

BECKE LOUIS

OFFICER AND

MAN

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The anchor of her Majesty's ship *Hannibal* was underfoot and the captain on the bridge, and Rear-Admiral Garnet had shaken hands with the last of the "leading" Fijian white residents, who always did the welcoming and farewelling when distinguished persons visited Levuka, when Lieutenant Bollard approached him and intimated that "a person" from the shore had just come alongside in a boat and desired to see "his Excellency on private and important business."

"What the devil does the fellow want?" said the Admiral irascibly, not a whit softened by the "his Excellency" style of address; "I'm going on the bridge, and can't see any one now; we can't delay the ship and get into a mess going through the passage."

"Told him so, sir; but he says he wants to see you upon an important—a most pressing matter."

"Oh, well! Confound him! Let the sentry show him to my cabin, and tell Captain Bracely I shall be up in five minutes."

The "person," conducted by the sentry, was shown into the cabin, where the Admiral, without taking a seat or offering one to his visitor, inquired with a cold, cautious politeness born of much experience of island visitors with "important and private Service matters of great urgency," what he might be pleased to want?

The stranger was a short, fat, coarse-looking man with little pig-like eyes and scanty tufts of black beard and whiskers growing in irregular patches on his cheeks and chin, like clumps of gorse on clayey banks. He was dressed—in a manner—in an ill-fitting black cloth suit imported from Sydney. His hair was very black and shiny, plastered down over his temples and beautifully parted at the back of his bullet head. Altogether he was an unpleasantly sleek, oleaginous creature, and as he stood bowing and smirking with a catlike grin, the Admiral felt an almost irresistible impulse to kick him out of the cabin. Notwithstanding his haste, however, he began to recollect the man as an individual who had been introduced to him a few days previously at some municipal function.

"Can't recollect the fellow's name," he muttered to himself. "I wonder what the devil the creature wants! Got a complaint against the Consul very likely—every one has a complaint against a Consul—it's a disease in the South Seas. Confound their twopenny-halfpenny squabbles!" Then the little fat man, with another servile grin, spoke.

"I wish, your Excellency, to see you upon a matter which I think, as a loyal subject, it is my duty—my painful duty—to bring under your notice."

"Thought as much," said the Admiral to himself. "Some row about a trader insulting a native teacher, or *vice-versa*." Then smothering an exclamation of impatience, he said—

"What is it, sir? I have no time to lose. By the way, who are you, sir?"

"My name, your Excellency, is Obadiah Howl-man. I had the distinguished honour, your Excellency, of showing your Excellency over the grounds of the new Mission College. I was the contractor for the erection of that ornament to our little town." And again the oily creature smirked and bowed and did the invisible soap business.

"Surely *you* are not a missionary, sir?" asked the Admiral, with undisguised contempt.

"I am not, your Excellency. That is, I am not yet an ordained labourer in the Vineyard, your Excellency; but I hope soon to be one. Meanwhile, all the time that is left to me from my business (I am a storekeeper and contractor) is given to the cause of spreading the Light I was once a lost soul, your—"

"I see, I see," interrupted the Admiral, with ill-disguised disgust and open impatience, "but do, for Heaven's sake, tell me what is your complaint. I am due in Sydney on the tenth of this month, and the ship is already under way. As it is, we shall have to stop outside the reef to let you get into your boat."

“I am aware of it, your Excellency, and I should not have ventured to detain you, but this is a very serious matter—I may say, a criminal matter. When I had the honour of meeting your Excellency, on the occasion of your Excellency’s visit to the College, I would have spoken of this matter then; but my poor, weak nature was so torn by conflicting emotions that I *could* not. And for the past two nights have I struggled and wrestled in spirit, and sought Divine guidance. ‘Tis indeed hard for one man to reveal the sins and wickedness of a fellow-sinner—knowing that we are all but weak vessels. But yet in this case it is my bounden duty as a loyal—”

“Go on—go on, for Heaven’s sake! What on earth is the matter? And what the deuce do you want?”

“Your Excellency, I wish, in all sorrow and tribulation of spirit, to give you information as to the whereabouts of a deserter from her Majesty’s Navy.”

“What do you mean, sir? None of my men are missing, and if any were, I’d tell the Fijian police about it, and not delay the *Hannibal*,” and with a curt nod the Admiral turned on his heel and was about to leave the cabin, when the man stepped forward and interrupted him, saying—

“One word more, your Excellency. There is in connection with this case—”

“The reward. Yes, of course. I forgot all about that. If there is a deserter from any of her Majesty’s ships living ashore here, you will get the usual reward, I have no doubt. But really, sir, this is a matter that you must arrange with the police when the next man-of-war comes here, or go to the Consul”—and then, *sotto voce*—“or the devil, confound you!” and the Admiral more than ever felt inclined to kick his visitor out.

“You quite mistake me, Admiral Garnet I have no wish to claim an earthly reward for doing my duty to my Queen and country. Since I have lived in these islands the Lord has prospered me in my worldly affairs, and I am in a position far above taking payment in money for doing my duty. I am, I trust, walking in the Light, and do not want to obtain wealth—which is but of this world—for performing such duty.”

“Well, well, I am sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Howlman. But now I really cannot talk any longer here, so please do not keep me. At the same time if there is a deserter here I don’t see what business it is of yours to interest yourself in his capture. Don’t you think you have enough to do to look after your store, and contracting, and your *alleged* missionary business, without running after deserters?” And inwardly the Admiral cursed his visitor for a meddlesome ass. He was in a hurry to get to sea, and yet this fellow might make it necessary for the ship to be delayed till the deserter was apprehended.

“My humble connection with missionaries, Admiral, has taught me that, at whatever cost to my own feelings, my duty as a loyal subject must, next to my duty as a Christian, be performed honestly.”

“Oh, yes, yes. That’s all right, I meant no disrespect to the missionaries. Many of the *gentlemen* engaged in missionary work in these islands have rendered very valuable services to her Majesty’s ships on many occasions,” and then to himself, “and given us a devil of a lot of trouble as well.”

“Now, sir,” the Admiral resumed, “having explained that the Consul or police will attend to this deserter, you will allow me to say ‘Good-day.’”

“One moment more, sir,” and a spiteful green lit up the little piggish eyes. “I desire, as a British subject, to speak to you privately on this matter, and to you alone. There are reasons—very particular reasons—why her Majesty’s Consul or the Fiji police here cannot deal with this case.”

“Oh, well,” sighed the Admiral resignedly; “sit down, Mr. Howlman. I see I am in for it, and so I’ll send for my secretary and—”

“Cannot this matter be arranged without a third party?”

“No, sir; it CANNOT!”

The Admiral said this with so much emphasis, and rang the bell with so much force at the same moment, that the sentry almost jumped into the cabin to see what was the matter.

“Pass the word for Mr. Hayling to come to my cabin, and to the captain that I shall not be with him for ten minutes yet. Ten minutes will do your business, Mr. Howlman, eh?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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