

BECKE LOUIS

RÍDAN THE DEVIL AND
OTHER STORIES

Louis Becke

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Rídan The Devil And Other Stories / 1899

RÍDAN THE DEVIL

Rídan lived alone in a little hut on the borders of the big German plantation at Mulifenua, away down at the lee end of Upolu Island, and every one of his brown-skinned fellow-workers either hated or feared him, and smiled when Burton, the American overseer, would knock him down for being a 'sulky brute.' But no one of them cared to let Rídan see him smile. For to them he was a wizard, a devil, who could send death in the night to those he hated. And so when anyone died on the plantation he was blamed, and seemed to like it. Once, when he lay ironed hand and foot in the stifling corrugated iron 'calaboose,' with his blood-shot eyes fixed in sullen rage on Burton's angered face, Tirauro, a Gilbert Island native assistant overseer, struck him on the mouth and called him 'a pig cast up by the ocean.' This was to please the white man. But it did not, for Burton, cruel as he was, called Tirauro a coward and felled him at once. By ill-luck he fell within reach of Rídan, and in another moment the manacled hands had seized his enemy's throat. For five minutes the three men struggled together, the white overseer beating Rídan over the head with the butt of his heavy Colt's pistol, and then when Burton rose to his feet the two brown men were lying motionless together; but Tirauro was dead.

Rídan was sick for a long time after this. A heavy flogging always did make him sick, although he was so big and strong. And so, as he could not work in the fields, he was sent to Apia to do light labour in the cotton-mill there. The next morning he was missing. He had swum to a brig lying at anchor in the harbour and hidden away in the empty forehold. Then he was discovered and taken ashore to the mill again, where the foreman gave him 'a dose of Cameroons medicine'—that is, twenty-five lashes.

'Send him back to the plantation,' said the manager, who was a mere German civilian, and consequently much despised by his foreman, who had served in Africa. 'I'm afraid to keep him here, and I'm not going to punish him if he tries to get away again, poor devil.'

So back he went to Mulifanua. The boat voyage from Apia down the coast inside the reef is not a long one, but the Samoan crew were frightened to have such a man free; so they tied him hand and foot and then lashed him down tightly under the midship thwart with strips of green *fau* bark. Not that they did so with unnecessary cruelty, but ex-Lieutenant Schwartzkoff, the foreman, was looking on, and then, besides that, this big-boned, light-skinned man was a foreigner, and a Samoan hates a foreigner of his own colour if he is poor and friendless. And then he was an *aitu* a devil, and could speak neither Samoan, nor Fijian, nor Tokelau, nor yet any English or German.

Clearly, therefore, he was not a man at all, but a *manu*—a beast, and not to be trusted with free limbs. Did not the foreman say that he was possessed of many devils, and for two years had lived alone on the plantation, working in the field with the gangs of Tokelau and Solomon Island men, but speaking to no one, only muttering in a strange tongue to himself and giving sullen obedience to his taskmasters?

But as they talked and sang, and as the boat sailed along the white line of beach fringed with the swaying palms, Rídan groaned in his agony, and Pulu, the steersman, who was a big strong man and not a coward like his fellows, took pity on the captive.

'Let us give him a drink,' he said; 'he cannot hurt us as he is. Else he may die in the boat and we lose the price of his passage; for the white men at Mulifanua will not pay us for bringing to them a dead man.'

So they cast off the lashings of *fau* bark that bound Rídan to the thwart, and Pulu, lifting him up, gave him a long drink, holding the gourd to his quivering mouth—for his hands were tied behind him.

‘Let him rest with his back against the side of the boat,’ said Pulu presently; ‘and, see, surely we may loosen the thongs around his wrists a little, for they are cutting into the flesh.’

But the others were afraid, and begged him to let well alone. Then Pulu grew angry and called them cowards, for, as they argued, Rídan fell forward on his face in a swoon.

When ‘the devil’ came to and opened his wearied, blood-shot eyes, Pulu was bathing his forehead with cold water, and his bruised and swollen hands were free. For a minute or so he gasped and stared at the big Samoan, and a heavy sigh broke from his broad naked chest. Then he put his hands to his face—and sobbed.

Pulu drew back in wondering pity—surely no devil could weep—and then, with a defiant glance at the three other Samoans, he stooped down and unbound Rídan’s feet.

‘Let him lie,’ he said, going aft to the tiller. ‘We be four strong men—he is but as a child from weakness. See, his bones are like to cut through his skin. He hath been starved.’

At dusk they ran the boat along the plantation jetty, and Pulu and another man led Rídan up the path to the manager’s house. His hands were free, but a stout rope of cinnet was tied around his naked waist and Pulu held the end.

‘Ah, you dumb, sulky devil; you’ve come back to us again, have you?’ said Burton, eyeing him savagely. ‘I wish Schwartzkoff had kept you up in Apia, you murderous, yellow-hided scoundrel!’

‘What’s the use of bully-ragging him?’ remarked the plantation engineer, with a sarcastic laugh; ‘he doesn’t understand a word you say. Club-law and the sasa ¹ are the only things that appeal to him—and he gets plenty of both on Mulifanua. Hallo, look at that! Why, he’s kissing Pulu’s toe!’

Burton laughed. ‘So he is. Look out, Pulu, perhaps he’s a *kai tagata*’ (cannibal). ‘Take care he doesn’t bite it off.’

Pulu shook his mop of yellow hair gravely. A great pity filled his big heart, for as he had turned to go back to the boat Rídan had fallen upon his knees and pressed his lips to the feet of the man who had given him a drink.

That night Burton and the Scotch engineer went to Rídan’s hut, taking with them food and a new sleeping-mat. He was sitting cross-legged before a tiny fire of coco-nut shells, gazing at the blue, leaping jets of flame, and as the two men entered, slowly turned his face to them.

‘Here,’ said Burton, less roughly than usual, ‘here’s some *kai kai* for you.’

He took the food from Burton’s hand, set it beside him on the ground, and then, supporting himself on his gaunt right arm and hand, gave the overseer one long look of bitter, undying hatred; then his eyes drooped to the fire again.

‘And here, Rídan,’ said Craik, the engineer, throwing the sleeping-mat upon the ground, ‘that’ll keep your auld bones frae cutting into the ground. And here is what will do ye mair good still,’ and he placed a wooden pipe and a stick of tobacco in ‘the devil’s’ hand. In a moment Rídan was on his knees with his forehead pressed to the ground in gratitude.

The men looked at him in silence for a few moments as he crouched at Craik’s feet, with the light of the fire playing upon his tattooed yellow back and masses of tangled black hair.

‘Come awa’, Burton, leave the puir deevil to himself. And I’m thinking ye might try him on the other tack awhile. Ye *have not* broken the creature’s spirit yet, and I wouldna try to if I were you—for my own safety. Sit up Rídan, mon, and smoke your pipe.’

Two years before, Rídan had been brought to Samoa by a German labour-ship, which had picked him up in a canoe at sea, somewhere off the coast of Dutch New Guinea. He was the only survivor of a party of seven, and when lifted on board was in the last stage of exhaustion from thirst and hunger. Where the canoe had sailed from, and whither bound, no one on board the *Iserbrook*

¹ Whip.

could learn, for the stranger spoke a language utterly unknown to anyone of even the *Iserbrook's* polyglot ship's company—men who came from all parts of Polynesia and Micronesia. All that could be learned from him by signs and gestures was that a great storm had overtaken the canoe, many days of hunger and thirst had followed, and then death ended the agonies of all but himself.

In a few weeks, and while the brig was thrashing her way back to Samoa against the south-east trades, Rídan regained his health and strength and became a favourite with all on board, white and brown. He was quite six feet in height, with a bright yellow skin, bronzed by the sun; and his straight features and long black hair were of the true Malayo-Polynesian type. From the back of his neck two broad stripes of bright blue tattooing ran down the whole length of his muscular back, and thence curved outwards and downwards along the back of his thighs and terminated at each heel. No one on the *Iserbrook* had ever seen similar tattooing, and many were the conjectures as to Rídan's native place. One word, however, he constantly repeated, 'Onêata,' and then would point to the north-west. But no one knew of such a place, though many did of an Oneaka, far to the south-east—an island of the Gilbert Group near the Equator.

The weeks passed, and at last Rídan looked with wondering eyes upon the strange houses of the white men in Apia harbour. By-and-by boats came off to the ship, and the three hundred and odd brown-skinned and black-skinned people from the Solomons and the Admiralties and the countless islands about New Britain and New Ireland were taken ashore to work on the plantations at Vailele and Mulifanua, and Rídan alone was left. He was glad of this, for the white men on board had been kind to him, and he began to hope that he would be taken back to Onêata. But that night he was brought ashore by the captain to a house where many white men were sitting together, smoking and drinking. They all looked curiously at him and addressed him in many island tongues, and Rídan smiled and shook his head and said, 'Me Rídan; me Onêata.'

'Leave him with me, Kühne,' said Burton to the captain of the brig. 'He's the best and biggest man of the lot you've brought this trip. I'll marry him to one of my wife's servants, and he'll live in clover down at Mulifanua.'

So early next morning Rídan was put in a boat with many other new 'boys,' and he smiled with joy, thinking he was going back to the ship—and Onêata. But when the boat sailed round Mulinu's Point, and the spars of the *Iserbrook* were suddenly hidden by the intervening line of palm trees, a cry of terror burst from him, and he sprang overboard. He was soon caught, though he dived and swam like a fish. And then two wild-eyed Gilbert Islanders held him by the arms, and laughed as he wept and kept repeating, 'Onêata, Onêata.'

From that day began his martyrdom. He worked hard under his overseer, but ran away again and again, only to be brought back and tied up. Sometimes, as he toiled, he would look longingly across the narrow strait of sunlit water at the bright green little island of Manono, six miles away; and twice he stole down to the shore at night, launched a canoe and paddled over towards it. But each time the plantation guard-boat brought him back; and then Burton put him in irons. Once he swam the whole distance, braving the sharks, and, reaching the island, hid in a taro swamp till the next night. He meant to steal food and a canoe—and seek for Onêata. But the Manono people found him, and, though he fought desperately, they overcame and bound him, and the women cursed him for a Tâfito² devil, a thieving beast, and beat and pelted him as the men carried him back to the plantation, tied up like a wild boar, to get their ten dollars reward for him from the manager. And Burton gave him thirty lashes as a corrective.

Then came long, long months of unceasing toil, broken only by attempts to escape, recapture, irons and more lashes. The rest of the native labourers so hated and persecuted him that at last the man's nature changed, and he became desperate and dangerous. No one but Burton dared strike him

² The Samoans apply the term 'Tâfito' to all natives of the Gilbert Group and other equatorial islands. The word is an abbreviation of Taputeauea (Drummond's Island), and 'Tâfito' is synonymous for 'savage'—in some senses.

now, for he would spring at an enemy's throat like a madman, and half strangle him ere he could be dragged away stunned, bruised and bleeding. When his day's slavery was over he would go to his hut, eat his scanty meal of rice, biscuit and yam in sullen silence, and brood and mutter to himself. But from the day of his first flogging no word ever escaped his set lips. All these things he told afterwards to Von Hammer, the supercargo of the *Mindora*, when she came to Mulifanua with a cargo of new 'boys'.³

Von Hammer had been everywhere in the North Pacific, so Burton took him to Rídan's hut, and called to the 'sulky devil' to come out. He came, and sullenly followed the two men into the manager's big sitting-room, and sat down cross-legged on the floor. The bright lamplight shone full on his nude figure and the tangle of black hair that fell about his now sun-darkened back and shoulders. And, as on that other evening long before, when he sat crouching over his fire, his eyes sought Burton's face with a look of implacable hatred.

'See if you can find out where the d—d brute comes from,' said Burton.

Von Hammer looked at Rídan intently for a minute, and then said one or two words to him in a tongue that the overseer had never before heard.

With trembling limbs and a joyful wonder shining in his dark eyes, Rídan crept up to the supercargo, and then, in a voice of whispered sobs, he told his two years' tale of bitter misery.

'Very well,' said Burton, an hour later, to Von Hammer, 'you can take him. I don't want the brute here. But he is a dangerous devil, mind. Where do you say he comes from?'

'Onêata—Saint David's Island—a little bit of a sandy atoll, as big as Manono over there, and much like it, too. I know the place well—lived there once when I was pearling, ten years ago. I don't think the natives there see a white man more than once in five years. It's a very isolated spot, off the north-east coast of New Guinea. "Bully" Hayes used to call there once. However, let me have him. The *Mindora* may go to Manila next year; if so, I'll land him at Onêata on our way there. Anyway, he's no good to you. And he told me just now that he has been waiting his chance to murder you.'

The *Mindora* returned to Apia to take in stores, and Von Hammer took Rídan with him, clothed in a suit of blue serge, and with silent happiness illumining his face. For his heart was leaping within him at the thought of Onêata, and of those who numbered him with the dead; and when he clambered up the ship's side and saw Pulu, the big Samoan, working on deck with the other native sailors, he flung his arms around him and gave him a mighty hug, and laughed like a pleased child when Von Hammer told him that Pulu would be his shipmate till he saw the green land and white beach of Onêata once more.

Six months out from Samoa the *Mindora* was hove-to off Choiseul Island, in the Solomon Group, waiting for her boat. Von Hammer and four hands had gone ashore to land supplies for a trader, and the brig was awaiting his return. There was a heavy sea running on the reef as the boat pushed off from the beach in the fast-gathering darkness; but who minds such things with a native crew? So thought Von Hammer as he grasped the long, swaying steer oar, and swung the whale-boat's head to the white line of surf. 'Give it to her, boys; now's our chance—there's a bit of a lull now, eh, Pulu? Bend to it, Rídan, my lad.'

Out shot the boat, Pulu pulling stroke, Rídan bow-oar, and two sturdy, square-built Savage Islanders amidships. Surge after surge roared and hissed past in the darkness, and never a drop of water wetted their naked backs; and then, with a wild cry from the crew and a shouting laugh from the steersman, she swept over and down the edge of the reef and gained the deep water—a second too late! Ere she could rise from the blackened trough a great curling roller towered high over, and then with a bursting roar fell upon and smothered her. When she rose to the surface Von Hammer was fifty feet away, clinging to the steer-oar. A quick glance showed him that none of the crew were missing—they were all holding on to the swamped boat and 'swimming' her out away from the reef,

³ Polynesian labourers are generally termed 'boys.'

and shouting loudly for him to come alongside. Pushing the steer-oar before him, he soon reached the boat, and, despite his own unwillingness, his crew insisted on his getting in. Then, each still grasping the gunwale with one hand, they worked the boat out yard by yard, swaying her fore and aft whenever a lull in the seas came, and jerking the water out of her by degrees till the two Savage Islanders were able to clamber in and bale out with the wooden bucket slung under the after-thwart, while the white man kept her head to the sea. But the current was setting them steadily along, parallel with the reef, and every now and then a sea would tumble aboard and nearly fill her again. At last, however, the Savage Islanders got her somewhat free of water, and called to Pulu and Rídan to get in—there were plenty of spare canoe-paddles secured along the sides in case of an emergency such as this.

‘Get in, Pulu, get in,’ said Rídan to the Samoan, in English; ‘get in quickly.’

But Pulu refused. He was a bigger and a heavier man than Rídan, he said, and the boat was not yet able to bear the weight of a fourth man. This was true, and the supercargo, though he knew the awful risk the men ran, and urged them to jump in and paddle, yet knew that the additional weight of two such heavy men as Rídan and Pulu meant death to all, for every now and then a leaping sea would again fill the boat to the thwarts.

And then suddenly, amid the crashing sound of the thundering rollers on the reef, Rídan raised his voice in an awful shriek.

‘*Quick! Pulu, quick!* Some shark hav’ come. Get in, get in first,’ he said in his broken English. And as he spoke he grasped the gunwale with both hands and raised his head and broad shoulders high out of the water, and a bubbling, groan-like sound issued from his lips.

In an instant the big Samoan swung himself into the boat, and Von Hammer called to Rídan to get in also.

‘Nay, oh, white man!’ he answered, in a strange choking voice, ‘let me stay here and hold to the boat. We are not yet safe from the reef. But paddle, paddle... quickly!’

In another minute or two the boat was out of danger, and then Rídan’s voice was heard.

‘Lift me in,’ he said quietly, ‘my strength is spent.’

The two Savage Islanders sprang to his aid, drew him up over the side, and tumbled him into the boat. Then, without a further look, they seized their paddles and plunged them into the water. Rídan lay in a huddled-up heap on the bottom boards.

‘Exhausted, poor devil!’ said Von Hammer to himself, bending down and peering at the motionless figure through the darkness. Then something warm flowed over his naked foot as the boat rolled, and he looked closer at Rídan, and—

‘Oh, my God!’ burst from him—both of Rídan’s legs were gone—bitten off just above the knees.

Twenty minutes later, as the boat came alongside the *Mindora*, Rídan ‘the devil’ died in the arms of the man who had once given him a drink.

A MEMORY OF 'THE SYSTEM'

CHAPTER I

The house in which I lived from my birth till I was twelve years of age stood on the green-grassed slopes of a treeless bluff which overlooked the blue waters of the sunlit Pacific. Except for a cluster of five or six little weatherboard cottages perched on the verge of the headland, half a mile away, and occupied by the crew of the Government pilot boat, there were no other dwellings near, for the 'town,' as it was called, lay out of sight, on the low, flat banks of a tidal river, whose upper waters were the haunt and breeding places of the black swan, the wild duck and the pelican.

My father was the principal civil official in the place, which was called Bar Harbour, one of the smaller penal settlements in Australia, founded for what were called 'the better class' of convicts, many of whom, having received their emancipation papers, had settled in the vicinity, and had become prosperous and, in a measure, respected settlers, though my father, who had a somewhat bitter tongue, said that no ex-convict could ever be respected in the colony until he had lent money to one or other of the many retired military or civil officers who held large Crown grants of land in the district and worked them with convict labour; for, while numbers of the emancipists thrived and became almost wealthy, despite the many cruel and harassing restrictions imposed upon them by the unwritten laws of society (which yet academically held them to be purged of their offences), the grand military gentlemen and their huge estates generally went to ruin—mostly through their own improvidence, though such misfortunes, our minister, the Reverend Mr Sampson, said, in the sermons he preached in our hideous, red-brick church, were caused by an 'inscrutable Providence'—their dwellings and store houses were burnt, their cattle and sheep disappeared, and their 'assigned' labourers took to the bush, and either perished of starvation or became bushrangers and went to the gallows in due course.

My mother, who was a gentle, tender-hearted woman, and seemed to live and move and have her being only for the purpose of making happy those around her, was, being English-born (she was of a Devonshire family), a constant church-goer, not for the sake of appearances, for her intelligence was too great for her to be bound by such a shallow reason, but because she was a simple, good and pure-minded woman, and sought by her example to make a protest against the scandalous and degraded lives led by many of the soldier officers and officials with whom she and her children were brought in almost daily contact, for my father, being an all too generous man, kept open house. But although she was always sweet-tempered and sometimes merry with the hard-drinking old Peninsular veterans, and the noisy and swaggering subalterns of the ill-famed 102nd Regiment (or New South Wales Corps), she always shuddered and looked pale and ill at ease when she saw among my father's guests the coarse, stern face of the minister, and her dislike of the clergyman was shared by all we children, especially by my elder brother Harry (then sixteen years of age), who called him 'the flogging parson' and the 'Reverend Diabolical Howl.' This latter nickname stuck, and greatly tickled Major Trenton, who repeated it to the other officers, and one day young Mr Moore of the 102nd, who was clever at such things, made a sketch of the cleric as he appeared when preaching, which set them all a-laughing immoderately.

'God alive!' cried old Major Trenton, holding the picture in his left hand, and bringing down his right upon the table with a thump that set all the glasses jingling, 'tis a perfect likeness of him, and yet, Moore, if ye had but given him a judge's wig and robes instead of a cassock, he would be the double of damned old hanging Norbury up there,' pointing to the picture of an Irish judge which hung on the wall. 'Come,' he added, 'Mrs Egerton must see this. I know our hostess loves the gentle parson.'

So three or four of them, still laughing boisterously, left the table to look for my mother, whom they found sitting on the latticed-in verandah, which on hot summer days was used as a drawing-

room. She, too, laughed heartily at the sketch, and said 'twas wonderfully drawn, and then my brother Harry asked Mr Moore to give it to him. This the young lieutenant did, though my mother begged him to destroy it, lest Mr Sampson should hear of the matter and take offence. But my brother promised her not to let it go out of his keeping, and there the thing ended—so we thought.

Yet, in some way, my mother's convict and free servants came to hear of the picture—they had already bandied about the parson's nickname—and every one of them, on some cunning excuse, had come to my brother's room and laughed at the drawing; and very often when they saw the clergyman riding past the house, attended by his convict orderly, they would say, with an added curse, 'There goes "Diabolical Howl,"' for they all hated the man, because, being a magistrate as well as a minister, he had sentenced many a prisoner to a dreadful flogging and had watched it being administered.

But perhaps it was not altogether on account of the floggings in which he so believed for which he was so detested—for floggings were common enough for even small breaches of the regulations of the System—but for the spiritual admonition with which he dosed them afterwards, while their backs were still black and bloody from the cat. Once, when an old convict named Callaghan was detected stealing some sugar belonging to one of the pilot boat's crew, my mother went to Dr Parsons, who, with the Reverend Mr Sampson, was to hear the charge against Callaghan on the following morning, and begged him not to have the man flogged; and Tom King, the man from whom the sugar was stolen, went with her and joined his pleadings to hers.

'Now, come, doctor,' said my mother, placing her hand on the old officer's arm and smiling into his face, 'you *must* grant me this favour. The man is far too old to be flogged. And then he was a soldier himself once—he was a drummer boy, so he once told me, in the 4th Buffs.'

'The most rascally regiment in the service, madam. Every one of them deserved hanging. But,' and here his tone changed from good-humoured banter into sincerity, 'I honour you, Mrs Egerton, for your humanity. The man is over sixty, and I promise you that he shall not be flogged. Why, he is scarce recovered yet from the punishment inflicted on him for stealing Major Innes's goose. But yet he is a terrible old rascal.'

'Never mind that,' said my mother, laughing. 'Major Innes should keep his geese from straying about at night-time. And then, doctor, you must remember that poor Callaghan said that he mistook the bird for a pelican—it being dark when he killed it.'

'Ha, ha,' laughed the doctor, 'and no doubt Mr Patrick Callaghan only discovered his mistake when he was cooking his pelican, and noticed its remarkably short bill.'

My mother left, well pleased, but on the following morning, while we were at our mid-day meal, she was much distressed to hear that old Callaghan had received fifty lashes after all—the good doctor had been thrown from his horse and so much hurt that he was unable to attend the court, and another magistrate—a creature of Mr Sampson's—had taken his place. The news was brought to us by Thomas King, and my mother's pale face flushed with anger as, bidding King to go into the kitchen and get some dinner, she turned to my father (who took but little heed of such a simple thing as the flogging of a convict), and said hotly,—

'Tis shameful that such cruelty can be perpetrated! I shall write to the Governor himself—he is a just and humane man—oh, it is wicked, wicked,' and then she covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

My father was silent. He detested the parson most heartily, but was too cautious a man, in regard to his own interest, to give open expression to his opinions, so beyond muttering something to my brother Harry about Thomas King having no business to distress her, he was about to rise from the table, when a servant announced that the Reverend Mr Sampson wished to see him.

The mention of the clergyman's name seemed to transform my mother into another woman. Quickly, but gently, putting aside my sister Frances, whose loving arms were clasped around her waist, she rose, and fire flashed in her eyes as she said to the servant,—

‘Denham, tell Mr Sampson that I desire to speak with him as soon as he has finished his business with Mr Egerton.’

My father went out to the drawing-room, where the clergyman awaited him, and for the next ten minutes or so my mother walked quickly to and fro in the dining-room, bidding us remain seated, and in a harsh, unnatural tone to one so sweet and gentle, she told the servants who waited to withdraw.

‘Mr Sampson is at your service, madam,’ said Denham, opening the door.

‘Show him in here,’ said my mother, sharply, and her always pale face grew paler still.

The clergyman entered, and extended his fat, white hand to her; she drew back and bowed coldly.

‘I do not desire to shake hands with you, sir.’

Mr Sampson’s red face flushed purple.

‘I do not understand you, madam. Is this a jest—or do you forget who I am?’

‘I shall try to make you understand me, Mr Sampson, in as few words as possible. I do not jest, and I do not forget who you are. I have a request to make.’

‘Indeed! I feel honoured, madam,’ and the corners of the clergyman’s thick lips turned contemptuously down—‘and that is—?’

‘That you will cease your visits to this house. It would be painful indeed to me to receive you as a guest from this time forth, for this very day it is my intention to write to the Governor and acquaint him with the shocking act of cruelty committed this morning—’twas a shameful, cruel deed to flog an old man so cruelly.’

Mr Sampson’s face was now livid with the rage he could not suppress.

‘Beware, madam, of what you say or do. ’Tis a pretty example you set your children to thus insult a clergyman.’

My mother’s answer cut like a whip-lash. ‘A clergyman such as you, Mr Sampson, can inspire naught in their childish minds but fear and abhorrence,’ and then she pulled the bell cord so violently that not only Denham but my father entered as well.

‘Show Mr Sampson out,’ she said in accents of mingled anger and scorn, and then turning to the window nearest, she seemed to be gazing unconcernedly upon the blue expanse of ocean before her; but her little hands were clasped tightly together, and her whole frame trembled with excitement.

As soon as the clergyman had mounted his horse and ridden off, my father returned to the dining-room.

‘You have made a bitter enemy of a man who can do me much harm,’ he began; but something in my mother’s face made him cease from further reproaches, and he added lightly, that he hoped ‘twould soon blow over.

‘Charles,’ said my mother, who was now herself again, ‘it must *not* blow over. The Governor shall know of this man’s doings. And never again shall I or my children enter the church when he preaches. To-night, I suppose, he will visit that wretched old man—the victim of his brutality—and administer “spiritual admonition.” Come, children, let us go to the beach and forget that that dreadful man has been here.’

It was, I think, this practice of ‘administering admonition’ to convicts after he had had them sentenced to a severe flogging that first gave my mother such an utter abhorrence of the man, together with his habit of confining his sermons to the prisoners to the one subject—their own criminal natures and the terrors of hell-fire everlasting. Then, too, his voice was appalling to hear, for he had a way of suddenly dropping his harsh, metallic tones, and raising his voice to a howl, like to that of a hungry dingo.⁴

Often did I, when sitting in our great square pew in that dreadful, horrible church, press close to my mother’s side and bury my face in her dress, as he lashed himself into a fury and called down

⁴ The native dog of Australia, whose long, accentuated howl is most distressing to hear.

the vengeance of a wrathful God upon the rows of silent, wretched beings clad in yellow, who were seated on long stools in the back of the church, guarded by soldiers, who, with loaded muskets, were stationed in the gallery above. Some of the convicts, it was said, had sworn to murder him if an opportunity served, and this no doubt made him the more merciless and vindictive to any one of them who was so unfortunate as to be charged before him in his capacity of magistrate. By the Regulations he could not sit alone to deal out punishment, and sometimes had difficulty in finding a colleague, especially among the military men, who nearly always protested against his fondness for the cat; but there were always to be found, in the end, magistrates who would do anything to please him, for it was known that he had great influence with the Home Government, and was not chary of using it on behalf of those who truckled to him, if he so inclined; and, indeed, both Major Trenton and Dr Parsons said that he was a man with many good points, and could be, to those who pleased him, a good friend, as well as a bitter enemy to those who in any way crossed him. But they asserted that he should never have been appointed a magistrate in a colony where the penal laws gave such latitude to his violent temper and arbitrary disposition.

Early one morning in December, and three months after the drawing of the picture by Lieutenant Moore, my two brothers and myself set off on a fishing excursion to a tidal lagoon whose waters debouched into the Pacific, about fifteen miles southward from the little township. Behind us followed a young man named Walter Trenfield, who was one of my father's assigned servants, and an aboriginal named 'King Billy'; these two carried our provisions, cooking utensils and blankets, for we intended to camp out for two or three days.

A half-an-hour's walk over the slopes of the bluff brought us to the fringe of the dense coastal forest, through which our track lay for another two or three miles before we again came to open country. There was, however, a very good road, made by convict labour, through the scrub as far as it went; it ran almost along the very verge of the steep-to coast, and as we tramped over the rich red soil we had the bright blue sea beneath us on our left, and the dark and almost silent bush on our right. I say 'almost,' for although in these moist and sunless seaboard tracts of what we Australian-born people call bush, and English people would call wood or forest, there was no sound of human life, there was yet always to be heard the *thump, thump* of the frightened scrub wallaby, and now and again the harsh, shrieking note of the great white cockatoo, or the quick rush of a long-tailed iguana over the thick bed of leaves, as the timid reptile fled to the nearest tree, up whose rugged bole it crawled for security.

We had come some three or four miles upon our way, when we suddenly emerged from the darkness and stillness of the scrub out into the light of day and the bright sunshine, and heard the low murmur of the surf beating upon the rocks below. Here we sat down to rest awhile and feast our boyish eyes on the beauties of sea and shore and sky around us. A few hundred yards away from where we sat was a round, verdured cone called 'Little Nobby'; it rose steep-to from the sea to a height of about three hundred feet, and formed a very striking and distinct landmark upon that part of the coast—bold and rugged as it was—for a stretch of three score miles. Presently, as we lay upon the grass, looking out upon the sea, Walter Trenfield and the aboriginal joined us, and whilst they made a fire to boil a billy of tea, my brother Harry, hearing the call of a wonga pigeon, picked up his gun and went into the scrub to shoot it.

CHAPTER II

I must now relate something of the previous history of this young man Trenfield. He was a native of Bideford, in Devon—my mother's county—and had been a sailor. Some years before, he, with another young man named Thomas May, had been concerned in a mutiny on board a London whale-ship, the *Jason*, and both men were sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude, it being believed, though not proven, that either Trenfield or May had killed one of the officers with a blow of the fist. They were, with six of their shipmates, tried at the Old Bailey, and although a Quaker gentleman, a Mr Robert Bent, who had visited them in prison, gave a lawyer fifty guineas to defend them, the judge said that although the death of the officer could not be sheeted home to either of them, there was no doubt of their taking part in the mutiny—with which offence they were charged. After spending three months in one of the convict hulks they were sent out to Sydney in the *Breckenbridge* transport. But before they sailed they were several times visited by Mr Bent, who told them that he would always bear them in mind, and should endeavour to have their sentences reduced if he heard good word of their future conduct from his agent in Sydney; this Mr Bent was the owner of several of the Government transports, which, after discharging their cargo of convicts, would sail upon a whaling cruise to the South Seas. More than this, he said that he would give them berths on one of his vessels as soon as they regained their freedom, and that he had written to his agent to that effect.

It so happened that this agent, a Mr Thomas Campbell, was a friend of my father's, who also knew Mr Bent, and so when the *Breckenbridge* arrived at Sydney he succeeded in having Trenfield assigned to him, and Thomas May to a contractor who was building a bridge for the Government over a river in the vicinity of Bar Harbour.

The two young seamen were very much attached to each other, and their cheerful dispositions, good conduct and unceasing industry led to their being granted many privileges. Both my father and my mother had taken a strong liking to Trenfield; and so, too, had Ruth Kenna, a young free female servant of ours. As for we boys, we simply worshipped both Trenfield and May as heroes who had sailed in the far South Seas and harpooned and killed the mighty sperm whale, and had fought with the wild and naked savages of the Pacific Isles.

Ruth Kenna was the daughter of a small farmer in the district, who had been emancipated by the good Governor. He was a widower, and a rough, taciturn man, but passionately devoted to Ruth, who was his only child. He had been transported for having taken part in the disastrous Irish rebellion of '98, and his young wife had followed him to share his exile. The terrors and hardships of the long voyage out killed her, for she died almost as soon as she landed, without seeing her husband, and leaving her infant child to the kindly care of the officers of the detachment of the regiment which had come out in the same ship. By them the infant girl had been placed in the charge of a respectable female convict, who, at my mother's expense, had kept her till she was ten years of age. Then she came to us as a servant, and had remained ever since.

Very often my father—though he pretended, as became his official position in a Crown Colony, to have a great dislike to Irish Roman Catholics—would allow we boys to go to Patrick Kenna's farm to shoot native bears and opossums, which were very plentiful thereabout, for the land was very thickly timbered with blue gum, tallow-wood and native apple. The house itself stood on the margin of a small tidal creek, whose shallow waters teemed with fish of all descriptions, and in the winter Kenna would catch great numbers of whiting, bream and sea mullet, which he salted and dried and sold to the settlers who lived inland. He lived quite alone, except from Saturday morning till Sunday morning, when Ruth stayed with him and straightened up the rough house. Sometimes Ruth would persuade my mother to let my brother Will and myself stay with them for the night, and dearly did we love going; for her father, though a silent, cold-mannered man to most people, was always different

to any one of us Egertons, and never even grumbled when we got into mischief, though he pretended to be very angry. Once, indeed, he had good cause to be—as I shall relate.

One Saturday evening, after we had finished our supper, Patrick Kenna found that he had run out of tobacco, and said that if we were not afraid of being left by ourselves for a few hours he would walk into Bar Harbour and buy some before the store closed, returning before midnight. Of course we did not mind, and in a few minutes Ruth's father set out, accompanied by 'King Billy' and one or two other black-fellows who were in hopes of selling some wild honey for a bottle or two of rum. We watched them disappear into the darkness of the forest, and then, as the night was suitable, my brother Will proposed that we should all go down to the creek and fish for black bream.

'The tide is coming in, Ruth,' he said gleefully, 'and we'll have fine sport. I'll go on first and light a fire on the bank.'

Presently, as Ruth and I were getting ready our lines, he dashed into the house again, panting with excitement.

'Never mind the lines. Oh, I have glorious news! The salmon are coming in, in swarms, and the water is alive with them! Ruth, let us get the net and put it right across the creek as soon as it is slack water. 'Twill be glorious.'

Now, we knew that the sea salmon had been seen out at sea a few days before, but it was yet thought to be too soon for their vast droves to enter the rivers and lagoons. But Will was quite right, for when we dragged down the heavy net we found that the water, which half an hour before, though under the light of myriad stars, had been black and silent, was now a living sheet of phosphorescent light, caused by the passage up the creek of countless thousands of agitated fish, driven in by hundreds of porpoises and savage, grey ocean-haunting sharks, whose murderous forms we could see darting to and fro just outside the shallow bar, charging into and devouring the helpless, compact masses of salmon, whose very numbers prevented them from escaping; for serried legion after legion from the sea swam swiftly in to the narrow passage and pressed upon those which were seeking to force their way up to the shallow, muddy waters five miles beyond—where alone lay safety from the tigers of the sea.

Ruth Kenna, as wild with excitement as my brother and myself, took up one pole of the net and sprang into the water, leaving Will and I to pay out on our side. She was a tall, strong girl, but what with the force of the inward current and the mad press of the terrified salmon, she could barely reach the sand-spit on the other shore, though the passage was not fifty feet across. But she managed to struggle ashore and secure her end of the net by jamming the pole between some logs of driftwood which lay upon the sand. Then, with a loud, merry laugh, she bade me run up to the house and bring her a petticoat and bodice, and leaping into the water she swam across again and helped Will to properly secure his end of the net to the bole of a tea tree.

Old as I am now, the memory of that happy, happy night lives with me yet. By the light of a huge fire of logs we sat and watched the net, which, as the tide ebbed, curved outward to the sea, though the salmon without still tried to force a passage into the creek, and the ravening sharks outside the deep water of the bar rushed through and through their close-packed ranks and gorged themselves till they rolled about, with distended bellies, as if they were water-logged baulks of timber.

As we sat by the fire, waiting for the tide to run out, we heard the dogs barking and knew that Patrick Kenna had returned. Presently we heard him walking down towards us, and at the same moment Ruth uttered an exclamation of terror and pointed to the water.

'Oh, look! look! There are a lot of sharks inside, coming down the creek. Quick! let this end of the net go, or they will be caught in it and tear it to pieces!'

Her father was alive to the danger. Springing before us, he cut the end of the line fastened to the tea-tree; but he was too late, for before the net had tailed out to the current four or five sharks had dashed into it and entangled themselves in its meshes, and in ten minutes the net was utterly ruined,

for although the sharks could not use their teeth, the great weight of their gorged bodies and their furious struggles soon tore the bight of it to shreds.

Kenna watched the destruction of the net in silence. As he stood in the light of the fire, his dark, rugged face showed no sign of the anger that must have burned within him at our thoughtless conduct.

‘Ye might have waited till I was back, Ruth,’ he said quietly; ‘there’s as good a net as was ever made gone to ruin. And sure ‘twas a mad thing for ye to do when th’ ravening sharks were so plentiful.’

Of course my father and mother were very angry with us, and sent Kenna five pounds to partly pay for the damage done. He sent it back by Ruth, and said that he would be a poor creature to take it, for the mishap was caused by Ruth’s folly, and that we boys were in no way to blame.

Almost every alternate evening Tom May would come to our house, and go to Walter Trenfield’s quarters, which were in a large airy loft over our stable, and the two young men would dress and sew the skins of the wallabies and ‘possums which my brothers had shot. My mother never objected to us staying with them till about ten o’clock, and Ruth, too, often came and made coffee for us all. Both May and Trenfield always behaved well and soberly, and although they had been whale-ship sailors they were always very careful in their language when we were with them. Some time before my mother’s angry interview with Mr Sampson she had mentioned, in his hearing, to Major Trenton’s wife, that her boys were greatly attached to the two young men, whose stories of their former sea life were very exciting, and so forth, whereupon the clergyman said sourly that both were dangerous villains who should not be trusted, and she would do well to prevent the further intercourse of her children with such rascals.

My mother bowed stiffly to him, and said gently that she thought he was mistaken greatly in their characters; also she was well able to look after her children’s morals; but Mrs Trenton, a sharp-tongued old Irishwoman, who hated the parson and loved my mother, spoke out pretty plainly.

‘No one but a clergyman would make such a rude speech to a lady, sir. A man who *called* himself a gentleman would be made to account for his lack of manners.’

One Saturday afternoon, as Walter Trenfield and Ruth were driving the cows down to the creek to drink, and Will and I were idling about on the seaward hill, we saw Patrick Kenna ride up to the house, dismount and knock. He only remained indoors a few minutes, and presently we saw him galloping towards Trenfield and Ruth, with whom he stayed talking for even a still shorter time; then, without taking any notice of us—which was most unusual for him—he put spurs to his horse and rode straight for the scrub, towards his home.

‘There is something the matter,’ said Will. ‘See, there is Walter running up to the house again. Come, let us see what it is.’

We ran home, and entering by the garden gate saw that Walter was talking to my mother on the back verandah. She seemed very troubled and almost on the verge of crying, and we soon heard the news, which was bad enough. Thomas May had been given a hundred lashes and had taken to the bush.

It appeared that May, whom we had not seen for one or two weeks, had been working under an overseer named Cross, at a place about ten miles from the town. (This man Cross was of a notoriously savage disposition, and had himself been a convict in Van Diemen’s Land, but had received a pardon for having shot and killed a bushranger there.)

May, with the rest of his gang, was felling timber, when a heavy chip flew from the tallow-wood tree upon which he was working, and struck the overseer in the face. Cross at once flew into a violent passion, and with much foul language accused poor May of having thrown the chip at him. This the young fellow warmly denied, whereupon Cross, taking his pistol out of his belt, struck the sailor on the mouth with the butt. In an instant May returned the blow by knocking the overseer down, and was then seized by two of his fellow-convicts. He was ironed and taken into town, and on the following morning was brought before Mr Sampson and another magistrate. It was no use of his pleading provocation, he received his flogging within a few hours. Towards daylight he crept out of

his hut, broke into his master's storeroom, and took a musket, powder and ball, and as much food as he could carry, telling a fellow-prisoner that he would perish in the bush rather than be taken alive.

On the fifth night after his escape, and whilst the constables were scouring the country in search of him, he came to Patrick Kenna's house. The night was very dark and the rain descending in torrents; so, there being no fear of intruders, Kenna barred his door and made the poor fellow comfortable by giving him a change of clothes, a good meal and some tobacco to smoke. Tom inquired very eagerly after Walter, and sent him a long message, and then told Kenna some startling news.

Two days after he had absconded, and when he was quite thirty miles distant from Bar Harbour, he saw smoke arising from a dense scrub. Creeping along on his hands and knees he saw two men—escaped convicts like himself—engaged in skinning a wallaby. He at once made himself known to them and was welcomed. After a meal from the wallaby, the two men asked him if he would join them in a plan they had of getting away from the country; he was just the man, they said, being a sailor, who could bring the attempt to a successful issue. Then they told him that, many weeks previously, they had found a whale-boat lying capsized on the beach some miles away, and that she was perfectly sound. By great labour they had succeeded in dragging her up into the margin of the scrub on the beach, where they had turned her over and covered her carefully with dead branches. A further search along the beach had resulted in their finding an oar and one of the line tubs,⁵ but that was all.

Of course poor Tom May was greatly taken with this, and said that he would join them, and that he thought Walter Trenfield would come as well. He went with the men to look at the boat, and found her just as they had said—almost new and quite watertight. He agreed to return to within a safe distance of Bar Harbour, and, through Patrick Kenna, let Trenfield know of the discovery of the boat and get him to help them to fit her out properly. Oars and a mast they could easily make, had they the tools, and a sail could also be obtained through either Ruth or her father, who could get them enough coarse calico for the purpose.

Kenna promised to help, although he told Tom he should try to dissuade Walter from joining in the enterprise. Just before daylight May bid Kenna good-bye, as he was anxious to return to the other two convicts and tell them that they had friends who would help them. Before he left, however, he arranged with Kenna that the latter should bring the required articles one by one—especially two breakers of water—to the foot of Little Nobby's and hide them in the scrub at the spot agreed upon. Then, when all was ready and a dark night favoured, May and the other two men were to launch the boat and make their way with all speed down the coast to Little Nobby's—nearly twenty miles distant from where the boat was hidden—take on board the water and provisions and put to sea; it being May's intention, whether Trenfield joined him or not, to make to the northward for Timor in the East Indies. Then, with a warm hand-grasp, they parted; and never again was Thomas May seen alive.

On the following morning Kenna contrived to see Walter and tell him that his former shipmate was safe, and what was afoot. Of course Walter was overjoyed to learn that he (Tom) had such a means of escape offering, and at once announced his intention of falling in with the enterprise; but Patrick Kenna spoke very strongly against his doing so, and Ruth, too, came to her father's aid. It was, they said, foolish of him to link himself with these desperate men, every one of whom had a price upon his head, whereas he, Walter, stood in good chance of receiving his pardon at any moment. Why should he sacrifice himself and break Ruth's heart for the sake of his friend?

So, finally, overcome by their arguments, he yielded, saying, however, that he felt he was acting a coward's part, and begged of Kenna to arrange a farewell meeting between Tom and himself. This, wisely enough, Kenna refused to do, but said he would do anything else to make their separation easier. So Trenfield wrote his old comrade a letter of farewell, and, taking a canvas bag, he filled it with all sorts of articles likely to be useful on a long boat voyage. Kenna took the bag, together with

⁵ English whale-ship boats generally used two line tub's— American only one. No doubt this boat was lost from an English whaler, the *Britannia*, then on the coast.

material for a sail, away with him at night and placed it in the spot agreed upon with May. He had already given Tom a tomahawk and an adze with which to make some oars and a mast.

On the fourth night after his visit to Kenna's house, Tom May again came through the bush, and went to Little Nobby's, for when Ruth's father went to the hiding-place in the morning with a breaker of water and a large bundle of dried fish, he found that the bag and the sail-cloth were gone, and on a small piece of white driftwood which lay on the ground these words were written in charcoal:—

'Sunday, Midnight?'

By this Kenna knew that the three men meant to come for the provisions and water at the time mentioned. It was then Friday, and he had much to do to get all in readiness; for Little Nobby's was quite six miles distant from his house, and he could only make his journeys to and fro with great secrecy, for the constables were still searching the coastal region for May. But, aided by Billy, the aboriginal, he managed to have everything in readiness early on Sunday night. He afterwards told my mother that besides the two breakers of water, each holding ten gallons, he had provided four gallons of rum, a hundredweight each of salted meat and dried fish, tobacco and pipes, fishing tackle, two muskets, and plenty of powder and bullets. The place selected for the landing of the boat was an excellent one; for on one side of Little Nobby's was a little, narrow bay running in between high cliffs of black trap rock, which broke the force of the ocean swell entirely. Then, too, the place was very lonely and seldom visited, for the main road lay nearly two miles back beyond the cliffs.

Whether my mother actually knew of all that was going on I do not know; but I do know that about this time she seemed paler than ever, and we frequently saw her and Ruth talking earnestly together; and Ruth and Walter, too, were always whispering to each other.

Sunday came, and as my mother, since her quarrel with the Reverend Mr Sampson over the flogging of old Callaghan, did not now go to church, we all, except my father, who was still on friendly terms with the clergyman, remained at home, my mother herself conducting a short service in the dining-room, at which all the servants, free and bond, attended. In the afternoon Major Trenton, Captain Crozier and some other soldier officers rode up, as was customary with them on Sundays, and Ruth and Denham brought them brandy and water on the front verandah, where they awaited my mother and sisters.

'Harry, you young rascal,' said Major Trenton, presently to my eldest brother, 'what did you do with Mr Moore's picture of the parson, eh?'

'It was stolen from me, sir,' he answered, laughing, 'about three or four months ago.'

'Indeed,' said the major; 'then the thief has principles, and will doubtless send it back to you, for he has made a score of copies of it, and they are all over the district. Why, the rascal, whoever he is, nailed one to the door of the Commissariat Store not long ago, and the first person to see it was Mr Sampson himself. He is mightily wroth about it, I can tell ye, and somehow suspects that the picture came from someone in this house, and told your father that these copies were given about by your man Trenfield. So just ye give a hint to the fellow, and tell him that if the parson gets a chance to tickle his back, faith he'll do it.'

'I am sure, sir, that Walter did not take the picture,' said my brother. 'It was nailed up over my bed and one day I missed it. I thought that my mother had destroyed or taken it away. But she had not, and I cannot account for its disappearance.'

Now this was hardly true, for, from something they had heard from Ruth, both Harry and my sister Frances thought that Thomas May had taken away the caricature, intending to replace it.

'Well, never mind, my lad,' said Major Trenton, laughing, 'tis a monstrous fine joke, anyway, and, faith, I sent one of the copies to the Governor himself. 'Twill amuse him hugely.'

Presently my mother and my two sisters joined the group on the verandah, and as they were all talking and laughing together, Ruth Kenna came to my mother and said that her father had just come with a basket of fresh fish and would like to see her for a minute. I, being the youngest boy of the family, and over-fond—so my brothers said—of hanging on to mammy's apron-strings, as well as

being anxious to see the fish, followed her out on to the back verandah, where black-browed, dark-faced Patrick Kenna awaited her.

‘Tis a fine dark night coming on, ma’am,’ he said in a low voice. ‘The wind is north-east and ‘twill hould well till daylight. Then ‘twill come away from the south-east, sure enough. They should be there long before midnight and out of sight of land before the dawn.’

‘Yes, yes, Patrick,’ said my mother, hurriedly. ‘I shall pray to-night to God for those in peril on the sea; and to forgive us for any wrong we may have done in this matter.’

‘No harm can iver come to any wan in this house,’ said the man, earnestly, raising her hand to his lips, ‘for the blessin’ av God an’ the Holy Virgin is upon it.’

My mother pressed his hand. ‘Good-bye, Patrick. I do hope all may go well;’ and with this she went away.

Kenna raised his hat and turned to go, when Walter Trenfield came to the foot of the verandah steps and stopped him.

‘Let me come with you,’ he said, ‘and bid Tom good-bye.’

‘No,’ answered Kenna, roughly, ‘neither you nor I nor any wan else must go near Nobby’s to-night; matthers are goin’ well enough, an’ no folly of yours shall bring destruction upon them. As it is, the constables suspect me, and are now watching my house.’

Then, mounting his horse again, he rode leisurely away over the brow of the hill towards the scrub, through which his road lay.

Both Walter and Ruth knew that unless the night was very clear there was no chance of even the lookout man on the pilot station seeing a small boat passing along to the southward; but nevertheless they went up to the pilot station about ten o’clock, when they thought that Tom May and his companions would be passing Bar Harbour on their way to Little Nobby’s. They stayed on the headland for nearly an hour, talking to Tom King and the look-out man, and then came home, feeling satisfied that if the three men had succeeded in launching the boat safely, they had passed Bar Harbour about eleven o’clock and would reach Nobby’s at or before midnight.

Soon after breakfast next morning, Patrick Kenna, under pretence of speaking to my mother about a strayed heifer of ours, came into the kitchen, and told Ruth that all was well; he had been to Little Nobby’s at daylight and found that everything was gone and the boat was nowhere to be discerned.

For quite another two or three weeks after this the constables pursued their search after Thomas May, much to the amusement of Ruth and Patrick Kenna, especially as the latter, with ‘King Billy’ and another aboriginal, were officially employed by my father at ten shillings *per diem* to discover the absconder—Billy, who seemed to be most anxious to get the reward of five pounds, leading the constables all over the country and eating more than three men’s rations daily. At last the chase was abandoned, and my father wrote officially to Sydney and said that ‘Thomas May, No. 3614, *Breckenbridge*,’ was supposed to have either died of starvation in the bush or have been killed by the natives. My mother, of course, thought she knew better.

And so the matter was forgotten by everyone but us who had known and cared for the good-natured, high-spirited and warm-hearted young sailor; and as the months went by, Walter Trenfield and my mother both looked forward to receiving a letter from Tom May, telling them that he and his companions had reached some port in the Dutch East Indies in safety. For not only was the boat well found, but they had plenty of provisions, and Tom May was a thorough seaman; and besides that, my mother had often told us the story of the convict William Bryant, who had escaped from Sydney Harbour in Governor Phillip’s time, and in an open boat, with four other men and his wife and two infant children, succeeded in reaching Timor, after a voyage of three thousand miles.⁶

⁶ Publisher’s Note.—The strange but true story of the Bryants is told in a volume entitled *A First Fleet Family*. (Louis Becke and Walter Jeffery. London: T. Fisher Unwin. 1896.)

But no letter came until two long years had passed.

Ruth Kenna, at the time of my story, though not yet seventeen years of age, was a tall, powerful girl, and was known as the best horsewoman in all the country around. She was a happy, good-natured sort of a wench, with a heart filled with sunshine and love and truth and honesty; though Mr Sampson once told my father that she was a 'dangerous Papist,' and the child of a convicted rebel, and as such should have no place in a Protestant family. This so angered my mother that she wrote the clergyman a very sharp letter and said she would take it as a favour if he would not interfere with her servants. This was a great thing for her to do; and my father said 'twas most indiscreet. But mother only smiled and said that although she was sorry Ruth was a Papist, she (Ruth) was a good, honest girl, and that her father was a good, honest man, and that if Mr Sampson was wise he would not come near Ruth, who, being a free woman, had said she would throw him down the garden well. At this time Ruth was looking forward to the day of her marriage with Trenfield, who, through my father's influence with the Governor, was expecting to be pardoned.

But now I am forging ahead too fast, and must go back to where we boys and Walter Trenfield were lying on the grassy bluff overlooking Little Nobby's awaiting the return of my brother Harry.

CHAPTER III

‘Walter,’ said Harry, throwing down the pigeon which he had shot, and pointing to Little Nobby’s, ‘this is the lowest tide I have ever seen. Look, the topmost fringe of kelp on the rocks is quite dry, and six feet above the water, and there is no surf. Let’s swim across the gut into the cave.’

‘As you please, sir,’ the young man answered, his sun-tanned face lighting up with pleasure; ‘the wind is westerly, and the water very clear; so, if there are any sharks about we can easily see them.’

So presently down we trooped, and, clambering over the jagged pinnacles of rock, soon reached the seaward face of Little Nobby’s. The cave of which my brother had spoken was in the very centre of the cone, and the only known way of access to it was by swimming across the narrow gut or channel which cleft in twain the base of the hill. A boat, in calm weather, might have easily rowed up to the mouth of the cave, but only during a very low tide. No one, so far, had attempted this, and ‘King Billy,’ when he saw my brother and Trenfield strip and jump into the water, seemed much disturbed. The cave, he said, was the home of a ‘debbil-debbil,’ and ‘twas dangerous for any human being to enter it. But Harry and Trenfield had already swum across, clambered up the kelp-covered ledge of the cave and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

For nearly ten minutes, or perhaps a quarter of an hour, Will and I waited impatiently for their return, grumbling at not being allowed to go with them, for the sea was as smooth as a mountain lake, and the water so clear that the smallest pebble could be discerned lying upon the white sandy bottom five fathoms below.

Said Will presently, ‘I don’t believe there’s a shark within a mile; do you?’

‘No,’ I answered, looking longingly at the crystal water and then at the black mouth of the cavern, which neither Will nor I had ever entered.

‘Then come on,’ said Will, quickly, and in a few seconds we were out of our clothes, and paying no heed to ‘King Billy’s’ exclamations of terror we dropped quietly into the water and swam across, telling him to stay where he was and keep a look-out for sharks.

A few strokes brought us safely over, and then, as we climbed up and stood on the cold rocky floor of the dark cave, our hearts began to fail us somewhat—the place was so grim, silent and terrifying.

Feeling our way carefully along, however, we advanced for some ten or twelve yards and then stopped, for though we heard the voices, we could see the figures of Harry and Trenfield but dimly.

‘Where are you?’ cried Will.

‘Over here,’ answered my brother; ‘you can come along if you like. We think that there’s a way of getting out by climbing up—we can see the trees on the back of the hill.’

This was a discovery indeed, and Will and I, as we made our way to where they sat, found the darkness decreasing at every step, and when we reached them, we could see about us quite plainly, for thin, dimmed shafts of sunlight penetrated the cavern from above by a narrow cleft, through which we could see not only the dark foliage of the trees, whose branches overhung the place, but a strip of blue sky.

‘Listen!’ said Will.

Somewhere near a ‘butcher’ bird was calling to its mate, who quickly answered, and then the pair whistled sweetly and joyously together; and when they ceased a bell-bird sounded his clear, resonant note thrice—then silence.

Presently Walter and Harry set about to attempt an ascent, laughing heartily at the thought of how we should startle poor ‘King Billy’ by reappearing out of the bowels of the earth, instead of by the way we had left him.

The top of the cleft was not more than thirty feet from the floor of the cave, and its very narrowness reduced the difficulty of climbing up its rugged sides, which were composed of pieces of

rock embedded in earth. In the centre, however, the walls approached so closely to each other about half way down—within a few inches, in fact—that they were blocked up with what appeared to be a mass of decaying branches, fallen leaves and such *débris*.

Walter Trenfield went first, then Will, and Harry and I followed. We found it much easier working our way up than we anticipated, for the jutting points of rock gave us a good foothold, and the roots of trees, living and dead, helped us greatly, for some of these grew across from one side of the cleft to the other, and afforded us ladder-like steps.

Walter had nearly reached the mouth of the chasm, when Will, who was ascending more leisurely and carefully behind him, put his foot upon the thick mass of leaves and rotting wood which blocked up its centre, and, finding it was firm, sat down upon it to rest himself. Presently, to have some amusement at the expense of Harry and myself, who were directly beneath him, he began to shower armfuls of dead leaves upon us—then suddenly he uttered a cry of terror, sprang to his feet, and clambered quickly to the top, where Trenfield seized him just as he was about to fall.

Thinking that he had been frightened, or perhaps bitten by a black snake or a death-adder, Harry and I climbed up after him as quickly as possible, little heeding the cuts and bruises we inflicted upon our naked bodies. As soon as we reached the ledge and flung ourselves, panting and somewhat terrified, on the thick bed of leaves which covered the ground like a carpet, we saw Walter Trenfield bending his tall, naked figure over Will, who was crouched up in a heap and trying, through his sobs of terror, to tell what it was that he had seen.

‘There is a dead man down there,’ he gasped, ‘a dead man! When I took up the last armful of leaves to throw down on Tom and Harry, I saw a dreadful face beneath... it was almost a skull, but there is some flesh on the face... and oh, Walter! *it has red hair like Tom May’s.*’ Then, overcome by the terror of that which he had seen, he sobbed afresh.

‘Come,’ sir,’ said Trenfield to my eldest brother, ‘we must go down and look.’

Leaning over the brink of the narrow cleft, I watched Harry and Trenfield descend, throw down the rotting leaves and timber which had accumulated in the centre; and then I saw a dreadful sight—a shrunken, awful face, with white, gleaming teeth, and two fleshless hands lying together upon an all but skeleton chest. The rest of the body, except one leg, which from the knee downwards was partly raised and showed a bone protruding from a rough raw-hide boot, was mercifully concealed from our sight by the coarse jumper and grey canvas trousers of a convict.

Presently Walter looked up, and cried out in a strange, hoarse voice,—

‘Go away, Master Tom, you must not look. Do you and Master Will wait for us on the rocks, but first tell Billy to come here with our clothes.’

Will and I at once obeyed, glad to get away, and hurrying round the base of the hill we returned to ‘King Billy,’ who, poor simple savage, had given us up for lost, and was crouched up in a heap on the rocks, making a low whining noise like the cry of a very young puppy. He did truly dance for joy when he heard our voices, and then at once, without asking us what had happened, went off to Walter and Harry, taking their clothes with him.

Will and I dressed ourselves, and then we sat down to wait.

‘Tom,’ said Will, who had now recovered his composure, ‘I am sure it is poor Tom May who is lying there. Do you remember a red silk handkerchief which mother gave him last Christmas Day? Well, there is one exactly like it round *its* neck. I was too frightened to look closer, but Tom always wore his handkerchief round his neck in a sailor’s knot. And then, too,’ and here Will’s eyes filled with tears and he began to sob, ‘*it* had bright red hair... it had nearly all fallen off, and...’

‘Oh, Will,’ I cried, ‘don’t tell me any more! I feel so sick.’

Nearly half an hour passed, and then we saw Harry and Trenfield, holding each other’s hand like two children, coming towards us. They sat down near us, and then the young convict placed his big, brown hands over his face, and heavy sobs broke from his broad chest.

‘Oh, God! Master Harry!’ he cried, ‘is there no justice in the world? To die there, in that awful place, like a rat in a trap! oh, it is dreadful, dreadful! And then I thought that he was long ago far away from here—a free man.’

‘Do you think those two other men threw him down there, Walter?’ asked my eldest brother, almost in a whisper.

‘No, sir,’ he replied, catching his breath. ‘Why should they murder the man who alone was capable of taking the boat upon such a long voyage? This is what I think, sir. Poor Tom, instead of coming down in the boat with the other two, left them on Saturday and walked here so that he might light a fire on the top of Little Nobby’s on Sunday night to guide them to the place. He told Ruth’s father that he thought he should do this in case the night turned out very dark. And Billy says that a fire was made, and that when poor Tom was descending the hill to meet the boat he fell into the cleft and got jammed between the rocky walls.’

‘But would not the two other men make a search for him?’

‘God knows, sir! We shall never know. They may have thought that Tom had been captured, and that the fire had been lit by Ruth’s father. But I think that Billy is right, and that poor Tom, after lighting the fire, was coming down the hill to meet the boat, when in the darkness he wandered off the track and stepped into the crack at the widest part of its mouth, which is right above where we found him. He must have fallen upon his back and become so tightly wedged in in that awful place that he could not use his arms to free himself. And then, sir, even if he had not been stunned, his cries could not have been heard by the other two men, who, unless they purposely made a search, would not have had any reason to go within two hundred yards of the spot where he fell.’

Harry shuddered, and then for some time no one of us spoke. ‘King Billy’ had been sent off to tell my father of the discovery of the body, or rather skeleton, which Walter and Harry had at first attempted to free from the walls of the chasm, but were too overcome to complete the task.

Together we slowly ascended the bluff, and there a surprise awaited us; for, sitting on their horses, on the brow of the hill, were the dreaded minister and his convict orderly. They had no doubt seen our bags and guns lying on the grass, and had ridden to the crest of the bluff to discover our whereabouts.

Mr Sampson eyed us all very sourly, and scarcely deigned to respond to our salutations, as one by one we walked past him and busied ourselves in silence over our impedimenta. No doubt he saw that both Harry and Walter were very pale, and that Will and I had not yet dried our tears.

‘Come here, boys,’ he said in his harsh, pompous tones. ‘What, may I ask, is the cause of this grief which seems to be shared by all alike?’ Then, without waiting for an answer, his glance fell upon Walter Trenfield, who, after saluting him, had turned away, and with averted face was strapping some of our belongings together.

I saw the clergyman’s coarse red face, with its fat, terraced chins, grow purple with rage as I had seen it once before, and I instinctively drew back.

‘Ha!’ he said, and urging his horse forward, he bent down and touched the young convict on the shoulder with his whip. ‘Ha! look up, fellow. I want a word with you, sirrah.’

Trenfield, who was stooping at the moment, stood erect, and then, facing the parson, again raised his hand to his cap. His face was deadly pale, and his deep-set bright blue eyes seemed to have suddenly shrunk and drawn back, and his whole body was trembling.

‘Look at me, fellow,’ said Mr Sampson, for the second time.

‘I am looking at you, sir.’

The words came from between his white lips and set teeth in a low, hoarse whisper, and all the hatred in his heart seemed to go with them. The clergyman eyed him for a few seconds in silence, but the convict met his gaze unfalteringly.

‘So ‘tis to you, you scoundrel, that your ruffianly fellow-criminals are indebted for so much amusement at my expense! Tell me, you villain, where you got that picture, and who prompted you to display it? Answer me quickly, you unhanged rascal!’

Trenfield’s lips moved, but ere he could speak, my eldest brother stepped forward, bravely enough.

‘Indeed, sir, Trenfield had nothing to do with the picture. It was given to me, but by some mischance was lost or stolen. I am sure, sir, that Trenfield would not—’

‘Trenfield is a villain. How dare you, presumptuous boy, seek to excuse him! A good birching, for which you are not too old, would teach you that reverence and respect for a clergyman which your mother has so forgotten.’

Harry fired up quickly enough at the insulting words.

‘How dare you, sir, speak to me in this fashion? My father shall hear of this.’

‘Let *me* deal with him, the bloody-minded dog!’ said a voice.

It was that of Walter Trenfield, who, springing forward, presented my brother’s loaded fowling-piece at the minister’s head. ‘Listen to me, you beast in human form, you heartless fiend! I am going to send your poisonous soul to hell.’

He pulled the trigger, but the gun missed fire; then swiftly clubbing the weapon he brought it with terrific force against the clergyman’s chest and knocked him off the horse. The orderly at once turned, and fled as his master fell.

The Reverend Mr Sampson lay prone upon the sward, his once red face blanched to a deathly white, and over him, with grounded gun, stood the young convict.

My brother tried to take the weapon from him, but Trenfield tossed him aside with one hand as if he were a straw. Then for a minute he looked at the prostrate man in silence; once he raised the gun by the muzzle, then he threw it aside, and, kneeling beside the clergyman, placed his face close to his.

‘You dog, you dog, you damned dog! I could choke you now as you lie, you brute beast. But I will let you live, to go to hell in God’s own time, you cruel, flogging wretch! *You* murdered Thomas May—his rotting body is not a hundred yards away. May the stink of it reach the nostrils of Almighty God—and be in yours for ever!’

He rose quickly, took the saddle and bridle off the clergyman’s horse, and, striking the animal a sharp blow on the nose, sent it galloping away into the forest; then he returned and again stood over Mr Sampson, his face working with the violence of his passion.

‘Are you going to murder me?’ the minister asked gaspingly.

‘No,’ he replied savagely, kicking him again and again in the face, ‘but lie there, you bloody-minded swab, till I tell you you can go.’

And then, his passion spent, he turned to us with outstretched hand,—

‘God bless you all, young gentlemen! God bless you, Master Harry! and your good mother and Miss Frances and little Miss Olive. I am done for now. But tell Ruth that if I am taken I’ll die a man. And tell her, Master Harry, that—that—’

My brother grasped his trembling hand, as for a moment he stood, gun in hand, and swayed to and fro as if he were like to fall. Then he plunged into the forest.

One night, three weeks after this, and whilst Mr Sampson was recovering from his injuries, and a force of constables, with a black tracker, were scouring the country for Walter, my mother called we children to her bedroom. She had retired, but Ruth Kenna, with tears in her blue Irish eyes, stood beside the bed.

‘Quick, children,’ said my mother, in a whisper, ‘Ruth is going away. Quick, quick; kiss her goodbye.’

And then whilst we, wondering, put our arms around dear Ruth, my mother slipped out of bed, and taking some money out of a cabinet, put it into the girl’s hand, and said,—

‘Good-bye, Ruth. You’ve been an honest girl to us. May God bless and keep you always, my dear child, and do not fail to write.’

Next morning there was a great to-do, for Patrick Kenna’s house was found to be empty, and he and his daughter and Walter Trenfield were never seen again in our part. But away out on the horizon were the sails of a whale-ship which had been cruising about the coast for some days past; and though my mother kept her own counsel for a long year, we children soon knew that all three had escaped in the whaler, for my brother Harry had received a letter from Trenfield. It was handed to him by the aboriginal ‘King Billy,’ and contained only these words,—‘Good-bye, sir. Ruth and I and her father will be on the blue water before daylight.’

When two years or more had passed, my mother received a letter. It was written from Boston in America, and was signed ‘Ruth Trenfield.’

‘I am glad she and Walter are happy at last,’ said my mother, with the tears shining in her soft eyes.

A NORTH PACIFIC LAGOON ISLAND

Two degrees north of the Equator, and midway between the Hawaiian Islands and fair, green Tahiti, is the largest and most important of the many equatorial isolated lagoon islands which, from 10 deg. N. to 10 deg. S., are dispersed over 40 deg. of longitude. The original native name of this island has long been lost, and by that given to it by Captain Cook one hundred and twenty years ago it is now known to Pacific navigators—Christmas Island. Cook was probably the first European to visit and examine the place, though it had very likely been sighted by the Spaniards long before his time, in the days of the voyages of the yearly galleons between the Philippines and Mexico and Peru.

On the afternoon of December 24, 1777, Cook (in the *Resolution* and *Discovery*) discovered to leeward of the former ship a long, low, sandy island, which proved to be about ninety miles in circumference. It appeared to be an exceedingly barren-looking land, save on the south-west side, where grew a luxuriant grove of coco-palms. Here he brought his ships to an anchor, and partly to recuperate his crews, who were in ill health, and partly to observe an eclipse of the sun, he remained at the island some weeks. He soon discovered that the lagoon in the centre was of noble proportions, and that its waters teemed with an immense variety of fish and countless 'droves' of sharks. To-day it remains the same.

Fifty years passed ere this lonely atoll was visited by another ship, and then American and English whalers, or, as they were called in those days, 'South Seamen,' began to touch at the island, give their crews a few days' spell amid the grateful shade of the palm grove and load their boats to the gunwales with fat green turtle, turtle eggs, robber crabs, and sea-birds' eggs. From that time the place became well known to the three or four hundred of sperm whalers engaged in the fishery, and, later on, to the shark-catching vessels from the Hawaiian Islands. Then, sixteen years ago, Christmas Island was taken up by a London firm engaged in the South Sea Island trade under a lease from the Colonial Office; this firm at once sent there a number of native labourers from Manhiki, an island in the South Pacific. These, under the charge of a white man, were set to work planting coco-nuts and diving for pearl shell in the lagoon. At the present time, despite one or two severe droughts, the coco-nut plantations are thriving, and the lessees should in another few years reap their reward, and hold one of the richest possessions in the South Seas.

The island is of considerable extent, and though on the windward or eastern side its appearance is uninviting in the extreme, and the fierce oceanic currents that for ever sweep in mighty eddies around its shores render approach to it difficult and sometimes dangerous, it has yet afforded succour to many an exhausted and sea-worn shipwrecked crew who have reached it in boats. And, on the other hand, several fine ships, sailing quietly along at night time, unaware of the great ocean currents that are focussed about the terrible reefs encompassing the island, have crashed upon the jagged coral barrier and been smashed to pieces by the violence of the surf.

Scarcely discernible, from its extreme lowness, at a distance of more than eight miles from the ship's deck, its presence is made known hours before it is sighted by vast clouds of amphibious birds, most of which all day long hover about the sea in its vicinity, and return to their rookeries on the island at sunset. On one occasion, when the vessel in which I was then serving was quite twenty miles from the land, we were unable to hear ourselves speak, when, just before it became dark, the air was filled with the clamour of countless thousands of birds of aquatic habits that flew in and about our schooner's rigging. Some of these were what whalers call 'shoal birds,' 'wide-awakes,' 'molly-hawks,' 'whale birds' and 'mutton birds.' Among them were some hundreds of frigate birds, the *katafa* of the Ellice Islanders, and a few magnificently plum-aged fishers, called *kanapu* by the natives of Equatorial Polynesia.

Given a good breeze and plenty of daylight, the whale-ships of the olden days could stand round the western horn of the island, a projecting point rendered pleasingly conspicuous by the grove of

graceful coco-palms which Cook was so glad to observe so many years before, and then enter a deep bay on the north-west coast, where they obtained good anchorage in from fifteen to twenty fathoms of water of the most wonderful transparency, and within a mile of the vast stretches of white sandy beach that trend away for miles on either hand. And then the sailors, overjoyed at the delightful prospect of running about in the few and widely-apart palm groves, and inhaling the sweet, earthy smell of the thin but fertile soil, covered with its soft, thick bed of fallen leaves, would lower away the boats, and pulling with their united strength through the sweeping eddies of the dangerous passage, effect a landing on a beach of dazzling whites and situated in the inner south-west border of the wide lagoon.

On our first visit to the island, in 1872, we had some glorious fishing; and when we returned on board, under the rays of a moon that shone with strange, uncanny brilliancy, and revealed the coral bottom ten fathoms below, the scene presented from our decks was one of the greatest imaginable beauty, though the loneliness of the place and the absence of human life was somewhat depressing. We remained at the island for three days, and during our stay our crew of South Sea Islanders literally filled our decks with fish, turtle and birds' eggs. Curiously enough, in our scant library on board the little trading vessel I came across portion of a narrative of a voyage in a South Seaman, written by her surgeon, a Mr Bennett, in 1838,⁷ and our captain and myself were much interested in the accurate description he gave of Christmas Island and its huge rookeries of oceanic birds.

This is what he says: 'Here and there among the low thicket scrubs are vast rookeries of aquatic birds, whose clamour is deafening. They nest and incubate upon the ground, and show not the slightest fear of the approach of human visitors. Among the sooty terns, whose number it was impossible to estimate, were many hundreds of tropic birds and pure snow-white petrels.' (He no doubt imagined the pure snow-white petrels to be a distinct species—they were young tropic birds.) 'These latter, who flew with a gentle, flapping motion, would actually fly up to us and scan our countenances with an almost human expression of interest and curiosity.' (Darwin, in his account of another Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, also describes these gentle creatures as being of ethereal beauty.) 'Some, indeed, permitted themselves to be caught, and although their delicate, fragile forms quivered with fear when they came in contact with our hands, they would, when released, return to us again and again, as if seeking to solve the mystery of what strange beings were these that had invaded their retreat. In one rookery there were many varieties of these oceanic birds, and a species of booby that seems to be peculiar to Christmas Island. In size and colour they much resemble the ordinary gannet of our cold northern seas. Their plumage is of a wondrously bright snow white, with the exception of the primary and secondary feathers of the wings, and the *retrices* or tail feathers, which are of a glossy black. The skin of the cheeks and chin is devoid of feathers, and of a jet black colour, the beak a delicate yellow blue, the legs bright blue. The solicitude of the female birds of this species for their offspring was most interesting to witness. Their nests were of the rudest description, being merely circular heaps of sand raised in the open plain and exposed to the fury of storms. As we approached the nests the mother birds settled themselves down upon their single egg and screamed loudly, but would permit themselves to be lifted off, yet struggled violently in our hands to get back again. Although there were thousands of these nests within a radius of an acre, a brooding hen might easily have been passed unnoticed, for her white plumage corresponded so well with the hue of the coral sands that one was apt to kick against the nest were it not for the agonised, barking note of the poor mother. The male birds, however, of this species did not show any marital concern for their partners. They were usually seated near the nests, but at once took to flight upon our approach. Further on, among a thicket of scrubby vegetation, we found a rookery of many thousands of the superb red-tailed tropic bird (*Phaeton phoenicurus*), also engaged in incubation. Their nests were mere circular excavations in the sand, under the shade of the bushes of the thicket. Each nest contained an egg of pure white, dotted with delicate lilac spots, and in size rather larger and rounder than that of the

⁷ *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage round the Globe, from 1833 to 1836.* By F. D. Bennett.

domestic hen. The females, as well as the males, made no attempt to escape from their nests on our approach, whether they had or had not the care of eggs, and consequently several of our crew, with innate Polynesian vanity, soon caught a number, and plucking out the two long scarlet tail feathers placed them in their hat bands.

‘A hundred yards away from the rookery of the tropic birds was one of a colony of the snowy tern before mentioned. These gentle, black-eyed creatures do not even pretend to construct a nest, but simply deposit a solitary egg upon the bough of a tree (like the *gogo*, or whale bird). They select for this purpose a tree destitute of foliage, and a branch of horizontal growth. It is strange that, notwithstanding the exposed situation of these eggs, they are very difficult to find; and it was not until long after the solicitude of the parent birds informed us that their spot of incubation was near that we could solve the mystery which attended their nursery. Each egg is the size of a pigeon’s, and marked with either blood or chocolate-coloured splashes and spots of irregular shape. Considering the slenderness of the branches on which they are deposited, it is remarkable that the eggs (which appear to be at the mercy of every passing breeze) should yet retain their extraordinary position during incubation.’ (Any Pacific Islander could easily have explained this seeming mystery. The shell, when the egg is laid, is covered with a strong adhesive coating. I have often seen a single egg, laid upon a slender branch, swaying about in a strong trade wind, and yet remain firmly in its position.) ‘What may be the habits of the newly-hatched birds we had no opportunity of learning, as none of the latter came within our observation.

‘Small reef birds (tern) were present in prodigious numbers, skimming the waters of the coast with an erratic, rapid, but yet graceful flight, like that of the stormy petrel. At night they assembled in vast numbers on an islet in the lagoon, to roost on the trees. They are about the size of an Australian snipe, and their forms are models of elegance and beauty. Their plumage is in true slate colour, the secondary wings are white, and a narrow white zone surrounds each eye; their legs and feet are a pale blue, with white webs.

‘Every now and then as we, during our visit, walked along the snow-white beaches, great crowds of golden-winged plover and tiny snipe sprang skyward, and swept in graceful gyrations over the broad expanse of water, till they settled upon some sandy spit or spot of projecting reef; and, indeed, the immense concourse of frigate birds, boobies, terns, petrels and other aquatic denizens of the island filled us with boundless astonishment.

‘At night time there crept out from their lairs in the loose coral shingle that lined the scrub at high-water mark, incredible numbers of huge “land lobsters”—the “robber crab” of the Pacific Islands. They all crawled to within a few feet of the placid waters of the lagoon, where they remained motionless, as if awaiting some event—possibly to prey upon the smaller species of *crustaceæ* and turtle eggs.’

Christmas Island, in its structure and elevation, much resembles Palmerston Island, Arrecifos or Providence Island (the secret rendezvous of Captain ‘Bully’ Hayes), Brown’s Range, and other low-lying atolls of the North and South Pacific. The greater part of the interior of the island is, however, despite the vast number of coco-nuts planted upon it during the past ten years, still sadly deficient in cheerful vegetation.

The waters of the lagoon vary greatly in depth, but generally are shallow and much broken up by sandy spits, reefs and huge coral boulders which protrude at low water, and the surface is much subject to the action of the trade wind, which, when blowing strong, lashes them into a wild surf; and the low shores of the encircling islets, that form a continuous reef-connected chain, are rendered invisible from the opposite side by the smoky haze and spume which ascends in clouds from the breaking surf that rolls and thunders on the outer barrier reefs.

In the interior no fresh water is obtainable, although in the rainy season some of a brackish quality can be had by sinking shallow wells. This water rises and falls in the wells in unison with the tides. Here and there are very extensive swamps of sea-water, evaporated to a strong brine; the

margins of these are clothed with a fair growth of the pandanus or screw-pine palm, the fruit of which, when ripe, forms a nutritious and palatable food for the natives of the Equatorial Pacific Islands.

The island where Captain Cook set up his observatory is but a small strip of sandy soil, clothed with a few coco-palms, some screw-palms (pandanus), and a thick-matted carpet of a vine called *At* by the natives. The only quadrupeds are rats, and some huge land tortoises, similar to those of the Galapagos Islands. They are most hideous-looking creatures, and, being of nocturnal habits, like the great robber crab, are apt to produce a most terrifying impression upon the beholder, if met with in the loneliness of the night. The present human occupants of Christmas Island are, however, well supplied with pigs and poultry; and though this far-away dot of Britain's empire beyond the seas is scarcely known to the world, and visited but twice a year by a trading vessel from Sydney, they are happy and contented in their home in this lonely isle of the mid-Pacific.

BILGER, OF SYDNEY

A death in the family brought about my fatal acquaintance with Bilger. A few days after the funeral, as my sister and I sat talking on the verandah of our cottage (which overlooked the waters of Sydney Harbour) and listened to the pouring rain upon the shingled roof, we saw a man open the garden gate and come slowly up to the house. He carried an ancient umbrella, the tack lashings of which on one side had given way entirely, showing six bare ribs. As he walked up the path, his large, sodden boots made a nasty, squelching sound, and my sister, who has a large heart, at once said, 'Poor creature; I wonder who he is. I hope it isn't the coal man come for his money.'

He went round to the back door and, after letting himself drain off a bit, knocked gently and with exceeding diffidence.

I asked him his business. He said he wanted to see my wife.

'Not here. Gone away for a month.'

'Dear, dear, how sad! Broken down, no doubt, with a mother's grief. Is there any other lady in the family whom I could see?'

'What the deuce do you want?' I began angrily; then, as he raised his weak, watery eyes to mine, and I saw that his grey hairs were as wet as his boots, I relented. Perhaps he was someone who knew my wife or her people, and wanted to condole with her over the death of her baby. He looked sober enough, so, as he seemed much agitated, I asked him to sit down, and said I would send my sister to him. Then I went back to my pipe and chair. Ten minutes later my sister Kate came to me with her handkerchief to her eyes.

'Do go and see the old fellow. He has *such* a sympathetic nature. I'm sure I should have cried aloud had I stayed any longer. Anyone would think he had known poor little Teddie ever since he was born. I've asked Mary to make him a cup of tea.'

'Who is he?'

'I don't know his name, but he seems so sympathetic. And he says he should be so pleased if he might see you again for a few minutes. He says, too, that you have a good and kind face. I told him that you would be sure to take at least a dozen of those in cream and gold. There's nothing at all vulgar; quite the reverse.'

'What *are* you talking about, Kate? Who is this sodden old lunatic, and what on earth are you crying for?'

My sister nearly sobbed. 'I always thought that what you derisively termed "mortuary bards" were horrid people, but this old man has a beautiful nature. And he's very wet—and hungry too, I'm sure; and Mary looks at him as if he were a dog. Do try and help him. I think we might get one or two dozen cream and gold cards, and two dozen black-edged.'

And then he's a journalist, too. He's told me quite a sad little story of his life struggle, and the moment I told him you were on the *Evening News* he quite brightened up, and said he knew your name quite well.'

'Kate,' I said, 'I don't want to see the man. What the deuce does he want? If he is one of those loafing scoundrels of undertakers' and mortuary masons' touts, just send him about his business; give him a glass of whisky and tell Mary to clear him out.'

My sister said that to send an old man out in such weather was not like *me*. Surely I would at least speak a kind word to him.

In sheer desperation I went out to the man. He addressed me in husky tones, and said that he desired to express his deep sympathy with me in my affliction, also that he was 'a member of the Fourth Estate.' Seven years before he had edited the *Barangoora News*, but his determined opposition to a dishonest Government led to his ruin, and now—

'All right, old man; stow all that. What do you want?'

He looked at me reproachfully, and taking up a small leather bag, said that he represented Messrs —, ‘Monumental Masons and Memorial Card Designers and Printers,’ and should feel pleased if I would look at his samples.

He was such a wretched, hungry-looking, down-upon-his-beam-ends old fellow, that I could not refuse to inspect his wares. And then his boots filled me with pity. For such a little man he had the biggest boots I ever saw—baggy, elastic sides, and toes turned up, with the after part of the uppers sticking out some inches beyond the frayed edges of his trousers. As he sat down and drew these garments up, and his bare, skinny legs showed above his wrecked boots, his feet looked like two water-logged cutters under bare poles, with the water running out of the scuppers.

Mary brought the whisky. I poured him out a good, stiff second mate’s nip. It did my heart good to see him drink it, and hear the soft ecstatic ‘Ah, ah, ah,’ which broke from him when he put the glass down; it was a *Te Deum Laudamus*.

Having briefly intimated to him that I had no intention of buying ‘a handsome granite monument, with suitable inscription, or twelve lines of verse, for £4, 17s. 6d.,’ I took up his packet of *In Memoriam* cards and went through them. The first one was a hand-drawn design in cream and gold—Kate’s fancy. It represented in the centre an enormously bloated infant with an idiotic leer, lying upon its back on a blue cloud with scalloped edges, whilst two male angels, each with an extremely vicious expression, were pulling the cloud along by means of tow-lines attached to their wings. Underneath were these words in MS.: ‘More angels can be added, if desired, at an extra charge of 6d. each.’

No. 2 represented a disorderly flight of cherubims, savagely attacking a sleeping infant in its cradle, which was supported on either hand by two vulgar-looking female angels blowing bullock horns in an apathetic manner.

No. 3 rather took my fancy—there was so much in it—four large fowls flying across the empyrean; each bird carried a rose as large as a cabbage in its beak, and apparently intended to let them drop upon a group of family mourners beneath. The MS. inscribed said, ‘If photographs are supplied of members of the Mourning Family, our artist will reproduce same in group gathered round the deceased. If doves are not approved, cherubims, angels, or floral designs may be used instead, for small extra charge.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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