

Exit Tony Blount

CHAPTER XIX
Continued

It was old and slightly faded, and from the fact that a grinning black fellow's face showed dimly from inside an open window to the right of the photograph, it would appear that it had been taken somewhere in Australia. "That's supposed to be you in the middle," the captain observed. "But it's about as much like you as I'm like the Prince of Wales." In truth, there was small resemblance except with regard to

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build, for the man was partly bald and his face was swarthy and slightly saturnine, and even in the imperfect print it was possible to see that he had been badly scarred with smallpox.

"Well, he wouldn't have got far on this evidence," Strang remarked dryly. "What about the letter, though? Have you read it?"

"Here it is," the captain returned, passing it over to Thurlow.

"Yes, I've read it. It was that that made me take him on — but I'm blamed if I know what to think of it now."

It consisted of a single sheet of cheap notepaper, and as Thurlow unfolded it he saw that it was covered with large sprawling writing — evidently the writing of an uneducated man.

It was addressed from — 12 Harbour View Terrace, Auckland, and it ran —

"Dear Jimmy, — Just a line to let you know that they've fixed up for me to sail on the Mauwahi next Tuesday, so you won't be seeing me in Apla after all. Tough luck but it can't be helped. The best thing for you to do is to stay where you are for a bit and take the last steamer to Apla that will connect you with Sorenson's old tub. He sails around the end of July, so you've got plenty of time. Maybe, it's better this way because it will give me time to get shook down and have things fixed up for you when you show up.

"Keep your pecker up, old timer, and don't let the quacks get you down. They don't know everything and I'm hoping when you've been on Arafut for a spell and seen the way the Kanaka girls shake a leg you'll be going all young and skittish again. — Your old pal,

MATT"

"P. S. — I saw Charlie the other day and he sends his best." "O' course, it don't prove nothing," the captain observed slowly. "An' I ought to ha' thought o' that at the time. Matt might be anybody. But he does talk about Arafut, don't he?"

Thurlow was silent, studying the letter with unseeing eyes. It was damning evidence to his mind and he could think of nothing to say at the moment. Things had gone beyond the point where bluff would serve him now.

And then, to his amazement, Strang came to the rescue.

"I don't see what the idea is behind it," he said abruptly. "But I should say you'd been taken in, Skipper. It's pretty evident that this letter is a forgery. It isn't in Thurlow's fist and you'll notice there's no envelope with it to show that it was ever posted from Auckland. And the man in the photograph isn't Thurlow, either. That much is clear at any rate. It was a try-on of some sort, but now the drip's dead I don't suppose we'll ever know what was at the bottom of it. What do you say, Thurlow?"

"It stumps me completely," Thurlow admitted. "But then I'm in a position to be easily stumped. After all, I didn't know who I was myself till somebody else told me!"

In spite of the trader's unexpected support, he felt the position to be so precarious as to necessitate falling back on this last line of defence, and from the captain's next words it became evident that he was only half convinced by Strang's confident assertion.

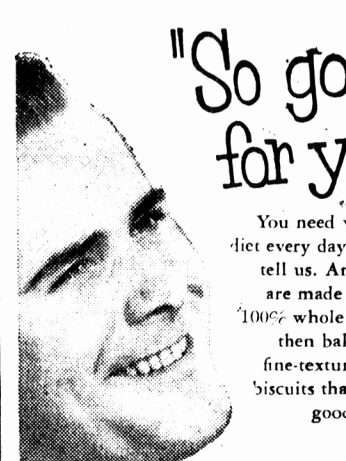
"That's true," he said slowly. "An' it set me wonderin' if me an' the doc hadn't made a bloomer in the first place. But when we picked you up in the Mauwahi's boat and found that warrant with you, we took it for granted that you was Thurlow. Who else could you have been, anyway?"

"Exactly," Strang put in impatiently. "Who else could he be? Apart from the warrant, he'd got Thurlow's name on his clothes and you'd have had to be a pair of fools to think he was anybody else! No; what this chap's game was is a mystery, but it sticks out a mile that there's no mistake at this end."

"Well, I'm glad you look at it in that way," the captain returned in a relieved voice. "But I don't mind tellin' you I've been a bit worried in the last couple o' days.

You see, if we'd slipped up, I should ha' took the rap for it. O' course, nobody could blame you, mister, seein' you didn't know who you was yourself, but it would be a mighty serious thing if I'd gone an' put the wrong man into a job like this."

"Well, you needn't worry about that part of it," Strang told him with a short laugh. "He's the right man all right — in more senses than one. He's already got a better grip of the job than Porson ever had — and I worked with the old boy for a few years." He turned to Thurlow. "But what do you propose to do about this queer business, Mr. Resident? The skipper will have to report the death of that'll take some time." He paused. "Not that I can see any good served by some sort of inquiry into the chap's past history? Better or bad, the man's dead." To be continued



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