

Mosquito Bay,  
June 30th, 1912.

I HAVE just returned from a walk of at least 100 yards along the beach, and I am feeling exhausted. I set out intending to investigate the other side of the headland that shuts in this little bay, but the mid-winter sun was too much for my unhardened body, and, as my pyjamas were speedily losing their Sunday freshness, I returned to my deck-chair on the verandah, where the refreshing trade wind gives one sufficient strength to stretch out an occasional hand for a banana or an orange in the intervals between drowsily 'penning these few lines.'

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Really I am very much at peace. Between the verandah and the Pacific there are some palm trees and a stretch of coral beach. I can really hear the incessant booming of the surf on the reef. Away across the calm, blue, sleepy sea I can see other little islands like this. The sky is so cloudless and brazen that the shade of each palm tree looks like a heaven on earth. In the surf, under the shadow of the trees, there are some natives, nothing but their heads showing as they lie in the water and smoke; and—in the dining-room my fellow-planters are singing 'Our Miss Gibbs' to the accompaniment of a right bully talking-machine. To think that once a month a boat—an ugly steam boat—reaches us from civilised Sydney, and brings new records for this abomination—'where every prospect pleases and only man is vile'—I thank thee, Dr. Watts (or Mr. Wordsworth? I forget), for this exceptionally beautiful line. But I must not revile. In spite of 'man' I am seeing and learning. Remember that in my last letter I told you I expected for two years to be obliged to put up with inconveniences in order to have a year of free wandering. I shall keep this firmly in my mind when I am likely to curse the fate that sent Orstrylyuns to these beautiful lands. For these New Hebrides are beautiful. I have seen all the islands and landed on most. They have not the lotos charm that I expected. I am told that that is only found in the groups further east. But they have an indescribable charm, a remoteness which is beginning (in spite of 'phonos') to eat into my heart. They are covered with a mass of green; small hills dense with 'bush,' and here and

there a plantation with its not ugly bungalow and store. There is no gorgeous foliage; and tropical fruits are not as common as I had supposed; but, really the bush is wonderful. It is dark and silent and a fit home for dreadful mysteries. (As a matter of fact it is still the scene of cannibalistic orgies—in spite of missionaries or perhaps because of them.)

I will stop description for a bit. I don't feel quite in the mood—thanks to 'Yip-i-addy,' etc.—so will content myself with a hard statement of facts such as they have occurred to me since posting my last letter to you. My last news to you was that I was just about to set off for Muller's plantation where I now am. In order to reach this island I had to journey from Nouméa to Vila. The voyage took three days on an evil-smelling 80-ton auxiliary steam cutter. The weather was horrid; the engines broke down; my bunk (in the dirty and only cabin) was situated just over the ship's store of garlic; the rest of the ship was full of mixed cargo and Kanakas returning home from their three years' work in New Caledonia. It was not a pleasant trip, but it took me on my way.

Vila is a typical South Sea town—beach, stores, and bungalows. I had to put in four days there while waiting for a boat to take me to Mosquito Bay, and I made the most of my time. I had heard news in Nouméa that made me take special interest in Vila—the possibility of a well-paid job. These islands are ruled over by a French and English Condominium. This régime is of fairly recent installation, and more recently still there has been started a High Court (3 judges—one Spanish, one

French and one English) to ratify titles to land in the group. Aforetime planters bought or stole land from the natives, and now all these plantations are to be surveyed and title-deeds to be granted by the High Court. These cases will begin about September and will last for years. Well, I smelt jobs here as sworn translator or as surveyor, and I was not disappointed. I got letters of introduction from the Governor of New Caledonia to the British and French Resident Commissioners, and called on them as soon as I arrived. I likewise called on the Spanish President of the High Court, and jawed with him for some hours in his native tongue, which pleased the old man hugely. I got considerable satisfaction out of my visits. The B.R.C. was most friendly and most encouraging. He said that there was work for me in plenty as sworn translator at 35s. a day as soon as the High Court began its sittings; and also there were other jobs which I could hold in conjunction. While waiting he advised me to go and learn all I could about planters and their ways, as the information would be useful. I thanked him heartily and said that I would take his advice. I didn't tell him that I had broken into my last sovereign to pay my hotel bill at Vila, and that consequently I could have no choice. He likewise offered to take me for a trip round the islands on the Government steam yacht the 'Medea,' and drop me afterwards at Mosquito Bay. This also I thankfully accepted as I didn't know how I was going to make the trip without any money. I had two nights in the hotel at Vila, and it was enough. My room was an outhouse, and I shared it with the

most awful collection of creeping things. The hotel was full of the most fearsome collection of beach-combers, ex-convicts, etc., who drank and fought all day and all night. I slept with my Colt's Police Special in my hand, and was jolly thankful I had nothing worth stealing.

So I am only waiting here for a few months, and then I shall be back in Vila earning a good screw, and being more or less respectable. I debated long with myself before deciding on this, but I concluded eventually that it was the most sensible thing I could do. That was before I had seen the planters. Now I am doubly glad, as I couldn't stand these folk for long. In Vila I shall have to be more or less correct and official, but I shall be piling up money, and I shall have leisure to read and write. Also I shall be daily improving my French and Spanish with a view to the future.

... It is only necessary to mention the name of X.Y.Z. to raise a shriek of laughter in any part of the South Sea Islands. Its fame preceded it, and everywhere it was met with the most hopeless yarns in lieu of information, and with carefully prepared fakes. It never stopped more than a few hours anywhere, and then wrote as if it had a life-long acquaintance with the islands. It even (in some books) goes to the length of describing conversations between natives, when there is not a white man in the islands who knows so much as one word of any of the languages. In Epi alone there are more than 20 tribes each speaking a totally distinct language. Natives from one village cannot understand natives from another village. Everybody talks to the

natives in Biche-la-mar, which is a kind of pidgin-English. It is used by French and English; and by natives themselves when talking to men of a different tribe. Even French and English people talk it to one another. It is a weird kind of Esperanto. I haven't got the hang of it yet, but will give you examples later on. So much for X.Y.Z.—the shallow journalist. I was glad to hear my opinion confirmed. But I bear it no grudge. Certainly it, in conjunction with B.L., revived the fire in me that had been lighted years ago by Stevenson. By the way, there is an old man in Vila who was for years with Stevenson in Samoa. . . .

(The Plantation),

July 12th, 1912.

AS you see, I have once more changed my address. This is another plantation owned by the same man. It is about 12 miles by sea from Mosquito Bay, and as the plantation is just being begun, the boss-man thought I should learn more here than on a finished plantation. I willingly agreed in order to get free from the 'cornstalks.' I had got a little tired of being addressed alternately as 'Mister' and 'New Chum'—(imagine how you would like to be called Neeew Chem). One youth riled me so much that I thankfully accepted his offer to teach me how to box. I said I had always wanted to learn, but there were no boxers in England. It was only in the Commonwealth that men were found now. The youth was entirely self-taught, or

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