

A PEARLSHELLING TRIP TO THE COAST OF NEW GUINEA

by an Ex-Bushman

Finding myself at Thursday Island nearly "fit" once more, after a tolerably severe bout of fever contracted in the Gulf country, but woefully emaciated both in appearance and pocket, I cast about me for something to do. Having an old journalistic friend established on the island I mentioned my difficulty, and received advice to try a trip out with a pearlsheller for a month or so, as times were exceedingly dull, and occupation of any sort scarcely to be had. He further gave me an introduction to a friend of his own, who owned some boats or luggers. The result was an invitation to start on a trip in the course of a week or so. A few days later, meeting Captain Jack, I was told that there was some difficulty in getting a good crew together. Of course I immediately proffered my services, and assured him that I would be useful as far as I knew how, stating (with truth) that I was a good sailor in one respect — "I never get seasick."

"Well," said the skipper, "if you'll only do that, I'll give you the usual rate of wages."

My reply was to the point, "I'm your man, old fellow."

Thus somewhat to my surprise, and afterwards, when I learned all that was expected in the way of duty or work, occasionally to my dismay, I found myself shipped as ordinary seaman on board the trim little schooner "Nautilus," fifteen tons register, and bound for the coast of New Guinea on a pearl-fishing expedition. Two days after I joined the vessel at the station on Prince of Wales Island, and found that the skipper had just been fooling with a Martini-Henry shot gun, and that the gun had got all the best of the game. Endeavouring to draw a cap from a cartridge which had stuck in the barrel, and which prevented the breach from closing, an explosion had followed, driving some of the brass pieces of cartridge into the operator's hand, and otherwise damaging hand, wrist and thigh. My advice, to place the hand and wrist under a steady water drip, was

taken, with very happy results. No inflammation followed, and a couple of days afterwards we embarked, having during that time loaded up with firewood, water, and stores, and got everything ship-shape.

Our crew consisted of Mr John T---, skipper and owner; Doolah, tender or sailing master, a well-made, smart Malay; Gavin W---, a strong, large-boned, active Victorian, who had been one trip on a similar expedition in another vessel, and who was familiarly known on board as "Jim;" Tom T---, an old miner down on his luck; two blackboys, and your humble servant.

The evening of embarkation (Wednesday, 6th March) we had a regal blowout of turtles' eggs provided by Doolah. They were excellent, eaten with prime New Zealand salt beef and home-made bread. To sleep in a narrow bunk for the first time was difficult. However, there was nothing for it but to be still, as a drizzling rain was falling and there could be no camping on deck. At last I became oblivious to all sublunary woes and at break of day was loathe to turn out when roused by the tender. The deck was quickly washed clean as any housewife could desire her kitchen floor to be; the anchor weighed, sails unfurled, and we were off on our cruise, standing over to Thursday Island to get some trade which had been forgotten.

After dinner we left by the East Passage, carrying with us a rather stiff breeze, which caused the little vessel to spin along at most exhilarating speed. Once through the passage, we had in view no less than fourteen islands, some with thick umbrageous growth and rugged rocky sides presenting a pretty and romantic appearance. Shortly we sighted the wreck of the "John Da Costa," a large vessel which, when carrying horses to India some years ago, had run on a dangerous reef, and there remained. The hull and lower masts seemed to withstand all efforts of the sea and weather. We continued to run our course until evening, when we anchored in the midst of a fleet of shellers under Monar Island, about thirty miles out. Immediately "Jim," who was to act as cook for the first three days, had the pot boiling and the tea made. It was his first experience in cookery, and did him great credit. The stew was savory, and we were very hungry. If

the thought of the mess I should make when it came my turn to cook hadn't intruded itself, I should have been happier certainly. Still it was pleasant to be on deck afterwards in the scantiest and easiest of habiliment --- chatting and smoking till late. Early morn saw us busily engaged tightening rigging, and after coffee the mud hook was made fast to the bows and we went bowling along to the coast of New Guinea, meeting on our way another of "our" boats -- the "Garnet" -- the diver of which, misunderstanding a wave of Doolan's hand, meant merely as a recognition, 'bout ship and was after us like a racehorse. She could outsail us easily on a wind, and seemed to tire of waiting for us, as she shaped a course for Darro Island, and was out of sight in a few hours.

I had to take a turn at painting the new dingy and must have cost the skipper considerable in paint, as I found myself, when finished, with enough on shirt and trousers to go over the job again. The vessel rolled about so that there was no steadying oneself. During the afternoon the rolling and pitching got to be worse as the breeze freshened, and "Jim" and "Tom" told colourful tales to the fishes in an outstanding language, mostly composed of "ohs!" and "ahs!" highly diverting to one not affected by *mal-de-mer*. I think Tom sadly remarked that he wished he was in Kingdom Come; but just then I didn't care to ask him any questions. Before evening we anchored in smooth water near Saibai Island, seven or eight miles from the coast.

Next morning we ran into the mouth of the Kailow River, about one hundred miles from Thursday Island, and anchored near the village of Mowatt. Scarcely was the anchor down when we were boarded by a lot of shaggy-headed natives offering their hands to shake, and otherwise behaving in an amiable and friendly fashion. As we had seen cocoanut trees lining the low lying coast for miles, a demand for some was immediately made and heartily responded to. I purchased three of large size for half a fig of tobacco, and afterwards got sat upon by the skipper for spoiling the market by giving an extravagant price. I confess the price did not appear to me to be exorbitant. However, live and learn, and I purchased at a cheaper rate afterwards. About fifty or sixty could be negotiated for a couple or three figs I found. I engaged a native to open the nuts, and business com-

menced. The milk or juice of the largest almost filled a two-pound preserved beef tin. I drank it with great gusto, feeling good all over; the second was also deliciously refreshing, and I, to use Jim's words, "scoffed" it, but when the third was emptied into the tin, I had my doubts, and finally concluded that one could have too much even of a good thing.

Along the coast the scrub is thick, and almost impenetrable, though there are a few winding tracks known to the natives only. I very soon gave up the attempt to follow one a little distance into the interior, and contented myself with a ramble through the village and along the shore. The natives are, generally speaking, an exceedingly intelligent-looking race, well made, and with a thoroughly Jewish cast of countenance. Ears pierced all round to admit of a fringe of coral or beads being fixed, which on the youngsters looks really pretty. Women's rights are seemingly fully recognised amongst them — the right to do all the hard and heavy work, while her lord and master hunts or goes fishing. I noticed women cutting and carrying heavy logs of timber for a *bêche-de-mer* station at the mouth of the river, while her master carefully supervised the work and saw that she did her duty. They are, in consequence of regular toil, great strapping women, masculine in appearance, and generally taller, or quite as tall, as the men, and stride along with a heavy swing. The men mostly wore either a dirty shirt or waist cloth; the ladies had very little clothing to speak of (with the exception of two, who wore short petticoats), and are satisfied with a light and airy costume of cocoanut fibre. The houses are all on piles five or six feet from the ground, and are long barn-looking structures of grass, with sides about three feet in height. Several families inhabit one house, and seemingly dwell together in peace and amity. I didn't care to venture inside, as I saw the women and some of the men engaged in making searching investigations into the condition of their woolly *caputs*. They were apparently often successful, and I came near "pukeing" once before I could get round a corner out of sight.

The cocoanut trees were a sight in themselves, being of great height and girth, and mostly loaded with fruit. I visited one neatly fenced garden of several acres in extent. Indian corn, yams, bananas, and water melons were growing in abundance.

The natives have a few pigs of a long-nosed breed, dirty brown in colour, and not of any size. There are great numbers, however, of wild pigs in the bush and along the coast; I was offered a piece of a roast, but declined, not liking the way it was handled. The fellow who offered the delicacy was a filthy-looking beast, with great flesh tags at his ear and hanging almost to his shoulders. I noticed afterwards that these tags were for use as well as ornament. One day Addagio, who with his brother, Schneider, formed part of our crew, and whose ears were adorned with these savage-looking fleshy tassels, busily engaged cleaning his ears with what I took to be a small mop or broom, but which turned out to be the long tag mentioned, and which after using he carefully stowed away again behind his ear. At the time of our visit the *Mamooah*, or chief, and most of the villagers were away in their canoes down the coast about forty miles purchasing sago. The canoes drawn up on the beach were strong and rather handsomely carved with an outrigger on each side. Across the centre was a raised platform of split bamboos, on which half a dozen could comfortably squat, while some ten or twelve rowers could be accommodated in the body of the canoe.

At night mosquitoes visited us in clouds and would not allow us to rest, but they disappeared at dawn and we took an extra forty winks or so, as there was no wind to waft us out of the river. At last, whistling for wind in vain and getting tired of inaction, we got out the sweeps and pulled for two hours, and caught a slight breeze about two miles from the shore. We glided slowly along the coast, passing a small village called Toori Toori, about five miles from Mowatt. (In all cases I spell the names practically as they are pronounced by the natives, not as they are given in the Admiralty chart. In it Kaitow is Katau, and Toori Toori, Ture Ture, *etc.*, *etc.*)

Next morning Tom was duly invested with the cook and chief bottle-washer regalia, to his evident disgust. I'm afraid congratulations on his cooking exploits would be rank hypocrisy, but there is little room for criticism on my part, seeing what my own performances were in the same line. I may at once confess that I was in my turn – well – not a success, and then passed the only miserable days of the trip. When retiring in favour of Jim I said *consumatum est* with joy and thankfulness unbounded.

A few days after, our minds were relieved from sorrowful anticipations of the same experience in the future by the skipper getting from another of his boats a small Manilla boy to act as our cook. I became afraid that a good set of teeth would be ruined if the endeavour to pronounce his jawbreaking name were persevered with, so as he was chubby and small of stature, I christened him afresh "Piccaninny," and gave him a warm welcome on board.

We took the breeze down with us to Darro and Bristow Islands; but then it failed us altogether, a short distance only from the shelling grounds. No exertion in the way of whistling—and all hands went at it for dear life—would fetch us a puff, so the mud-hook was let go, and afishing we went with our usual luck. I found it much more amusing to watch the turtles bobbing up and down in all directions, until the sun went down in a blaze of glory. I may have heard or read that expression before, nevertheless it applies on this occasion, as there were all the colours of the rainbow and a few over.

Next morning all the diving gear was got ready as, after sounding and finding good bottom in ten fathoms, the skipper had decided to go down and try his luck. A diver generally wears a suit of flannels, or worsted singlet and drawers, as well as other clothes, under the dress of strong guttapercha cloth—an ungainly-looking affair as need be with the only opening at the neck. The dress is first drawn up as far as the middle of the body. The diver, after soaping his hands to admit of his slipping them through the strong India rubber at the ends of the sleeves, gets on his feet, and with the assistance of two or three of the crew struggles into the body of it. At the back, and round by the shoulders and breast, is also a very strong thick India rubber attachment, which is screwed on under plates of metal to a bronze corselet placed over the shoulders, and which protects the chest and upper part of the back. Strong boots, soled with leather and with lead half an inch thick and protected at the toes by plates of brass, are then pulled on the feet and securely strapped and tied. After the strong life line has been passed round his middle the diver waddles to the side of the boat and descends the rope ladder till his breast is level with the deck, his feet and part of his legs being submerged. Two lead weights,

twenty-five pounds each, attached to each other by two lengths of rope supporting the weights, are then placed on the back and breast and securely fastened. The helmet, a capacious affair in which are three glasses, one of about eighteen inches in circumference in front, and one on each side somewhat smaller, is then screwed on to the corselet, and further secured by a screw at the back of the neck. The air tube is passed one turn round the shoulder and tied firmly. An awe-inspiring antediluvian looking monster the diver then is as he waits for the front glass to be rubbed with tobacco juice, washed in salt water, and screwed in its place. The plumper line, by which the diver steadies himself as he goes down, is lowered; the air pump set going at slow speed, the shellbag handed and the front glass fixed, the diver straightens himself, throws one leg and foot out, drops off the ladder, and is quickly out of sight. The air-pump is driven at a fast rate until the signal comes that bottom has been reached, but after that "go easy" is the order.

Unless in deep water—twenty fathoms, or thereabouts—the pump is easy to work, that is for white men, but I have seen Malays and Cingalese tire of it very quickly and call for relief. The tender stands at the stern of the vessel holding the life line just sufficiently tight as not to impede the diver's movements. The diver signals by a series of tugs and shakes at the rope. Some divers if on a patch of shell can stay down below for a whole forenoon, but generally speaking they come to the surface for a breath of fresh air once every hour. On this occasion our diver stayed below about a quarter of an hour and brought with him to the surface three splendid shells covered with submarine parasites and vegetation. The oyster must have had a sad life of it, as in each of these shells, and in fact in every shell we afterwards found, were either several miniature lobsters or long sea worms, which no doubt prey upon the fish. Some of the crew indulged in a hearty feed off parts of the oyster, which, when fried in fat, is a dish by no means to be despised.

A splendid toad-stool, as I take it to have been, standing eighteen inches high, two inches through at the thickest part, and with a stem nine inches in circumference, was also brought up from the bottom. The substance was leathery and very tough, and impervious to the knife after dying. It became, in the course

of a few days, of a beautiful buff colour, spotted with black. I tried in vain to become the possessor of it, but the skipper hardened his heart and was proof against all my wheedling.

For several days we had varying luck with but few incidents worth noting. One afternoon, however, as we were going about three or four knots, there rose a cry of "man overboard." I bestirred myself, knowing however that everyone on board, with the exception, perhaps, of poor old Tom, were excellent swimmers. I needn't have excited myself, as it turned out to be Jim, who, with the happy recklessness of youth, had taken a header overboard after a bucket which he had let slip when dipping for water. The bucket was lost, and we had to luff up until Jim regained the boat, somewhat out of breath, but apostrophising fate and his fingers with wonderful vehemence.

We occasionally visited other boats and were received always with courtesy (unpolished, perhaps, but kindly). Tea was brewed, extra Sunday stores set out, of which we had to partake or give offence; cut tobacco placed on the (I was about to write table) deck, the tarpaulin spread as a couch, and yarns, mostly hair raising experiences with sharks, recounted. After hearing a few of these stories I began to think that I had been premature in getting Jack to promise that I should pay a visit to the bottom in a diving dress before the trip was over. Nevertheless, I believe that there are only two instances of sharks interfering with divers in Torres Straits. They mostly have a good square look at the frightful apparition presented by a diver in full dress, and not at all liking his appearance, vamoose without molesting him.

One evening Jim, being seized with the desire to become a diver, was let down — his third attempt — in about ten fathoms, and at the end of ten minutes came up triumphant with one shell. On certain days sea snakes were to be seen every quarter of an hour, brown, with short black stripes and an eel-shaped tail. One of these gentry rose to the surface close to us with a monkey fish in his mouth and after taking a deliberate survey of his surroundings went down perpendicularly. Numbers of long, lathy, thin fish darted out of the water and went scudding along the surface upright on their tails, touching every wavelet; occasionally during the flight they would fall flat without going beneath the surface, making a bound of several yards like a grey-

hound, then up and away again for a hundred yards or so. One unexpectedly paid us a friendly visit on a moonlight night, and concluded to stay for good and all. The scales of the skin shone like silver, the back ridge was of a bright blue colour, and the body a mass of small flexible bones.

Up till 16th March we had very indifferent luck in shell-getting, insomuch that our skipper declared that he believed Jonah was on board. It was therefore decided to sail for the coast, with the intention of making a raid on the ducks. Five miles from land butterflies and dragonflies were about us in great numbers. We dropped anchor about two miles from shore, and launched our dingy, into which five of us got, although it was built to carry three only. I was glad when the cranky little craft was beached and myself safe on land with no worse mishap than a thorough drenching. Carrying the gun, I plunged through the scrub in two or three places, but severe excoriations soon taught me that the game was not worth the candle. In the scrub the mosquitoes were in myriads, but the beach was comparatively free of them, owing to the stiff breeze blowing. I therefore strolled along near the edge where the wild pigs had been rooting, making the ground appear as if it had been lately tilled. Addaggio, who accompanied me, suddenly pointed to a sapling placed in a peculiar position between the forks of two trees and explained that "Here bin boy belong Garzee; me show him boy belong Mowatt come along." He accordingly broke off a large branch, and hung it to the sapling by a strip of bark, seemingly rather proud of having established communication with the neighbouring tribe. Along the shore sago palms, a sort of bastard cocconut, and a straight stemmed tree thirty feet or over in height, and jointed every six or eight inches (native name *paroo*) were very common.

Within an hour after landing there came a regular downpour of rain with heavy wind squalls. I retraced my steps as quickly as possible, and found the others ambushed in the scrub, through which rain had not then penetrated. Fires had been lighted to keep off the clouds of mosquitoes, but these were of no avail against the dreaded torments. They got accustomed to the smoke or braved it on purpose to gorge their wretched little bodies

with white men's blood. The rain came swirling down from the trunks of all the trees leaning over or growing at an angle, cascading down our backs, fronts and all over us. Accumulated misery at last drove us out into the open, where we had only a strong wind and a soaking rain to contend with. The prospects for the night were gloomy, as unless the wind fell there was little chance of getting on board till morning. How often I had viciously anathematised the small bunk I had to occupy on board, but now how fervently I wished myself safe in it. It was at least shelter. In the midst of the deluge Doolah, looking more than half drowned, returned from a shooting excursion, bringing a couple of ducks, something like the Burdekin bird, and a Kowri pigeon. The land bird was at least twice the size of an ordinary domestic fowl, and wore a splendid crest of light blue feathers, five or six inches long (which I immediately appropriated, willy-nilly). The plumage was dark blue, with a few bars of black and white on the wings and tail. Afterwards the flesh made a capital stew for all hands, and was duly appreciated. As the sun went down the wind and sea fell, and a move was made for the dingy lying in shallow water about three hundred yards from shore, over a mud flat. I carried some sticks I had out, the pigeon and two ducks, and found myself in woeful difficulties before I had gone a dozen yards. The mud was soft yet tenacious, and I several times took enforced spells on my side or back in two feet of mud. I tried hard to look as if I meant it all, and was simply resting, but couldn't impose on my heathenish companions, who howled and yelled with delight each time I went under. When I reached the dingy I sat down up to the neck in water, and made two of the boys, under promise of half a fig of tobacco when we got on board, delve the mud off me. The sea was too high to admit of the whole of us going off at once in the dingy, so we left Doolah and one of the boys to shake and shiver till the boat was sent back for them. We shipped a great deal of water and had to bail steadily going out, but at last reached the lugger in safety, where hot tea, dry clothes and a pipe of nail-rod did much to soothe one's irritated nerves.

On Sunday, March 24th, we were inside the reefs close to Warrior Island, and in capital shelter from the winds or sea.

Fishing was tried again, but as before the hooks were too large. Only one fish two feet in length was pulled up, and proved worthy of inspection if good for nothing else. Some of the crew called it a sucker. Its body was shark-like, but rather more slender and it had a serrated shield, four or five inches long, and two and a half or three wide, entirely protecting the top of its head, no teeth and a wide mouth. It was thrown overboard as being unfit for food.

On Friday, 29th March, our return to the station was decided upon, and next morning I was to take a journey to the bottom of the deep blue sea. As daylight appeared Doolah roused me up with the simple observation, "Now, come long please. Shark, he want breakfast." Out I tumbled, and found that they had just sounded the depth – a little over ten fathoms, too deep for a first attempt by at least four fathoms; but I had to take the chance or miss it for that trip, which would never have done. All hands took a decided interest in the proceedings, and had me engulfed in the dress and fully equipped in a very short time, Andrew meanwhile cheerfully prognosticating my sudden demise, and doing his level best to raise an alarm in my "busum" in true sailor fashion. Admonition after admonition was poured into my unwilling ears, but I disregarded all, only making certain of the signals for "more air" and "coming up," and how to work the air valve. As the front glass was being screwed into its place I must confess to a slight "rumbling in my innards," which may be better described as a "now I'm in for it" feeling. There was no time for hesitation however, so I flung myself off the ladder.

The start was not by any means propitious; the dress had been unduly inflated, and instead of flinging myself on my back I should have dropped off feet first, so there I floated utterly helpless, until Andrew, holding by the ship's stave, jumped on my swollen legs and weighted them down. I could see the crew grinning like a lot of baboons; but at last I held proper control of myself and commenced to sink. There was no difficulty in slipping down the plumper line, but at a depth of two or three fathoms my ears took fierce revenge for my attempt to leave the upper world. The pain was intense until I reached the bottom (always the case in the first dive) where by taste I also dis-

covered that I was bleeding at the nose. I took a short breathing spell when I found myself on *terra firma sub aqua*, as Pat might say, and to my great chagrin could only see a foot or two on every side, owing to the dirtiness of the water. I had to be cautious in picking my steps, but could move about with the greatest ease, stumbling once only when I stooped to pick up a handful of sand. I soon began to feel comfortably warm, and as there was really nothing to be seen — not fish even — I gave the signal “coming up,” and closed the air valve.

No motion was perceptible as I was rising, and I was considering how pleasant and dreamy a style of locomotion it was, when my head came bump against some obstruction, and my feet went sailing upwards leaving me fast under the boat wrong end uppermost. I saw in a few seconds that I had come up not only under the boat but at the wrong side, and struggled hard to push myself under the keel, but it was of no use, the more I struggled the tighter the life line seemed to get. I judged correctly that those on deck were in a quandary, and I'm afraid that for a short time my mind had considerable tendency towards the making of objugatory observations, until I actually began to feel that a very little longer would see me unable even to articulate “quant. suff.” The rope slackened a little in time, and I got my right arm sufficiently free to get at the air valve, and to open it and sink myself a foot or two, and so got under the keel and clear of the boat. The tender pulled the life line with vigor, and I was dragged to the ladder as quickly as possible, up which I climbed in a most awful state of perspiration. The helmet was removed, and I once more felt the refreshing breeze. What relief — a very little more heat and I should have fainted at least. But with the exception of a lingering pain in my ears for an hour or two I felt no bad effects, and only regretted that the water didn't admit of a clear view.

Immediately after my diving exploit sail was set for home, and weary work we had of it all that day beating up against a strong head wind. At about 9 p.m. on a starry night we anchored full two miles out from an island called Naghi, on which we saw some Binghis' (natives of the island) fires, and where unluckily we felt the full strength of the wind and sea. How the little vessel did roll and pitch that night as the wind rose. First a dip,

then a roll, then a plunge with the water tumbling in over the bows, then a rear up, and then a succession of rolls, gunwale under, while all the time the water and spume flew over the craft. We had to worry out an unpleasant night as best we could, for there was no sleep. Morning broke bright and clear with a favourable breeze which carried us to the station in four hours.

Interviewing the skipper, I was presented (at my own request) with a certificate of efficiency as an ordinary seaman, and can assure you that I feel no small pride in the possession of that sheet of writing. I believe anyone unaccustomed to a life at sea could enjoy and benefit by a trip as described, provided he can readily adapt himself to circumstances and pocket his dignity (if he possess any) when the occasion requires. For myself, I not only enjoyed it thoroughly, but could, on my return, quote my old college motto — *mens sana in corpore sano* — with more truth than when I started.

