

now assumes the dignity of a French mail-packet astonishes even people in Noumea. But the subsidy was obtained in Paris by the *deus ex machina* of the New Hebrides Company there, and is very useful in assisting to pay the working expenses and salaries of the officials, which it is more than hinted are considerably in excess of the income derived from raising maize and coffee and trading in copra, the latter being the principal source of revenue. In the copra trade this company, which has such high-sounding pretensions, enters into undignified competition with the "beach-combers" of British and other nationalities long settled in the different islands. And it generally gets worsted. The natives will never trade with a Frenchman when they can do so with an Englishman, or one speaking the English tongue sufficiently to pass for an Englishman. So an English captain of long experience in the island trade has recently been appointed manager of the "fleet" of the New Hebrides Company, which consists of one steamer, two small schooners, and a cutter, with a brigantine, which is now engaged in enticing labourers from other islands to work on the company's plantations. The "recruiter" of this labour ship is also an Englishman; and another Englishman occupies the same position on a schooner at present in the Solomon group, which is likewise engaging labourers for the company. When it is known that the manager in question was five years ago the hero of a notorious trial, in which he was charged at Noumea with kidnapping some ninety natives at the Solomon Islands, and when it is known that these English recruiters engage the "boys" ostensibly to work on Queensland plantations, one becomes dubious as to whether the recruiting may not become kidnapping, and the nominally free service slavery.

In nothing is the immunity which the New Hebrides Company enjoys in these seas so apparent as in this matter of the labour trade. Any ship recruiting labour for New Caledonia carried a Government agent, who, as in the case of the officers on the Fijian and Queensland vessels, was supposed to see that none but fair means were used in persuading the natives to leave their island homes for a term of service in the French colony. As a matter of fact, these duties were performed in a very perfunctory way. English recruiters were always carried, and it is generally known that their powers of persuasion were used on the natives to engage them for an English colony. With foreknowledge no "boy" would recruit for New Caledonia. But when landed there he was generally fairly treated, and the Government officials took good care that his wages were duly paid, and that he was returned to his native shores at the expiration of his three years of service, unless he wished to make another engagement. In the Bureau of the Director of the Interior at Noumea one found a complete record of every native imported into New Caledonia. With the exception of the deceit used in recruiting there was not much to complain of. But the vessels flying the French flag now engaged in the labour trade on behalf of the New Hebrides Company carry no Government agents, and are under no official supervision. There is no guarantee that the natives will be returned to their homes at the end of the "three yams" for which they all engage to serve. It is known that many of them have not been so returned. There is no guarantee that they will be paid in proportion to their services. There is no guarantee that they will not be grossly ill-used. Brought from the Solomon Islands and landed on Vati, the natives are really slaves dependent on the caprice of the plantation manager. There is no law to protect them, no authority to which they can appeal. If they have been violently kidnapped there is no chance of the deed ever becoming known. The only result will be that the next vessel from Queensland will be attacked in revenge, and British lives will be sacrificed. Kidnapping may take place individually or wholesale. The captain of the "Venus" was tried at Noumea for enticing the ninety natives on board to move an iron tank in the hold, which was bolted to the deck. The hatches were simply clapped on them, and the vessel sailed away. It was partly through the exertions of Bishop Selwyn that the doings of this piratical craft were exposed. The trial was a *cause célèbre* in New Caledonia. But the highest influence was brought to bear. Mr. John Higginson daily drove the merchant skipper to Court in his carriage, and an acquittal was the result. With no law in the New Hebrides, no chance of being brought to account, such a proceeding might very well be repeated and the captain easily earn £10 a head from the company. I am told of one case where nine boys from Mallicolo, taken to a plantation at Port Vila, alleged that they were kidnapped, and ended by stealing an open boat and rowing 80 miles by sea to their home. While Queensland vessels are subject to such rigid restrictions in the labour-trade, it is absurd that French ships can carry on what is virtually a slave-traffic on behalf of the New Hebrides Company.

I left Noumea in one of the only two schooners floating the British flag in the New Hebrides. The course was inside the great reef which surrounds New Caledonia till we rounded the south-east point of the island, and sailed into the open ocean through the Havannah Pass; thence north-east through the Loyalty Islands, Lifu, and Mare, till we sighted Erromango, and on northwards to Vati. One advantage of cruising in the New Hebrides is that you seldom lose sight of land. One island no sooner fades away in the horizon than you "pick up" another. In two days after clearing the Havannah Pass we cast anchor in Port Vila, on Vati. There is an eruption of French flags round this harbour. The tricolour flies over a store and warehouse at the water's edge, on two houses on the slope of the hill, and on a little rock not three yards in diameter, which is joined at low water to the small but fertile island of Vila, off which we are anchored. You imagine at first that this is a signal connected with surveying operations. But night and day the flag floats on this patch of stone, which a charge of dynamite would blow to pieces. As the natives would sell no land in Vila, the manager of the New Hebrides Company bought this rock from the chief for £2, and the tricolour is a sign to all that it is French property. There seems something childishly absurd in this. Yet I imagine that the French official is not by any means a fool. I think the floating of the flag here is more than to please the eye or satisfy the vanity of an individual. Connected with Vila as it is, it is a sign of sovereignty which the natives may get accustomed to. And if by chance some mischievous spirit should pull down the tricolour it would be an act to be avenged by confiscation of the island, and if the natives resisted it would give an excuse for the permanent occupation of Vati and afterwards of the whole of the New Hebrides.