

## THE UNICORN MAN.

"Tai aoka" - the familiar Gilbertese phrase for 'please', precedent to making a request or a statement, distracted my attention momentarily from an old copy of Blackwood's Magazine which I was reading. I was sitting in the dining saloon of the s.s. "Nauru Chief" (more familiarly known in those islands as the "Nauru Thief") and enjoying an early afternoon cup of tea as we voyaged between islands of the Gilbert Group. The weather was perfect - the sky an azure blue without a cloud to be seen, the sea a deep blue and like a mirror, and the heat of the day tempered by the cool south-east trades which blow almost constantly in those latitudes.

The vessel, owned and operated by the British Phosphate Commissioners, who conducted the phosphate - mining operations on Ocean Island (and Nauru) was presently engaged in repatriating Gilbertese who had been working in the open-cast phosphate fields on Ocean Island, and at the same time recruiting others to take their place. The recruiting was undertaken by representatives of the Commissioners - one a little, spare man with gimlety blue eyes, who was in charge of the Gilbertese on Ocean Island, and the other a tough, burly ex-Naval Petty Officer, who handled all the boat-work in the open roadstead at Ocean Island, and also did so on recruiting voyages. Both, as might be expected from their duties, spoke the Gilbertese language fluently, though with an Australian accent, making it sound simply ugly rather than soft and mellifluous.

By contrast, my knowledge of the language was as yet pretty modest - reasonably strong in grammar, but weak in vocabulary. The reason was not far to seek; I had been appointed a Cadet Officer in the Colonial Administrative Service on the 15th November, 1932, and assigned to the then Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (now the Republic of Kiribati). Arriving on the 15th January, 1933, at Ocean Island, the headquarters of the Colony, I had spent only some seven months there. Unfortunately, however, the language generally used there, save amongst the Gilbertese employed by the Phosphate Commissioners, was English, and it was only as a result of receiving some coaching in the Gilbertese language from the Postmaster, one Morning Star, himself a Gilbertese and a follower of Hiram Bingham, one of the early missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, that I had managed to attain a modest proficiency in the language.

In August, 1933, I had been appointed to act as the Government representative on the recruiting voyage of the s.s. "Nauru Chief", since the law, obviously derived from the 'blackbirding' days - provided that all contracts of service in excess of one month should be signed by employer and employee before a Deputy Commissioner for the Western

Pacific, even one as junior as myself, who exercised judicial powers.

But such a recruiting voyage was no joy-ride. The vessel journeyed from island to island with great rapidity, dropping its repatriates, and recruiting their replacements as swiftly as practicable. At some of the islands, where the shores were steep-to and unprotected by fringing reefs, the operation could be, and in rough weather had to be, quickly completed, whereas at those islands with huge lagoons like Nonouti and Tabiteuea, it might take as long as four hours to reach the beach and then only if, as was not uncommon, either the launches or the boats towed behind them did not become stuck on some of the numerous reefs within the lagoons. Further, as speed was vital so that the vessel might return to its normal duties - the carriage of phosphate to Australia, New Zealand or elsewhere - work was undertaken by day or by night, though actual recruitment was forbidden save in daylight - again a relic of the 'blackbirding' days.

But at least one of the advantages - and pleasures - of such a somewhat chaotic journey was the opportunity it gave one to mingle with the natives - on the ship, on the launches, boats and canoes, in the meeting houses (maneaba) ashore - and not merely learn something of them and their ways, their hopes, their fears and aspirations but, above all, to learn something more of the language, and especially improve one's vocabulary.

So, when I heard the familiar words "Tai aoka" my ears pricked up, ready for what was to follow the request. But, in my wildest dreams, I would never have imagined that the Gilbertese speaker would, in the calmest of voices, have added after a slight pause - "I have just killed another man down in No. 3 hatch".

On these repatriation and recruiting voyages, the tween-decks were completely cleared of all partitioning and all cargo, save for the miscellaneous belongings of the repatriates and those recruited, whose proportionate numbers were changing with each island at which we called, and each family squatted down in its chosen place to sleep, feed, play cards, gossip, and so on.

On hearing the original greeting "Tai aoka" I must have paused before looking up for the speaker was at the door of the dining saloon leading on to the main deck; but, when he calmly announced that he had murdered another, I sprang to my feet and for the first time regarded him closely. And it was only then that I noticed that an object, like the wooden handle of a small bread-knife was sticking out of his forehead at an angle of some sixty degrees. I must have looked a bit mazed for, in the calmest of tones, he repeated his remark about having killed another. But I might not have been surprised if I had

remembered Kipling's well known verse that -

"The wildest dreams of Kew,  
Are the facts of Katmandu,  
And the crimes of Clapham  
Chaste in Martaban".

The time being about 1400 hours, and the vessel proceeding northwards between islands, most folk on board were enjoying a well-earned siesta. Although the speaker had reiterated that he had killed another, it seemed to me that I had best visit the tween-decks at once in No. 3 hold as the man allegedly killed might yet have some life left in him and be saved. So, indicating to the man to lead on, and proceed with all speed to No. 3 hold, we sped along the deck and descended into the hold where many natives were congregated. But, in place of the cheerful babble of Gilbertese, there was an unusual and eerie silence. Near the centre of the hold was the usual Gilbertese sleeping mat and it seemed at once obvious that there was probably no question of saving anyone's life; blood was spattered everywhere and the mat on which the dead man lay was soaked in it. Calling for my Gilbertese clerk and interpreter and police orderly, I bade them to stand by the tragic scene and at the same time collect the names and villages of any who had witnessed the tragedy.

Summoning the two medical orderlies of the Phosphate Commissioners, I told them to take 'the unicorn man' - for so he looked so exactly - to the temporary hospital on the after-deck and persuade him to lay down, whilst I summoned the elderly native medical practitioner to examine him and do what he could for him. But it was only after hammering on the door of his cabin for some moments, however, that I was able to awaken him as he was apparently in a deep sleep. He obviously thought that my description of what had happened and of the injury done to 'the unicorn man' much exaggerated, but somewhat grudgingly agreed to come and examine him. This he did, but pronounced that he did not see what assistance he could render, having first attempted to pull the knife out, but without success. He suggested that the Captain of the vessel should be requested to make for the island of Tarawa, where there was the hospital at which the Senior Medical Officer was stationed.

Fortunately, at this point, only one island was left to which some natives required to be repatriated, and at which it had been proposed to recruit, and such island was adjacent to Tarawa, so that it was possible to disembark the repatriates there and allow them to make their own way, with appropriate assistance, back to their own island.

After discussion with the Captain and the representatives of the

British Phosphate Commission it was agreed that the vessel should head for Tarawa as fast as possible - it was only some four hours steaming distant - there disembark the repatriates for the neighbouring island of Maiana, give up the idea of recruiting there, and, most important of all, seek medical assistance for 'the unicorn man'. A radio was sent to the Senior Medical Officer accordingly explaining the circumstances and seeking his immediate assistance on the arrival of the vessel, though it would be after dark.

Meanwhile I was giving the most anxious thought as to what, if anything, could be done for the unfortunate 'unicorn man', a good-looking, clean shaven Gilbertese of below middle age, whom I felt must surely be suffering. My principal worry in this connexion was my firm conviction that, unless the knife could be removed without undue delay, the chances were that blood poisoning would be likely to take place almost immediately, since such knives, to the knowledge of anyone who had lived in the islands, were used for almost any purpose - cleaning fish and food, paring or cleaning finger or toe nails, and so on. It therefore seemed to me that an attempt should be made to remove the knife in a rather more forcible manner than the somewhat half-hearted attempt made by the native medical practitioner, who had retired I suspected to continue his slumbers.

I therefore discussed my ideas with the two medical orderlies who, though they had only the most rudimentary knowledge of medical matters, quickly agreed with my view as to the danger of leaving the knife in the head of 'the unicorn man'. At this point the latter was lying on a stretcher-type bed on the after-deck, which had been surrounded by a canvas screen to shield him from the prying and curious eyes of the many who thought him to be a somewhat wondrous sight. Perhaps the most extraordinary feature at that stage was the fact that 'the unicorn man' was not only fully conscious but also completely lucid in his discussions with the medical orderlies and myself. When it was suggested to him that the medical orderlies or myself should, for the reasons already mentioned, attempt to pull the knife out, he was quite agreeable to the proposal.

To cut a long story short, each of the three of us attempted in turn to pull the knife out. Whilst two of us held his head and his body the third, standing above and astride 'the unicorn man', strove with all his might and main, by exerting a strong, steady pull, to extract the knife. We all failed; our efforts did not move the knife by a millimetre. Quite extraordinarily, whilst we were in the process of doing this, 'the unicorn man' talked freely and insisted that he was suffering no pain whatever as a result of our efforts. It might

have seemed a simple thing for one of us to have pulled that knife out, but the reason for our inability to do so was explained later.

So all we could do was to sit beside 'the unicorn man' whilst the ship headed for Tarawa as fast as possible, make such conversation as seemed possible, whilst giving him a drink from time to time from a moimoto (green coconut). He assured us that he was in no pain and conversed quite lucidly on trivialities concerning his work on Ocean Island, life in the Gilbert Islands, and so on. I did not question him as to the circumstances of the killing since I felt that so doing would be to take a most unfair advantage of him as he must be suffering from shock (though he gave no evidence of this) and, in any case, he would have to be tried later in the Native Court and inevitably be charged with murder; further, I should have to sit with the Court and hear the evidence and, if the accused were found guilty, it would be my duty to send the records of the case with my recommendations to higher authority.

On arrival at Tarawa, we were boarded by the Senior Medical Officer, and 'the unicorn man' on his stretcher, and the body of his victim wrapped in a Gilbertese sleeping mat, were quickly transferred to a boat, transported ashore, and thence to the hospital.

On arrival ashore, I was greeted by members of the very small European population, since I had arrived to assume charge of the District, and by the Native Magistrate and other members of the Native Government of the island. To the Magistrate I explained as briefly as I could what had transpired and that my police orderly and the medical orderlies would be able to notify him of the names of witnesses who would be required to attend the Court when the case was heard. Then, for some 48 hours, I completely forgot about 'the unicorn man' since I had to take over all the records, cash and stamps, etc., from the officer who was to leave by the s.s. "Nauru Chief" that night. I did, however, receive a message from the Senior Medical Officer that he had operated on 'the unicorn man' and that the latter might be considered to be out of danger.

Two days later I visited the hospital and saw 'the unicorn man' whose 'horn' had been removed, leaving only a small scar where the nasal bones should have been. He was grateful for what I had done for him, which was little enough, and assured me that he felt fit and well and in good health. He recognized, however, that he would have to appear before the Native Court on a charge of murder.

Native Courts in the Colony had a long and honourable history, having been established in 1892 when the Union Jack was first raised

and a Protectorate established over the Gilbert Islands by Captain E.H.M. Davis in H.M.S. "Royalist". The Court comprised a Native Magistrate, a number of Kaubure (one or two being elected by each village on the island, depending on the size of the village), a Chief Kaubure, and a Native Scribe, whose duties were to keep the records of all meetings of the Native Government, and the Native Court, in addition to acting as treasurer and postmaster. It is probable that judicial purists would find a multitude of faults of procedure, but there is no question but that on the whole justice was done by these uneducated members of such Courts.

The laws and regulations which the Courts administered were, however, extremely simple, though in those days many were extremely draconian. Thus, for example, Law No. 1 simply read as follows:-

MURDER.

The punishment for taking the life of another is death. A sentence of death passed under this law shall not be carried out without the authority of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific.

Other laws, in equally simple verbiage, dealt with suicide, abortion, theft, assault, rape, etc., but there was no mention of manslaughter.

Before the case came on in the Native Court, however, I went to see the Senior Medical Officer about 'the unicorn man'. The knife which had been stuck in the latter's head was still in his custody and he produced it for my inspection, before forwarding it to the Native Scribe for production in Court when the case was heard. The blade of that knife was exactly  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, and in the main  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch wide, tapering to a viciously sharp point. If anyone had told me that one could thrust a knife blade  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches into a man's head without killing him, I should have disbelieved him, but I was now faced with that fact. Just below the wooden handle, the knife had a 'shoulder' some  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch wide. The Senior Medical Officer then explained that the reason why the medical orderlies and I had been unable to withdraw the knife had been because the 'shoulder' of the knife had become jammed under the thick frontal bone (torus), and the harder we pulled the more securely wedged the 'shoulder' of the knife became embedded in the bone. The Senior Medical Officer also said, as I had suspected, that the knife, when extracted after the operation, which had necessitated cutting a V-shaped wedge in the frontal bone, was filthy, though as sharp as a razor. He envisaged no problems arising from the damage caused to 'the unicorn man'. He explained that the latter must have been struck by the knife from above and that the blade had passed through the nasal bones and the back of the palate, fortunately missing any vital organ. Finally, the Senior Medical

Officer stated that there was no reason from a medical viewpoint why 'the unicorn man' should not stand his trial.

The meeting of the Native Court took place three weeks later. In this connexion, it should be explained that in such Courts there were neither prosecutor nor defending counsel in the normal sense of such words. Those arraigned before the Court had the charge read out to them by the Native Scribe, whereafter the Native Magistrate asked the accused whether he or she wished to plead guilty or not guilty. If the plea were one of guilty, normally little confirmatory evidence was taken. In this particular case 'the unicorn' man was charged under the law of murder, and pleaded guilty. I had, however, prior to the trial, suggested to the Native Magistrate that this was a case in which it was essential that all the evidence must be heard.

There is little need in this context to repeat the evidence in detail. What transpired in the Court may be summarized thus; after formal evidence of identity, etc., had been given (fortunately both 'the unicorn man' and his victim were single men), evidence was then given by witnesses that the victim had been molesting the niece of 'the unicorn man' who was also travelling on the vessel; that 'the unicorn man' had warned the victim to desist from so doing; that the victim had paid no attention to the warning and had obviously decided that, rather than wait for 'the unicorn man' to take some action against him, he had better strike first; thus, it came about that the victim, with his hand holding the knife behind his back, swiftly and silently approached 'the unicorn man' who was seated on his camphor-wood chest of belongings in No. 3 hold, and struck down at him from above (which accounted for the angle at which the knife had penetrated the nasal bones); the victim had then endeavoured to withdraw the knife so as to strike again, but, being unable to do so (for the same reason that the medical orderlies and I were not) had fled; whereupon 'the unicorn man', with the knife in his forehead, had stood up, plucked his knife from out of his camphor-wood chest, and calmly pursued his defenceless victim and, catching up with him, killed him, for the Gilbertese are a hot-blooded and hot-tempered race especially where interference with their womenfolk is concerned. 'The unicorn man' had then, on his own initiative, reported to me what he had done.

Though the evidence given by the witnesses for the 'prosecution', if such it can be described, left no shadow of doubt that 'the unicorn man' had killed his opponent, the former appeared to be entirely unconcerned as to his fate. This may have been for two reasons; first, I have little doubt that, in his own mind and having regard to the ethics of the Gilbertese especially in relation to their

womenfolk, he was convinced that there was a rightness about his action that his fellow Gilbertese, members of the Court, could not gainsay; secondly, it is possible that he felt that the advice which I had given him before the trial - and which I had felt entitled to do in the circumstances and in the absence of a defending counsel - might help him for, at the time of this trial, some 45 years ago, there was a general recognition amongst the Gilbertese that the white man, the I-Matang, was possessed of a superior wisdom in matters of the law. Thus, I had advised him to stress before the Court the provocation which he had suffered, not merely in Gilbertese custom in that the victim had molested his niece, but that, prior to the killing, he had been attacked and had had a knife plunged deeply into his head before he had retaliated. Apart from the defence of gross provocation, I advised him that I thought that he could validly plead temporary insanity by reason of the knife plunged deeply in his head. But, whilst he listened to me and agreed to mention these points in Court, I sensed that he was also possessed by a certain degree of fatalism as to the probable outcome of the trial.

The accused, who had pleaded guilty, was then invited by the Native Magistrate to make any statement which he might wish. He made no attempt to deny or refute any of the evidence given by the witnesses as to the killing, though he did elaborate the facts relating to the molestation of his niece by the accused in a quiet but determined tone, and then mentioned, almost as an afterthought that, not only that such molestation had provoked him, but that the attack by the victim, which had deservedly recoiled upon the latter, had induced a degree of provocation amounting virtually to temporary insanity, or, as he put it "the act which made me lose my senses", which had almost inevitably resulted in the killing.

At that point the Native Magistrate adjourned the hearing so that the members of the Court might discuss the case before reaching verdict and sentence, if any. In this connexion, I should mention that it was incumbent on the District Officer to attend any meeting of a Native Court when the accused was being charged with murder. He was not, however, expected to express a view as to guilt or otherwise, but to ensure that the procedure followed was fair, and that he gave advice on any question of law. After the adjournment, I was invited to attend the meeting of the Court and advise it on the precise meaning of the terminology of Law No. 1 - "The punishment for taking the life of another is death". The members of the Court had no doubt that 'the unicorn man' had committed the killing and they had, of course, a full understanding about how a fellow Gilbertese would feel



about the circumstances leading up to that act. They were impressed too by the accused's mention - not plea, for neither in manner nor in tone did he plead them - of his provocation and temporary insanity. But they felt puzzled and frustrated by the simple and mandatory wording of the law in this matter. All agreed that 'the unicorn man' had taken the life of another and that the law simply laid down the penalty of death for that without any option. The case therefore genuinely caused them conflicts of conscience since they were averse to disobeying the law. Not one of them, however, was in any doubt that it would be wrong to invoke the death penalty or, indeed, any penalty at all in the circumstances of this case.

In the circumstances, I felt no compunction in advising them that, in view of the latter part of the law as cited, I would feel in duty bound, in submitting the records of the case to higher authority, to recommend a pardon for the accused should the Court now find him guilty, and, after a brief discussion on the issues of provocation and temporary insanity, the sitting of the Court resumed and the accused was informed that its verdict was one of not guilty. Far from expressing his relief and joy, however, as might have been expected, 'the unicorn man' gravely thanked the Court and stepped outside the Courthouse a free man. Nor did he omit to thank me in the same grave tones, before departing for his village up the lagoon.

In the days that followed, I found my hands more than full in carrying out the administration of the District, improving my proficiency in the Gilbertese language, meeting the numerous officials and others throughout the islands, and attending to the numerous minutiae of administration, so that the incident of 'the unicorn man' gradually faded from my memory (though I still have my photographs of him lying on the stretcher-bed on the after deck of the s.s. "Nauru Chief").

It was, however, some months later, on a particularly busy day when the Colony schooner had arrived in port from headquarters at Ocean Island with passengers, mails and cargo, that my clerk and interpreter whispered to me that there was a native who wished to see me; he would give neither his name nor village, nor mention his business but I told the clerk somewhat sharply to show the man in and at the same time to advise the man that I was exceedingly busy and could <sup>only</sup> ~~not~~ spare him a moment or two to discuss his business.

In came a man of slightly below middle age, with a bushy moustache, who greeted me with the usual "Ko na mauri" ("May you be blessed" or "May you be in good health"). He sat down on the Gilbertese mat

provided for such visitors, as they customarily preferred to sit thus rather than stand or be seated on a chair. After a brief exchange of generalities, I explained in Gilbertese that I was very busy and asked him what he wished to discuss with me. He paused, smiled and gave a low chuckle; then said "So you do not recognize me?" I stared hard at him for a moment but could recall no Gilbertese of my acquaintance with such a luxurious moustache. But his question being an obvious invitation to identify him, I stared further and then saw the tell-tale scar where his nasal bones had been. It was then my turn to chuckle for it was of course "the unicorn man".

After some further discussion, I asked after his health and he then explained that this was the reason for his visit. The last time we had met, I had given him some good advice, apart from trying to save him from what appeared to be a fatal head wound. Now and for some time past, however, he explained that he had been suffering from headaches and wondered if I could suggest a cure. Whilst it struck me as being somewhat ludicrous that one who had passed through such an experience as he had only a few months previously, so controlled and almost nonchalantly, should now suffer a few headaches, I was not prepared 'to play God' again and bade him farewell after giving him a note to the Senior Medical Officer identifying him and asking him to cure his ailments.

And that, I thought to myself, was the end of the affair. But I was wrong. On Christmas Eve my police orderly called at my quarters and handed me an envelope addressed to me in an ill-educated hand, and beneath my name the words "Onvellop opner. Happy Cristmas". Somewhat mystified, I opened the envelope and there fell out a small wooden handled knife with a blade about 4 inches long. I recognized it almost at once and I could not help but chuckle. But I took no further action in the matter since I later discovered through discreet enquiries that 'the unicorn man' had lifted the knife from the Native Scribe's office unbeknownst to the latter, and had given it to me as a token of his gratitude for what I had done for him. It lies beside me as I write this story, a grim, yet in a way, a happy memento.