

### TALES FROM THE POSTS.

"If I c-c-a-tch you even one p-p-p-enny out in your c-c-c-ash I will s-s-s-ee that you are d-d-d-issmised and returned to England with your t-t-t-ail b-b-b-etween your l-l-l-egs to the s-s-s-hame and d-d-d-isgrace of your p-p-p-arents".

It is not possible effectively to convey in writing the powerful stammer in which these words were uttered, though their halting delivery rendered them doubly daunting to a newly joined Cadet. Indeed, seated on the opposite side of his desk to the Chief Postmaster, I was somewhat perturbed by the ferocity of his tone, even though I had been warned that his bark was worse than his bite. In fact, I later found him to be quite a genial companion, a raconteur par excellence, whose stories and conversation grew more ribald with each successive whisky and soda. However, this was my first encounter with him.

Always impeccably dressed in white, he had, however, a stern, if rather rubicund, countenance. The latter was rendered somewhat fiercer by reason of the fact that his forehead had some mysterious black markings upon it. He liked to explain that these were miniscule particles of shrapnel dust, which he had acquired when serving at the front with the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the first World War. But there was another version which explained that he had acquired them one night in Fiji when, after a particularly riotous party on board a ship at the wharf, he had lost his way on the quay heading homewards, fallen in a coal dump gashing his forehead badly, and that, despite washing his forehead the following morning, some of the coal dust was so embedded that it would not come out and has remained there till this day.

After some weeks spent at headquarters, I was shortly to be posted to a district, in which my manifold duties would include those of District Postmaster, and which accounted for my visit to the Chief Postmaster's office that afternoon. After a few desultory exchanges, he asked me if I knew anything about postal work, to which I replied in the negative save that I was a stamp collector in a modest way. That statement, however, merely produced another stuttering outburst to the effect that I had better not try pocketing any postage stamps from the stocks for which I would be responsible as District Postmaster.

He then swung round in his swivel chair, opened a small safe behind him, and produced a bottle of whiskey (unlabelled), a bottle of water and a glass, into which he proceeded to pour himself a generous tot, though taking great care not to drown it. Leaning back in his chair, he then roared "Morning Star" at the top of his voice, though I was puzzled as to whether this might be the name of the liquid in the bottle or some celestial body to save him from all young would-be District Postmasters and stamp collectors.

Somewhat to my surprise, however, a door at the side of the room opened and an elderly grey-haired Gilbertese man, dressed in nothing but a white singlet and a pair of khaki shorts, and sporting a pair of gold-



rimmed spectacles, entered. This was "Morning Star", so christened by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, whose local base was in the island of Abaiang.

The Chief Postmaster introduced us to each other and explained to Morning Star that I was shortly to be posted away from headquarters at Ocean Island to be the District Postmaster at Tarawa Island and that he should, in the brief intervening period before my departure, teach me what he thought appropriate concerning postal duties. After having the intricacies of such matters as poundage on postal orders, money orders, way bills, etc., explained to me, Morning Star then attempted an explanation of the system whereby all inter-governmental accounts were settled in gold francs. However, halfway through his explanations, he said that this was a highly technical matter of which he frankly had but little understanding. As this was quite clear, I agreed and the explanation was terminated. Such matters as letter and parcels rates of postage were of course simple because one could always refer to printed documents setting out such rates. There was, I noted with interest, at the time penny postage in force within the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony.

My acquaintance with Morning Star over postal matters ceased after one week, but I became even better acquainted with him thereafter since he was paid by Government to visit me in the evenings and instruct me in the intricacies of the Gilbertese language, which he did with such devotion and skill that I eventually passed my higher standard Gilbertese examinations in that language with honours. But I also saw the old man about the building as well, for the Chief Postmaster was also Treasurer and Collector of Customs, which functions were carried out in the same building. Mention of the building recalls to mind that new offices for the Treasury, Customs and Post Office were built in concrete whilst I was there, including a concrete strong-room, with large amounts of reinforcing steel and a heavy steel door. Alas, when the time came for the main steel safe to be moved from the old to the new offices, it was discovered that the door of the strong room was too narrow to admit the safe, and it had to be removed and re-hung after widening and replacing the concrete surround. However, an incident such as this was by no means untypical of life in His Majesty's farthest flung Colony.

A few weeks later I left Ocean Island on a voyage through the Gilbert Islands, supervising the recruitment of Gilbertese for work in the phosphate fields on Ocean Island; that voyage had an exciting conclusion which I have told in another tale entitled "The Unicorn Man". I had already been notified that I should be in charge of the Northern Gilbert Islands of Little Makin, Butaritari (or Makin), Marakei and Abaiang, as well as the island of Tarawa, which was the administrative centre of the group and later to become the first of the bloody battles to be fought by the United States armed forces en route to Tokyo.

Arrived at Tarawa, I was met by a senior Administrative Officer, who was to be in charge of the other Central, and Southern, Gilbert Islands.



Able, unruffled, and inclined to be rather dreamy - more interested in native customs than the intricacies of Treasury accounting, he had been secretary of the Cambridge University Psychological Research Society and, though he and I stayed in two allegedly ghost-ridden houses, we never met the spirits, although my colleague was always suspicious of any unusual noises after dark. He was quite unlike the somewhat extrovert members of Jesus College, whom I knew at Cambridge.

Becoming quickly acquainted with my various duties as Administrative Officer, Deputy Commissioner for the Western Pacific (which required me to sit on the bench occasionally), Treasury Sub-Accountant, District Postmaster, and even Sanitary Inspector, I was relieved to hear that my senior officer had already checked all the stocks of postage stamps in the hands of the Postal Clerk, a half-caste (or part-European as one was advised it was more tactful to call them), by the name of Burangke (Frank), and verified them to be correct.

I should explain at this point that the values of such postage stamps varied between  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and £1; their design was both simple and dignified (unlike so many of today's current issues which are so often crudely inappropriate and solely designed to increase the takings of Treasuries), and consisted of the King's head in the upper centre panel, the value in the lower centre panel, the words "Gilbert and Ellice Islands" across the top, and the words "Postage" and "Revenue" on either side.

I had plenty to occupy my attention in my various capacities without having to pay too much attention to postal affairs, which appeared to be dealt with competently by the Postal Clerk, until one Friday morning there was a knock on my office door at 8 a.m. and, on being bidden to enter, Burangke appeared. He was normally a cheerful rogue, whose great hobby was deep-sea fishing, a sport which I also thoroughly enjoyed and for which the waters round the island offered great scope; the few discussions which we had had about postal matters were usually preceded by a conversation about fishing prospects, types of bait and hooks, varieties of fish, and so on. On this particular morning, however, he was downcast in countenance, and even a discussion <sup>on fishing</sup> failed to cheer him up.

However, eventually coming to the point, the following conversation ensued:-

Burangke - I have some very bad news for you, Sir,

Self - (immediately wondering if Burangke had helped himself to money from the till, or that his cash was short for some other reason)

Well, what is it ?

Burangke - We have run out of  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d stamps, Sir. I am very sorry.



Self - Well, that's too bad as I happen to know that there will be no ship sailing from Ocean Island for Tarawa for another four or five weeks, by which fresh supplies of the  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d denominations can be shipped.

Burangke - Yes, Sir, but the seriousness of the problem is that all inter-island letters bear 1d postage and we have no  $\frac{1}{2}$ d or 1d stamps to sell for such letters; we sell many more of those denominations than any others.

Self - Yes, I see, that's quite a problem.

Burangke - Can we sell 2d or 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamps for that purpose.

Self - Certainly not, that would be quite illegal. The Chief Postmaster/Treasurer would doubtless support and cheer such a proposal as such action would increase his revenue, but there would probably be so many complaints from members of the public and such a row from the Secretariat in Ocean Island that you might well lose your job and I should certainly be disciplined in some way.

Burangke - But what can we do, Sir, if we can get no more  $\frac{1}{2}$ d or 1d stamps for the next four or five weeks?

Self - (after pondering the problem for some ten minutes) - This is what we shall do. I will at once send a telegram to headquarters asking them to ship large quantities of stamps of the lower denominations by the next vessel for Tarawa in four or five weeks time. In the meantime, close the Post Office and put a notice on the door stating that, due to unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances, the office will be closed until Monday'. That should not inconvenience the public much. Then go and see Sergeant Kaipati of the Police and tell him to send their canoe, manned by three constables to the neighbouring island of Maiana (some 15 miles away to the southwards). Give the Corporal in charge a note to the Native Government Scribe of that island explaining the problem, and some funds from your cash wherewith to buy some  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d stamps from his stock. If they made a quick start, they should be back here in the early hours of tomorrow morning. Then you yourself take the cutter "Britannia", two constables and some cash and sail to Abaiang (some 25 miles away to the northwards) on a similar mission. You too should be back here tomorrow about the same time as the others with some  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d stamps and, as the trolling between Tarawa and Abaiang is excellent, a good haul of fish as well.

Burangke ran out of the office with a broad smile on his face, though whether this was at the thought of solving his postal problem or the thought of making a good haul of fish, I don't know.



Thereupon I put the problem out of my mind, confident that the two parties which I had despatched to Maiana and Abaiang would return within 24 hours with sufficient  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d stamps to enable us to tide over the awkward four or five weeks until fresh supplies were received from Ocean Island.

Next morning, as I anticipated, Burangke and the police corporal who had been sent in charge of the canoe to Maiana were at my office soon after it opened, but neither were looking particularly elated as though they had been successful in their mission. Both apparently had been successful in their trolling and catching fish, but ultimately each had to confess that he had not been able to purchase any stamps of the two denominations. Each told the same story; the Native Government Scribe at each island had told him that their stocks of those stamps, the sales of which greatly exceeded others, were almost finished since they had not been replenished for a considerable time, and they felt their own positions would be jeopardized if they disposed of the limited numbers which they still held. No amount of persuasion was able to change their minds. My envoys had therefore both returned empty-handed, and the problem now began to assume somewhat serious proportions. So I dismissed them both and told Burangke that we would meet again at 3.p.m. that Saturday afternoon to decide what should be done.

Recalling the warning of the Chief Postmaster some weeks previously I was determined to find a solution, even though time was very short.

It seemed to me that there were four requirements which had to be met -

1. His Majesty's mails could not be held up but had to 'go through'.
2. There must be no loss of postal revenue.
3. Any action taken had to be such that members of the public would not complain or, indeed, even comment, thus leading to official enquiries.
4. Disciplinary proceedings against Burangke and myself had, if possible to be avoided.

The first course of action I considered was to accept all inter-island letters without charge and distribute them in bags as usual to the Native Government Scribes at the other islands for delivery to addressees. This would, however, almost certainly have led to representations from those Scribes as to why all letters arriving at their islands were unstamped - a difficult question to answer convincingly. Further, the few Europeans on Tarawa and some Gilbertese would almost certainly have commented and, their comments reaching, say, Ocean Island, "the cat would have been out of the bag". Most important of all aspects of this course of action, however, was that there would be a loss of postal revenue with fulminations when that was discovered from the Chief Postmaster, as well as the Resident Commissioner, the head of the Colony Administration, at the illegality of the action. Clearly, such a course of action was out of the question.



The second course of action I thought of was to accept all inter-island letters and charge in cash those wishing to mail them, though without putting postage stamps on the envelopes. However, this would have been open to the first two objections already mentioned in respect of the first course of action and, though there would have been no loss of postal revenue, it was possible, if not probable, that the news would leak out and result in enquiries from the Resident Commissioner in Ocean Island. So I discarded that idea.

The third course of action I considered was to charge the local residents who wished to mail inter-island letters with slightly higher postal charges using, for example 2½d stamps, but such a course of action, apart from being quite illegal and unsupportable by higher authority, would almost certainly have caused comments and protests by local residents, both European and Gilbertese. Inevitably "the cat would have been out of the bag". Though the Chief Postmaster would silently have approved of such a course of action as augmenting his postal revenue, the Resident Commissioner would have been bound to make enquiries and disciplinary action of some kind would inevitably have followed, especially since that officer was an elderly man, who never took a decision if he could possibly help it, whose outlook was bounded by Colonial Regulations, General Orders, rules and regulations, and who had about as much imagination and sense of humour as the Rock of Gibraltar.

In view of what I have so far written about the Chief Postmaster, and his anxiety in that post and in his combined post of Treasurer, to ensure that there was never the slightest loss of revenue, I should perhaps digress momentarily, in fairness to him, to explain that in those days it was the policy of the powers that resided in Whitehall to insist that the Colony's expenditure did not exceed such revenue as could be collected. We were not what is known as a 'grant-in-aid' Colony where, if the collectable revenue did not match an extremely modest (if not parsimonious) level of expenditure, the difference was made good by His Majesty's Government. So every penny of revenue counted, and the need to collect it in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was a paramount consideration.

I next considered whether it would be possible to accept inter-island mail and demand I.O.Us for the postage, but perforce had to abandon the idea; whilst the European residents might well have honoured their I.O.Us in due course, it was highly problematical whether the natives would have done so.

I was now scraping the bottom of the barrel for solutions but could think of none other than to put up a notice frankly advising the public of the fact that the Post Office had run out of postage stamps of the ½d and 1d denominations, and that therefore no inter-island letters could be accepted for mailing during the next four or five weeks. That,



however, seemed to me an appalling acknowledgment of defeat and a humiliating admission of gross inefficiency on the part of the Government. Whilst there would be no loss of postal revenue and no serious disciplinary action could, I felt confident, be taken as regards Burangke and myself, His Majesty's mails would not 'go through' as they should and the names of Burangke and myself would be 'mud'.

It was therefore in a despondent frame of mind that I returned to my quarters for a lonely lunch, the senior Administrative Officer having left three days previously for the southern Gilbert Islands on an extended tour of some six weeks, which precluded me in any case from seeking his advice.

Summoning my Gilbertese servant, I asked him to bring me a bottle of beer before lunch. In this connexion, I might explain that in those days we had neither icyball machines, refrigerators, nor any other such means of rendering drinks (or food) cold. All that could be done to make the drinks more enjoyable was to lower the bottles (or case) down the nearest well, and to haul the bottles (or case) up for consumption as necessary. Drinks, whether beer, soda water, etc., were thus never cold, but a spell in the well did render them less hot or tepid.

It was not, however, until I was halfway through my second bottle of beer that I received an inspiration; and I realized that, despite my somewhat frantic worries, the solution of the problem was staring me in the face. I thereupon hurriedly finished my beer, ate a hurried meal and was ready when Burangke called at my office. He was looking not merely despondent, but worried, not only due I felt to the stamp problem but also I suspected at having to miss his Saturday afternoon's fishing.

I asked him whether he had yet come up with a solution, but he shook his head sadly and admitted that he had not done so. Whereupon I told him that the solution was simple, so simple that it met all my four requirements and that we should have thought of it much earlier.

We would simply cut the 2d stamps in half and sell each half for 1d.

His jaw dropped and I could see that he was ready to raise various objections to such a course of action, but I bade him hold his peace whilst I explained that more was entailed than just snipping the 2d stamps in two.

The first thing to be decided was just how to cut the stamps in two. At first sight it seemed appropriate to cut them in the middle from side to side; this would have left His Majesty's head and shoulders intact, as well as the words Gilbert and Ellice Islands at the top,



whilst the bottom half would consist almost entirely of the symbol "2d". But the top half would not indicate just what postage had been paid, whilst the bottom half would carry the above but nothing else. To cut the 2d stamp from top to bottom, whilst committing lèse majesté on His Majesty's figure, would however leave the words "Gilbert" on one half of the stamp and "Ellice" on the other; and, at the same time, by splitting the symbol "2d" in half, it might indicate that half that sum had been paid in postage. On balance, it appeared to me that, despite the possibility of lèse majesté, it was best to cut the stamps from top to bottom, which would render them in size almost exactly like the South Australian  $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamp of 1868. And so it was decided but I told Burangke that the stamps should be cut carefully and not just anyhow. So, I said that as far as he was concerned, he would have to devote a little time next day, Sunday, to cutting up, say, half a dozen sheets of 60 stamps each in the way I had indicated. I said also that I would like to see one or two specimens in my office on Monday morning before 8.a.m.

The second thing which had to be done was to stop, as far as possible, any comments or complaints about the half stamps being sold for 1d each. I said that I would invite the handful of European residents, all civil servants save for the manager of the trading company, to come and have drinks with me tomorrow before lunch. I would explain the nature of the crisis quite frankly to them, and seek their cooperation in keeping quiet about the course of action decided upon, not merely to stop the tongues of natives wagging, but also to stop news of the action reaching headquarters in Ocean Island and places beyond the Colony. I felt confident they would cooperate if I spoke to them frankly and sought their assistance.

The third thing, I said was that, whilst inter-island letters might be accepted and have the new half 2d stamp affixed to the envelopes, on no account whatever were any such letters to be accepted for addressees beyond the Colony, viz. Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, etc., which might carry such a stamp as part of the total postage. This was crucial but should not, I felt prove a problem as postage rates for letters beyond the Colony were well in excess of 1d. Even more crucial was the necessity not to accept any letters for Ocean Island, which, being within the Colony, would normally bear a 1d stamp. If any such letters reached Ocean Island, there would immediately be questions asked. Fortunately, I knew that there would be no vessel to carry mails to Ocean Island until the Government auxiliary schooner arrived at Tarawa in some five weeks' time and then returned to Ocean Island. But it was absolutely crucial that no letters for Ocean Island should be posted in the interim bearing the half 2d stamp.

To carry out this part of the plan Burangke, who mercifully had "the gift of the gab" was to do several things. First, he was to put up a



Notice which I gave him on the door of the Post Office on Monday morning stating that it was very uncertain indeed when the next mail would be for Ocean Island, and that it might even be via Fiji or Nauru in which cases postage would exceed 1d, but that, as soon as the date of the next mail for Ocean Island was known, it would be widely publicized. Such publicity would not of course take place until further supplies of  $\frac{1}{2}$ d and 1d stamps had been received from Ocean Island. In the meanwhile, persons wishing to mail letters to Ocean Island should withhold their mail. I felt pretty sure that I could rely on Burangke to overpersuade any natives who tried to insist on posting their letters.

In receiving half 2d stamps for their inter-island letters, some natives might well question the postage. I therefore told Burangke, who could outtalk any native, that he was to tell such persons that the Government was experimenting with smaller sized stamps to see whether costs could be saved in printing by using stamps only half the normal size. To help him, I lent him a South Australian  $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamp of 1868 which was almost the right size. Though this was not a very convincing argument, the eccentricities and vagaries of the administration - vide the case of the Treasury steel safe - were sufficient I thought to render the reasoning acceptable and unlikely to be pursued further.

Finally, I told Burangke that all the half 2d stamps when affixed to the envelopes were to be properly postmarked in the normal way.

On Sunday, I saw the European residents, who greeted the proposals with much merriment; but they agreed to cooperate fully, as indeed they did. On the Monday morning, though Burangke and I were slightly nervous about the acceptance of the scheme by the natives, nothing untoward occurred, thus justifying my judgment in Burangke's salesmanship.

Thus, the inter-island mails 'went through' by trading steamers, schooners, cutters, or canoes and, if some of the Native Government Scribes or addressees thought the stamps slightly odd, they did not, as far as I know, ever bother to pursue the matter. No revenue was lost; no comments or complaints were received and, unless "the cat got out of the bag" there was virtually no likelihood of disciplinary action being taken against either Burangke or myself. (In fact, it never was). There were rumours, of course, later on but it was possible to laugh them off, change the conversation, or dispose of them by ridicule or in some other way.

But let the final word rest with my friend the Chief Postmaster. Some three years later, when I was Secretary to the Government on Ocean Island, I was having a drink with him one evening and I said that I would like to say something to him quite off the record.



His suspicions were aroused but, when I stood firm on my proposal, he finally capitulated, and I then told him about the half 2d stamp scheme. I had timed my approach carefully since he had just finished imbibing his third whisky and soda. On being told, he burst into peals of laughter, clapped his hands and said -

"W-w-w-ell my b-b-b-oy, I n-n-n-everthought any of my b-b-b-loody D-d-d-istrict P-p-p-ostmasters c-c-c-ould d-d-d-isplay even a g-g-g-rain of imagination and initiative l-l-l-ike that.

W-w-w-ell d-d-d-one. N-n-n-ow l-l-l-ets have another d-d-d-rink".

My only regret is that I never kept an envelope with the half 2d cancelled stamp thereon for my collection. I often wonder, however, what Stanley Gibbons and other stamp dealers would value them at if by any chance such an envelope fell into their hands.



Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

It was the first and only time that I have spent at night, or, indeed, by day, in a building with police patrolling up and down on duty outside. I suppose that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the person inside would be a malefactor of some description, being detained by the police for some peccadillo or something worse, and perhaps trembling at the sound of each footstep, as he or she realized that they were confined or trapped. But to me the thud, thud, thud of the barefooted policemen round and round the house gave me precisely the reverse feeling, and was the most comforting sound I could have heard, or indeed have sought.

I had left my headquarters on the island of Funafuti in the Ellice group (now rechristened Tuvalu) in the Government auxiliary schooner the day before to make a tour of all the islands of the group and fulfil the many functions expected of a District Officer in the then Colonial Administrative Service - appeals of those sentenced by the Native Courts, the replenishment of the funds held by the Native Scribes as well as their stocks of postage stamps, participating with the Native Court in the hearing of divorce cases, listening to complaints, chiefly about lands, and a thousand and one other matters.

As we left Funafuti by the north channel through the reef the weather was deteriorating, the winds were gusting and there was a fairly heavy sea running. However, this was the first opportunity which had occurred for me to tour my District for some months and I was loath to cancel or postpone the tour. It was decided to head for the northernmost island of Nanumea and then work southwards through the other seven Ellice Islands, concluding the voyage at Funafuti.

One's first sight of a coral atoll, probably at a range of some twelve miles from the deck of a schooner, is of a barely distinguishable blur - a mere smudge - on the horizon. This then very gradually develops into a forest of the feathery tops of the coconut trees, which form a straight line tapering away to nothing over the horizon on each side. Slowly then the sharp classic stems of the coconut palms become identifiable, and finally only the land with its line of white beach, since the land is seldom, if ever, more than ten feet above sea level. Amongst the palms may be seen the pandanus thatched houses of the village, the large thatched maneaba (meeting house), the tin roof of a trader's hut or co-operative store, neat little paths, a small grassed area used for recreation or parades, a whitewashed school for the children, a church, the local gaol, and sometimes (though not at Nanumea) the neat rectangular shape of a jetty. Extending outwards from the beach is the fringing



reef, of an unattractive brownish-grey colour, holding pools of constantly changing waters with small marine life in them. Beyond the reef is the deep, bottomless blue of the open sea, whilst at the reef's edge the spume will in bad weather hover as the breakers cascade and boil upon the reef.

As we came up to Nanumea the next morning, it was obvious that a fairly heavy sea was running at the island for one could both see and hear the breakers pounding on the fringing reef. There was unfortunately no channel through the reef at Nanumea, as is the case with some islands, so that landing at the island had to be effected over the reef. To do so in the ship's dinghy in such weather would have been folly since such a boat could not be manoeuvred quickly enough to meet the constantly changing rise and fall and sometimes confused direction of the breakers. Fortunately, however, several canoes, which are so immediately responsive to such changes in the hands of those skilled native paddlers, came out over the reef to meet the ship.

As I was planning to stay on the island for several days, I had a suitcase of clothes packed ready to take ashore, in addition to a couple of cases of provisions and drinks, since there were no trade stores ashore, save for one run by the Nanumeans with an extremely limited range of basic foodstuffs. Fortunately, however, fish, taro and bananas were freely obtainable. In addition to my suitcase and the two boxes, I also took with me on my travels a solidly built and locked box, about 15" x 15" x 15"; to the box were attached two lengths of strong rope, which terminated in two blocks of some light wood such as balsa, each of which measured about about 15" x 6" x 4". The ropes were about 4 fathoms in length. This somewhat peculiar object was, however, the most important and valuable of my travelling gear for the box held, not only some £500 in Australian currency (used then throughout the islands), of which £100 was in silver and copper coin, but also contained £250 worth of postage stamps ranging in value from 1d to £1. The purpose of the ropes and wooden floats was, of course, to ensure that, if one's boat or canoe was upset when landing in rough weather at any island, the box would be buoyed up by the floats and be retrievable, even if the contents were damaged by sea water. Whether this contraption would in fact prove to be really effective I rather doubted, but I was buoyed up by the fact that, in making use of it, I was at least following official instructions and avoid having my salary docked if money or stamps were lost.

Getting from the deck of the schooner which, like the canoes, was rising and falling in an alarming degree, and on to one of the canoes proved to be a somewhat hazardous operation. However, the Ellice



islanders were, I knew from my experiences at Ocean Island, professionals at this game; those on the first canoe seized my suitcase and those on another canoe the two boxes of provisions and made for the shore. Watching them head for the shore over the reef, one could not but admire their canoemanship (if one may coin such a word) and, though it was obvious that the suitcase and boxes were getting a bit of a wetting, the canoes finally emerged triumphantly through the surf over the reef and on to the sandy shore. It was now my turn, accompanied by the "cash box" which I felt to be my duty, to make the shoreward journey. With this comparatively heavy box, weighed down with \$100 in coin, added to my 13 $\frac{1}{2}$  stone in weight, the canoe with its two paddlers did not have much freeboard, but the box and I were eventually safely received on board the canoe.

The technique for landing over the reef, especially in somewhat heavy surf, is to paddle to within some 20 feet of the edge of the reef and there remain steady bows-on if possible awaiting the "right" wave to catch at the exact moment which will lift one up and over the reef - in fact having the canoe riding the wave like a surf-rider. It is an exhilarating, even if somewhat alarming, experience, especially the first time, as this was for me. We reached our station off the reef after a succession of swoops up and down the wave crests and troughs - rather like a ride on a roller-coaster, and there paused. As each succeeding wave drained off the reef and back into the ocean, the 'wall' of the reef was exposed to a depth of about two fathoms and presented an ugly and alarming sight - only to be obliterated a few moments later as the next breaker surged forward and broke on the reef's edge.

Suddenly the paddler in the stern of the canoe gave a shout whereupon he and his colleague in the bows paddled madly, catching the surging breaker beneath us. Alas, however, they had not timed it precisely right. I do not remember what happened next, save that we were heading into the surf at high speed. But all at once the canoe turned turtle and I was decanted into the surf. I wondered if I should ever surface again, especially as I felt that I had swallowed half the Pacific Ocean. But the breaker finally dropped me and I found myself on top, but on the edge, of the reef. I tried to get some kind of handhold and foothold on the reef but it was too slippery and in any case would probably have cut my hands to ribbons. All that I did in fact recall in those few moments were the late Sir Arthur Grimble's account of Octopi lying in wait in holes in the reef to grab one, and the perhaps even more frightening thought that one of the huge green moray eels, pieces of streamlined muscle with thin white teeth as sharp as razor blades, might likewise be waiting to savage me.



These thoughts passed through my mind as through a high speed kaleidoscope before the next breaker arrived, mercifully picked me up on the edge of the reef and hurled me like a sack of potatoes towards the sandy shore. Struggling against the strong backwash, I managed finally to scramble to my feet and waded ashore.

Here I paused, not merely to recover my breath but to see what had happened to the canoe and its two paddlers but, most of all, to the 'cash box' containing the money and the stamps. The canoe was lying on its side on the reef and as far as I could see was reasonably whole, save that it seemed to have lost its outrigger and the struts attaching it to the canoe. I did not at first see the 'cash box' however owing to the spume at the reef's edge, but then spotted the floats on the crest of a breaker about to crash on the reef. This it did and the box, fortunately intact as far as I could see, was swept over the reef towards the shore, where the two canoeists pounced upon it and brought it up to the beach.

As this was the first visit of a District Officer to Nanumea for a considerable time, there was quite a crowd on the shore to welcome me. It included all the members of the Native Government, as well as others including the Pastor, an important figure in those islands. Feeling rather like a drowned rat, I hobbled along the shore a little way and shook hands with all the officials and greeted the crowd as cheerfully as I could. I then hastened to the quarters of the District Officer. Most of the provisions being canned had fortunately survived the journey from ship to shore, but my suitcase had been penetrated by the salt water and the clothes therein wet through. So perforce I had to change into the only dry item available - a grass skirt, loaned to me by one of the village policemen.

After a shower and a vigorous rub-down, I drank a couple of strong whiskie-s and water, though I did not know how they would mix with so much of the Pacific Ocean sloshing around inside me. I then borrowed an uniform shirt and lava-lava from one of the village policemen to cover my nakedness. Then, looking more like a beachcomber than a member of His Majesty's Colonial Administrative Service, I held a brief meeting with the members of the Native Government, asking them to excuse me from holding a more formal meeting with them until the following morning. All were profuse in their apologies at my experience and, with that well-known generosity for which the Ellice islanders are renowned, sent me during the day a profusion of grass skirts, some old shirts, in addition to gifts of food in the form of pork, fish, taro, bananas and coconuts.

But, recalling the threats of the Chief Postmaster (who also doubled as the Treasurer), which I have mentioned in another story,



to the effect that I should be in very serious trouble, possibly even facing dismissal, if I failed to safeguard in every way his precious stamps (and cash), I hastened back to the District Officer's house to open the 'cash box' and inspect the damage, for I felt sure that it was not 'breaker-proof'. It was, however, with no little relief that I discovered the box to be not seriously damaged, though the sea water had penetrated it and the currency notes and stamps had suffered a bad wetting.

Whilst I could count on the sun and the strong wind to dry out all my clothes, I could unfortunately not count on the latter element to be of any assistance to me in dealing with the notes and stamps - indeed the reverse. In this connexion, I should explain that the so-called District Officer's quarters were not a building possessed of any degree of security; it was erected with coconut and pandanus poles on a concrete base; the walls were of roughly dressed coconut-leaf mid-ribs held together with sennit, but did not fit very tightly together; there were no doors within or without; although spaces existed for windows, in fact there were no windows; and the whole building was crowned with a thatch of pandanus leaf.

Obviously the first task was to dry out the currency notes which were not only more valuable, but also in rather better shape than the sheets of stamps. But first the several doors leading outside the house had to be barricaded lest the gusty wind should scatter the notes through such apertures like autumn leaves all over the island. That done, the window apertures would require to be similarly treated. The barricades erected by I and my staff were pretty amateurish efforts but had to be undertaken with a minimum of suitable materials. However, we felt that they were sufficient to deter all but the most determined entrants.

There were several hundred notes in all, since there were many of the 10/-, as well as the £1, denomination. These we spread all over the floor of the quarters - in the sitting room, dining room, and bedrooms - but leaving little narrow pathways in between the notes so that it was possible to move around the house.

We then turned our attention to the stamps which posed a more difficult problem. Although each sheet of 60 stamps was separated from its neighbour by a very thin sheet of wax paper, the sea water turned out to have penetrated between all the sheets of stamps and wax paper, either wholly or in part. The effect had been to activate the gum on the backs of the stamps on the one hand and to discolour in greater or lesser degree the faces of the stamps on the other. Some colours were worse affected than others. Nevertheless I suspected that the old Chief Postmaster would somehow hold me responsible for what had



occurred, so that every possible step had to be taken to salvage the stamps as far as possible and thereby justify my actions. I do not now recall how many sheets of stamps there were but I would think there must have been several dozens. These, dried as far as was possible by hand with cloths, were suspended with drawing pins all round the walls of the sitting room, dining room and bedrooms, giving those rooms unexpected rainbows of colours, probably never before seen in those and similar quarters before or since. Any visitor, official or otherwise, who had happened to call at the quarters at that time would have been astonished, on being admitted after the barricades had been removed, to be confronted with a house, the floors of which were 'paved' with currency notes, and the walls of which were brightened with sheets of multicoloured stamps.

I could not, however, overlook the fact that the quarters, with their 'paved' floors, were almost an invitation to a burglar to try his hand at acquiring some currency notes with but little skill or effort and, though the Ellice islanders of those days had a very well-deserved reputation for honesty and integrity, I felt that I should remove temptation from their thoughts, hence the 24-hour guard.

I had anticipated that the notes would dry out within some 24 hours but that the stamps might take rather longer. In fact, it took a surprisingly long time - three days, I think - before the notes were fully dry, but even then they looked rather as though they had been passed through a mangle. But luckily the toughness of the paper of the currency notes rendered them usable, though I had to explain at all islands during my tour that their discoloration was due to the accident at Nanumea and that they were good legal tender.

The stamps took longer to dry out and many finally proved unusable though, with their variegated colours, I might have invested in a few, to be used later as rare specimens. On returning to Funafuti, I wrote to the Chief Postmaster asking permission to write off a considerable quantity (and value) of stamps, putting two of the worst affected on the envelope since I was sure that this would give vent to one of his stuttering imprecations about 'young District Postmasters thinking that they could get away with anything'. My surmise was correct, as I learned later, but by the time his somewhat explosive reply reached Funafuti, I heard that I had been assigned to Ocean Island as Secretary to the Government, from which post I was able to do battle with the old man as an equal, which I did.



The Line Islands - I wonder how many have heard of them; some might guess that their nomenclature indicated, quite correctly, that they straddled the Equator somewhere on the globe, but how many would know that, with names as varied as Washington, Fanning, Christmas, Malden, Starbuck, Caroline, Vostok and Flint, they lie almost athwart the 180° meridian of longitude too. Yet the three islands first-named are part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (now the Republic of Kiribati) lying hundreds of miles to the westward. Of the islands named, Fanning and Christmas are probably the best known, since the former was a link in the trans-Pacific cable between North America on the one hand and Australia and New Zealand on the other hand., whilst Christmas Island, discovered and so named by Captain James Cook when he spent Christmas Day there in 1777, later became well known as the site of Great Britain's first H-bomb test.

I was appointed District Officer there before the war, stationed in Fanning Island, and was interested to learn that, although it had been for many years part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, all mail emanating from there had borne New Zealand postage stamps. Unfortunately, the station records were so abysmally <sup>poor</sup> that I did not discover the reason for this somewhat strange state of affairs, but I suspect that it was because in earlier days there was no colonial official stationed on the island and that, with the concurrence and authority of the Colony and New Zealand authorities, mails were dealt with by the managers of the cable company, who were usually seconded for service there from New Zealand.

On my arrival there I found, however, that the Colony stamps bearing the head and shoulders of the King were in use, though I had been given large quantities of the new Colony pictorial issue to introduce there, as had been done elsewhere in the Colony in 1938. This entailed destroying many sheets of the first-mentioned issue, and I can still recall standing beside a large fire and feeding sheets of stamps - 60 stamps to a sheet - into the flames. It struck me at the time as a somewhat distasteful exercise; for example, a sheet of the £1 stamps would today I suppose be worth several hundred pounds, but the flames hungrily licked up the sheets of the £1, 10/-, 5/-, 2/6d, 2/- and stamps of lower denominations. It never then occurred to me, however, that it would have been very profitable for me to see that a sheet or two of the higher denominations escaped the flames, but such a thought might well have seriously tested the moral fibre of a keen philatelist.

Perhaps the most interesting item concerning stamps, however, related to Christmas Island. This had been leased many years before my arrival on the scene by the Crown to one Father Emanuel Rougier.



Originally a priest in the Sacred Heart Mission in Fiji, where he had served for some years at the turn of the century, he was finally suspended from the exercise of his priestly duties for a number of reasons. He had then leased Christmas Island from the Crown for a period of many years with the aim of developing it into a profitable coconut and copra producing operation. But it was, alas, a failure.

After leaving Fiji, although he travelled to Europe and the United States, he made his headquarters in Tahiti, and for this reason employed Tahitian labour on Christmas Island. Schooners owned or chartered by him ran to Christmas Island from Tahiti, their home port, and then either sailed to the west coast of America or returned to Tahiti.

Père Rougier evidently saw no reason why the Tahitians employed by him on Christmas Island should not pay postage on their mails sent from the island. He therefore insisted that letters carried by his company's vessels should bear a Christmas Island stamp. Those stamps thus served to ensure the carriage of letters to the first British, French or American port of call and to reimburse the company for its expenses in transit; it also reimbursed the company in part for any onward transmission of mails from the first port reached, since the captain of the vessel was obligated to affix the necessary stamps there to ensure such letters reached their ultimate destination.

There were four issues of such stamps, the design and printing of which were presumably decided on by Père Rougier. Printed in five colours, the stamp showed a schooner (believed to be the "Ysabel May" owned by Père Rougier) under full sail, arriving at its anchorage off an island studded with coconut trees. The sea was a cerulean blue, and the schooner was being welcomed by the white bo'sun birds with their long scarlet tail feathers. A small house was depicted on the island and in the background was a golden-red sun either rising in the east or setting in the west. At the base of the stamp are the words "CHRISTMAS ISLAND", whilst on the left-hand side and across the top are the words "CENTRAL PACIFIC COCOANUT PLANTATIONS LTD.", being the registered name of Père Rougier's company. Down the right-hand side are the words "MAIL BOAT SERVICE". At least he did not make the mistake, made by the Fiji Government in 1938, in which the 1½d stamp showed a canoe under full sail but with no one aboard, and the 5d stamp showed a field of blue sugar cane, which any schoolboy knows should be green.

As Christmas Island was then part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, only the official postage stamps of the Colony should have been used, and enquiries of the highest British and French authorities declared the stamps to be totally unauthorized and of no monetary value - a pity since they were gay and attractive. Indeed, they accorded well with this most colourful character of a



French priest, who, as already remarked had been suspended from his priestly duties and undertaken a commercial career. His story alone would fill a book and one will soon, I hope, be published which will, whilst recording the history of Christmas Island, also deal at length with the history of that remarkable man.

I can only record here what a pleasure it was to discover such an unusual stamp and learn something of its history and that of its colorful originator.