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The Beach Comber And the Man-of-War.

By J. F. ROSE-SOLEY.

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The copra house was down on the rock bound beach, some 50 yards away from the shore, a stretch of uneven, stony soil, with grass patches here and there and great black rocks showing out from the surface, separating the two places where the trader did his business. The old man's weary feet had worn a deep track across the plot; up and down he went many times a day. The copra house—the title is a misnomer, but it is always used in Samoa—was but a mere flimsy erection of rough boards, though iron roofed and water tight. Further, the door was provided with a very substantial padlock, which the trader was at great pains to lock and unlock every time he visited the shed, for the place held the only merchandise the country could produce—all that there was to trade for. The little bits of oily, brown, evil smelling copra must be kept dry or else they would rot long before the time came for shipping them to Europe. And they must be protected from theft, or else the cunning natives would think nothing of taking a few basketsful at night and reselling them to the trader next day. Therefore every time a Samoan came, perhaps with but a few baskets of the copra, the old trader, with a weary sigh, would take a key down from its accustomed nail and plod down to the shed. It was quite a solemn and serious business, this purchase of a few shillings' worth of produce, and both sides went about it with becoming gravity. The first question that had to be decided was whether the copra was green—that is to say, whether it had been merely warmed in the sun or whether it had been properly dried by several days' exposure.

As the copra is bought by weight, it is, of course, to the native seller's interest to dry it as little as possible, while the trader, on the other hand, does not want to lose 20 or 30 per cent by shrinkage. So the two argue the point out together, while I sit on the wire enclosed veranda and watch from afar the wordy conflict.

Silei, the industrious girl, has got her sewing machine out. She does not put it on a table, as the white lady would, but rests it on a kerosene case on the floor and squats cross legged before it. Of course it is a hand machine; natives do not take readily to the use of the treadle. She is fastidious really, for geona lava-lava out of the brightest prints Manchester can produce, and when they are made they will be hung up in the store and sold for half a dollar each, perhaps in exchange for the very basket of copra the native is arguing about. He swears with a fluency of Biblical expression which only long missionary training has rendered possible, that the copra has been three days in the sun, whereas the trader, judging from his experience, asserts that at the outside it cannot have been more than one, and in cloudy weather too.

At last the trader, grumbling somewhat, purchases the copra, for he knows if he does not it will go to his rival, and that his balances are 12 pounds out in every 100; also he is an expert at weighing and by dexterously manipulating the scales can make the copra appear several pounds lighter than it really is, and so under the waving palms by the side of the rippling lagoon, nature smiling on them with her most innocent expression, the two complete their ingenious transaction. Both are cheating, and both know it. So perhaps it does not matter very much. The native, having been well taught by the missionaries, will go to church three times next Sunday and say his morning and evening prayers more fervently than ever, so that he will save his conscience. As for the godless trader, he has no conscience. He has long since lost even the memory of the article. So we need not concern ourselves about him.

At last, after another half hour's haggling in the store, the native goes away with the goods which he has been permitted to take in exchange for the copra, and the trader comes out of the house and seats himself wearily beside me, mopping his face the while.

As usual he harks back to the old times.

"Things were different in those days," he said. "Then we could do as we liked with the natives. Now they can do as they like with us. We have to cut things fine to make a living at all." And to console himself he took a long drink of kava, emptying the cocoanut shell, which held about a pint, at one draft.

Silei laughed the musical little laugh of the Samoan maiden. The whir of the sewing machine ceased and she looked smilingly at the nearly empty bowl. She knew she would soon have to fabricate more kava, an occupation which she particularly enjoyed, I suppose, because it gratified her maiden vanity by enabling her to exhibit herself in the most graceful of attitudes.

"Yes, yes, girl, you can make some more," said the trader. "I'll keep you from the machine, and we don't want that infernal thing clicking away while we are talking."

"The oil days were the times," he began, "before any one invented this copra and we used to take oil from the natives in payment for everything. Why, even the missionaries used to have a big tank outside the church door and would take up the collection in oil. It was gallons of oil instead of dollars then, but they got the money just the same in the end, and the church prospered."

His face clouded as he made this last remark. Perhaps the undoubted prosperity of mission work in Samoa brought him no consolation. Perhaps he would have preferred the natives in their original barbaric state rather than civilized and Christianized and educated up to a standpoint of bargaining which he found it difficult for even the superior intellect of a white man to overreach them.

He did not say this, though. "I've made more money in a week then than I can do in a year now," he went on. "Forty years ago, when I was but a young fellow, I started trading on the southern side of Upolu, within 20 miles of me, and I could get any price I liked for an old uniform coat, especially if it had brass buttons on it, but a Tower musket—that was the thing," and his rugged old face lit up at the pleasant reminiscence.

"I had the place to myself for three years, and you may be sure I made a pretty good thing of it. Wish I had it. Some of the money I left now. Then old Jack Wilkinson came along and settled down near me."

"But who was Jack Wilkinson?" I asked.

"Never hear of Jack Wilkinson—old Jack, as he was always called? Why, I thought everybody in Samoa knew of him, but he was getting to be an old man then, and he's been dead long since, and I suppose you young people have forgotten all about the old fogies."

"Well, I'll tell you about Jack. He was a hard case, one of the regular old style beach combers. He had been I don't know how many years in the group and had grown to be almost like a native. He used to wear a lava-lava instead of trousers, just like a Samoan, and he could go about barefoot anywhere, even on a coral reef, and that's a thing few white men can manage without cutting their feet to pieces."

"They did say," and he lowered his voice unconsciously, "that he was one of a party of convicts who had escaped from Australia when it was a penal settlement. They stole a boat and somehow found their way here and made themselves at home among the natives, but the story was only whispered between white men, and it would have been as much as one's life was worth to even hint at the thing to old Jack. He was a handy man with his knife, and there were no police about to call him to account for his actions."

"I got along well enough with Jack, though I must say he had ways of dealing with the natives which I hardly approved of. They were afraid of him, though, and fed him on the best the land could furnish. Jack never did anything for them in return. He spent his days lying on a mat in the shade of one of their big cool houses, open all round, so that the breeze could pass through and Jack could see all that was going on without even moving. Sometimes, when he was particularly energetic, he would go fishing on the reef at low tide, when coral showed up high above the water, and it was easy enough to spear mulluuli with long three pronged spears."

"Still, I soon found it was to my interest to keep in with old Jack. He got twice as much oil as I could for the same amount of trade, and though he was always abusing and ill treating the Samoans, strangely enough they would take their oil to him rather than to me."

and I was as smooth as butter to the natives, talking kindly to them and always giving them little presents. I own that I could never quite make it out to this day, and no man knows the crooks and twists of the Samoan character better than I do. I cannot understand what gave Jack his extraordinary influence over the people, though, to be sure, in the end they killed him on Manono. But I'll tell you about that some other time."

"So it happened that Jack became a sort of sub-trader or assistant and would buy the natives' oil, giving them in return orders on me for so much trade. I paid him a good commission, and I could afford to do it, for so long as Jack was sober he was the best hand at bargaining with the Samoans I ever saw, but when he got drunk there was no holding him. I had to get a case of gin down from Apia now and again or else Jack would never have staid with me. Then, he would go tearing wild for a week or two until it was all finished and perhaps wind up by setting fire to a native house, or carrying off a woman, or something like that. I had to pay for the damage, and then Jack sobered down and went along right enough for another month or two."

"It was this falling that had got the beach comber into trouble at Tanua, a village about 20 miles along the coast, where he had lived before coming to my place. The natives there had put up with him for a long time, but at last they got sick of the business, and the chiefs of the town turned dead against him and gave him a week in which to clear out. I never knew rightly what brought this about, for Jack was very reticent on the point, but it must have been something very bad or else the natives would never have summoned up courage to behave as they did. There was a taupe, a village virgin, mixed up in the business, I know, a fine looking girl. She stuck to him all through and came away with him to Salua, where I was."

"For a long time Jack had been playing off an old beach comber's bounce on the natives at Tanua. Whenever they would turn a bit nasty he would threaten to bring a British man-of-war down on them and have them well punished. This used to scare the people, for men-of-war were scarce in those days, and the Samoans had an almost superstitious awe of their guns. It's different now, for the natives have seen so much of modern war vessels that they've grown to despise them. They aren't afraid of being shelled either. Why, I've seen them over on Upolu, when a man-of-war did actually fire on the rebels, sitting round smoking quite comfortably in the back behind, while the shots were dropping into their village and doing no harm at all, except perhaps setting fire to a house or two, and when, by pure accident, a shell did fall into a cookhouse and kill five men they said that the victims had been stealing the missionary's ducks or else they would not have been killed. Shows the benefit of religious teaching, doesn't it?"

"Well, to come back to Jack. The man-of-war game at last got played out because no man-of-war came, and the natives would not believe him any longer. Then he had to clear, but at the very last, when he was leaving, he told them that he would soon come back with a big war canoe and make them pay a heavy fine in pigs."

"The Tanua people only laughed at him, but as it turned out, strangely enough, Jack kept his word. He had been at Salua about six months when a man-of-war actually did come, not after the natives, but after Jack himself. The coastal had at last—for news traveled slowly then—heard of Jack's pranks at Tanua, and had sent the Sea Gull, which happened to be in Apia at the time, down to arrest him. It was a bad lookout for Jack, for there were enough crimes charged against him to hang a dozen men."

"I was away in the bush hunting wild cattle when the Sea Gull arrived, and that saved Jack—that and his own smartness. The vessel dropped into the lagoon at Salua early one morning and anchored about a mile from the shore, for it was a good safe harbor, though rather small. Jack from his own hut saw her come in and guessed what she was after. Presently she lowered a boat, and a lieutenant, all gold lace, came ashore in style. Of course he went to my place, for it was the only papalagi house about, and I suppose they thought I would be able to tell them the whereabouts of Jack, having heard that he had been seen around Salua."

"When the lieutenant opened the gate, there was Jack, as bold as brass, sitting on an easy chair upon the veranda reading an old newspaper and looking very much at home."

"I nearly died of laughing when Jack told me the story afterward, mim-

ing the haw haw style of the lieutenant, who, of course, did not know a word of Samoan, and took everything that Jack said for gospel truth."

Concluded to-morrow.

She flushed and started. Scarce I knew.

Whether the maid was pleased or vexed.

Then, as my keen impatience grew, she said, "Continued in our next."

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