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Title: John Corwell, Sailor and Miner; and, Poisonous Fish

Author: Louis Becke

Release date: January 28, 2008 [eBook #24446]  
Most recently updated: February 24, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger

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POISONOUS FISH \*\*\*

# **JOHN CORWELL, SAILOR and MINER**

## **and POISONOUS FISH**

**By Louis Becke**

**T. Fisher Unwin, 1901**

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#### **POISONOUS FISH OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS**

# JOHN CORWELL, SAILOR AND MINER

## I

"Am I to have no privacy at all?" demanded the Governor irritably as the orderly again tapped at the open door and announced another visitor. "Who is he and what does he want?"

"Mr. John Corwell, your Excellency, master of the cutter *Ceres*, from the South Seas."

The Governor's brows relaxed somewhat. "Let him come in in ten minutes, Cleary, but tell him at the same time that I am very tired—too tired to listen unless he has something of importance to say."

The day had indeed been a most tiring one to the worthy Governor of the colony of New South Wales, just then struggling weakly in its infancy, and only emerging from the horrors of actual starvation, caused by the utter neglect of the Home authorities to send out further supplies of provisions. Prisoners of both sexes came in plenty, but brought nothing to eat with them; the military officers who should have helped him in his arduous labours were secretly plotting against him, and their spare time—and they had plenty—was devoted to writing letters home to highly-placed personages imploring them to induce the Government to break up the settlement and not "waste the health and lives of even these abandoned convicts in trying to found a colony in the most awful and hideous desert the eye of man had ever seen, a place which can never be useful to man and is accursed by God." But the Governor took no heed. Mutiny and discontent he had fought in his silent, determined way as he fought grim famine, sparing himself nothing, toiling from dawn till dark, listening to complaints, remedying abuses, punishing with swift severity those who deserved it, and yet always preserving the same cold, unbending dignity of manner which covered a highly-sensitive and deeply sympathetic nature.

But on this particular day, fatigue, the intense heat, which had prevailed, a violent quarrel between the intriguing major commanding the marines, and many other lesser worries, had been almost more than he could bear, so it may well be imagined that he was more inclined for rest than talk.

Ten, twenty minutes, and then the thin, spare figure raised itself wearily from the rude sofa. He must see his visitor. He had promised to do so, and the sooner it was over the better. He called to the orderly.

"Tell Mr.—Corwell you said?—to come in."

A heavy step sounded on the bare floor, and one of the finest specimens of manhood Governor Arthur Phillip had ever seen in all his long naval career stood before him and saluted. There was something so pleasant and yet so manly in the handsome, cleanshaven and deeply-bronzed face, that the Governor was at once attracted to him.

"Be seated, Mr. Corwell," he said in his low, yet clear tones. "I am very tired, so you must not keep me long."

"Certainly not, your Excellency. But I thought, sir, that you would prefer to hear the report of my voyage personally. I have discovered a magnificent harbour north of the Solomon Islands, and——"

"Ha! And so you came to me. Very sensible, very sensible of you. I am obliged to you, sir. Tell me all about it."

"Certainly, your Excellency; but I regret I have intruded on you this evening. Perhaps, sir, you will permit me to call again to-morrow?"

"No, no, not at all," was the energetic reply. I am always ready to hear anything of this nature.

"I knew that, sir, for the masters of the *Breckenbridge* and another transport told me that you were most anxious to learn of any discoveries in the Pacific Islands."

"Very true, sir. I am looking forward to hear from them and from the masters of other transports which I am inducing to follow the whale fishery on their return voyage to England *via* Batavia. But so far I have heard nothing from any one of them."

Encouraged and pleased at the Governor's manner, the master of the *Ceres* at once produced a roughly executed plan and a detailed written description of the harbour, which, he asserted with confidence, was one of the finest in that part of the Pacific. A broad, deep stream of water ran from the lofty range of mountains which traversed the island north and south and fell into a spacious bay, on the shores of which was a large and populous native village, whose inhabitants had treated Cornell and the few men of his ship's company with considerable kindness, furnishing them not only with wood and water, but an ample supply of fresh provisions as well.

During the two weeks that the *Ceres* lay at anchor, Corwell and two or three of his hands unhesitatingly trusted themselves among the natives, who escorted them inland and around the coast. Everywhere was evidence of the extraordinary fertility of the island, which, in the vicinity of the seashore, was highly cultivated, each family's plantation being enclosed by stone fences, while their houses were strongly built and neatly constructed. The broad belt of the slopes of the mountains were covered with magnificent timber, which Corwell believed to be teak, equal in quality to any he had seen in the East Indies, and which he said could be easily brought down to the seashore for shipment owing to there being several other large streams beside the one on whose banks the principal village was built.

The Governor was much interested, and complimented the young seaman on the manner in which he had written out his description of the place and his observations on the character and customs of the inhabitants.

"Such information as you have given me, Mr. Corwell, is always valuable, and I give you my best thanks. I

wish I could do more; and had I the means, men, and money to spare I should send a vessel there and to other islands in the vicinity to make further examination, for I believe that from those islands to the northward we can obtain invaluable food supplies in the future. The winds are more favourable for making a quick voyage there and back than they are to those groups to the eastward; but," and here he sighed, "our condition is such that I fear it will be many years ere His Majesty will consent to such an undertaking. But much may be done at private cost—perhaps in the near future."

The young man remained silent for a moment or two; then with some hesitation he said, as he took a small paper packet from his coat pocket and handed it to the Governor, "Will your Excellency look at this and tell me what it is. I—I imagine it is pure gold, sir."

"Gold, gold!" and something like a frown contracted the Governor's pale brows; "ever since the settlement was formed I've been pestered with tales of gold, and a pretty expense it has run me into sending parties out to search for it. Why, only six months ago a rascally prisoner gulled one of my officers into letting him lead an expedition into the bush—the fellow had filed down a brass bolt—" he looked up and caught sight of the dark flush which had suddenly suffused his visitor's face—"but I do not for a moment imagine you are playing upon my credulity, Mr. Corwell."

He untied the string and opened the packet, and in an instant an exclamation of astonishment and pleasure escaped as he saw that the folds of paper held quite three ounces of bright and flaky water-worn gold.

"This certainly *is* gold, sir. May I ask where you obtained it?"

"I made the voyage to Sydney Cove to tell your Excellency of two discoveries—one was of the fine harbour, the other was of this gold, which my wife (who is a native of Ternate) and myself ourselves washed out of the bed of a small stream; the natives helped us, but attached not the slightest value to our discovery. In fact, sir, they assured us as well as they could that much more was to be had in every river on the island."

"Your wife was it, then, or yourself, who first recognised what it was?"

"She did, sir. She has seen much of it in the hands of the Bugis and Arab traders in her native country."

The Governor moved his slender forefinger to and fro amid the shining, heavy particles, then he pondered deeply for some minutes.

"Tell me frankly, Mr. Corwell—why did you make a long voyage to this settlement to tell *me* of your discovery?"

"In the hope, sir, that you would advise and perhaps assist me. My crew are Malays and Chinese and would have murdered me if they knew what I knew. Will your Excellency tell me the proper course to pursue so that I may be protected in my discovery? I am a poor man, though my ship is my own, but she is old and leaky and must undergo heavy repairs before she leaves Sydney Cove again; my present crew I wish to replace by half a dozen respectable Englishmen, and—"

The Governor shook his head. "I will do all I can to help you, but I cannot provide you with men. The island which you have visited may have been discovered and taken possession of by France, two of whose exploring ships were in these seas a few years ago, and even if that is not the case I could not take possession of them for His Majesty, as I have no commissioned officer to spare to undertake such a duty. Yet, if such an officer were available, Mr. Corwell, I would be strongly tempted to send him with you, hoist the British flag, and then urge the Home Government to confirm my action and secure to you the right, subject to the King's royalties, to work these gold deposits. But I am powerless—much as I wish to aid you."

A look of disappointment clouded the young captain's handsome features.

"Would your Excellency permit me to endeavour to find three or four seamen myself? There is a transport ready to sail for England, and I may be able to get some men from her."

"I doubt it. Unless you revealed the object of your voyage—which would be exceedingly foolish of you—you could not induce them to make a voyage in such a small vessel as yours to islands inhabited mostly by ferocious savages. But this much I can and will do for you. I will direct Captain Hunter of the *Sirius*, the only King's ship I have here, to set his carpenters to work on your vessel as soon as ever you careen her; I will supply you at my own private cost with arms and ammunition and a new suit of sails. Provisions I cannot give you—God knows we want them badly enough ourselves, although we are not now in such a bad plight as we were ten months ago. Yet for all that I may be able to get you a cask or two of beef."

"That is most generous of you, sir. I will not, however, take the beef, your Excellency. But for the sails and the repairs to my poor little vessel I thank you, sir, most heartily and sincerely. And I pledge you my word of honour, as well as giving you my written bond, that I will redeem my obligations to you."

"And if you fail I shall be content, for I well know that it will be no fault of yours. But stay, Mr. Corwell; I must have one condition."

"Name it, sir."

"You too must pledge me your honour that you will not reveal the secret of your discovery of gold to any one in the settlement. This I do not demand—I ask it as a favour."

Then the Governor took him, guardedly enough, into his confidence. With a thousand convicts, most of them utter ruffians, guarded by a scanty force of marines, the news of gold having been found would, he was sure, have a disastrous effect, and lead to open revolt. The few small merchant ships which were in port were partly manned by convict seamen, and there was every likelihood of them being seized by gangs of desperate criminals, fired with the idea of reaching the golden island. Already a party of convicts had escaped with the mad idea of walking to China, which they believed was only separated from Australia by a large river which existed a few hundred miles to the northward of the settlement. Some of them died of thirst, others were slaughtered by the blacks, and the wounded and exhausted survivors were glad to make their way back again to their gaolers.

Cornell listened intently, and gave his promise readily. Then he rose to go, and the Governor held out his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Cornell. I must see you again before you sail."

## II

One evening, three weeks later—so vigorously had the carpenter's mates from the old frigate *Sirius* got through their work—the *Ceres* was ready for sea. She was to sail on the following morning, and Corwell, having just returned from the shore, where he had been to say goodbye to the kind-hearted Governor, was pacing the deck with his wife, his smiling face and eager tones showing that he was well pleased.

He had reason to be pleased, for unusual luck had attended him. Not only had his ship been thoroughly and efficiently repaired, but he had replaced six of his untrustworthy Malays by four good, sturdy British seamen, one of whom he had appointed mate. These men had arrived at Sydney Cove in a transport a few days after his interview with the Governor; the transport had been condemned, and Corwell, much to his delight, found that out of her crew of thirty, four were willing to come with him on what he cautiously described as a "voyage of venture to the South Seas." All of them had served in the navy, and the captain of the transport and his officers gave them excellent characters for sobriety and seamanship. Out of the sixty or seventy pounds which still remained to him he had given them a substantial advance, and the cheerful manner in which they turned to and helped the carpenters from the frigate convinced him that he had secured decent, reliable men, to whom he thought he could reveal the real object of his voyage later on.

Two years before Cornell had been mate of a "country" ship employed in trading between Calcutta and the Moluccas. The Ternate agent of the owners of the ship was an Englishman named Leighton, a widower with one daughter, whose mother had died when the girl was fifteen. With this man the young officer struck up a friendship, and before six months had passed he was the acknowledged suitor of Mary Leighton, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight, and who quickly responded to his affection. She was then twenty-two years of age, tall and fair, with dark hazel eyes, like her English mother, and possessed of such indomitable spirit and courage that her father often laughingly declared it was she, and not he, who really managed the business which he controlled.

And she really did much to help him; she knew his weak, vacillating, and speculative nature would long since have left them penniless had he not yielded to her advice and protests on many occasions, Generous and extravagantly hospitable, he spent his money lavishly, and had squandered two or three fortunes in wild business ventures in the Indian Seas instead of saving one. Latterly, however, he had been more careful, and when Corwell had made his acquaintance he had two vessels—a barque and a brig—both of which were very profitably engaged in the Manila-China trade, and he was now sanguine or mending his broken fortunes.

Isolated as were father and daughter from the advantages of constant intercourse with European society, the duty of educating the girl was a task of love to her remaining parent, who, before he entered "John Company's" service, had travelled much in Europe. Yet, devoted as he was to her, and looking forward with some dread to the coming loneliness of life which would be his when she married, he cheerfully gave his consent to her union with John Cornell, for whom he had conceived a strong liking, and who, he knew, would make her a good husband.

They were married at Batavia, to which port they were accompanied by Mr. Leighton, who, during the voyage, had pressed Corwell to leave his then employment and join him in a venture which had occupied his mind for the past year. This was to despatch either the barque or brig, laden with trade goods, to the Society Islands in the South Pacific, to barter for coconut oil and pearl shell.

Leighton was certain that there was a fortune awaiting the man who entered upon the venture, and his arguments so convinced the young man that he consented.

On arrival at Batavia they found there the officers and crew of a shipwrecked English vessel, and one of the former eagerly took Corwell's place as chief mate, his captain offering no objection. A few weeks after Mr. Leighton hired the *Ceres* to take himself, his daughter, and her husband back to Ternate, eager to begin the work of fitting out one of his vessels for the voyage that was to bring them fortune. He, it was arranged, was to remain at Ternate, Mary was to sail with her husband to the South Seas.

But a terrible shock awaited them. As the *Ceres* sailed up to her anchorage before Mr. Leighton's house, his Chinese clerk came on board with the news that the barque had foundered in a typhoon, and the brig had been plundered and burnt by pirates within a few miles of Canton. The unfortunate man gave one last appealing look at his daughter and then fell on the deck at her feet. He never spoke again, and died in a few hours. When his affairs came to be settled up, it was found that, after paying his debts, there was less than four hundred pounds left—a sum little more than that which Corwell had managed to save out of his own wages.

"Never mind, Jack," said Mary. "'Tis little enough, but yet 'tis enough. And, Jack, let us go away from here. I should not care now to meet any of the people father knew in his prosperity."

Cornell kissed his wife, and then they at once discussed the future. Half an hour later he had bought the *Ceres* from her captain (who was also the owner), paid him his money and taken possession. Before the week was out he had bought all the trade goods he could afford to pay for, shipped a crew of Malays and Chinese, and, with Mary by his side, watched Ternate sink astern as the *Ceres* began her long voyage to the South Seas.

After a three weeks' voyage along the northern and eastern shores of New Guinea the *Ceres* came to an anchor in the harbour which Cornell had described to the Governor. The rest of his story, up to the time of his arrival in Sydney Cove, the reader knows. \*\*\*\*\*

Steadily northward under cloudless skies the high-pooped, bluff-bowed little vessel had sailed, favoured by leading winds nearly all the way, for four-and-twenty days, when, on the morning of the twenty-fifth, Corwell,

who had been up aloft scanning the blue loom of a lofty island which lay right ahead, descended to the deck with a smiling face.

"That is not only the island itself, Mary, but with this breeze we have a clear run for the big village in the bay; I can see the spur on the southern side quite clearly."

"I'm so glad, Jack, dear. And how you have worried and fumed for the past three days!"

"I feared we had got too far to the westward, my girl," he said. Then telling the mate to keep away a couple of points, he went below to pore over the plan of the harbour, a copy of which had been taken by the Governor. As he studied it his wife's fingers passed lovingly through and through his curly locks. He looked up, put his arm around her waist, and swung her to a seat on his knees.

"I think, Mary, I can tell the men now."

"I'm sure you can! The sooner you take them into your confidence the better."

Corwell nodded. During the voyage he had watched the mate and three white seamen keenly, and was thoroughly satisfied with them. The remainder of the crew—three Manila men and two Penang Malays—did their duty well enough, but both he and his wife knew from long experience that such people were not to be trusted when their avarice was aroused. He resolved, therefore, to rely entirely upon his white crew and the natives of the island to help him in obtaining the gold. Yet, as he could not possibly keep the operations a secret from the five men he distrusted, he decided, as a safeguard against their possible and dangerous ill-will, to promise them double wages from the day he found that gold was to be obtained in payable quantities. As for the mate and three other white men, they should have one-fifth of all the gold won between them, he keeping the remaining four-fifths for himself and wife.

He put his head up the companion-way and called to the man whom he had appointed mate.

"Come below, Mallett, and bring Totten, Harris, and Sam with you."

Wondering what was the matter the four men came into the cabin. As soon as they were standing together at the head of the little table, the captain's wife went quietly on deck to see that none of the coloured crew came aft to listen.

"Now, men," said Corwell, "I have something important to tell you. I believe I can trust you."

Then in as few words as possible he told them the object of the voyage and his intentions towards them. At first they seemed somewhat incredulous, but when they were shown some of the gold their doubts vanished, and they one and all swore to be honest and true to him and to obey him faithfully whether afloat or ashore, in fair or evil fortune.

From his scanty store of liquor the captain took a bottle of rum, and they drank to their future success; then Corwell shook each man's hand and sent him on deck.

Just before dusk the *Ceres* ran in and dropped her clumsy, wooden-stocked anchor in the crystal-clear water, a few cables' length away from the village. As the natives recognised her a chorus of welcoming shouts and cries pealed from the shore from five hundred dusky-hued throats.

### III

A blazing, tropic sun shone in mid-heaven upon the motionless waters of the deep, land-locked bay in which the *Ceres* lay, with top-mast struck and awnings spread fore and aft. A quarter of a mile away was the beach, girdled with its thick belt of coco-palms whose fronds hung limp and hot in the windless air as if gasping for breath. Here and there, among the long line of white, lime-washed canoes, drawn up on the sand, snowy white and blue cranes stalked to and fro seeking for the small thin-shelled soldier crabs burrowing under the loose *débris* of leaves and fallen palm-branches to escape the heat.

A few yards back from the level of high-water mark clustered the houses of the native village, built on both sides of the bright, fast-flowing stream which here, as it debouched into the sea, was wide and shallow, showing a bottom composed of rounded black stones alternating with rocky bars. Along the grassless banks, worn smooth by the constant tread of naked feet, grew tall many-hued crotons, planted and carefully tended by their native owners, and shielded from the rays of the sun by the ever-present coco-palms. From either side of the bank, looking westward towards the forest, there was a clear stretch of water half a mile in length, then the river was hidden from view, for in its course from the mountains through the heavily-jungled littoral it took many bends and twists, sometimes running swiftly over rocky, gravelly beds, sometimes flowing noiselessly through deep, muddy-bottomed pools and dank, steamy swamps, the haunt of the silent, dreaded alligator.

At the head of the straight stretch of water of which I have spoken there was on the left-hand bank of the river an open grassy sward, surrounded by clumps of areca and coco-palms, and in the centre stood a large house, built by native hands, but showing by various external signs that it was tenanted by people other than the wild inhabitants of the island. Just in front of the house, and surrounded by a number of canoes, the boat belonging to the *Ceres* was moored to the bank, and under a long open-sided, palm-thatched shed, were a number of brown-skinned naked savages, some lying sleeping, others squatting on their hams, energetically chewing betel nut.

As they talked and chewed and spat out the scarlet juice through their hideous red lips and coaly black teeth, a canoe, paddled by two natives and steered by Mallet, the mate of the *Ceres*, came up the river. The instant it was seen a chorus of yells arose from the natives in the long hut, and Mary Corwell came to the open doorway of the house and looked out.

"Wake up, wake up, Jack!" she cried, turning her face inwards over her graceful shoulder, "here is Mallet."

Her voice awoke her husband, who in an instant sprang from his couch and joined her, just as Mallet—a

short, square-built man of fifty—stepped out of the canoe and walked briskly towards them, wiping his broad, honest face with a blue cotton handkerchief.

“Come inside, Mallet. 'Tis a bit cooler in here. I'm sorry I sent you down to the ship on such a day as this.”

Mallet laughed good-naturedly. “I didn't mind it, sir, though 'tis a powerful hot day, and the natives are all lying asleep in their huts; they can't understand why us works as we do in the sun. Lord, sir! How I should like to see old Kingsdown and Walmer Castle to-day, all a-white with snow. I was born at Deal.”

Mary Cornell brought the old seaman a young coconut to drink, and her husband added a little rum; Mallet tossed it off and then sat down.

“Well, sir, the ship is all right, and those chaps aboard seem content enough. But I'm afeared that the worms are a-getting into her although she is moored right abreast of the river. So I took it on me to tell Totten and Harris to stay aboard whilst I came back to ask you if it wouldn't be best for us to bring her right in to the fresh water, and moor her here, right abreast o' the house. That'll kill any worms as has got into her timbers. And we can tow her in the day after to-morrow, when there will be a big tide.”

“You did quite right, Mallet. Very likely the worms have got into her timbers in spite of her being abreast of the river's mouth. I should have thought of this before.”

“Ah, Jack,” said his wife, with a smile, “we have thought too much of our gold-getting and too little of the poor old *Ceres*.”

“Well, I shall think more of her now, Mary. And as the rains will be on us in a few days—so the natives say—and we can do no more work for three months, I think it will be as well for us to sail the *Ceres* over to that chain of lagoon islands about thirty miles from here. I fear to remain here during the wet season, on account of the fever.”

After further discussion it was decided that Jack and Mallet, with some natives, should make an early start in the morning for their mining camp, six miles away, at the foot of the range, and do a long, last day's work, returning to the house on the following day. Meanwhile a message was to be sent to Harris and Totten to bring the vessel into the creek as soon as the tide served, which would be in forty-eight hours. Then, whilst she lay for a week in the fresh water, so as to kill the suspected *teredo navalis* worms, which Mallet feared had attacked her, she was to be made ready for the short voyage of thirty miles over to a cluster of islands enclosing a spacious lagoon, where Corwell intended to beach her till the rainy season was over, when he would return to work a very promising stream in another locality. Already he and his men, aided by the natives, had, in the four months that had passed since they arrived, won nearly five hundred ounces of gold, crude as were their appliances.

“Jack,” said his wife, “I think that, as you will be away all day and night, to-morrow I shall go on board and see what I can do. I'll make the men turn to and give the cabin a thorough overhauling. Marawa, the chiefs wife, has given me a lot of sleeping-mats, and I shall throw those old horrible flock mattresses overboard, and we shall have nice clean mats instead to lie on.”

At daylight Mallet aroused the natives who were to accompany him and the captain, and then told off two of them to make the boat ready for Mrs. Corwell. Then he returned to the house and called out—

“The boat is ready, sir.”

“So am I, Mallet,” replied Mary, tying on her old-fashioned sun-hood. Then she turned to her husband. “Jack, darling, this will be the very first time in our married life that I have ever slept away from you, and it shall be the last, too. But I *do* want to surprise you when you see our cabin again.”

She put her lips up to him and kissed him half a dozen times. “There, that's a good-night and good morning three times over. Now I'm ready.”

Corwell and Mallet walked down to the boat with her and saw her get in. She kissed her hand to them and in a few minutes was out of sight.

## IV

A light, cool breeze, which had set in at daylight, was blowing when Mary Corwell boarded the *Ceres*. Totten and Harris met her at the gangway, caps in hand. Poor Sam, their former shipmate, had died of fever a month before. They were delighted to hear that she intended to remain on board, and Harris at once told Miguel, the scoundrelly-faced Manila cook, to get breakfast ready.

“And you must have your breakfast with me,” said Mary, “and after that you must obey *my* orders. I am to be captain to-day.”

As she and the two seamen sat aft under the awning, at their breakfast, Selak, the leading Malay, and his fellows squatted on the fore-hatch and talked in whispers.

“I tell thee,” said Selak, “that I have seen it. On the evening of the day when the man Sam died and was buried, I was sitting outside the house. It was dark, and the Tuan Korwal thought I had returned to the ship. I crept near and listened. They were speaking of what should be done with the dead man's share of the gold. Then I looked through the cave side of the house, and—dost remember that white basin of thine, Miguel?”

The Manila man nodded.

“The white woman, at a sign from her husband, went into the inner room and brought it out and placed it on the table. It was full to the brim with gold! and there was more in a bag!”

His listeners drew nearer to him, their dark eyes gleaming with avarice.

"Then the Tuan said, 'None of Sam's gold will I or my wife touch. Let it be divided among you three. It is but fair.'

"They talked again, and then Mallet said to the Tuan, 'Captain, it shall be as you wish. But let it all go together till the time comes for thee to give us our share.'

"I watched the white woman take the basin and the bag, put them into a box, and place the box in a hole in the ground in her sleeping-room. Then I came away, for my heart was on fire with the wrong that hath been done to us."

He rose to his feet and peered round the corner of the galley. Mary and the two seamen were eating very leisurely.

"Three of them are here now and will sleep aboard to-night. God hath given them into our hands!"

"And what of the other two?—they are strong men," asked a wizen, monkey-faced Malay, nicknamed Nakoda (the captain).

"Bah! What is a giant if he sleeps and a kriss is swept across his throat, or a spear is thrust into his back from behind? They, too, shall die as quickly as these who sit near us. Now listen. But sit thou out on the deck, Miguel, so that thou canst warn us if either of those accursed dogs approach."

The cook obeyed him silently.

"*This* it is to be. To-night these three here shall die in their sleep, silently and without a sound. Then we, all but thou, Nakoda, shall take the boat and go to the house. Both the Tuan and Mallet sleep heavily, and"—he drew his hand swiftly across his tawny throat.

"And then?" queried Nakoda.

"And then the gold—the gold, or our share of which we have been robbed—is ours, and the ship is ours, and I, Selak, will guide ye all to Dobbo in the Aru Islands, where we shall be safe, and become great men."

"But," muttered another man, "what if these black sons of Shaitan here of the Island turn upon us after we have slain the white men?"

Selak laughed scornfully. "The sound of a gun terrifies them. They are cowards, and will not seek to interfere with us."

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Night had fallen. The two white seamen, tired out with their day's work, had spread their mats on the poop, and were sound in slumber. Below in the cabin, the captain's wife lay reading by the light of a lamp; and Selak, standing in the waist, could see its faint reflection shining through the cabin door, which opened on to the main deck. Sitting on the fore-deck, with their hands clutching their knives, his companions watched him.

At last the light was lowered, and Mary closed her eyes and slept.

The Malay waited patiently. One by one the remaining native fires on the shore went out; and, presently, a chill gust of air swept down from the mountains, and looking shoreward he saw that the sky to the eastward was quickly darkening and hiding the stars—a heavy downpour of rain was near.

He drew his kriss from its tortoiseshell sheath and felt the edge, made a gesture to the crouching tigers for'ard, and then stepped lightly along the deck to the open cabin door; the other four crept after him, then stopped and waited—for less than a minute.

A faint, choking cry came from the cabin, and then Selak came out, his kriss streaming with blood.

"It is done," he whispered, and pointing to the poop he sprang up.

"Hi, there! what's the matter?" cried Totten, who had heard the feint cry; and then, too late, he drew his pistol from his belt and fired—as Selak's kriss plunged into his chest. Poor Harris was slaughtered ere he had opened his eyes.

Spurning Totten's body with his naked foot, Selak cursed it. "Accursed Christian dog! Would I could bring thee to life so that I might kill thee again!" Then, as he heard the rushing hum of the coming rain squall, and saw that the shore was hidden from view, as if a solid wall of white stone had suddenly arisen between it and the ship, he grinned.

"Bah! what does it matter? Had it been a cannon instead of a pistol it could scarce have been heard on the shore in such a din."

Ordering the bodies of the two seamen to be thrown overboard, Selak, the most courageous, entered the cabin, took a couple of muskets from the rack, and some powder and ball from the mate's berth, and returning to his followers, bade them bring the boat alongside.

"Throw the woman after them," he cried to Nakoda, as the boat pushed off into the darkness, just as the hissing rain began. "We shall return ere it is dawn."

Nakoda would have sprung over the side after the boat, but he feared the sharks even more than Selak's kriss; so running for'ard, he crept into his bunk and lay there, too terrified to move.

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Mallet and Corwell, with the natives, worked hard till near sunset, and then ceased.

"There's nearly five ounces in that lot, Mallet," said the captain, pointing to two buckets of wash-dirt. "Let us have a bathe, and then get something to eat before it is too dark."

"The natives say we ought to get back to the house, sir, instead of sleeping here tonight. They say a heavy storm is coming on, and we'll be washed out of the camp."

"Very well, Mallet I don't want to stay here, I can assure you. Tell them to hurry up, then. Get the shovels and other gear, and let us start as quickly as possible. It will take us a good three hours to get back to the house."

By sunset they started, walking in single file along the narrow, dangerous mountain-path, a false step on which meant a fall of hundreds of feet.

Half-way down, the storm overtook them, but guided by the surefooted natives they pressed steadily on, gained the level ground, and at last reached the house about ten o'clock.

"Now that we have come so far we might as well go on board and give my wife a surprise," said Corwell to Mallet. "Look, the rain is taking off."

"Not for long, sir. But if we start at once we may get aboard afore it starts again."

Two willing natives, wet and shivering as they were, quickly baled out a canoe, and in a few minutes they were off, paddling down towards the sea. But scarce had they gone a few hundred yards when another sudden downpour of rain blotted out everything around them. But the natives paddled steadily on amid the deafening roar; the river was wide, and there was no danger of striking anything harder than the hanging branch of a tree or the soft banks.

"I thought I heard voices just now," shouted Mallet.

"Natives been out fishing," replied Corwell.

As the canoe shot out through the mouth of the river into the open bay the rain ceased as suddenly as it began, and the *Ceres* loomed up right ahead.

"Don't hail them, Mallet. Let us go aboard quietly."

They clambered up the side, the two natives following, and, wet and dripping, entered the cabin.

Corwell stepped to the swinging lamp, which burnt dimly, and pricked up the wick. His wife seemed to be sound asleep on the cushioned transom locker.

"Mary," he cried, "wake up, dearest. We— ... Oh my God, Mallet!"

He sprang to her side, and kneeling beside the still figure, placed his hand on the blood-stained bosom.

"Dead! Dead! Murdered!" He rose to his feet, and stared wildly at Mallet, swayed to and fro, and then fell heavily forward.

As the two natives stood at the cabin door, gazing in wondering horror at the scene, they heard a splash. Nakoda had jumped overboard and was swimming ashore.

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Long before dawn the native war-drums began to beat, and when Selak and his fellow-murderers reached the mouth of the river they ran into a fleet of canoes which waited for them. They fought like the tigers they were, but were soon overcome and made prisoners, tied hand and foot, and carried ashore to the "House of the Young Men." The gold was taken care of by the chief, who brought it on board to Corwell.

"When do these men die?" he asked,

"To-day," replied Corwell huskily; "to-day, after I have buried my wife."

On a little island just within the barrier reef, she was laid to rest, with the never-ending cry of the surf for her requiem.

At sunset, Corwell and Mallet left the ship and landed at the village, and as their feet touched the sand the war-drums broke out with deafening clamour. They each carried a cutlass, and walked quickly through the thronging natives to the "House of the Young Men."

"Bring them out," said Corwell hoarsely to the chief.

One by one Selak and his fellow-prisoners were brought out and placed on their feet, the bonds that held them were cut, and their hands seized and held widely apart. And then Corwell and Mallet thrust their cutlasses through the cruel hearts.

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## POISONOUS FISH OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Many years ago I was sent with a wrecking party of native seamen to take possession of a Swedish barque which had gone ashore on the reef of one of the Marshall Islands, in the North Pacific. My employers, who had bought the vessel for £100, were in hopes that she might possibly be floated, patched up, and brought to Sydney. However, on arriving at the island I found that she was hopelessly bilged, so we at once set to work to strip her of everything of value, especially her copper, which was new. It was during these operations that I made acquaintance with both poisonous and stinging fish. There were not more than sixty or seventy natives living on the island, and some of these, as soon as we anchored in the lagoon, asked me to caution my own natives—who came from various other Pacific islands—not to eat any fish they might catch in the lagoon until each one had been examined by a local man. I followed their injunction, and for two or three weeks all went well; then came trouble.

I had brought down with me from Sydney a white carpenter—one of the most obstinate, cross-grained old fellows that ever trod a deck, but an excellent workman if humoured a little. At his own request he lived on board the wrecked barque, instead of taking up his quarters on shore in the native village with the rest of the wrecking party. One evening as I was returning from the shore to the schooner—I always slept on board—I saw the old man fishing from the waist of the wreck, for it was high tide, and there was ten feet of water around the ship. I saw him excitedly haul in a good-sized fish, and, hailing him, inquired how many he had caught, and if he were sure they were not poisonous? He replied that he had caught five, and that "there was nothin' the matter with them." Knowing what a self-willed, ignorant man he was, I thought I should have a look at the fish and satisfy myself; so I ran the boat alongside and clambered on board, followed by two of my native crew. The moment we opened the fishes' mouths and looked down their throats we saw the infallible sign which denoted their highly poisonous condition—a colouring of bright orange with thin reddish-brown streaks. The old fellow grumbled excessively when I told him to throw them overboard, and then somewhat annoyed me by saying that all the talk about them being unsafe was bunkum. He had, he said, caught and eaten just the same kind of fish at Vavau, in the Tonga Islands, time and time again. It was no use arguing with such a creature, so, after again warning him not to eat any fish of any kind unless the natives "passed"



them as non-poisonous, I left him and went on board my own vessel.

We had supper rather later than usual that evening, and, as the mate and myself were smoking on deck about nine o'clock, we heard four shots in rapid succession fired from the wreck. Knowing that something was wrong, I called a couple of hands, and in a few minutes was pulled on board, where I found the old carpenter lying writhing in agony, his features presenting a truly shocking and terrifying appearance. His revolver lay on the deck near him—he had fired it to bring assistance. I need not here describe the peculiarly drastic remedies adopted by the natives to save the man's life. They at first thought the case was a hopeless one, but by daylight the patient was out of danger. He was never able to turn to again as long as we were on the island, and suffered from the effects of the fish for quite two or three years. He had, he afterwards told me, made up his mind to eat some of the fish that evening to show me that he was right and I was wrong.

A few weeks after this incident myself and a native lad named Viri, who was one of our crew and always my companion in fishing or shooting excursions, went across the lagoon to some low sandy islets, where we were pretty sure of getting a turtle or two. Viri's father and mother were Samoans, but he had been born on Nassau Island, a lonely spot in the South Pacific, where he had lived till he was thirteen years of age. He was now fifteen, and a smarter, more cheerful, more intelligent native boy I had never met.

His knowledge of bird and fish life was a never-ending source of pleasure and instruction to me, and the late Earl of Pembroke and Sir William Flower would have delighted in him.

It was dead low tide when we reached the islets, so taking our spears with us we set out along the reef to look for turtle in the many deep and winding pools which broke up the surface of the reef. After searching for some time together without success, Viri left me and went off towards the sea, I keeping to the inner side of the lagoon. Presently in a shallow pool about ten feet in circumference I espied a small but exceedingly beautiful fish. It was about four inches in length, and two and a half inches in depth, and as it kept perfectly still I had time to admire its brilliant hues—blue and yellow-banded sides with fins and tail tipped with vivid crimson spots. Around the eyes were a number of dark yellowish or orange-coloured rings, and the eyes themselves were large, bright, and staring. It displayed no alarm at my presence, but presently swam slowly to the side of the pool and disappeared under the coral ledge. I determined to catch and examine the creature, and in a few minutes I discovered it resting in such a position that I could grasp it with my hand. I did so, and seizing it firmly by the back and belly, whipped it up out of the water, but not before I felt several sharp pricks from its fins. Holding it so as to study it closely, I suddenly dropped it in disgust, as strange violent pains shot through my hand. In another two minutes they had so increased in their intensity that I became alarmed and shouted to Viri to come back. Certainly not more than five or ten minutes elapsed before he was with me; to me it seemed ages, for by this time the pain was excruciating. A look at the fish told him nothing; he had never seen one like it before. How I managed to get back to the schooner and live through the next five or six hours of agony I cannot tell. Twice I fainted, and at times became delirious. The natives could do nothing for me, but said that the pain would moderate before morning, especially if the fish was dead. Had its fins struck into my foot instead of my hand I should have died, they asserted; and then they told the mate and myself that one day a mischievous boy who had speared one of these abominable fish threw it at a young woman who was standing some distance away. It struck her on the foot, the spines penetrating a vein, and the poor girl died in terrible agony on the following day. By midnight the pain I was enduring began to moderate, though my hand and arm were swollen to double the proper size, and a splitting headache kept me awake till daylight. The shock to the system affected me for quite a week afterward.

During many subsequent visits to the Marshall Group our crews were always cautioned by the people of the various islands about eating fish or shell-fish without submitting them to local examination. In the Radack chain of this widely spread out archipelago we found that the lagoons were comparatively free from poisonous fish, while the Ralick lagoons were infested with them, quite 30 per cent, being highly dangerous at all times of the year, and nearly 50 per cent at other seasons. Jaluit Lagoon was, and is now, notorious for its poisonous fish. It is a curious fact that fish of a species which you may eat with perfect safety, say, in the middle of the month, will be pronounced by the expert natives to be dangerous a couple of weeks later, and that in a "school" of pink rock bream numbering many hundreds some may have their poison highly developed, others in but a minor degree, whilst many may be absolutely free from the taint. In the year 1889 the crew of a large German ship anchored in one of the Marshall Islands caught some very large and handsome fish of the bream kind, and the resident natives pronounced them "good." Three or four days later some more were taken, and the cook did not trouble to ask native opinion. The result was that eight or nine men were taken seriously ill, and for some time the lives of several were despaired of. Two of them had not recovered the use of their hands and feet at the end of ten weeks, and their faces, especially the eyes and mouth, seemed to be permanently, though slightly distorted. All the men agreed in one particular, that at midday they suffered most—agonising cramps, accompanied by shooting pains in the head and continuous vomiting to the point of exhaustion, these symptoms being very pronounced during the first week or eight days after the fish had been eaten.

That kind-hearted and unfortunate officer, Commodore J. G. Goodenough, took an interest in the poisonous and stinging fish of the Pacific Islands, and one day showed me, preserved in spirits of wine, a specimen of the dreaded *no'u* fish of the Hervey Group—one of the most repulsive-looking creatures it is possible to imagine out of a child's fairy book. The deadly poison which this fish ejects is contained in a series of sacs at the base of the spines, and the commodore intended to submit it to an analyst. By a strange coincidence this gallant seaman a few months afterwards died from the effects of a poisoned arrow shot into his side by the natives of Nukapu, one of the Santa Cruz group of islands.

This *no'u* however, which is the *nofu* of the Samoans, and is widely known throughout Polynesia, and Melanesia under different names, does not disguise its deadly character under a beautiful exterior like the stinging fish of Micronesia, which I have described above. The *nofu* which is also met with on the coasts of Australia, is a devil undisguised, and belongs to the angler family. Like the octopus or the death-adder (*Acanthopis antarctica*) of Australia, he can assimilate his colour to his environment. His hideous wrinkled head, with his staring goggle eyes, are often covered with fine wavy seaweed, which in full-grown specimens sometimes extends right down the back to the tail. From the top of the upper jaw, along the back and sides,

are scores of needle-pointed spines, every one of which is a machine for the ejection of the venom contained at the root. As the creature lies hidden in a niche of coral awaiting its prey—it is a voracious feeder—it cannot be distinguished except by the most careful scrutiny; then you may see that under the softly waving and suspended piece of seaweed (as you imagine it to be) there are fins and a tail. And, as the *nofu* has a huge mouth, which is carefully concealed by a fringe of apparently harmless seaweed or other marine growth, he snaps up every unfortunate small fish which comes near him. In the Pacific Islands the *nofu* (*i.e.*, “the waiting one”) is generally a dark brown, inclining to black, with splashes or blotches of orange, or marbled red and grey. In Australian waters—I have caught them in the Parramatta river, Port Jackson—they are invariably either a dark brown or a horrid, dulled yellow.

Despite its poison-injecting apparatus this fish is eaten by the natives of the Society, Hervey, and Paumotu groups of islands, in the South Pacific, where its flesh is considered a delicacy. It is prepared for cookery by being skinned, in which operation the venomous sacks are removed. In 1882, when I was living on the island of Peru in the Gilbert Group (the Francis Island of the Admiralty charts), a Chinese trader there constantly caught them in the lagoon and ate them in preference to any other fish. Here in Peru the *nofu* would bury itself in the soft sand and watch for its prey, and could always be taken with a hook. And yet in Eastern Polynesia and in the Equatorial Islands of the Pacific many deaths have occurred through the sting of this fish, children invariably succumbing to tetanus within twenty-four hours of being stung.

A little more about poisonous fish, *i.e.*, fish which at one time of the year are good and palatable food and at others deadly. In the lagoon island of Nukufetau (the “De Peyster Island” of the charts), where the writer lived for twelve months, the fish both within the lagoon and outside the barrier reef became highly poisonous at certain times of the year. Flying-fish (which were never caught inside the lagoon) would be safe to eat if taken on the lee side of the island, dangerous, or at least doubtful, if taken on the weather side; *manini*, a small striped fish much relished by the natives, would be safe to eat if caught on the reef on the western side of the island, slightly poisonous if taken four miles away on the inside shore of the eastern islets encompassing the lagoon. Sharks captured outside the reef, if eaten, would produce symptoms of poisoning—vomiting, excessive purging, and tetanus in a modified form; if caught inside the reef and eaten no ill effects would follow. Crayfish on one side of the lagoon were safe; three miles away they were highly impregnated with this mysterious poison, the origin of which has not yet been well defined by scientists.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOHN CORWELL, SAILOR AND MINER; AND, POISONOUS FISH \*\*\*

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