

Allen Grant

Wednesday the Tenth, A Tale of the South Pacific



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CHAPTER I. WE SIGHT A BOAT

On the eighteenth day out from Sydney, we were cruising under the lee of Erromanga – of course you know Erromanga, an isolated island between the New Hebrides and the Loyalty group – when suddenly our dusky Polynesian boy, Nassaline, who was at the masthead on the lookout, gave a surprised cry of "Boat ahoy!" and pointed with his skinny black finger to a dark dot away southward on the horizon, in the direction of Fiji.

I strained my eyes and saw – well, a barrel or something. For myself, I should never have made out it was a boat at all, being somewhat slow of vision at great distances; but, bless your heart! these Kanaka lads have eyes like hawks for pouncing down upon a canoe or a sail no bigger than a speck afar off; so when Nassaline called out confidently, "Boat ahoy!" in his broken English, I took out my binocular, and focused it full on the spot towards which the skinny black finger pointed. Probably, thought I to myself, a party of natives, painted red, on the war-trail against their enemies in some neighboring island; or perhaps a "labor vessel," doing a veiled slave-trade in "indentured apprentices" for New Caledonia or the Queensland planters.

To my great surprise, however, I found out, when I got my glasses fixed full upon it, it was neither of these, but an open English row-boat, apparently, making signs of distress, and alone in the midst of the wide Pacific.

Now, mind you, one doesn't expect to find open English row-boats many miles from land, drifting about casually in those far-eastern waters. There's very little European shipping there of any sort, I can tell you; a man may sometimes sail for days together across that trackless sea without so much as speaking a single vessel, and the few he does come across are mostly engaged in what they euphoniously call "the labor-trade" – in plain English, kidnaping blacks or browns, who are induced to sign indentures for so many years' service (generally "three yams," that is to say, for three yam crops), and are then carried off by force or fraud to some other island, to be used as laborers in the cane-fields or cocoa-nut groves. So I rubbed my eyes when I saw an open boat, of European build, tossing about on the open, and sang out to the man at the wheel:

"Hard a starboard, Tom! Put her head about for the dark spot to the sou'-by-southeast there!"

"Starboard it is!" Tom Blake answered cheerily, setting the rudder about; and we headed straight for that mysterious little craft away off on the horizon.

But there! I see I've got ahead of my story, to start with, as the way is always with us salt-water sailors. We seafaring men can never spin a yarn, turned straight off the reel all right from the beginning, like some of those book-making chaps can do. We have always to luff round again, and start anew on a fresh tack half a dozen times over, before we can get well under way for the port we're aiming at. So I shall have to go back myself to Sydney once more, to explain who we were, and how we happened to be cruising about on the loose that morning off Erromanga.

My name, if I may venture to introduce myself formally, is Julian Braithwaite. I am the owner and commander of the steam-yacht *Albatross*, thirty-nine tons burden, as neat a little craft as any on the Pacific, though it's me that says it as oughtn't to say it; and I've spent the last five years of my life in cruising in and out among those beautiful archipelagos in search of health, which nature denies me in more northern latitudes. The oddest part of it is, though I'm what the doctors

call consumptive in England – only fit to lie on a sofa and read good books – the moment I get clear away into the Tropics I'm a strong man again, prepared to fight any fellow of my own age and weight, and as fit for seamanship as the best Jack Tar in my whole equipment. The *Albatross* numbers eighteen in crew, all told; and as I am not a rich enough or selfish enough a man to keep up a vessel all for my own amusement, my brother Jim and I combine business and pleasure by doing a mixed trade in copra or dried cocoa-nut with the natives from time to time, or by running across between Sydney and San Francisco with a light cargo of goods for the Australian market.

Our habit was therefore to cruise in and out among the islands, with no very definite aim except that of picking up a stray trade whenever we could make one, and keeping as much within sight of land, for the sake of company, as circumstances permitted us. And that is just why, though bound for Fiji, we had gone so far out of our way that particular voyage as to be under the lee of Erromanga.

As for our black Polynesian boy, Nassaline, to tell you the truth, I am proud of that lad, for he's a trophy of war; we got him at the point of the sword off a slaver. She was a fast French sloop, "recruiting" for New Caledonia, as they call it, on one of the New Hebrides, when the *Albatross* happened to come to anchor, by good luck or good management, in the same harbor. From the moment we arrived I had my eye on that smart French sloop, for I more than half suspected the means she was employing to beat up recruits. Early next morning, as I lay in my bunk, I heard a fearful row going on in boats not far from our moorings; and when I rushed up on deck, half-dressed, to find out what the noise was about, blessed if I didn't see whole gangs of angry natives in canoes, naked of course as the day they were born, or only dressed, like the Ancient Britons, in a neat coat of paint, pursuing the French sloop's jolly-boat, which was being rowed at high pressure by all its crew toward its own vessel. "Great guns!" said I, "what's up?" So, looking closer, I could make out four strapping young black boys lying manacled in the bottom, kicking and screaming as hard as their legs and throats could go, while the Frenchmen rowed away for dear life, and the Kanakas in the canoes paddled wildly after them, taking cock-shots at them with very bad aim from time to time with arrows and fire-arms. Such a splutter and noise you never heard in all your life. Ducks fighting in a pond were a mere circumstance to it.

"Tom Blake!" I sang out, "is the gig afloat there?"

"Aye, aye, sir," says Tom, jumping up. "She's ready at the stern. Shall we off and at 'em?"

"Right you are, Tom!" says I; "all hands to the gig here!"

Well, in less than three minutes I'd got that boat under way, and was rowing ahead between the Frenchmen and their sloop, with our Remingtons ready, and everything in order for a good stand-up fight of it.

When the Frenchmen saw we meant to intercept them, and found themselves cut off between the savages on one side and an English crew well-armed with rifles of precision on the other, they thought it was about time to open negotiations with the opposing party. So the skipper stopped, as airy as a gentleman walking down the Boulevards, and called out to me in French, "What do you want ahoy, there?"

"Ahoy there yourself," says I, in my very best Ollendorff. "We want to know what you're doing with those youngsters?"

"Oh! it's that, is it?" says the Frenchman, as cool as a cucumber, coming nearer a bit, and talking as though we'd merely stopped him with polite inquiries about the time of day or the price of spring chickens; while the savages, seeing from our manner we were friendly to their side, left off firing for a while for fear of hitting us. "Why, these are apprentices of ours – indentured apprentices. We've bought them from their parents by honest trade – paid for 'em with Sniders, ammunition, calico and tobacco; and if you want to see our papers and theirs, Monsieur, here they are, look you, all perfectly *en règle*," and he held up the bundle for us to inspect in full – with a telescope, I suppose – at a hundred yards' distance.

"Row nearer, boys," I said, "and we'll talk a bit with this polite gentleman. He seems to have views of his own, I fancy, about the proper method of engaging servants."

But when we tried to row up the Frenchman stopped and called out at the top of his voice, in a very different tone, all bustle and bluster, "Look out ahead there! If you come a yard closer we open fire. We want no interference from any of you Methodistical missionary fellows."

"We ain't missionaries," I answered quietly, cocking my revolver in the friendliest possible fashion right in front of him; "we're traders and yachtsmen. Show 'em your Remingtons, boys, and let 'em see we mean business! That's right. Ready! present! – and fire when I tell you! Now then, Monsieur, you bought these boys, you say. So far, good. Next then, if you please, who did you buy them from?"

The Frenchman turned pale when he saw we were well-armed and meant inquiry; but he tried to carry off still with a little face and bluster. "Why, their parents, of course," he answered, with a signal to his friends in the ship to cover us with their fire-arms.

"From their parents? O, yes! Well, how did you know the sellers were their parents?" I asked, still pointing my revolver towards him. "And why are the boys so unwilling to go? And what are the natives making such a noise over this little transaction in indentured labor for? If it's all as you say, what's this fuss and row about? Keep your rifles steady, lads."

"They want to back out of their bargain, I suppose, now they've drunk our rum and smoked our tobacco," the Frenchman said.

"No true, no true," one of the natives shouted out from beyond in his broken English. "Man a *oui-oui*!" – that's what they call the French, you know, all through the South Pacific – "man a *oui-oui*, bad – no believe man, a *oui-oui* – him make us drunk, so try to cheat us."

"Now, you look here, Monsieur," I said severely, turning to the skipper, "I know what you've been doing. I've seen this little game tried on before. You landed here last night with your peaceable equipment for recruiting labor – we know what that means – a Winchester sixteen-shooter and half a dozen pairs of English handcuffs. You brought on shore your 'trade' – a common clay pipe or two, some cheap red cloth, and a lot of bad French Government tobacco; and you treated the natives all round to free drinks of your square gin. When they'd reached that state of convenient conviviality that they didn't know who they were or what they were doing, you took advantage of their guileless condition. You picked out the likeliest young men and lads, selected any particularly drunken native lying about loose to represent their fathers, made 'em put their marks to a formal paper of indentures, and handed over twenty dollars, a bottle of rum, and a quid of tobacco, as a consolation for the wounded feelings of their distressed relations. You've been carrying them off all night at your devil's game; and now in the morning the natives are beginning to wake up sober, miss their friends, and put a summary stop to your little proceedings. Well, sir, I give you one minute to make up your mind; if you don't hand us over these four lads to set on shore again, we'll open fire upon you; and as we're stronger than you, with the natives at our back, we'll make a prize of you, and tow you into Fiji on a charge of slave-trading."

Before the words were well out of my mouth the French skipper had given the word "Fire!" and the bullets came whizzing past, and riddling the gunwale of the gig beside us. One of them grazed my arm below the shoulder and drew blood. Now there's nothing to put a man's temper up like getting shot in the arm. I lost mine, I confess, and I shouted aloud, "Fire, boys, and row on at them!" Our fellows fired, and the very same moment the natives closed in and went at them with their canoes, all alive with Sniders, lances and hatchets. It was a lively time, I can tell you, for the next five minutes, with those lithe, long black fellows swarming over them like ants; and poor Tom Blake got a bullet from a French rifle in his thigh, that lodges there still in very comfortable quarters. But one of the Frenchmen fell back in the jolly-boat shot through the breast, and the skipper, who turned out to be a fellow with one sound leg and a substitute, was severely wounded.

So we'd soon closed in upon them, the natives and ourselves, and overpowered their crew, which was only ten, all told, besides the fellows on the big vessel in the harbor.

Well, we took out the four boys, when the mill was over, and transferred them to our gig; and then we escorted the Frenchmen, ironed in their own handcuffs, to the deck of their sloop, with the natives on either side in their canoes rowing along abreast of us like a guard of honor. The crew of the sloop didn't attempt to interfere with us as we brought their comrades handcuffed aboard; if they had, why, then, with the help of the savages, we should have been more than a match for them. So we prowled around the ship on a voyage of discovery, and found ample evidence in her get-up of her character as an honest and single-hearted recruiter of labor. A rack in the cabin held eight Snider rifles, loaded for use, above which hung eight revolvers, employed doubtless in self-defense against the lawless character of the Kanakas, as the skipper (with his hands in irons and his eyes in tears) most solemnly assured us. The sloop was prepared throughout, with loopholes and battening-hatches, to stand a siege, and could have made short work of the natives alone had they tried to attack her, for she carried a small howitzer, not so big as our own; but she never suspected interference from a European vessel. We went down into her hold, and there we found about forty natives, men, women and children – free agents all, the skipper had declared – packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, and with stench intolerable to the European nostril. Such a sight you never saw in your life. There they lay athwart ship, side by side, the unhappy black cattle, some handcuffed and manacled, others dead-drunk and too careless to complain, while the women and children were crying and screaming, and the men were shouting as loud as they could shout in their own lingo.

Fortunately, we had a sailor aboard the *Albatross* who had been a beach-comber (or degraded white man who lives like a native) for three years on the island of Ambrymon, and had a Kanaka girl for a sweetheart; so he could talk their palaver almost as easy as you can English, and he acted as interpreter for us with the poor people in the hold. We knocked their handcuffs off, and explained the situation to them. About a dozen of the wretchedest and most squalid-looking of the lot were prepared, even when we offered them freedom, to stand by their last night's bargain, and go on to New Caledonia; but the remainder were only too delighted to learn that they might go ashore again; and they gave us three ringing British cheers as soon as they understood we had really liberated them.

As for the four boys we'd got in the gig, three of them elected at once to go home to their own people on the island; but the fourth was our present black servant, Nassaline. He, poor boy, was an orphan; and his nearest relations, having held a consultation the day before whether they should bake him and eat him, or sell him to the Frenchman, had decided that after all he would be worth more if paid for in tobacco and rum than if roasted in plantain-leaves. So, as soon as he found we were going to put him on shore again, the poor creature was afraid after all he was being returned for the oven; and flinging himself on his face in the gig, groveling and cringing, he took hold of our knees and besought us most piteously (as our sailor translated his words for us) to take him with us. Of course, when we entered into the spirit of the situation, we felt it was impossible to send the poor fellow back to be made "long pig" of; so, to his immense delight, we took him along, and a more faithful servant no man ever had than poor Nassaline proved from that day forth to me.

I've gone out of my way so far, as I said before, to tell you this little episode of life in the South Pacific, partly in order to let you know who Nassaline was and how we came by him; but partly also to give you a side glimpse of the sort of gentry, both European and native, one may chance to knock up against in those remote regions. It'll help you to understand the rest of my yarn. And now, if you please, I'll tack back again once more into my proper course, to the spot where I broke off in sight of Erromanga.

CHAPTER II. THE BOAT'S CREW

Presently, as we headed towards the black object on the horizon, Nassaline stretched out that skinny finger of his once more (no amount of feeding ever seemed to make Nassaline one ounce fatter), and cried out in his shrill little piping voice, "Two man on the boat! him makey signs for call us!"

I'd give anything to have eyes as sharp as those Polynesians. I looked across the sea, and the lippy waves in the foreground, and could just make out with the naked eye that the row-boat had something that looked like a red handkerchief tied to her bare mast, and a white signal flapping in the wind below it; but not a living soul could I distinguish in her without my binocular. So I put up my glasses and looked again. Sure enough, there they were, two miserable objects, clinging as it seemed half-dead to the mast, and making most piteous signs with their hands to attract our attention. As soon as they saw that we had really sighted them, and were altering our course to pick them up, their joy and delight knew no bounds, as we judged. They flung up their arms ecstatically into the air, and then sank back, exhausted, as I guessed, on to the thwarts where they had long ceased sitting or rowing.

They were wearied out, I imagined, with long buffeting against that angry and immeasurable sea, and must soon have succumbed to fatigue if we hadn't caught sight of them.

We put on all steam, as in duty bound, and made towards them hastily. By and by, my brother Jim, who had been off watch, came up from below and joined me on deck to see what was going forward. At the same moment Nassaline cried out once more, "Him no two man! Him two boy! Two English boy! Him hungry like a dying!" And as he spoke, he held his own skinny bare arm up to his mouth dramatically, and took a good bite at it, as if to indicate in dumb show that the crew of the boat were now almost ready to eat one another.

Jim looked through the glasses, and handed them over to me in turn. "By George, Julian," he said, "Nassaline's right. It's a couple of boys, and to judge by the look of them, they're not far off starving!"

I seized the glasses and fixed them upon the boat. We were getting nearer now, and could make out the features of its occupants quite distinctly. A more pitiable sight never met my eyes. Her whole crew consisted of two white-faced lads, apparently about twelve or thirteen years old, dressed in loose blue cotton shirts and European trousers, but horribly pinched with hunger and thirst, and evidently so weak as to be almost incapable of clinging to the bare mast whence they were trying to signal us.

Now, you land-loving folk can hardly realize, I dare say, what such an incident means at sea; but to Jim and me, who had sailed the lonely Pacific together for five years at a stretch, that pathetic sight was full both of horror and unspeakable mystery. For anybody, even grown men long used to the ocean, to be navigating that awful expanse of water alone in an empty boat is little short of ghastly. Just think what it means! A stormy sheet that stretches from the north pole to the south without one streak of continuous land to break it; a stormy sheet on which the winds and waves may buffet you about in almost any direction for five thousand miles, with only the stray chance of some remote oceanic isle to drift upon, or some coral reef to swallow you up with its gigantic breakers. But a couple of boys! – mere children almost! – alone, and starving, on that immense desert of almost untraveled water! On the Atlantic itself your chance of being picked up from open boats by a passing vessel is slight enough, heaven knows! but on the Pacific, where ships are few and routes are far apart, your only alternative to starvation or foundering is to find yourself cast on

the tender mercies of the cannibal Kanaka. No wonder I looked at Jim, and Jim looked at me, and each of us saw unaccustomed tears standing half ashamed in the eyes of the other.

"Stop her!" I cried. "Lower the gig, Tom Blake! Jim, we must go ourselves and fetch these poor fellows."

At the sound of my bell the engineer pulled up the *Albatross* short and sharp, with admirable precision, and we lowered our boat to go out and meet them. As we drew nearer and nearer with each stroke of our oars, I could see still more plainly to what a terrible pitch of destitution and distress these poor lads had been subjected during their awful journey. Their cheeks were sunken, and their eyes seemed to stand back far in the hollow sockets. Their pallid white hands hardly clung to the mast by convulsive efforts with hooked fingers. They had used up their last reserve of strength in their wild efforts to attract our attention.

I thanked heaven it was Nassaline who kept watch at the mast-head when they first hove in sight. No European eye could ever have discovered the meaning of that faint black speck upon the horizon. If it hadn't been for the sharp vision of our keen Polynesian friend, these two helpless children might have drifted on in their frail craft for ever, till they wasted away with hunger and thirst under the broiling eye of the hot Pacific noontide.

We pulled alongside, and lifted them into the gig. As we reached them, both boys fell back faint with fatigue and with the sudden joy of their unexpected deliverance. "Quick, quick, Jim! your flask!" I cried, for we had brought out a little weak brandy and water on purpose. "Pour it slowly down their throats – not too fast at first – just a drop at a time, for fear of choking them."

Jim held the youngest boy's head on his lap, and opened those parched lips of his that looked as dry as a piece of battered old shoe-leather. The tongue lolled out between the open teeth like a thirsty dog's at midsummer, and was hard and rough as a rasp with long weary watching. We judged the lad at sight to be twelve years old or thereabouts. Jim put the flask to his lips, and let a few drops trickle slowly down his burnt throat. At touch of the soft liquid the boy's lips closed over the mouth of the flask with a wild movement of delight, and he sucked in eagerly, as you may see a child in arms suck at the mouthpiece of its empty feeding-bottle. "That's well," I said. "He's all right, at any rate. As long as he has strength enough to pull at the flask like that, we shall bring him round in the end somehow."

We took away the flask as soon as we thought he'd had as much as was good for him at the time, and let his head fall back once more upon Jim's kindly shoulder. Now that the first wild flush of delight at their rescue was fairly over, a reaction had set in; their nerves and muscles gave way simultaneously, and the poor lad fell back, half-fainting, half-sleeping, just where Jim with his fatherly solicitude chose to lay him.

Tom Blake and I turned to the elder lad. His was a harder and more desperate case. Perhaps he had tried more eagerly to save his helpless brother; perhaps the sense of responsibility for another's life had weighed heavier upon him at his age – for he looked fourteen; but at any rate he was well-nigh dead with exposure and exhaustion. The first few drops we poured down his throat he was clearly quite unable to swallow. They gurgled back insensibly. Tom Blake took out his handkerchief, and tearing off a strip, soaked it in brandy and water in the cup end of the flask; then he gently moistened the inside of the poor lad's mouth and throat with it, till at last a faint swallowing motion was set up in the gullet. At that, we poured down some five drops cautiously. To our delight and relief they were slowly gulped down, and the poor white mouth stood agape like a young bird's in mute appeal for more water – more water.

We gave him as much as we dared in his existing state, and then turned to the boat for some clue to the mystery.

She was an English-built row-boat, smart and taut, fit for facing rough seas, and carrying a short, stout mast amidships. On her stern we found her name in somewhat rudely-painted letters, *Messenger of Peace: Makilolo in Tanaki*. Clearly she had been designed for mission service among

the islands, and the last words which followed her title must be meant to designate her port, or the mission station. But what that place was I hadn't a notion.

"Where's Tanaki, Tom Blake?" I asked, turning round, for Tom had been navigating the South Seas any time this twenty years, and knew almost every nook and corner of the wide Pacific, from Yokohama to Valparaiso.

Tom shifted his quid from one cheek to the other and answered, after a pause, "Dunno, sir, I'm sure. Never heerd tell of Tanaki in all my born days; an' yet I sorter fancied, too, I knowed the islands."

"There are no signs of blood or fighting in the boat," I said, examining it close. "They can't have escaped from a massacre, anyhow." For I remembered at once to what perils the missionaries are often exposed in these remote islands – how good Bishop Patteson had been murdered at Santa Cruz, and how the natives had broken the heads of Mason and Wood at Erromanga not so many months back, in cold blood, out of pure lust of slaughter.

"But they must have run away in an awful hurry," Tom Blake added, overhauling the locker of the boat, "for, see, she ain't found; there ain't no signs of food or anything to hold it nowheres, sir; and this ere little can must 'a' been the o'ny thing they had with 'em for water."

He was quite right. The boat had clearly put to sea unprovisioned. It deepened our horror at the poor lads' plight to think of this further aggravation of their incredible sufferings. For days they must have tossed in hunger and thirst on the great deep. But we could only wait to have the mystery cleared up when the lads were well enough to explain to us what had happened. Meanwhile we could but look and wonder in silence; and indeed we had quite enough to do for the present in endeavoring to restore them to a state of consciousness.

"Any marks on their clothes?" my brother Jim suggested, with practical good sense, looking up from his charge as we rowed back toward the *Albatross*, with the *Messenger of Peace* in tow behind us. "That might help us to guess who they are, and where they hail from."

I looked close at the belt of the lads' blue shirts. On the elder's I read in a woman's handwriting, "Martin Luther Macglashin, 6, '87." The younger boy's bore in the same hand the corresponding inscription, "John Knox Macglashin, 6, '86." It somehow deepened the tragedy of the situation to come upon those simple domestic reminiscences at such a moment.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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