from me again.~~ I have not had word from you in a over year, in spite of my writing repeatedly to inform you of the works I have undertaken on your behalf. Let it be known: I have not failed the colony. It is the colonists who failed themselves. They chose this outcome of their own volition, by leaving me no alternative. I choose not to be dragged down with them. I have done what is honourable to protect you from the aftershocks. Once, it would have made a difference to me to have your approval. Had you or they been willing to listen to my advice, perhaps the situation might have been different, but that opportunity passed a long time ago.

Respectfully yours,

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To his Lordship, the Prime Minister of England,

I address this appeal to you, sir, on behalf of the weak of the world, in your capacity as leader of what is widely held to be an enlightened government. ~~You must surely agree that~~ Those who enjoy the wealth and standing of Empire have a duty to place the interests of humanity above purely national concerns.

For more than two years I have lived and travelled among the islands of New Britain and New Ireland. The crafts and traditions of the peoples of this archipelago are from village to village unique. They are being destroyed as a direct consequence of trade carried out by your countrymen and others. Already several tribes have ceased to produce the stone axes whose manufacture they practised hitherto with painstaking precision, for the sake of faulty iron goods bought from America. Everywhere the musket is replacing the spear, sling or bow and arrow, cheap cotton cloth supplants the native tapa, shells give way to beads, and ancient headdresses are forsaken for hats and bonnets. As the fingers of trade spread and penetrate, the destruction increases. In very little time the ancient skills and ways of life will be irrevocably destroyed, for an island is more accessible than a continent, the natives may be easily encountered and will too readily succumb to insidious merchants. What sense is a man to make of a world in which steel rifles exist, who knows only shell and bone tools? Nor is the Melanesian man equipped to comprehend the

impact upon him and his people of the new faith which the missionary urges him to embrace, or what he surrenders by embracing it. Blacks exposed to religious instruction become fawning adherents to a confusion of ideas. They see what the white missionary possesses and embrace his faith only in the simple conviction it will bring them this same wealth. Only one activity is more deleterious than these: settler colonisation. These islands have neither room nor resources for the idle white to invade, swindling tribes of their land in order to 'buy' hunting grounds and turning them into plantations, indenturing free men as slaves and reducing them to scavengers.

I have set myself to the task of recording this fragile treasure of human existence before it is effaced from the world. Even so, we all know that what is thrown into the fire can never be recovered. There can no justification for the shrugging of shoulders. This situation must not be accepted, for your nation has the power and presence to prevent all further devastation forthwith.

The calamity may be grave and dire, yet a simple solution ~~is clear~~ lies in your power. ~~I implore you to establish~~ You must establish a protectorate over the islands of Nova Britannia ~~at the earliest~~ with immediate effect; a protectorate in its strictest sense, one which has not yet been seen though the term is often used – you will defend the people and their land from all incursion of any kind by self-styled civilised nations, permitting them the freedom and dignity to continue in their ways undisturbed.

I, Captain Gustave Rabardy, ex-governor of the colony of New France, call upon Great Britain and her colonies to lead the way in designating the people of Nova Britannia subjects of an international guarantee, to be legally enforced by yourselves against all forms of infiltration by whites. I shall myself act as mediator and guarantor for this arrangement. I can personally vouch for the people of the free state which will be created thereby. Under my guidance and care they will – it is my solemn promise – represent no threat to Her Majesty's administration.

You may see by the enclosed maps and plans that a moderate naval force would be sufficient to maintain the protectorate, viz three fleets of four ships each to patrol the areas north-west, north-east and southern coastlines in rotation. To avoid even accidental contact all trading routes to Australia and

China are to be diverted through the Torres Strait or around the north-east of the Solomon islands, according to the season.

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And finally there is one more entry which appears on its own after several blank pages and is written in a weaker hand, though the author was undoubtedly Rabardy. It is almost the same, word for word, as the story Rabardy told me on the last evening I saw him alive.

An old man told me that the stars were lamps hung by the departed spirits to light the way for those that should come after; where they went, he did not say. He only knew that the spirit travelled across the water to the moon at its rising, climbed in and was carried to the stars, from whence by the same means the spirit returned to the earth. I asked how it came to be that the moon was sometimes large and sometimes small; he replied that when it was small there were not so many spirits needing to go, as it was always at the full moon that most people died, and that was always the time when most spirits required to visit the earth. New Irelanders believe the land on which they live was formed long ago by a being who is no longer in existence. Some declare it was a huge pig that rooted the earth up and formed the mountains and valleys. The natives are very superstitious about the spirits of their departed friends or enemies, which they consider have a great influence. Certain birds possess the power to announce the death of a man. Should such a one cry near a hut, they drive it off by yelling and throwing stones. The same omen is conveyed by shooting stars, which in the natives' minds are spirits that journey down to the earth to collect a person whom they have chosen. They are terribly afraid of an eclipse, and account for it by the notion that the spirits are angry.

THE SOUTH-PACIFIC SHORT STORIES

OF LOUIS BECKE

–A CRITICAL STUDY–

When Joseph Conrad wrote to his publisher in 1896 concerning Louis Becke, he reveals what seems to be considered admiration:

> Strangely enough I have been, only the other day, reading again his *Reef and Palm*. Apart from the great interest of the stories, what I admire most is his perfect unselfishness in the telling of them. He stands magnificently aloof from the poignancy and humour of his stories. A thing I could never do—and which I envy him (quoted in Day 146).

It made sense, at the time, for Conrad to be comparing his work with Becke's. In ten months both men had published their debut books with Fisher Unwin, focusing on traders in the South Pacific. The writers were only two years apart in age and had come to fiction publishing late, at the end of a couple of decades of life-experience in the watery margins of the British empire. Neither was English and both had recently arrived in London, although here their paths diverged. Almost at once Becke became the focus of literary attention: Conan-Doyle sponsored him for the author's club; Kipling professed to admiring his book of stories, and the Earl of Pembroke – descendant of Shakespeare's patron – agreed to author the introduction for the second edition. The year before, Mark Twain, touring in Australia had praised Becke's writing, and Stevenson's widow would later write to Becke of her husband's 'keen interest' in Becke's work (Day 143). Meanwhile Conrad languished, waiting for invitations that did not come (Bradshaw 210-211).

The most Conrad was likely to gain from being so complimentary to his publisher about a competitor was a free copy of that writer's new book, which he duly received. A month later, after completing Becke's third printed work, a novel written in

collaboration, Conrad wrote to Unwin again to thank him for sending it, this time with what appears to be a retraction of his earlier praise: 'The trouble is' he wrote, 'that I cannot find Mr Becke in the book' (quoted in Bradshaw 211). It may sound like a change of heart, but this second opinion is not necessarily a contradiction. In positive and negative lights, Conrad was making the same observation. His remarks, the first and last he is known to have written on the subject, highlight what might account both for Becke's initial success and for his ultimate neglect – his ambiguous narrative stance. Thirty-five books, many hundreds of short stories and seventeen years later, Becke was to die of throat cancer, impoverished and alone at a desk in a Sydney hotel – the pages of yet another short story, according to the chamber-maid, unfinished in front of him (Day 56 – 57). He was 58. A few friends and admirers connected with *The Bulletin* magazine had to club together to raise enough funds to pay for a tombstone after his funeral the following day. It was 1913, the year in which *Chance* was published and Conrad's star shot to its zenith.

II

Louis Becke was a prolific writer who wrote long and short works of fiction and non-fiction, drawing on his own life experiences for detail and plot ideas. His work was published and reprinted in numerous editions across the world, by British, American and Australian publishers, magazines and newspapers and in budget editions for distribution in the British colonies. The best of his oeuvre is generally agreed to be his short fiction in the South Pacific islands, but he also set many stories in Australia, and a few in France. Although he was writing in a wider tradition of the adventure romance in what Eric Hobsbawm called the age of empire, his aesthetic was realist, rooted in the Australian nationalist school of *The Bulletin* in the 1890s.

Becke's career was made possible and defined by the global historical context into which he was born. He was lifted and dropped on a tidal wave of economic, industrial, social and political change which washed out from the industrial centres of western nations into the quietest margins of the Pacific islands only to partially retreat again in his lifetime and afterwards. The extreme highs and lows of his progress can be accounted for almost entirely by a process in which he was, to a large extent, flotsam.

Becke arrived in the South Pacific islands when traders and missionaries were still making fresh inroads into what they saw as empty territory, and first encounters with the *papalagi* invasion were fresh in living memory. During his time there, the race for resources, markets and souls, fuelled by industrialisation and capitalism thousands of miles away, imposed rapid and unstoppable change on Pacific peoples. Population spikes in Europe were feeding social unrest, so that when large-scale emigrations took place in Becke's lifetime, they served both the wider economic and political interests of nation states and the needs of individuals who lacked prospects at home (Hobsbawm 1975: 228 –244). By the time Becke was back in Australia earning his living as a writer, Germany, France, Britain and the United States had annexed many of the free territories in which over a twenty-year period he had lived or traded. Industrial technology had also combined with colonialism to transform the publishing world into an expanding business, supplying fiction to a huge market of literate populations from countries where primary education had been compulsory for a decade or two. Becke benefited from this, and contributed through his writing to a self-sustaining vortex: his stories enabled readers to project themselves onto a space which their wishes could designate as effectively empty. Many, as his letters show, actually went to the South Pacific, where it was impossible, as he argued in 'Making a fortune in the south seas' 'for a man of limited means to make money' (1908). Even if their projection was only an imaginative one, it served a purpose as a safety valve for the metropolis itself: by introducing the

possibility of an alternative existence to which at any time a reader might think of escaping, the stories of writers like Becke could make the rigours of working life in the home country more bearable. During Becke's last few years, on the other hand, a new global political consciousness turned back towards the centre, to the arms race in Europe, which itself created uncertain prospects for their colonies. Becke's Pacific-island world no longer represented a bright future of possibility. In the years after his death, interest continued to wane through two world wars, a general global retreat from empire, and the political independence of many previously annexed dependencies. A reversal of narrative direction necessarily followed, as the peoples of those dependencies told their stories in their own words, and progressively deconstructed the power structures of the colonising cultures. Broadly speaking, the place of a writer like Becke in the apprehension of the book-buying public has swung in a century and a quarter from hero to villain: from a huge readership which found his writing entertaining and wanted to emulate him, to one which had less than no interest in his work. How Becke is or has been read will of course vary according to when he is or was read, and my point is that there is a difference between what the texts do and what his readerships – real or ideal, at the time or retrospectively – may assume they are doing. In view of how politically charged Becke's temporal and geographical field is, it seems all the more important to read closely and discover what is actually at work in his texts, not least because so many excellent writers of his day publicly admired those stories. Robert Dixon began this careful rereading process over twenty years ago, and his initiative has been followed by Michael Sturma, Peter Pierce, Sumanghala Bhattacharya and others, yet Becke still continues to baffle even those who admire him. This is partly due to his narrative technique, which I will go on to examine, and it is partly due to the stickiness of a number of legends which were either attached to Becke or invented by him, and

which he presumably felt suited his purposes at the time, though they fog the picture now.

There is a good archive of information about Becke's life – his childhood on the wild coast of a former penal colony, his various jobs in the Pacific islands and Australia, and his later life in Europe as an increasingly struggling writer – but many of the direct sources are Becke's own stories, some of which purport to be fiction and others autobiography, with a fair amount of both in each. Many of his later collections follow a formula which intersperses autobiographical features or sketches with fictional tales. Facts are not always easy to disentangle, and while Becke seems keen to welcome his readers into his world he is at the same time remarkably evasive – in a way that significantly distinguishes him from Conrad, for example – about what he really thinks.

III

Some of the most eloquent summaries of the Becke legend were set down by two of his mid-century American champions, his biographer A.Grove Day and the novelist James A.Michener. Damning his subject with faint praise, Michener recounts in the introduction to *The Spell of the Pacific* how he discovered Becke's work on a bookshelf one rainy afternoon in the Wallis Islands, and was captivated: 'They were, I must admit, poorly written, but they had upon them the stamp of allure, and they allure me still: the books of an unlettered man, a graceless storyteller, but a wonderfully tactile writer.' (quoted in Day 151)

In the final chapter of his biography, Day's sentimental evocation of the writer whom the pair attempted to redeem from literary obscurity echoes that of his friend:

> Becke's strength, then, lies in his self-confidence born of the early experience of a writer who not only responded to the call of adventure, but viewed the scene as a man does who looks up from his labor to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The glamor has faded under

> the pressure of work, sudden hardship, illness, and bitter monotony, and the islands of the Pacific are shown to be real places on our planet, not the dreamlands of more artistic craftsmen such as Conrad, Stevenson, and Melville. This is the way it was. (Day 156)

The myth ripples with masculine honesty and the Protestant work ethic. Becke was, it would seem, uneducated and instinctive, not an artist or thinker but a craftsman-toiler who was first a man of action and only second a writer. Place this consideration alongside his claim to twenty years spent living the 'wild life of the southern seas' (to borrow the title of one of Becke's collections), and Becke has all the qualifications required to stamp him authentic, a kind of muscular-adventurer idiot savant.

Day's assertion about Becke's cast of realism, that 'this is the way it was' says more about the man who wrote it than the man he was writing about. Day was chair of English studies at the University of Hawaii, where his college friend, Dr Carl Stroven inaugurated a course in 'Literature of The Pacific' (Day 151). Together, they produced five anthologies of 'Pacific' Literature. With James A.Michener, Day collaborated on *Rascals in Paradise* – a book of biographies of ten notable Pacific characters, including Becke and the Marquis de Rays, and published more than one full-volume biography of Becke. Day's problematic contribution to the study of literature in the Pacific has been criticised by Paul Lyons, who argues that Day had a personal agenda in the politics of culture, and that his championing of writers like Becke was a weapon in that campaign. Day's career, Lyons writes, coincided with the drive to statehood in Hawaii, by an America whose geopolitical ambitions it served. Day helped to fabricate a legend that the Hawaiian people had overthrown their monarch, choosing American democratic values instead. He fixed the myth using: 'a complex set of relays among American ideology, scholarship, literary criticism, popular culture, and the tourist industry' and a voice of unquestionable authority. 'Before and after statehood, Day sought to establish a tradition of fine "Pacific" literary writings, which functioned for him like heirlooms,

displaying a durable American connection to the islands, weaving a cultural narrative 'at the expense of a larger view of history and causality"' (54).

By stressing Becke's authenticity, Day was implicitly attempting to write the white coloniser's narrative over that of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific, as if the latter were a blank. With advocates like Day, a prosecution case against Becke might seem superfluous. I will argue for the defence, however, that there are elements of interest in the works of Becke which do not occlude these voices, but give them space and expression. A careful look at Becke's life, as told in his stories and letters and Day's biography reveals that none of the myths was true. He was not uneducated, and if his creativity was instinctive this was so only in keeping with the conscious creative process of an artist who practised his art for years before he would later claim to have picked up his pen. He was not a man of action, beyond being an enthusiastic fisherman, and I will argue that he was a thinker who felt keenly at the time and in reflection afterwards the strangeness and horror of the colonial project in which he had been embroiled.

IV

The first component of the unthinking Becke myth to be dispelled is that he had no education. The Becke siblings received three morning hours in the schoolroom with a private tutor who was, 'highly educated, well-travelled, a proficient linguist and a good navigator' (Becke 1905:11). The myth of the 'graceless unlettered man' seems to rely on the fact that Becke did not go to an educational institution until he was 12, when the family moved to Sydney and he attended Fort Street Model School infrequently for six months, a place he left because of the numerous thrashings he received and witnessed (1913:20-21). Becke's education took place before, not after, the move to Sydney. He is partly to blame for this misconception because he frequently downplayed his tutelage, as

Chris Tiffin has observed, 'painting himself as nautical and outdoorsy, a man living a life of freedom and adventure' (166). However, these elements also featured in his education. Becke's father insisted that afternoons were to be spent outdoors, learning the crafts of boat and bush. The children fished, shot, cooked, navigated, and sometimes had to round up one of the family's herd of bullocks, kill and butcher it, cure the skin and deliver cuts to the neediest neighbours. The Beckes do not seem to have been interested in accruing capital, and they did not consider themselves above anyone else. This may explain why Becke's stories, like Kipling's, capture the vernacular so vividly.

The same egalitarian tendencies applied to race as to class in Becke's upbringing. Inspired by their tutor, who liked to visit aboriginal camps and speak to the inhabitants in their own language (1905: 17), and by their mother who welcomed Chinese fishermen (1905: 23) or Tahitian sailors (1913: 23) regularly into the house, the boys also learned respect for other cultures and a knack of picking up languages. Becke's grasp of self-sufficient living, and his love of fishing and shooting provided him with communal activities which cross cultural and geographical boundaries, enabling him to strike up a rapport with almost anyone anywhere. Becke's fascination for Pacific wildlife and Pacific-island peoples led to him and Sabina setting off in 1908 for an expedition to Fiji. Becke was to catalogue natural history, especially fish, and Sabina, who had a background of extensive researches into English folk songs and dance, took phonograph and gramophone receivers for collecting verbatim songs and stories (Day 56).

Becke preserved a cynicism which he carried through his life and work. His isolated family home on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, near Port Macquarie – the downgraded penal colony on Australia's east coast where Becke was born, in 1855, and his father worked as a police magistrate – was surrounded by the ruins of the system, and a better class of criminals were still kept in the settlement and sometimes flogged. The willingness of churchmen to order such justice sowed an early distaste for hypocrisy and

authority, as he recounts in 'A Memory of the System' (1899). When the family moved to the Parramatta riverside opposite Cockatoo Island he saw more of the same and worse – men led about in chains and soldiers firing in the fog at those who tried to escape (Day 22). In the moody and evocative autobiographical sketch 'Night' Becke escapes his home town to walk for ten miles along the coast, recovering from fever. Captivating descriptions of the natural world contrast with 'a church bell that I regard as a personal enemy' and the town which, 'nothing but an earthquake or a big fire will ever improve'. The story develops a growing sense of how the protagonist sees himself and the place of his species in the world, which seems profoundly at odds with Bruce Bennett's idea that Becke is 'not a deeply reflective writer' (2006:154): 'And more and more of the myriad stars came out until sky and sea and sleeping mountain forest and shining beach made the world very beautiful and sweet, and the drifting schooner out beyond and myself were the only things to make a blot—a blot of human life—upon it' (1905: 32 – 35).

The last pillar upholding the construction of Becke as the 'graceless unlettered man' is the well-rehearsed legend of how he came to be a writer, in a Damascene moment after he walked, disconsolate, into a hotel in Wynyard Square and was overheard telling yarns by Ernest Favenc. Favenc informed Becke he ought to be a writer and sent him to J F Archibald at the offices of *The Bulletin,* who likewise encouraged him. 'Write just as you are telling me now', Archibald said, and half a dozen tales were duly scrawled on a table made of gin cases, published first in magazine form and then packaged off to London to emerge as Becke's first collection *By Reef and Palm* (Day 37). That this is partly fiction has already been established. Becke was working as a journalist in Sydney a year before that 1893 event, a fact which supports – as Day says in a footnote, after repeating the legend – 'the more usual view that writers of high talent seldom burst upon the world without any sort of apprenticeship' (161-162). My researches have proved that Becke's apprenticeship certainly started earlier. A letter to Becke in the Mitchell Library

in Sydney, dated Oct 27th, 1890, at about the time when Robert Louis Stevenson visited Australia, reads: 'Dear Gaskins, with reference to the agreement between myself and Mr L. Becke, I am perfectly prepared to cancel his agreement with me, and return all manuscripts for the sums I paid him for the same *viz*. £12 made up of amounts £10, £1 and £1. I consider that Mr Becke has acted in a most honourable and straightforward manner in all the relations we had together and I am only sorry that I cannot see any way clear to publish. Remember me very kindly to him and tell him that I expressed the most sincere wishes for his success. I remain, dear Gaskins, yours faithfully Edward Bevan (Vernon St, Strathfield).' Becke had clearly been writing with professional intent for at least a few years.

V

Another legend that hangs over Becke springs from anxiety about his attitude towards women. This is nothing new. In his preface to the second edition of *By Reef and Palm*, the 13th Earl of Pembroke revealed concern about how the book would be received by readers of his time, and distanced himself with editorial suggestions about a less controversial future output:

> 'I think it is possible that the English reader might gather from this little book an unduly strong impression of the uniformity of island life. The loves of white men and brown women, often cynical and brutal, sometimes exquisitely tender and pathetic, necessarily fill a large space in any true picture of the South Sea Islands, and Mr Becke, no doubt of set artistic purpose, has confined himself in the collection of tales now offered almost entirely to this facet of the life. I do not question that he is right in deciding to detract nothing from the striking effect of these powerful stories, taken as a whole, by interspersing amongst them others of a different character. But I hope it may be remembered that the present selection is only an instalment, and that, if it finds favour with the British public, we may expect from him some of those tales of adventure, and of purely native life and custom, which no one could tell so well as he.' (1894)

The same topic is controversial now for political reasons rather than reasons of taste, and Becke's curriculum vitae is sometimes brought into the debate as evidence. Michael Sturma writes that, 'Becke's personal life… appears to exude the *Bulletin* mystique which Lake suggests denigrated marriage, emphasised sexual pleasures without family responsibility and romanticised encounters with 'native' women' (109). And later: 'Given Becke's personal history, it is perhaps surprising that in most of his stories the wife-deserter is portrayed in an unfavourable light. Perhaps in part Becke used his writings to expiate his guilt' (112). I will analyse the gender power relations in two stories later but it seems worth considering Becke's history with women first. On Nanumaga – where Becke befriended the local missionary teacher, Ioane (who features negatively in a story which I will analyse later) he wrote in his journal which is now in the Mitchell Library that Ioane's wife, Elîne, was 'an old sweetheart of mine'. On Nukufetau, where he lived for a year, he married a local girl, Nelea Tikena. Five years later, he married Bessie Maunsell, a colonel's daughter from his home town, with whom he had a daughter, and a son who died in early childhood. Life in the islands did not agree with Bessie, so the Beckes returned to Australia where all that is known about them is that Becke worked in various white-collar jobs, and applied for administrative roles in the islands (Day: 36-37; Maude: 226). When Becke left for London in 1896 flush with publishing success, he took his daughter Nora and her nanny, Fanny Sabina Long. Nora later became 'a very distinguished linguist, [who] represented Great Britain at an international conference of languages held in St. Petersburg' (quoted in Day 161). As for Bessie, apart from the fact that she tried twice to divorce Becke for desertion and only succeeded in 1910, we know nothing of why she and Becke separated or her subsequent situation. Combining the separation with a move was the kind of manoeuvre which some of Becke's fictional characters had already demonstrated – using distance to erase unhappy details. In London, Sabina was accepted as Mrs Becke, while in letters to

Walter Jeffrey, his collaborator in Australia, Becke never referred to her as anything other than Miss Long. This last relationship seems to have been a happy one – at least until the difficult closing weeks of his life. Louis and Sabina had two further daughters and Becke encouraged Sabina to write as well, recommending her features to publishers. Becke's letters home to Sabina from a literary tour to Jamaica and the American east coast show a profoundly loving and affectionate relationship between the two of them, which seems to have outlasted endless money troubles and moves to Ireland and France in an attempt to find the holy grail of affordable living. In the period immediately preceding Becke's death Sabina's mail is delivered 'C/o Mrs Hardcastle' elsewhere in Sydney while Becke, after extensive health problems with throat cancer and rheumatism, and with creditors hovering, seems to have alienated his family. Nothing in his story suggests a disliking for or abuse of women. The women in Becke's stories live and breathe and answer back eloquently, in a way which leaves Conrad's women – like Jim's Jewel, for example – behind. Sturma too, finds that the stories project a more nuanced and complex picture than assumptions about 'Becke's background and the climate in which he wrote' (109) might suggest: 'Becke's stories… contain a range of ambivalent meanings and messages which are not easily categorised' (117)

This pattern of a kind of prejudicial presumption of prejudice, followed by partial retraction of the accusation after analysis, seems to be the model for Becke criticism since Dixon rediscovered him in 1996. Bhattacharya reads Becke's first collection 'as an attempt to situate the complex interactions of white men and brown women in relation to the legitimised normative relationships between white men and white women' (79) before finding that: 'the sexual relationships in Becke's fiction are not romanticised as "innocent" sensual frolic but are instead shown as pragmatic and often unsentimental choices made by European men and island women striving to make a life often in the face of natural and human violence' (92).

When Becke criticism focuses exclusively on political issues, an error frequently slips in which renders the analysis problematic. Extracts which a critic quotes in order to demonstrate Becke's views or those of his time are often clearly voiced by individual characters within a context, where a careful reading will show that those views are undermined or contradicted by their immediate context or the action which follows. For example, when Richard Eves looks for contemporaneous fears about the degeneration myth, he quotes from 'In a Samoan Village' (1896: 143), to illustrate that Becke's stories are 'allegories that warn travellers and colonisers to be wary when they enter the realm of the primitive' if they are not to end up travelling, 'back in time, down through the hierarchy of civilisation…a one-way journey with no return' (371). The sentiments which Eves takes to be such a warning are spoken by one beachcomber to another at the funeral of a third, all of whom have been mercenaries to the Samoan chief, Tuisila: 'I wonder if you an' me is goin' to spend all our lives here among a race o'savages, livin' like 'em, thinkin' like 'em, and dyin' like 'em' (1896: 145). It seems appropriate to reflect on the direction one's life is taking at such a moment, and the story goes on to show that the speaker, Trenchard, is happy with his lot, and the benefits it gives him (147). What animates his companion, Mayne, is fear of western justice catching up with him, and when it does there is a frantic scurry to avoid arrest. Here the story stops sharp and concludes after a leap of time, to when Trenchard is dead and his young companion, Mayne, old. Escaping from the American navy in a dinghy, they drifted a thousand miles to the west in an agonising journey which killed Mayne's vivacious native wife. Like so many of Becke's endings, it transforms the meaning of the rest of the story by a shocking switch of perspective: whatever the mercenary protagonists thought about their situation – and their thoughts were ambivalent and changing – the men were better off where they were, a fact they could not know until it was too late. The vicissitudes of chance – represented in this case, as typically, by the Pacific Ocean – dwarf human

preoccupations. Too much has been assumed from appearances to support a case which Eves believed he would find before he started. Even though he acknowledges Becke's writing to be 'exceedingly fluid' and that his stories reveal the 'ambivalent and contradictory nature of colonialism', the fact that not all colonials are condemned and that Becke's critique of colonialism is 'so saturated with class and racial dimensions' convinces Eves that 'ultimately he affirms the colonial project' (351- 361). Eves seems to retreat here to a position of finding the subject guilty by association.

Contrastingly, Robert Dixon's excellent analysis of the instability and ambivalence at the source of colonial discourses finds Becke's stories to be 'challenging texts that undermine the hierarchy of races' and which demonstrate Homi Bhabha's assertion that 'the boundaries of civility are a difficult and heterogeneous site inscribed by other voices' (129-130). Dixon goes much further than anyone else into analysing what is at work in the stories themselves. He observes that 'The dominant metaphor of relationships both between whites, and between whites and islanders is… trade… Sex, commerce, and labour are inextricably connected in these networks of exchange, and the recurring figure of the trader is a synecdoche of the imperial ideal reduced to the profit motive' (184). The politics of the islands is inextricably bound up with technique.

VI

It is in the artistry of the form, metaphor, the connections and juxtapositions of ideas, that Becke's work achieves its effect. Discussions of his formal techniques have generally taken second place, although these are mentioned often enough for a picture to emerge. Becke said very little about his approach, apart from referring modestly to the tips he received from Archibald at *The Bulletin,* who he said, 'taught me the secrets of condensation and simplicity of language' (Day 37) In an 1895 interview, in which the

reporter dubs Becke 'the Rudyard Kipling of Australia', Becke explains: 'I write a story and never rewrite it. I don't take notes but let it unfold itself. Then if when finished it satisfies me I keep it, but if I don't think it good enough I tear it up.' (quoted in Day 43-44) Even at the time, this was not quite true, as Chris Tiffin has shown in his analysis of the edits which took place between the publication of his first stories in the Bulletin and their reappearance in book form. Certainly a story like 'Yorke the Adventurer' (1908) shows refined description and the careful evocation of scene and character.

Becke's formal critics fall into two camps who see him as either an artist or a craftsman. Ann Lane-Bradshaw terms his stories 'yarns' by way of differentiating them in imaginative scope from Conrad's creation of a fictional world (212). Bradshaw's choice of term says more about her attitude than it does about Becke's work. Paul March-Russell has shown that there was such confusion about what to call the emerging short-story genre in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that it is not helpful to take ones definition of the genre from writers or readers of the time (1). Bradshaw's use of 'yarn', however, is not deferential in that sense but derogatory, which can be ascribed in part to a long-standing cultural snobbery against the short-story form, what Mary-Louise Pratt has described as 'the widespread tendency for [the short story] to be viewed as a (skill-based) craft rather than a (creativity-based) art' (May 109). The 'yarn' dismissal also ignores points Bradshaw later goes on to make, in arguing that Conrad's Marlow may well have borrowed from Becke's Dennison. She highlights Becke's instructive use of focalising through a limited partial observer, and its potential to dramatise distinctions between action and narration, and between narrative time and story time, creating a fractured, impressionistic effect (213). What she is describing is modernist fiction, and what she sees as a difference in scope is the difference between the modernist novel and the modernist short story. Bruce Bennett unselfconsciously stumbles over the same

distinction when he asserts that Becke's 'authorial tone is briskly dismissive of those discursive opportunities for philosophical reflection which give Conrad's (and sometimes Stevenson's) stories their special flavour and appeal' (2006:154). Similarly, Chris Tiffin asserts that 'Becke [is] no modernist' even though he says that Becke 'deal[s] with the instant', seems 'largely detached' and writes, 'powerful haunting fiction' (168). Ford Madox Ford differentiated between 'the true short story' which he said Conrad could not write, from the 'long short story' which answered Conrad's need for 'justification' – to make the action seem inevitable because of a protagonist's character (quoted in Bennett, Andrew: 79). The difference between the long and the short form is a difference in the appearance of control. This difference, as I will show when analysing Becke's fiction, is key to Becke's approach.

The characteristics of the short story which have been commonly observed in theory are, as Dominic Head has persuasively argued, by no coincidence also the characteristics of modernism. He takes issue with the idea of writer as controlling artist, harmoniously marshalling effects into a perfect whole, and instead uses the Althusserian concept of 'relative autonomy' to argue that 'the literary effects generated in modernist stories derive from a tension between formal convention and formal disruption… seeing the disruptive literary gesture as… something which is simultaneously conditioned by, yet critical of, its context' (26). Dixon has shown how such Marxist critical approaches offer productive openings into Becke's works. Taking his cue from Macherey, he observes that adventure forms can display 'an internal distanciation from the qualities they apparently reproduce' (200) and how they can, 'allow a complex dialectic between the self and its others in which the self can also take the place of the other' (199). 'Becke's 'tendency to fragmentation', he goes on to say, and the very shortness of Becke's chosen sketch form 'suggests formal as well as ideological fragmentation of the adventure tale' (201).

Many features of Becke's stories, which I will examine later, identify him with modernism and with the modernist short story. This includes compression, or 'unusual concentration (Head:1)'; 'a general shift in the treatment of time' (6); 'the analysis of personality, especially a consideration of the fragmented, dehumanised self' (7-8); a generic tendency towards paradox and ambiguity' (8) and 'authorial detachment' (8). To this list we can add a feature of the short story which has been entirely overlooked in Becke criticism: the way in which 'submerged population groups', as Frank O'Connor calls them, tend to be represented more by the short story than by longer-form fiction (May 104-111). Older narrative traditions are relegated to the short story, observes Pratt, where orality is a consistent trend: 'the short story has special significance in cultures where literacy is not the norm, or where the standard literary language is that of an oppressor' (May 108). In the South Pacific of the late nineteenth century, where oral cultures were invaded by literate ones, the value of attentiveness to oral culture cannot be overestimated.

VII

Before moving on to a close reading of four of Becke's short stories I will comment on this last point. While Becke has generally been approached with the assumption that a white Victorian male trader would have certain set views, I have shown that Becke's biography reveals a man whose affections and respect tied him to an unusual extent to the Pacific peoples and his time with them. If Becke did *not* share the accepted social, religious and political views of his era, it is interesting to consider how he might have gone about telling and dramatising the stories he witnessed, and how therefore he should be approached. The techniques he prefers seem to me on the one hand to give generous freedoms of self-expression to the Polynesians, in so far as he knows and remembers

them, and on the other to keep his readers, with whatever views they brought with them, at arm's length. He writes fluid stories within frames of narrative and makes use of dramatic perspectives and polyphony to deflect and complicate his intention.

Becke is, as Conrad observed, hard to find, because he plays games with his readers. His narrators are men with different names who followed the same careers he himself did, like Tom Dennison the trader and Tom Drake the supercargo. A late novel entitled *The Adventures of Louis Blake* carries a photograph of Becke and reads like an autobiography, drawing on details about Becke's childhood and early career which are indistinguishable from his overtly autobiographical reminiscences. His opinions are hard to find too, because of the way in which he he sets up mirrors of his contemporary readers' views and then hides behind it. On the subject of Melanesian people around New Britain and New Ireland, in particular, he is teasingly evasive. He builds up a fear in 'Yorke, the Adventurer' that the cannibals of New Britain are about to attack the protagonist and narrator, Yorke and Drake. The narrator Drake steps out of frame to make an apology for the savagery of his youth and 'a certain joy in destroying human life', the character Drake takes aim with his rifle and, with the reader's appetite whetted for violence, Becke gives them none. What happens, happens while Drake is out cold, Drake having nearly killed himself and fatally injured Yorke as a result of his own incompetence in failing to clean sand out of the barrel before firing. Something contrarian is at work against the racist assumptions of certain readers. There was a hint of it a few pages earlier when Drake called himself 'half a kanaka'. In another example of this, 'My friends, the anthropophagi' (1908: XII) tells how the narrator 'made the acquaintance, and…the friendship, of many cannibals', working in the labour trade and during his time on New Britain. Once tens and even hundreds of examples have been accrued of people falling victim to cannibals – all second-hand accounts – the narrator drops into scene only to report a fine feast and a chief who is 'a gentlemanly man,

courteous hospitable and friendly, and who 'although he told me that he had personally partaken of the flesh of over ninety men… was horror-struck when my interpreter told him that in England cousins intermarried […] "How can you clever white men do such disgusting things?" The tale twists to project judgement back onto the culture of the contemporaneous Western reader.

Frame narratives provide an opportunity for other voices to be heard and compared. In Becke's first collection there are three instances in which an unnamed white listener reports a story he has heard from the Polynesian perspective. This defamiliarises. The story of Macy O'Shea, runaway convict and cutter-off of whale ships, derives a strange added intensity because our source is 'Tikena the Clubfooted' sitting beside the ruins of the dead protagonist's house and telling the narrator about this former tyrant of the Marquesas with a mixture of hatred and respect which reflects – without gloss or comment – the established values and changing perspectives of his own culture: 'He was a great man in these *motu* (islands), although he fled from prison in your land…. There be none such as he these days. But now he is in Hell.' (1895:12)

In 'Luliban of the pool' the first story of the second collection, the game of multiple perspectives is more subtly worked still. Sru, a boy visiting Jakoits from Metalanien (both in Ponape) asks Niya, daughter of the chief of Jakoits, about the song she is singing while sitting with him weaving a basket beside a pool and she tells him the story. The tale performs a model of the how this oral culture works, in the way it links verifiable facts – that the protagonists are all real people only a generation back from living memory – whilst drawing out mythical elements: 'she who dived with one husband and came up with another – in this very pool.' The story is about the cunning of Luliban in overturning the established order so as to dispose of a cruel white husband she hated and to obtain the chief's approval to marry another white man whom she loved. The loving couple offer to reward the chief with all the first husband's

considerable possessions and the chief agrees to deceive the first husband – hitherto a favourite of his – and fool the people at the same time. The outermost frame narrator establishes the credentials of the story by fixing the events in a time which connects to the burning of whale ships in Kiti Harbour, an incident which has significance for both Polynesians and the western reader (a note names this as the affair of the Shenandoah in 1866). A typical element of the witnessing framework here is the way in which the presence of the listening white man is foregrounded:

> "What lie is this thou tellest to the boy because he is a stranger?" said a white man, who lay resting in the thick grass waiting for the basket to be finished, for the three were going farther up the mountain to catch crayfish.
> "Lie?" said the child; nay, tis no lie. Is not this the Pool of Luliban and do not we sing the 'song of Luliban' and was not Red Hair the white man he that lived in Jakoits and built the big sailing boat for Nanakin, my father, the chief of Jakoits?"
> "True, Niya, true," said the white man, "I did but jest; but tell thou the tale to Sru, so that he may carry it home with him to Metalanien."

We are made conscious as readers of how the indigenous oral teller of tales may choose to lie, especially to a stranger. As both we and our white narrator are potentially that stranger an underlying doubt is introduced, so that even when Sru responds to the tale at the end to show what meaning he draws from it, we are conscious that just by witnessing the story and these responses we may not necessarily be witnessing an objective picture. Sru's response seems to be to judge the two white men involved: "Huh!" said Sru, the boy, admiringly. "He was a fine man, that red-hair, but the white man with the tattooed skin was a Better." He seems to orientate his judgements and meanings entirely around the roles which the men play, and he appears to identify with the white men rather than the chief – perhaps because the high-status roles they occupy in the island society seem more attainable for someone of his family than becoming chief. But 'Luliban of the Pool' is not only narrated by a Polynesian woman it is also about how a woman negotiates the masculine power structures to get her way. The men

merely follow, though she only gets credit for her cleverness from the Polynesian girls who celebrate by singing about the story she later chose to reveal.

Becke's Pacific societies share common features which suggest that the islands are far from being blank spaces over which the white coloniser or traveller can write his own narrative. The idea of the 'great man' recurs often. A great man seems to be a strong leader, which entails his being someone whom people respect, an idea which is often indistinguishable from their being afraid of him. He may kill or betray others, but no one would dare to do the same to him, and in that sense he represents the law. He is also wealthy. If he is a chief, it is expected that other men, like the Red-hair from 'Luliban', will earn his favour by fighting for him and paying him tribute which will maintain the chief's status as the richest and most powerful member of the society and the stability of the hierarchy below him. This is the social setting into which various characters land in Becke's stories. It is a situation which can be adapted to or exploited according to the character, wit, luck or ambition of the white man and that of the chief and his society. In 'A truly great man' Probyn and his fierce native wife and child are deposited on an island by a whaling ship because, so he says when interrogated by the chief, he killed 'an enemy'. Probyn is canny about the structure of the island society and waits for the chief to appear, unperturbed by the 'deafening babble and frantic gesticulations of the crowd'. When asked why the boat hurried away so quickly he deflects blame onto 'a long, hatchet-visaged native, who had been especially turbulent and vociferous,' knowing the chief will be angry at missing an opportunity to trade. The chief demands from Probyn an immediate show of murderous effectiveness in order to prove his potential usefulness. Probyn steps up to the mark, shooting the hatchet-visaged man whom the chief first leads into the open for that purpose. Probyn pays in tobacco for the dead man and the chief, Tahori is won over: 'Look at this man. He is a truly great man. His heart groweth from his loins upward to his throat…. tomorrow every man shall cut

wood for his house…. Such men as he come from the gods.' We don't know how much Probyn is acting a part, but the drama has worked, a deal has been struck. Tahori's people will build him a house. Everyone – except the dead man – is happy.

In the manner of an alien species introduced to a new environment which has no defence against it, certain character types like the vicious wife-beating tyrant Macy O'Shea (1895: III) are at such an overwhelming advantage that nothing can be done to stop them. This cultural detail is a morally neutral fault line which can be exploited by the unscrupulous. Mrs Langton in Enderby's courtship is helpless before a ruthless and calculating husband for reasons of her culture: 'because of the strain of dark blood in her veins – her mother was a Tahitian half-caste – she felt the mastery of his savage resolution in the face of danger [….] And to hard, callous natures such as Langton's, women yield easily and admire – which is better perhaps than loving, for both' (1894). Such variation accommodates the lifestyles of a huge variety of characters – although immediately after this remark, adrift in a lifeboat, Mrs Langton discovers her husband's true cruelty, and within a few pages has watched their kinder companion kill him and then happily married the murderer.

VIII

The opening sentence of 'Challis the doubter', the first story in *By Reef and Palm*, runs to nearly eighty words – a confident stylistic move for a first appearance in book form. The second, as if to stress the point, contains only five. Before the first full stop arrives, Becke has set down a sweep of narrative background and thrown the reader into a turbulence which is the protagonist's state of mind:

> Four years had come and gone since the day that Challis, with a dull and savage misery in his heart, had, cursing the love-madness which once possessed him, walked out from his house in an Australian city with an undefined and vague purpose of going

> "somewhere" to drown his sense of wrong and erase from his memory the face of the woman who, his wife of not yet a year, had played with her honour and his. Or so he thought, anyway. (1895)

No less than eight qualifying clauses and phrases are packed in around the essential spine of this first sentence – namely that 'Four years had come and gone since... Challis... had... walked out from his house...' The rhythm is tightly controlled, starting with poised twelve-syllable phrases, but the clarity soon begins to fragment, the steady beat vanishes and a careening speed picks up. The changes of tempo, the scattering apart of the verb and all the other modifying elements of the subordinating second clause work in such a way that the sentence has to rattle along for the sense of it to be claimed at all, so that even when re-reading for clarification there is little possibility of absorbing the full meaning slowly. This grammatical high-wire act acts out in miniature a version of the bigger game of narrative perspective which this story brings into play. The third-person voice, which has privileged access to the protagonist's thoughts, swings between standing at a judgemental remove from those thoughts and being infected by them, so that it is not always clear whose terms of description we are hearing. The phrasing begins authoritatively, establishing the time of the protagonist's pivotal decision in monosyllables: 'Four years had come and gone since the day that Challis...'. The next time the voice of the third-person narrator appears is in the second sentence which wryly undermines the first. In between is all a mixture. Literary phrases mix with self-conscious melodrama: 'a dull and savage misery' seems evocatively authorial, a fair summary of what is then spelled out more closely in terms which a self-pitying Challis might use; 'cursing the love-madness which once possessed him'; 'to drown his sense of wrong and erase from his memory the face'; 'the woman who... had played with her honour and his'. Challis is writing his story in his head, unaware of the observing narrator, and he sees himself only in clichés. It seems he always has done so, too, for stereotypical roles from Victorian melodrama are – and were – being enacted here:

Challis as the romantic hero betrayed, a man subject to irrational forces of emotion so mighty he can only manage them by means of a gesture which might match their potency.

Everything about this second narrative voice, the Challis voice which is the frame within the main frame, is at work on the manly business of bringing about a definitive conclusion. He disowns the feelings he had for his wife by calling them 'love-madness' as if he now saw them in perspective, and by saying that this emotion 'once possessed him' he can disown it as the work of some outside agency. The 'once' and the past tense declare that the feelings are qualified and finished. Challis was in love, but now he is in control. He is in control, as the words which next describe him walking out of his house in an Australian city, seem to confirm. He is a decisive man, a man of action, who saw a situation for what it was and did something about it.

Except that this was not the case. Even while this narrative is being established in and by Challis's consciousness the third-person narrative is contradicting it. Challis's departure was enacted, says the authorial voice now creeping back in, 'with an undefined and vague purpose' which is neither decisive nor in control and therefore is not really purpose at all. The vagueness is emphasised by his dramatic exit, which entailed his going, '"somewhere" to drown his sense of wrong'. Inverted commas flag up that the perspectives of two narrators are interwoven, that while Challis can fool himself in the private space of his own reflections, his narrator and reader are mockingly watching him at it.

Now comes the hand-brake turn of the second sentence: 'Or so he thought, anyway.' Everything about the first sentence is brought into question by the second. Not only have we had a complete change of direction before the end of the first short paragraph but a further stratagem of confusion is at work here. Grammatically it would make sense if what was being undermined were the central assertion of the preceding sentence – the

exact quantity of time which had passed between Challis's leaving home and the present tense of the story's action. However, so many phrases and clauses have come between the words 'four years' and their contradiction that the chronology of the reading process is more likely to connect the about-turn either with the latest point made, which was the question of whether Challis's wife had or had not played with her husband's honour, or with that of the penultimate statement – Challis's avowed intention to erase her face from his memory and to drown his sense of wrong. The fact is, any of these could be contradicted, as the story will go on to show, for Challis still does not know if she was unfaithful or not, and he is still thinking about his wife's violet eyes, replaying the argument in his head and writing her a letter even after all this time and silence. In addition to that, his sense of white European, American or Australian time is indeed, like that of all the characters in Becke's stories, distorted and disconnected. In *About Time*, Mark Currie explores how distance affects narrative time for the traveller:

> Experiences which take place overseas… are often lived in a mode of anticipation of the act of narrating them afterwards. They are recorded in the present as if recounted in the past. The present is experienced as the object of a future memory, or in anticipation of retrospection. The depresentification of this mode is well known as a kind of schizophrenia involved in the act of self-narration: when an experience becomes both the subject and the object of a narration. If my lived present is translated into the conventional preterite of fictional narrative, there is a temporal depresentification involved in the transformation of present into past. There is also a spatial self-distance, or depresentification, involved in the translation of first person pronouns into the third person, as when 'I' becomes 'Mark' in 'Mark left the house'. I see myself as somebody else, and I see myself from a temporal distance, and in this couple act of depresentification I split myself into two both statically and temporally (40-41).

Challis's new life in the Tokelaus has frozen the domestic moment and the thousands of miles of spatial distance between then and now have taken away his sense of when the decisive event happened. Challis's consciousness remains as perplexed as the elaborate explosion of ideas seemed to show in the first sentence.

And here the first part of the story ends, for all the tales are broken up into fragments by line breaks, not one intermediate section anywhere in the book being longer than two and a half pages. This fragmentation of the prose movements combines with compressed phrasing to achieve an intensity of effect. Each line break signals a change of scene, a shift in location or time, or at any rate some alteration in perspective. The next begins with a direct address to the reader – 'You see' – as if to emphasise the main narrative frame, and therefore the presence of both reader and framer, and the storytelling act inside which, and in the terms of which, the scenes from the past will take place. The story is a battle to describe the protagonist, fought between narrator and protagonist, and it is the narrator who takes the last word. The last line of the story, isolated after a line-break is a sudden cheerful prolepsis in which the teller turns the vivid and immediate scenes of the tale to a past-past frame, establishing the reader's time as the solid one: 'That is why Challis has never turned up again.'

This sweeping authorial judgement, declaring, 'that is why' with its finite adverb 'never' is in fact rather vague. It isn't clear what 'that' is. The defamiliarising shift in the narrative voice frames Challis's experiences in the present tense of both third-person narrator and implied reader, at the fictional point of telling, as if the whole story-telling exercise were only ever a simple answer to a question asked by people who knew Challis in Australia. The casual switch-over, which dismisses the passions and life-decisions of the protagonist as a series of 'turning[s] up', rips away the immediacy of the past-tense scene to some distant remove in space and time. The Tokelaus are merely out there somewhere. The reader/narrator's time and place, at the point of telling, is the centre of understanding. (This battle between two places and time-zones, which persists also throughout the book, mirrors that of the narrative voices.) In one way, Challis has his finality of conclusion, for what we saw established dramatically by an accumulation of simple actions – the giving away of a few cheap trade goods – and perceptively by an

accumulation of impressions is, we are told, tantamount to a decision to stay. But it is also a false ending because the present-tense perspective stresses the limitations both of his knowledge and ours: Challis hasn't left the impasse *yet*. There are no clear endings. This is a knowing story, aware of the ways in which both readers and migrants to the islands of Oceania project their narratives forwards and back across time and space. The shortness of the short story highlights the paradox in this idea. As Timothy Clark has argued: 'there is an experience of, simultaneously, completion or saturation – achieved modes of reading and closure in the limited sense may well have been fulfilled – but also of finitude, of having reached a limit or a border but without being able to formulate what might be beyond it, for there is no secure alternative space from which the predicament could be overseen' (18).

This story is also the first in a number which engage with sexual relationships between white men and brown women, a relationship of doubly unequal power. This one, positioned at the start of the first book, offers a key to sexual mores in late-nineteenth-century Oceania. In addition to his legal Australian wife, Challis has a Polynesian 'wife' in his new home on a 'lonely and almost forgotten island' in the Tokelaus. In Becke's stories, a trader appears to be expected to have a local wife. The sexual mores of the wider Polynesian island community seem relatively untroubled by the prospect of bigamy – a white wife a thousand miles away at home – but an eligible (pale-skinned, technologically advanced and relatively rich) man who remains unattached represents a potential threat to stability. During Challis's opening thoughts he is beating a ring out of a silver coin on a marline spike for his current 'wife' Nalia who is not at home, and in the quiet he reflects on the discombobulating argument he had with his Australian wife four years ago, an argument about the secret love affairs he suspected her of conducting with other men, the very argument which caused him to issue ultimatums and sail away to the Tokelaus in the first place. The rest of the story

consists mostly of two conversations, the first with Tama, a young Tokelauan boy who watches Challis at his work, and the second with Challis's Polynesian wife when she returns. Both discussions deal in a light-hearted way with the rules of south-seas sexual relationships – why other women keep away when Nalia is not there, and whether Challis can trust Nalia out of his sight. Their banter maps out the ground for the rest of the stories in the collection: every white man has his brown 'wife' and every other brown woman respects that he is the wife's property; she in turn can be trusted entirely by her husband because she gains a higher status by her attachment to a white man and she knows that were she to err he would have the pick of many other women from among whom to replace her. It functions as a stable social system. Both Tama and Nalia reassure Challis on all points of his anxiety that he can be secure of Nalia's fidelity to him, not on metaphysical grounds, because of the depths of her passion – although she protests she loves him 'everlastingly' when he interrogates her – or the unswerving moral values of her soul, but because for her to be faithful is a matter of south-seas common sense if she wishes to preserve her own interests. It is not a romantic reassurance, but it seems to do well enough for Challis, who needs to look at something beautiful and feel secure and desired, and who by the next day has made Nalia a present of a relatively expensive length of cloth and in a spirit of generosity to human- and woman-kind has given a free tin of salmon to a female customer who is Nalia's rival. While the other woman admires Nalia's cloth and speculates about its significance, Challis tears up and throws away the letter he had written to his Australian wife.

The structure of the story may invite comparisons between Challis's marriages, and between his 'pretty violet-eyed' estranged wife and Nalia with her 'black orbs' but this works to show the contrasting ease and balance of the second relationship. Any ideas of moral control which Challis might have about Nalia are knocked off-centre by her voice

speaking her first line when she pinches his cheek and reprimands him teasingly: 'O lazy one!'

Bhattacharya states that: 'The story thus opposes two powerful attractions: the unnamed white lady representing civilisation, and Nalia, the island woman representing contentment in the sinful islands.' (85) Central to this story, says Sturma, 'is a comment on Australian women and the way they should or should not be (111).' There is an unsubstantiated assumption in both cases that Becke's purpose must be in some way didactic, whereas it has often been observed that he eschewed didacticism, subscribing, as Peter Pierce has observed, to 'moral relativism' (6). Even had this not been the case the interpretation makes an assumption that a story can be so simple and so under the control of the writer as to represent a moral idea in parable form in which the elements are interchangeable and the lesson may be unproblematically dramatised. Stierle, quoting Neuschäfer, has shown how the expansion of an idea from an exemplum to a story becomes complicated, when the 'surplus of determinants makes it impossible for it to be reduced to a simple moral precept' (May 28).

The story, like most of Becke's tales which feature a sympathetic kind of everyman as the protagonist, is about identity and choice, about what it means to have cut oneself loose into a state of almost complete freedom from the bonds of upbringing and social expectation which both bind and define a man in a country like Australia. The sexual politics of 'Challis, the doubter' are not about the free availability of sex, however long the second of those might have been a popular cliché of the time about Polynesians. And although it seems more or less constantly to master him, Challis is not even sure what love is. The emotion never gets defined beyond its being a feeling he gets when looking at a woman. Nothing apart from his lasting impression of the violet eyes, a gaping wound to his ego and an inability to manage his reasoning or arguments indicates that

there was anything profound about the love he declared to his first wife. He professed it, after all, in an attempt to win a point, a fact of which his wife seemed fully aware.

As Challis watches Nalia putting on his ring in 'the last glow of the sun as it sank into the ocean' his emotions take a sudden swing – echoing many other swings in the story – which surprises and worries him. At one moment he is paternal, patriarchal even, removed enough in his position at the end of the table to regard her 'with half-amused interest as does a man watching a child with a toy' and then without explanation he 'suddenly flush[es] hotly'. His feelings have caught him out and re-started his internal debate with himself: "By God! I can't be such a fool as to begin to LOVE her in reality, but yet..."

Immediately he pulls Nalia towards him and starts questioning her – albeit tenderly and with a slightly patronising air – as to whether or not she has ever lied to him, whether she has had another lover since she became his wife, and finally a question that the narrator tells us 'only one of his temperament would have dared to ask a girl of the Tokelaus', whether she loves him. He seems unable to resist this urge to examine a woman's heart, a lesson he ought by now to have learned. In both instances the interrogation seems a mistake or at best a waste of time, because the answers given are clearly defined by the context of the discussion, by what started it and what is to be gained or lost in the answer. Around the tumultuous emotions and fleeting impressions which make up Challis's consciousness exists a system of reliable facts on which the web of human relationships rests and which regulates all the vagaries. Both women probably do – or did – love Challis, as indeed he loves or did love them, in a complex way which is bound up with either's relative attractiveness, status, wealth and security – or even insecurity. Though the love talk has its own circumscribed terms it is intrinsically linked to other ideas operating on different levels, ideas of identity, ambition and money. Challis's wife called him 'a fool' and he remains a fool for not

seeing these connections. Everything is about negotiations, and Challis made a mess of negotiations back in the Australian city. The women are shrewder. She might seem supple and yielding with her childlike appreciation of cheap cloth and a cheap home-made ring, but Nalia knows how to fight her corner. She pleads her case expertly without having given him quite the answers to her questions which he required. Nalia allows the bigger truth behind her motivations to show, and her honesty is disarming and oddly reassuring: "Aye, ALOFA TUMAU (everlasting love). Am I a fool? Are there not Letia and Miriami and Eline, the daughter of old Tiaki, ready to come to this house if I love any but thee? *Therefore* [my italics] my love is like the suckers of the FA'E (octopus) in its strength. My mother has taught me much wisdom."

The women in this story are not the servants of the men. Even though Nalia professes to be afraid that Challis might kill her if he wished, and even though Tama implies that men have the upper hand when he makes the statement that all women are the same. Tama's assertion makes him, according to Bhattacharya, 'the mouthpiece of conventional misogyny' yet Bhattacharya misses the key detail that as soon as Tama has uttered his statement of masculine self-assurance it is entirely undermined by a woman's voice calling him, which sends him leaping to his feet and leaving. It would seem there is a gap between what men (even across ages and cultures) say to one another about women and what is proved by practice.

The suggestion here is that a better relationship has a balance of power and two partners who appreciate what they have – something which does not seem to have been the case back in Australia. An underlying amoral pragmatism operates here too, the all-pervasive trade metaphor which Dixon observed. A rare authorial remark from 'Long Charley's good little wife' – a later story from the same collection puts it well: 'In the South Seas, as in the civilised world generally, to get the girl of your heart is usually a mere matter of trade.' Critics frequently quote this and, as one, ignore the central

parenthesis. Perhaps the violet-eyed wife was too pretty for Challis to be able to keep. Pragmatically speaking there is a happy ending for all. The Australian wife has money and a free hand to play. The problem which will not go away is that Challis never achieved – and now never will – closure with his first wife, not least because he leaves it entirely up to her to make a move: 'Of course I'll go back if she writes. If not – well, then – these sinful islands can claim me for their own; that is, Nalia can.' He is torn between two open lives which he cannot live simultaneously.

Life and thought are not logical or straightforward experiences in this story. Challis's mind is our main vantage point, and the inner Challis is awash in a sea of impressions: an impression of his violet-eyed wife which put him in a certain state of mind, an unconfirmed impression gleaned from a letter about her secret activities; an impression of an argument in which he failed to master either his own will or the situation; an impression of life on the island and of his new wife's beauty, wit and charm, an impression gained from banter and easy living that he can relax and enjoy what he has; an impression we are left with that he will never either be able to forget his wife or the argument – and that it is hard to say which moves him most – but that the pull in that direction is at least equalled by the draw of Nalia and island life which keep him happily where he is. He sees things in certain ways and feels and behaves accordingly, a role which makes him essentially passive. In this respect, Becke had something in common with Ford Madox Ford who wrote of himself and Conrad what could arguably also be said of Becke in this story: 'We saw that life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions (182).'

IX

It seems reasonable to assume that 'Brantley of Vahitahi', the final story in *By Reef and Palm*, was chosen to bookend the collection because it invites comparison on so many levels with the first. Both stories feature white traders who have settled in the islands with a Polynesian wife, partly in response to an untenable situation which they left behind in the 'civilised' world. Each man, on his particular island home, enjoys an easier life in more bewitching surroundings with higher personal status than either could have expected in the Australian city from which he came, yet neither is able to stop his thoughts returning to that other world and transposing onto it an alternative life which at any moment he might hypothetically have been leading, or which he might yet lead were he to go back. One striking parallel is that these moments of reflection occur when the protagonist is standing in his doorway or in his home looking out through a window frame at the island landscape which encloses his existence. Stasis within limits generates imaginative escape and return, a dialectic of home and away:

> So he thought and talked to himself, listening the while to the soft symphony of the swaying palm-tops and the subdued murmur of the surf as the rollers crashed on the distant line of reef away to leeward. Of late these fleeting visions of the outside world – that quick, busy world, whose memories, save for those of Doris, were all but dead to him – had become more frequent; but the calm, placid happiness of his existence and that strange, fatal glamour that for ever enwraps the minds of those who wander in the islands of the sunlit sea – as the old Spanish navigators called Polynesia – had woven its spell too strongly over his nature to be broken. And now, as the murmur of women's voices caused him to turn his head to the shady end of the verandah, the dark, dreamy eyes of Luita, who with her women attendants sat there playing with her child, looked out at him from beneath their long lashes, and told him his captivity was complete. (1895)

Unlike Challis, Brantley is an ambitious and decisive individual: 'as smart a seaman (save for that one fatal mistake) as ever trod a deck', who has vowed to, 'liv[e] out his life among the people of solitary Vahitahi' in self-imposed exile by way of punishment for his shame and its consequences. Where Challis is a fool and the butt of gentle comedy, Brantley's story is his equivalent as hero of a tragedy.

‘Brantley of Vahitahi’ begins, as do most of the stories in the first collection with a narrative frame. When their ship is becalmed beside an island which has been unoccupied for forty years, a captain and supercargo walk along the beach to the remains of a *marae* (‘or heathen temple’) under giant *puka* trees where the old captain sits down and mentions Brantley, who he says is buried here with his wife and sister. Having established the veracity of what we are about to hear, with two witnesses vouching for the protagonist’s existence and the supercargo adding that Brantley died long ago; with the scene now set in its lonely beauty and the island’s excellent turtle fishing established, the captain now tells the story, and the frame disappears. The subsequent account is transposed into a free indirect style which closely follows Brantley’s perspective. The details come to light in an order that moves backwards and forwards in time as they occur either to Brantley looking out from his home remembering the past, or to the the third-person narrator, who explains what the character’s private musings would never tell. Chronologically, the story started with Brantley leaving Sydney six years before the main action, a young man on his first voyage as captain, in charge of his own ship, and with a parting kiss from his proud sister, Doris. In spite of warnings from his experienced older mate he tried to make record time to ‘Frisco and crashed the ship on a reef in the Paumotu Group. The disapproving faces of the men who drowned still haunt him, as does the unspeakable cannibalism he and his last two remaining companions had to resort to before drifting ashore in an appalling state among the kindly-hearted people of Vahitahi. The other men later left on a sperm whaler but Brantley could not bear to go back to Australia. A year later, a trading captain gave him a small stock of goods, and with the thought of his sister keeping him steady and straight he disdained to sink as he easily could have done to the level of a drunken beachcomber but instead made the most of the opportunity, and sent Doris money every year. With financial success came a new identity as Paranili

('Brantley' pronounced by speakers of a language whose consonants are always separated by vowels). Doris's letters begged him to let her come to him because she was so lonely. Two years later, however, Brantley assumes that proposal has become an impossibility because he has taken a local wife, an impropriety which he is certain would distress Doris. There is great tenderness in the scenes between the couple but as Brantley looks at Luita's pale tattooed skin he reflects that it is the reason why he could never take her to see Doris. He is at an impasse. Uncommunicative by nature, he has not told Luita about Doris, and having for so long failed to do so it becomes easier not to try. Perhaps in part because she senses Brantley's unexplained moods, his lengthening business trips prompt Luita's insecurities. She has her own obsessive concerns, based partly on cynicism about the ways of white men. She worries that he may desire either another local woman or one he dreams of in Beretania ('Britain' – synechdoche for Australia). A year later she has a child and Brantley has a schooner, bought with the thousand-dollar monthly income he is making by trading in pearl shell. When he sets off for a three-month trip to the pearling grounds at Matahiva, Luita's fears have been exacerbated by her mother who is wise in the old *lotu* (religion) and has twice dreamed about an unknown evil happening to him. Confronted with her distress, Brantley does not attempt to reason with her heightened emotional state, based as it is on native superstition, nor does he agree to her request to take her with him, but instead he gives a quick gesture of affection and hurries away. The job is complete a month early and, when he is almost home, a brig intercepts the schooner, captained by a friend who has Doris on board, dying of consumption, and worse news to tell – that Luita and the child are missing. When Doris arrived in Vahitahi Luita did not believe her story, nor did the other island women who teased Luita. Doris is desperate for poor Luita and the sick child, whose existence she was thrilled to find out about and whose welfare now concerns her far more than her own fading health. Brantley's native steersman knows

where Luita has gone – to the land of her mother's people where, by a tragic coincidence, the steersman tried to persuade Brantley to drop anchor only a week before, proposing that they fish for turtles and visit the place where Luita had told him she would like Brantley to take her one day. Ever efficient, Brantley postponed the tempting suggestion to a future trip in the turtle season, with as many Vahitahi people as the schooner will carry. Now with Doris as passenger, the schooner reaches Tatakoto in two days, too late to save the child who is buried under a heap of sand in the *marae*, where Luita too lies dying. She explains she was stung by the mockery of her friends and calls herself a fool for doubting Brantley, who holds her close as her heart stops beating. Before the schooner can set sail again Doris too dies, in her brother's arms, and is buried under the shade of the giant *puka* trees beside the *marae*. Brantley sends the schooner away to fetch his possessions and as many people who would like to join him setting up home, he says, on this deserted island. He waves his ship off and when his men return, they find him beside his family, with a bullet hole in his temple.

This is a story which depends heavily on the Oceanic setting for both plot and effect. The Icelandic writer Sjón has observed that all island stories ultimately end in self-destruction, and whilst this is clearly the case in Brantley's story, the statement highlights an existential quandary which is inherent both in the idea and the reality of islands. The appeal of an island lies in its circumscription. To project oneself imaginatively onto an island is to conceive of a self which is neither constrained nor defined by its position in the web of one's culture, history or society. Both Challis and Brantley use their island settings to enact a fantasy of escape from the selves which they have each become and which – because they cannot alter the facts, or society, or their own problematic inclinations – they cannot control. Gaston Bachelard describes what occurs here.

> By changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating…. This change of *concrete*

> space can no longer be a mere mental operation that could be compared with consciousness of geometrical relativity. For we do not change place, we change our nature (206).

This is the case for both of Becke's protagonists, though the process is only partial. Tialli (Polynesian pronunciation of the name) and Paranili may have come into existence but they have not replaced or effaced Challis and Brantley in their original contexts, who continue to exert an effect on the owners of what are now double identities. The lifestyles and identities of Tialli or Paranili – pleasant as it is to be a highly esteemed and sexually desirable white trader on a charming island – only have a meaningful value when compared with the lives and statuses of hypothetical Challises or Brantleys who are being cheated by their wives or toiling as a low-earning nobody in a city. So the protagonists' escape must remain perpetually open-ended, or else it will represent no escape at all. This paradox imbues the tales. Brantley's first decisive words to himself: "I will never go back again," are qualified immediately by the narrator: 'And perhaps he was right.' Brantley may promise Luita with touching finality: "Thy land is mine for ever", yet a year later, he has struck lucky with pearl shell, bought a schooner and is writing to his sister that, 'Another year or two like this, and [he] can go back a made man.' Again, the statement is qualified, this time by him: 'Some day, my dear, I may; but I will come back here again. The ways of the people have become my ways.' All attempts to close the discussion down fail, for putting down his pen Brantley goes straight into a reverie, this time initially about the two women, who become the focus of his insoluble identity-reconciliation issues: 'I would like to go and see Doris, but I can't take Luita, and so it cannot be.' He subtly shifts the blame onto them, then retracts it again, both guiltily appreciating them and feeling pressurised by their needs: 'How that girl (Luita) suspects me even now. When I went to Tahiti to buy the schooner, I believe she thought she would never see me again… What a fool I am! Doris is all right, I suppose, although it is a year since I had a letter…. and I – could any man want more? I

don't believe there's a soul on the island but thinks as much of me as Luita herself does; and by G-d! she's a pearl – even though she is only a native girl.' Then suddenly in the middle of the debate, up pops the issue of his identity and social status, which underlies everything and which has been resurrected by his recent success: 'No, I'll stay here; "Kapeni Paranili" will always be a big man in the Paumotus, but Fred Brantley would be nobody in Sydney – only a common merchant skipper who had made money in the islands.' Lastly, he lets himself off the hook with a hope which would conveniently absolve him from responsibility: 'And perhaps Doris is married.' Bachelard describes something like what is happening here in his chapter on the dialectics of inside and outside:

> Entrapped in being we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it….. One no longer knows right away whether one is running toward the centre or escaping…. The being of man is an unsettled being which all expression unsettles. (213-214)

Bhattacharya observes that this story, 'illustrates the need for honesty in white men's relationships with island women.'(86) In plot terms it seems unarguable that had Brantley told his sister about his wife or his wife about his sister, at least three of the four deaths would have been avoided, and it is possible they might have lived as a happy family instead. It is not possible, of course, to discern what effect Doris's unexplored unhappiness in Australia and the escalation of her illness may have had on her attitudes to interracial love and child-bearing; nevertheless the sentiments she brings to Vahitahi are the opposite of the 'old-fashioned notions of right and wrong' which her brother assumed they would be. Her instinct is to help look after the child – in this story Doris's is notably the only voice which ever refers to the child as his – and she also plainly observes what we never actually hear him express as such, let alone out loud, about Luita: 'She is a very beautiful woman, Fred. They told me at Vahitahi that she was called the pearl of Vahitahi.'

Doris isolates a key symbol here, echoing Brantley's thoughts earlier. While Brantley's protestant work ethic has been sending him chasing off away from home for months at a time hunting pearls in order to amass the credit and credentials that would establish him in a hierarchy which he says he has rejected, Luita is the real pearl, overlooked at home. The interpretation that the story is merely a parable about being communicative falls short because Brantley cannot be honest with his wife or sister, without first being honest with himself.

'Brantley's racist views', says Bhattacharya, 'which prevent him from fully accepting his love for Luita, lead to [the] fatal misunderstanding on her part.' There is some truth to this, but there is more complexity at play in Brantley's racism, which can be seen at work in the line which Bhattacharya also quotes: 'Her skin is not as dark as that pretty creole I was so sweet on in Galveston ten years ago.… Well, she's good enough for a broken man like me.' There are two parts to this quotation. Firstly, Brantley looks at Luita through the lens of what he imagines his fellows would see and applies their projected judgements as to quite what kind of skin shade or decoration is acceptable. In spite of the fact that he has escaped the world which he believes would condemn him, or even because he has escaped it, the judgements of that world play out constantly in his thoughts, as if he has internalised a kind of purgatory and is living a form of madness. We are repeatedly told that he speaks to himself, another sign of the dialogue taking place in his head. The judgements which he is both trying to live up to and running away from are judgements pronounced by himself against himself on behalf of bourgeois values about morality and respectability which we never hear from anyone but him, ventriloquising the voices of his own imagined homeland. Salman Rushdie describes how this works:

> Exiles, emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation…almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming

> precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions…imaginary homelands…of the mind…. Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. ((428 & 430)

In the turmoil of inner cultural and ethical battles we see Brantley secondly embracing his life with Luita *because* choosing her condemns him to an even greater level of exile, and he deserves to be punished. The ambitious bourgeois Australian who once looked forward to his future with hubristic conviction in his own brilliance, as measured against the standards of his own society, cannot lay them aside even though those standards have found him wanting. He will not simply live and enjoy what is in front of him because, like his wife and mother-in-law, whose superstitions he so sweepingly dismisses, he is plagued by ghosts which in his case must be placated with hard work and materialistic success, even though he is already on the uppermost rung of Vahitahi society and needs no more money. And even though no amount of either will absolve him from his deepest concern – guilt for the manslaughter of almost an entire ship's company, for the reckless destruction of his own ship and family fortune, and for eating human flesh.

R.Eves has observed that, 'these texts capture some of the wider tensions and ambiguities of nineteenth and early twentieth century ideas on race, place and empire'. (370) However, when Bhattacharya, echoing him, infers that, 'Brantley is plagued with the worry that his success in the islands means he has become degenerate' (87) this seems to miss the main point of the drama. Challis may have exclaimed, 'I must be turning into a native' but that is not sufficient motivation to change his ways or send him home, and the story does not suggest that any terrible consequence springs from the realisation or the inaction. There is no clear evidence that degeneration is a significant

issue for Brantley, either, who continues to work like an efficient middle-class businessman, reprimanding his steersman as a glutton when he proposes to hold up the schedule for some turtle fishing (the suggestion which, if followed, would have saved the lives of Luita and the child, who were by then on the island). To say that Becke's stories are 'allegories that warn travellers and colonisers to be wary' (Eves 371) therefore seems inappropriate. Brantley realises his second and significant mistake only when he hears that Luita has run away and that he may well be about to lose the two people he most loves and whom he has been neglecting. The realisation unfolds quickly and without the uncommunicative Brantley really saying anything about it at all, on the brig during the only conversation which actually takes place between white men. Referring to Doris, Latham says: "She is terribly cut up over poor Luita – more so than I knew you would be. But she was a grand little woman, Brantley, although she was only a native." Latham's assumption that Brantley's emotions will be relatively unscathed suggests that Brantley's outward show of his affections has been muted – which accounts retrospectively for Luita's insecurities. And when Latham's patronising platitudes echo Brantley's own thoughts from a few pages earlier, those sentiments are thrown into sharp relief by the desperate situation. Only now that the white, sexist, racist view is finally spoken out loud for the first time by a character rather than being repeated in Brantley's head, does he hear the ugliness in the sentiments to which he has hitherto deferred. By way of appreciation and kinship he tries to repeat to his friend what he knows was a well-meant phrase: '"Yes," he answered, in the same slow, dazed manner, "she was a good little girl to me, although she – " The words stuck in his throat.'

The symbol of the *puka* tree which throws its shade over the *marae* where Brantley and his family are buried, and over the beginning and ending of the story is a telling symbol of what has finally happened to Brantley. Instead of spreading as a seed, taking root and sending a shoot upwards like most trees, the *puka* starts life the opposite way

round, as an epiphyte which having been dropped on a large tree gradually sends its roots down to the ground.

X

Becke does not only write about white men's experiences. Two stories from his first two collections show him vividly evoking the trauma of the colonial invasion. I hope to demonstrate that Becke was profoundly aware of the problem of authority, because, just as Conrad suggests, he plainly avoided it. One of his techniques, apparent in this first volume which we know Conrad reread studiously, was to layer his narratives through differing viewpoints, held lightly together by a frame narrator who was a separate version of himself. Dennison appeared for the first time in this story, five years before Conrad created Marlow.

'The Rangers of the Tia Kau' is a gruesome account of an expedition of Polynesian islanders being attacked and eaten by sharks. But it is really about the relentless European assault on their traditional beliefs, which tears apart the fabric of their society. Strangely, Becke's damning critique seems to have passed unnoticed – at least in a conscious way – by his contemporaries. Many were struck by the force of the story, but no commentators appear to have remarked on it beyond saying that it was 'terrifying' or' shocking', like the fifth Earl of Rosebery who wrote in 1895 that "the shark story sometimes haunts me (Day 42)." Even as he sets the scene, Becke's narrator declares a conflict between cultures and versions of the truth. By pointing out that the Tia Kau did not exist on British charts (46), he undermines the authority on which most of his readers would ordinarily rely, obliging them to leave behind what they think they know and to trust instead the testimonies of a few white traders and Nanomagan islanders. Again and again the narrative is stitched in such a way as to repel certainty, to de-

familiarise. The text is fragmented by line breaks into multiple sections, which reflect flashes backwards and forwards in time and switches in tone and register. The narrative seems to move from one standpoint to another between sections and sometimes within them.

Sometimes the language takes on the pastoral form of English which Stevenson favoured when mimicking the Polynesian vernacular. Transitive verbs evoke a chief with unchallenged authority: "One day…Atupa…caused a huge fire to be lit"; "his people...would start at sundown, so as to avoid paddling in the heat" (46-47) Polynesian words, details of food preparations, and fire-signalling systems suggest an indigenous speaker at work, but after a line break mood and time shift again, drawing out to a more distant view, which anchors the events in Western time, in August 1872 (47). This date, the second in the story, indicates that two years have elapsed since the British surveying cruiser, *The Basilisk,* passed through. Although the British fleet did in fact include a ship of that name, the reference to the mythical creature with the lethal gaze is emblematic: simply because their island has been placed on a map, the Nanomagans are now in predatory sights. A Western voice now lightly explains the reason why "the heathen chief" ordered the 38-mile crossing. He wanted to get rid of an unwelcome pastor, who had been brought by a mission ship. Atupa politely turned the ship away the first time it visited but was too polite to do so twice (47). From this new, more detached narrative standpoint the benevolent, all-commanding Atupa appears awkward and conflicted.

The pastoral, Biblical English reappears whenever the focus is on events that only a Nanomagan could have known. Yet, that which seems to represent the Nanomagan voice can of course only ventriloquise them. The style evokes their consciousnesses by placing their expressive powers within a Western cultural frame of reference to which they themselves have no connection, even indirectly. This begs the question: who is really narrating?

Not until the final section of eight is this question answered. We experience the full impact of the story from the Nanomagan point of view first, and even then the revelation about who narrates and in what context they do so is eclipsed by the shocking disclosure of the devastation: the news that the Nanomagan speaker is one of only two survivors, and everyone mentioned in the account hitherto is dead (51).

The last section of the story, in which the context of its telling is dramatised, reveals the aftermath of the trauma. The terrifying death of 68 people is so overwhelming for those left behind on Nanomaga that the disaster demands interpretation. The traumatised speaker has lost all sense of time, but its passing is palpable because he uses Biblical ideas to express himself: "Were I to live as long as he whom the FAIFEAU (missionary) tells us lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine, I shall hear the groans and cries and shrieks of that PO MALAIA, that night of evil luck." (51)

Christianity is well established on Nanomaga and Atupa's efforts have failed. The Nanomagan refers to his pre-conversion days with the epithet "PO ULI ULI" (52), which according to a note means 'heathen', but which literally translates as "in the blackest night" – the same words the nameless narrator used to set the scene on the Tia Kau (50). The image of the attack has come to describe the man's religious journey. The Nanomagans are baffled and divided by the shark attack and by the arrival of the new religion, events which are in effect inseparable.

The identity of the Western narrator is only now slipped into the story. He is Dennison, "the white trader". Pressed by Dennison about whether he ought to be making such an un-Christian suggestion about, "the man who brought thee the new faith," the Nanomagan wrestles between the views of his earlier heathen self, who would have wanted Atupa to kill the pastor, and his present-day self, who is a Christian and would not. He laments "we could have lied and said he died of a sickness." (52) Every other concern seems overshadowed beside the simple fact of the man's great personal loss,

which he expresses with simple clarity: “And then had I my son Tagipo with me, he who went into the bellies of the sharks at Tia Kau.” (52) The most poignant transformation is that expectations have sunk so far. Where once Atupa sought to maintain the freedom and integrity of his rule and people, to the Nanomagan looking back, the best outcome they could ever have hoped for would have been merely to keep the people they loved.

It is striking that although the story includes a white man, no missionary voice or ‘white’ commentary ever speaks. Other than asking one playful question to prompt clarification, Becke, in his alter ego as Dennison, merely recounts the context of the testimony and testifies to its veracity. In setting up the mirrors so that one reflects another, he reveals periscopically what he could not otherwise personally know.

And yet, this framing effect also allows for more than one reading of the story. Through a gently racist or evangelical Christian lens of Becke’s time it would be possible to judge the Nanomagan’s confusion and hypocrisy as representative and to conclude that these poor souls needed further instruction. This interpretation haunts the text, and in that doubling performs a truth of the colonial project in the South Pacific – that no centre of reference existed, no omniscient perspective could see what was really going on in this struggle for moral and cultural domination or survival.

XI

“A dead loss”, a story from Becke’s second collection, brings Dennison back in another of Becke’s regular jobs, as supercargo. In this story a chief’s daughter, called Lunumula, has drifted hundreds of miles from home in a canoe with a retinue of her native Yap islanders. Her father and the rest of the passengers are dead or dying of starvation. Rescued by a whaling ship, she is taken thousands more miles away and sold

to a trader, Martin, who later sells her again to another sea captain, Chaplin – a menacingly unsympathetic character. Lunumula asks often for Chaplin to take her back to her home, but instead the ship sails still further away, pursuing its contractual duties. Unaware that Chaplin plans to sell her in Honolulu when he has finished with her, for a six-fold profit to a man in the sex trade, Lunumula continues "grave, dignified and always self-possessed"(109), until after almost a year of sexual enslavement she notices the ship has changed course again. The compass and Chaplin's cold replies and unrelenting face tell her finally that no one has any intention of taking her back to her people, so she climbs gracefully up onto the top-gallant forecastle, leaps overboard and drowns herself.

The story conforms to what Hemingway a few decades later called his iceberg theory (153-154). Its impact comes from the way the heart is almost entirely absent from the narrative. The girl's ordeal has to be pieced together from fragments of information scattered through the main action. She is not mentioned until the end of the third page out of nine, and her name is not revealed until the fifth. "A dead loss" appears instead to deal entirely with the white employees of an Auckland trading company going about their business. Lunumula is coincidental to that business; she pops up in their dealings both as an unexpected bonanza and as a problem that must be removed.

In the surface story, Becke's alter-ego Dennison, is sent to Nukupapau by his company – whom he calls, only half-ironically, his "owners"(102) – because they have heard one of their traders has "got into trouble by shooting a native" (102). The supercargo's brief is "to investigate the rumour, and, *if the business was suffering in any way* [my italics], to take away the trader and put another man in his place" (102). Dennison finds Martin alone with his "new girl", (102) who turns out to be at the root of the trouble.

It seems the trader offended the local tribe by pensioning off his village wife, to replace her with this stranger (105). When the wife's brother tried to kill him, Martin shot the man dead and received in turn a cutlass stab in the ribs and a taboo from the chief. Because Martin refuses either to kill or get rid of Lunumula, no one on the island has spoken to him or bought from him in six months. The situation is unsustainable for everyone but Martin, who sentimentalises Nukupapau as home and likes to imagine that the villagers will come round to his view. But the company cannot and will not afford this loss to their profits and Martin must choose between his position and his girl (106). Chaplin's strategic offer to buy her for what Martin paid makes the choice easier (107). As they go to board the ship again, Dennison is concerned enough about the situation to speak to Chaplin (108).

Extraordinarily, even though slavery had been outlawed for decades, the situation about which Becke's alter-ego wishes to speak urgently to Chaplin relates to his own job, looking after the company's financial interests. The supercargo points out that another mouth to feed will prove expensive. Chaplin replies: "I know our godly owners would raise a deuce of a row about my buying the girl if I couldn't pay for her keep while she's on board, but I've got a couple of hundred pounds in Auckland" (108). It is understood that the company's high moral standards would be exercised by employees cheating the firm over expenses, yet neither man considers that that they might object to a sideline in human trafficking. The option of returning Lunumula to her home is never even raised as a possibility. The blinkered forces of economics will not consider deviation even for humanitarian purposes, assuming anyone had them.

More unsettling still, is the fact that the plot offers no alternative choices or points of view to indicate that it might be conventional or feasible to operate in this sphere except in deference to financial concerns. Even the sympathies of Becke's alter-ego seem to be strictly limited. The only counter to this bleak picture of the world is therefore the

existence of the story itself, and the space it leaves open for a reader to interpret the same events using a different set of values. The narrative solicits moral revulsion through the way it presents the white man's perspective. While Lunumula is repeatedly marked down as cool, without reference to the ordeal she is suffering, the white men's coolness passes unremarked. Witnessing his love-slave's final stages of despair Chaplin sees only potential inconvenience to himself: "He knew by her white, set face that mischief was brewing" (109). When she walks away for the last time, he remarks to Dennison: "Sulky" (110).

In the closing lines of dialogue humanity and capital face one another. Chaplin, who has given up after an abbreviated search for the girl, is working in a tellingly trite way on "his accustomed amusement, making tortoiseshell ornaments with a fret-saw" (110). Two lines of dialogue say all that needs to be said:

> "A sad end to a young girl's life," said the supercargo.
> "Yes," said the methodical Honolulu black-birder, "and a sad end to my lovely five hundred dollars." (110)

Becke has a knack with the understatement, the telling turn-of-phrase. Through an amplified silence, a refusal to attempt to encapsulate the pathos of the situation, he exposes the cold power of the Western material gaze. He eschews a straightforward third- or first-person narrative to similar effect. Becke uses Dennison to separate his reflective role as writer from the active one he played as trader, casting the white colonial perspective within a more distant, arguably more objective frame. The Polynesian perspective shadows this one, an image in fragments. Two separate worlds operate in the same space: the Polynesians are preoccupied with the close-knit universe of their own islands and communities, the white Westerners with the relentless work of money-making. These cogs turn independently, but they interact to make exchanges. And in a fluid global economy in which everything has exchange value, a young woman's life counts for nothing. Grace Paley noted that the best short fictions occur

when two stories come together to create a third which is never spelled out (quoted in Cowan 153). The third unspoken story here is that of the global experience in which all Becke's characters – and indeed his readers – play a part: the free exchange of goods, services, beliefs and values in an unbalanced, newly globalised world.

The Iowa creative-writing workshop, an institution founded 23 years after Becke's death, famously inculcated into its students the mantra, taken from Henry James's prefaces to the 1908 New York editions of his novels: 'show, don't tell' (Menand). Becke's stories show, often shockingly, and this power to shock often derives from his refusal to tell. This is what I believe confused Conrad and what still throws Becke's readers off the scent. Becke's minimalism – the cutting and reducing which Becke credited to J.F. Archibald at *The Bulletin* – suppresses the force of his fiction into the white spaces between the lines, into what is not said, what is beyond the power of words to say. It seems to me that this approach was what both attracted and baffled Conrad for even Marlow in *A Heart of Darkness* attempts to marshal the story he narrates into a meaningful whole which is to some extent instructive and which he controls – when he compares, for example, the Roman invasion of Britain to the incursion of European colonial powers into Africa. Gaston Bachelard describes the effect on the reader's perception when the author steps in to give poetic and philosophical shape to what might otherwise seem meaningless action: 'Whatever the affectivity that colours a given space, whether sad or ponderous, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened.' (201) In other words, summing the situation up alleviates the pain and weight. This is the effect of the artistry of Conrad or Stevenson. What makes Becke's work stand out also continues to hide him from his readers – his rejection of the idea of writer as priest or didactic commentator. In the absence of a guide, or – in the case of Dennison – the refusal of that guide to reassure his reader by taking any kind of lead, the reader is thrown back on his or her own judgements in an alien setting. This is

unsettling. It is the modernist short story, it is culture shock, and it is the intelligent, respectful approach to the subject of colonialism.

XII

Becke dramatises the emerging modern consciousness, using his island settings, fragmented narrative structures, tiers of witnesses and polyphonous narrative voices. The trading and transport networks available in Becke's time created the possibility of moving great distances between alternative lives, in a way which was not available to Robinson Crusoe, for example. This capacity radically alters consciousness, as Becke subtly shows. In 'Challis, the doubter' and 'Brantley of Vahitahi' he reveals characters who, trapped in their own private thoughts, are constantly at work writing their own stories, mediated by cultural tropes and social baggage they have inescapably brought with them, and never succeeding. The thoughts themselves, far from being logical, unfold as a series of impressions triggered coincidentally by a beautiful view or an unexpected association. Becke is a proto-modernist in this sense, like Conrad or Ford. The randomness of thought is also expressed through a combination of the obsessive search for meaning, when meaning always depends on the ending, and until the ending has happened that meaning therefore remains open. Herein lies the appeal of death to the isolated impressionist thinker. Challis's sudden short-form, blind ending and Brantley's burial and transformation into culturally-hybrid myth serve to underline the existential strangeness of the very idea of endings.

Becke's endings deserve categorisation and further study. They frequently distort by a sudden change of perspective. To the casual reader this evokes a feeling of strangeness without Becke in any way pushing meaning onto the effect, but the feeling merits closer study; there is always some contradiction at the root of it. The endings which seem to

resolve equally turn out to be deceptive, on closer examination. 'Ninia' (1896:13-36), which ends on an apparent note of Christian salvation, may well have pleased many of Becke's readers, however the story provides little basis for that interpretation of events. Throughout the story, the Northern Pacific islanders attribute the sounds of the ocean to some belief or other, mostly their own gods. By the time that Ninia decides it was the Christian god who helped her boat find land, her two friends are already dead, a miracle of fish leaping into her boat has already happened, and she remains unable to get home to her grieving mother for many years, although she seems happy in her faith. One meaning superimposed upon events is perhaps as good as another. This existentialism of Becke's, which also informs the violence of his stories, likewise merits further examination. Extreme, unglamorous and impulsive brutality regularly explodes in a kind of vacuum in the boundary zones of empire. Among the 14 stories of the first collection, there are 111 deaths of which only seven have natural causes. The good, emphatically, have no special protection, and often meet a violent and unjust end.

The existentialism, the intense violence and the distinctive conditions of his characters' consciousnesses are created and amplified by Becke's Oceanic island settings. The Pacific Ocean runs through the stories as an appropriately vast presence, representing the vicissitudes of chance. The effects of being marooned for weeks, or driven a thousand miles from home without hope of returning, transform the lives of the characters with such force that meaning must be sought, even though at the same time there appears to be none.

It is easy to assume that as a Victorian writing about islands, Becke might be satisfying a Western fantasy, which inscribed its own desires onto a blank space, cut off from metropolitan social realism. The symbolism of the imagination has long designated islands a place of imagined desire where the individual is safely and clearly circumscribed, insulated, and at the same time isolated from all undesirable social

pressures. Becke's writing is realist, however, and the reality is quite different, as Challis and Brantley discover. Becke's characters are further isolated by their insulation, and insulated from knowledge of themselves by their isolation.

Becke's island settings also amplify conflict and pain. When two villages on three close-knit islands hundreds of miles from anywhere fall out and fight, as they do in 'Ninia' (1896:13-36) there is no stopping the violence until one side has completely exterminated the other, a situation which would have been impossible without the arrival of a willing white man with a huge stock of powder and bullets and five muskets, which he loads and reloads, as commanded by his chief, until hundreds are dead 'and the five muskets became so hot and foul that Harry could murder no longer, and his arm was tired out with slaughter'. Afterwards, in an isolated place such as this one, the history of that violence is an inescapable presence, the white man is murdered by his chief and the chief believes himself punished by a storm which smashes his whaleboat and carries away his daughter. Becke finds among far-flung island settings shock and pathos on a grand scale, a scale as grand as it would ordinarily be – thanks to its location – invisible to the outside world.

Peter Pierce calls Becke's short stories 'the most iconoclastic writing about the Pacific by any Australian', and has observed that Becke's unsettling subjects in vast spaces, drawn from the repository of the Pacific are written as variations on a theme, an idea that seems to me key to their formally-derived artistic effect (2005:7). In Becke's South Pacific the islands are petri dishes into which he places different characters of every colour and mix to see what chemical reaction takes place. Becke attempts no apologetic mystification of 'the idea' of colonialism, as Conrad does in *Lord Jim*. He does not pretend that anyone is doing anything for anyone other than themselves, yet he frequently represents strong communities who know how to enjoy life and what to do with a day. Becke's stories often provide a frame for indigenous voices to speak,

one in which the white western observer features so lightly it is easy to miss him on the first reading. The indigenous storytellers in a quite different way also transform themselves and their ancestors into legends in order to make meaning and significance. There is no definitive victim or villain in a Becke tale. Either may be male or female in different stories, they may be black, brown or white and more often they appear in hybrid racial identities which mostly represent only themselves. Sometimes, expectations of racial characteristics are raised only to be confounded, as is so often the case with Becke's representations of Melanesian cannibals and headhunters.

Becke himself lived multiple lives, either in isolated communities or crossing from continent to continent, changing himself along the way. His stories, interviews and reputation provided further opportunity for living multifaceted identities. He tells and retells himself, by way in part of hiding himself behind what he perceived to be a version of himself which would appeal to his readers. There is plenty of evidence in Becke's personal history to indicate that he was more interested in the people he met in the islands, their stories and way of life, and the times he spent with them fishing or shooting pigeons or drinking kava than he was in the machinations of empire or in how to make a lot of money in trade, which makes it difficult to argue that he was significantly involved in a mission to impose colonial racial mythologies on his island people and settings. To suggest that merely by sharing a century and a culture with people who did have that agenda he must be guilty of the same is circular and logically extends into the assertion that by sharing western culture and history with the current president of the United States we must definitively share his views. Time and effort are wasted starting from this standpoint. What is worth asking is, if Becke did not share the accepted views of his time, how would he have gone about telling and dramatising the stories he witnessed? I imagine, he would have done so in more or less exactly the way he did – writing fluid stories within frames of narrative and making use of multiple

perspectives to deflect and complicate the writer's intention, and then he would avoid ever saying what he thought. He would know, however, and so would the perspicacious reader. Instead of relegating Becke to a footnote or symptom, therefore, it is worthwhile re-engaging with his work at the line level, to see what it actually does, rather than what we have been taught to assume it does.

XIII

I would like to make a plea, finally, against the dismissal of colonial fiction as an unpleasant idea form the past. Colonialism is much older than the nineteenth century. When Odysseus arrives at Polyphemus's island in book 9 of Homer's epic, his instinct is to judge the unseen inhabitants for their paucity of cultivation and imagination. He sees untapped potential in the island and considers it would make a good colony. The Greeks who created and identified with this hero colonised vast areas of the Mediterranean coastline far beyond their shores. At the same time, the people whom we now broadly call Polynesians invented sailing boats of a far superior kind than had ever been seen before and set off from south-east Asia, powered by the technology and an imaginative capacity to envision new lands of possibility, across the vast Pacific Ocean. Ultimately they colonised islands which had never been seen or set foot on by humanity before. On the way, they met, befriended, interbred and conflicted with earlier human migrants whom we now broadly call Melanesians. The nineteenth-century brand of colonialism with its missionaries, traders, navy gunboats and jingoistic overtones may be dead and buried but colonialism and imperialism in different forms go back over all of recorded human history, and globalisation in the form of multi-national corporations, exploitation of resources, the sometimes unforeseen effects of well-meaning Western charitable interference are arguably more evolved forms of the same ideas. Many stories of

exploitation are currently active and as shocking and overwhelming as anything Becke wrote about, and might seem more worthy of academia's attentions than cautiously prodding the corpses of the forgotten. Becke, who worked in the labour trade in the 1870s and 80s may seem in that respect a repellent representative of a thankfully forgotten era, but the charity End Slavery Now reports that there are an estimated 20.9 million people trapped in some form of slavery today. People are moving voluntarily too, in hope of a better life. Oxford University's Migration Observatory cites data concluding that in Britain in 2015, somewhere between one third and a half of workers in elementary process plant occupations, process operatives and cleaning and housekeeping managers and supervisors were foreign-born. And the ugliness continues, in far-flung parts of the world where most of us do not know it is happening. Since the war on terror was announced, British and other private military security companies have made billions protecting assets in Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and the Indian Ocean. The International Business Times reports innocent people being killed without provocation, while mercenaries use their unregulated status to evade responsibility for war crimes. Surely Becke's dramatisations of similar experiences, and his evocation of multiple perspectives has something to offer our times? Colonialism is not dead. It is called globalisation.

Conrad's assessment of Becke's method remains key to a reading of this neglected writer. He pinpointed the narrative approach that made the Australian too slippery an enigma either to be celebrated in his own age, or to stand out readily from the crowd of colonial writings in the next. Becke's experiences gave him a unique understanding of the perspectives of both colonisers and colonised. He saw the vast cultural and linguistic division, and appreciated how little it was possible for any of the players in that drama to grasp, more than partially, the significance of events which were irreversibly

unfolding. In his writing, Becke innovated solutions to an enduring problem – how to narrate the advance of globalisation.

XIV

It is ironic to discover that in 1901 Becke tried his hand at rescuing another writer from obscurity. Becke wrote the introduction to a 1901 edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, after it had been fifty years out of print. Becke hailed Melville as a master with, 'a soul as deep and wide and pure as the ocean itself, a soul that for ever lifted him up above all mean and squalid things' and urged readers to overlook the 'imperfections' of the book's composition (Melville x). It took another twenty years and the intervention of a D.H. Lawrence before anyone would do so.

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